

COMBONI MISSION

Winter 2025



Christmas Novena
pages 4-6

On a Mission from God
pages 10-12

COMBONI MISSION

Winter 2025

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From the Editor

Going forward in Gratitude and Hope

Coming to the end of another year, 2025, the first thing that comes to mind is to thank sincerely all our readers and benefactors for their prayers and continued support. Throughout the year our priests are conducting Mission Appeals in many different parishes and operating mission offices here in England, Scotland and Ireland. We extend our grateful thanks to all the priests and people whom we have met on these journeys! The mission and the future of the Good News depend so much on all of us continuing to work together! Let us recall Pope Francis' appeal: "Christians are called to walk at the side of others, and never as lone travellers."

Time and time again we receive encouraging letters from our readers showing their appreciation and fondness for our magazine - You Write pg. 23. This encourages us in our efforts to continue spreading the Gospel through prayer and your financial support towards our missionaries present in many different parts of the world. Keep on writing!

Once again, we present our Christmas Novena to help us prepare spiritually to celebrate the birth of our Saviour. It just needs a few moments each day to participate and await in prayer and hope with Our Blessed Mother to welcome the

Christ Child. May it bring you and those you remember in your novena prayer to a renewed hope and peace!

As we approach the closing of 2025, we also celebrate the closing of the Jubilee Year 'Pilgrims of Hope' on January 6, 2026. Pope Leo XIV leaves us with these enlightening words: "To hope is

not to know," and underlined. "We do not already have the answers to all the questions. But we have Jesus. We follow Jesus. And so, we hope for what we do not yet see."

Strengthened with these encouraging words I wish to extend to all our friends and benefactors, on behalf of the Comboni Missionaries, our warmest best wishes for a Blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year!



Fr. John

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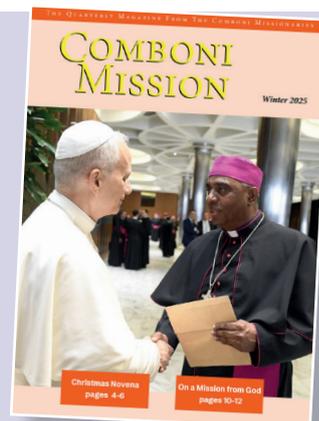
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Cover: Bishop Tesfaye Tadesse mccj with Pope Leo

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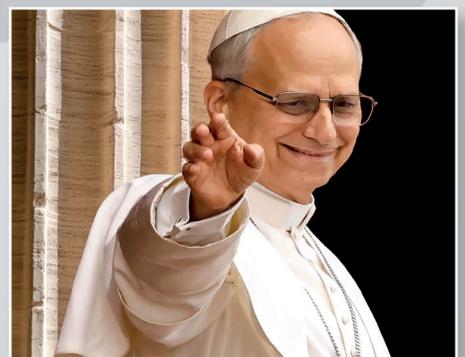
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Christmas Novena

16-24 December



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How to Pray This Novena

Set aside for about ten minutes each day. Take your time over the words you read. Linger over a word or a phrase. Repeat it aloud or in silence. Let it rest in your mind and heart. Think about its meaning. Share your feelings with God, who is father and mother to us, to Jesus or to Mary. And wait quietly to see what comes into your mind and heart. Don't worry if nothing seems to be happening. People who know each other well don't need many words. God has our best interests at heart.

The prayer of Mary, the Magnificat, a joyful prayer of thanks to God, is an ideal preparation for Christmas, as it was her pre-Christmas prayer. Novena takes a line of her prayer for each day.

Tuesday, December 16

Scripture

'My soul glorifies the Lord/my spirit exults in God my Saviour' (Lk 1:46).

Reflection

Like all good spirituality the Magnificat begins with thanks. A full-hearted thanks from the young woman, Mary. No mealy-mouthed joy here.

The closeness of the coming of Saviour expanded Mary's life. Nothing could unbalance her joy, not even the public doubt about her pregnancy. Her joy was realistic as her thanks were.

St Ignatius says that the worst sin of all is ingratitude! We know that. How often do we say (or feel) not even a word or a card of thanks. God likes our gratitude. This was Mary's constant prayer: no matter what, nothing, not even the poverty of her baby's birth, blocked her thanks.

Prayer

I thank you Lord for your goodness and care for me, especially for (mention here something you are grateful for). Hail Mary



Wednesday, December 17

Scripture

'He looks on his servant in her lowliness; henceforth all ages will call me blessed' (Lk 1:48).

Reflection

It's not Mary's graces or human qualities that make her blessed. It is her lowliness! A lowliness that did not put her down but raised her up. When we know our need for God, our need to trust and depend on others, our desire for justice and for peace – many things we cannot do for ourselves – then we are lowly and most blessed. All generations have called Mary blessed in her welcoming of Jesus as her son, and we know that the strength of God would guide her many times in her life.

Prayer

Make us love our lowliness as Mary welcomed hers, knowing that only in God is my soul at rest! Hail Mary ...

Thursday, December 18

Scripture

'The almighty works marvels for me, holy is his name' (Lk 1:49).

Reflection

What might Mary have been grateful for? The marvels God had done for the people were very much part of her religious upbringing. God was close, working in the world. Also in her own life, as with Elizabeth, she shared the joys and fears of pregnancy and of her vocation. She must have shared with her cousin the big moment of the Annunciation. When she might doubt this now and in the future, she recalls that God is near in the ups and downs of life. As we are grateful for God in our lives, we too share in his holiness.

Prayer

Father in heaven holy be your name. Holy is the name of everyone on earth because you are holy. Hail Mary ...

Friday, December 19

Scripture

'His mercy is from age to age for those who revere him' (Lk 1:50).

Reflection

God's nature, deepest quality, his middle name, is mercy. In God, love's centre is mercy. Mary knew this. As she prepared for the birth of her son, she began to realise that this birth had something to do with mercy. The life of her son would unfold with mercy; even the visitors to the crib went away with a sense of praise to God and trust in God. Mercy leads to praise and trust. As God was merciful to his people in the past, God will always be so. Prayer to Mary will bring us to the merciful God; as she herself is merciful in her regard of us. As we revere him, so we praise him.

Prayer

Be merciful to me Lord God this Christmas time. May mercy grow in my heart this time of year. Hail Mary ...

Saturday, December 20

Scripture

'He puts forth his arm in strength and scatters the proud hearted' (Lk 1:51).

Reflection

We stretch out our arm to console, to point the way, to give something; a way of expressing God's saving help was that 'he stretched out his arm'. We often say, 'with your strong

arm and mighty hand give me a hand with this.' A strong arm can scatter something as God scatters our pride and pomposity. God likes the humble, people like Mary who know their place in his love and his call to her. She would be the same herself – her arm reaches out to save us gently when we need this. She looks on the proud of heart with sadness and with hope, that they will find the gentleness of God leading to gentleness of heart.

Prayer

Help me O Lord to trust in your care for me; this is your strength. May it give me courage and hope in life. Hail Mary ...



Sunday, December 21

Scripture

'He casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly' (Lk 1:52).

Reflection

Mary was what might be called a lowly woman – she had no important role in society, was quite poor, but rich in her commitment to her God. She did not belong around the thrones of the mighty. Her life was ordinary. Mary would know like all of us that human honours don't last forever. The lowly are raised, lifted, as Jesus was lifted through his death to risen life. Mary had said, 'I am the servant of the Lord' and that was all that mattered." It is all that matters now as she is with him, body, and soul, in heaven.

Prayer

May the prayers of Mary, O Lord, bring me closer to your love. Hail Mary ...

Monday, December 22

Scripture

'He fills the starving with good things, sends the rich away empty' (Lk 1:53).

Reflection

This is a hope for Mary, that the poor in her locality and her family would no longer be hungry. Maybe the 'starving' are also people starving for love and friendship in the loneliness of busy urban life. The rich go away empty because often in our wealth we forget our dependence on

God and each other for most of what is good in life. The call of Christmas is to open our hearts to the wavelengths of starvation in the life of many people. As Mary hoped in her prayer to make a difference to all in need, we hope the same and offer something today to help feed the hungry, house the homeless and welcome the refugee and stranger.

Prayer

Open my heart, O Lord, to notice the needs of so many around me, and respond as best I can. Hail Mary ...

Tuesday, December 23

Scripture

'He remembers Israel his servant, mindful of his mercy' (Lk 1:54).

Reflection

When people felt God was angry with them, they often reminded him of his mercy, that he would remember he said things like 'he casts our sins to the depths of the sea.' A great freedom is to know we are forgiven, by God and indeed by others. Forgiveness is the fruit of mercy but mercy is even more. Mercy not only forgives but 'covers over many sins,' and is full of the compassion that leads to forgiveness. When we recall great moments of forgiveness, we remember the great forgiveness of God, and forgiving gives God great joy.

Prayer

May we remember each other, O Lord, in all our needs and the needs of each other. Hail Mary ...

Wednesday, December 24

Scripture

'... the mercy promised to Abraham and his children forever' (Lk 1:55).

Reflection

Mary had heard very often that mercy had been promised. This mercy of the Lord God would be for each of us forever. All we need is to look for this forgiveness and mercy and it is ours. I wonder did Mary realise that she now would be the mother of the saviour of mercy, and that she would be called the mother of mercy. She shares in the energy of divine forgiveness, and we ask her to remember us 'sinners, now and at the hour of our death.' Christmas lets us open the heart and soul to the joy of the Gospel, the blessedness of the closeness of Jesus and the protection always of God, father and mother to us.

Prayer

May I bring your kindness O Lord, into all I do and say today. Hail Mary ...

Opening of the Cause of the Beatification of **Father Alberto Ferri Garavelli**

On 22nd October, the cause of beatification of Comboni missionary Father Alberto Ferri Garavelli (1935–2009) [on the left in the picture with Pope John Paul II] will be opened in Portoviejo. The decision was announced by the curia of the archdiocese of Portoviejo, following a careful process of gathering data and testimonies, with a decree issued by archbishop Msgr. Edoardo Castillo on 15th September.

Originally from Cologno al Serio, in the province of Bergamo, Father Alberto Ferri Garavelli carried out his ministry in Ecuador, serving in the parishes of Limones and Viche (Vicariate of Esmeraldas) and later in various communities of the archdiocese of Portoviejo, in the province of Manabí. At his death, which occurred in Cologno al Serio on 16th October 2009, his remains were taken back to Ecuador at the request of the faithful who had known and loved him, and laid to rest in the church of Honorato Vásquez (Manabí), where he had devoted thirteen years of his life to visiting and forming numerous Christian communities.

The people continue to remember him with deep affection and to bear witness to his holiness. For this reason, on 22nd October, Msgr. Castillo will officially open the diocesan phase of the cause, in the presence of numerous faithful, priests, and a delegation from the Comboni Province of Ecuador.

With gratitude to the Lord for his life and missionary witness, we invoke for the entire Institute the grace to renew, in the light of his example, the missionary zeal that inspired him.

“Courage and forward, in the Lord! I am trying to accept all as the will of God and in the hope of returning as soon as possible to the mission. Thank you, Fr. Ravasio, for the contacts you keep for me with the major superiors who help me to feel part of the Institute”.

These are the last words of one of his letters, perhaps the last, he sent from Bergamo



Photo: Comboni.org

to Fr. Pietro Ravasio. Some of the words convey the two great principles which motivated the life and mission of Fr. Alberto: his passion for evangelisation and his belonging to the Institute

Fr. Alberto Ferri was born on 5 September 1935 at Cologno al Serio, near Bergamo, a land of families full of faith and love for the Church. He was the first son in a middle-class family and his father wanted him to take over the family business. Once he overcame the initial parental opposition, a very young Alberto joined the apostolic school of Crema: in those years a large number of boys responded to effective missionary animation in the diocese of Bergamo. He took his first vows on 9 September

1954 at Florence novitiate and began the scholasticate at Verona and afterwards moved to Venegono to continue his theological studies. He took his final vows on 9 September 1960 and was ordained priest by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montina in the cathedral of Milan on 18 March 1961.

His first appointment was to Spain where he collaborated with Fr. Enrico Farè in administering our magazines. Two years later he was sent to Ecuador where he began his apostolate at Quito, taking care of the Indians in the outskirts of the city. Meanwhile, the north of Esmeraldas needed generous missionaries sensitive to the needs of the poor. Fr. Alberto was sent to Limones, an island in the Pacific where he did his pasto-



Praying at the tomb of Fr Alberto.

Photo: Comboni.org

ral work with Fr. Luigi Zanini, Fr. Alberto Vittadello, Fr. Lino Campesan and Fr. Raffaello Savoia. From Limones, by sharing the work, they served the numerous communities of people of African origin along the Onzole and Santiago rivers. He stayed at Limones until 1972. After his holidays and the renewal course in Italy, which moved him to study further the council documents and the new ecclesiology of communion, Mgr. Angelo Barbisotti sent him to Viche, on the road to Quinindé, to start a new parish.

All his letters of this period have been collected in a book published by EMI in 1976, *“Una Chiesa Sui Fiumi”* (A Church on the rivers).

Here are two brief extracts from these letters from which one can understand the unique style which, from his earliest years, Fr. Alberto adopted as his missionary methodology.

Viche, 8 April 1978: “Holy Saturday, during the celebration of the Vigil I baptised around thirty new Christians, many of whom were adults... The Lord is truly risen and this changes everything. I proclaimed it in three places on Easter Sunday: Viche, Male and Lagartera. It gives me great joy and much hope to see even in this world the victory over death, evil, injustice, poverty, hunger and all that our Lord has overcome by his resurrection”.

Chigue, 3 June 1972: “Here we are still cutting down trees to build the seminary... I visited areas I had never been before, along the banks of the rivers, going from hut to hut and gathering the people at night in the places appointed, bringing them whatever little bit of comfort I could with medicine and some good laughs... To visit a new chapel I walked up to my knees in mud

with my bag on my shoulder. I don't think I ever sweated so much and that was just to reach the first hut. All my life is like that, a continual proclamation of the Lord and a continual reawakening of these poor peo-

ple cut off from everyone”.

In 1978 he was one of a group of Comboni missionaries who, faithful to the charisma and attentive to the needs of other dioceses, made themselves available to leave Esmeraldas to go and start a new missionary experience in the diocese of Portoviejo, a much bigger diocese than Esmeraldas but with very few priests. He chose the difficult area of Honorato Vasquez where, together with Fr. Livio Martini, he dedicated 13 years of his life visiting and forming numerous Christian communities.

He had a methodology which we Comboni missionaries in Ecuador adopted as our own and which gave great fruits. It consisted in involving and committing the people: the local laity, not just to be faithful to their baptismal promises but also to commit themselves to the construction and growth of their own Christian community.

Various ministries emerged from this work with people who were trained through various courses of formation for communi-



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Celebration with an Indigenous community

Credit iStock - Salvador_Aznar

ty leaders, catechists, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, health agents, those in charge of chapels and those helping the poor. Fr. Alberto also knew how to make the laity responsible in the financial administration of the community. This resulted in his last work of creating a savings bank.

It was from this involvement of the people, but most of all from his example, that the first vocations to the religious, missionary and diocesan life emerged in a land where results were not foreseen. Besides, at that time and in accordance with the serious commitment he required of his Christians, a group of “lay women missionaries” was born. These were young women who were committed to serving the local Church through missionary activity in those areas of the diocese requiring a missionary presence for reasons of isolation or other needs. This group of people went ahead, defining itself ever more clearly, to the point where it became an association of consecrated persons approved by the Bishop.

Mgr. Mario Ruiz, Archbishop of Portoviejo, always maintained that the methodology of Fr. Alberto was “admirable” but could not be imitated. He was extremely exact and demanding in planning the visits to the communities, never omitting a single one, and especially in being faithful at any

costs to his commitments towards God, the people and the Institute. We might well say that he made his own the motto of Comboni: “I have only one life and I wish I had a thousand to spread enthusiasm for the missions”.

With great reluctance on his part, he was sent from Honorato Vasquez to El Carmen for seven years, to continue the pastoral work in the numerous rural communities. However, Fr. Alberto, chose to concern himself with “Manga de cura” where the Christians were more numerous; so he remained in the area, together with Fr. Antonio Mangili, from 1988 to his death. He founded the parishes of Bramadora and El Paraíso-La 14 and had plans to open the parishes of Santa Teresa and Santa Maria.

The number of chapels and churches built with the cooperation of the people during those years is countless, with many classrooms for catechism and, in the centres, buildings to house the formation courses of his collaborators. He left the Blessed Sacrament in many communities, as these were growing with great fervour.

In 2008, the doctors diagnosed a tumour of the pancreas but, after a course of chemotherapy, Fr. Alberto asked to return to his mission of La 14 to help the young priests of the diocese continue his pastoral

work.

In April 2009, he asked permission from the General Council to be looked after at the home of his brother Mario, in Bergamo, close to the “Blessed Luigi Palazzolo Hospital”. During his last weeks, his sister wanted him to be close to his mother, then 103 years old and a great missionary like her son. Fr. Alberto died peacefully, having at his side Fr. Enea Mauri who had gone to visit him on the afternoon of 16 October, in the parental home in Cologno al Serio.

The body will be buried in Ecuador. The bishops and the local people insisted so much that the family agreed that the body of Fr. Alberto should return to the missions for good so as to be a “missionary and priestly reference for the Ecuadorian bishops, clergy and faithful, especially in this year dedicated to the priest.

Fr. Alberto was a true son of St. Daniel Comboni. We may also apply to him what was written of the founder before his canonisation: *“Once he had clearly realised the genuineness of his missionary vocation, his entire life became dedication without reserve, coherent and constant despite all difficulties. His zeal seemed to have been sustained by faith in the universal value of the sacrifice of Christ and the urgency of his mandate to evangelise all peoples”.*

Meeting of Bishop Tesfaye Tadesse mccc with the Holy Father

At a meeting in Rome with Pope Leo XIV, Bishop Tesfaye was able to greet the Holy Father and hear from him his fondness and his offering of prayers for Comboni Missionaries throughout the world. Our cover page records this meeting of both on a 'Mission from God'.



Credit: comboni.org

Our former Superior-General, Father Tesfaye Tadesse mccc, who was consecrated Auxiliary Bishop of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia on February 2nd, 2025, recently met with Pope Leo XIV in the Vatican on a week-long Induction Course at the beginning of September for nearly two hundred newly appointed Bishops from all over the world.

In his address to the Assembly, the Holy Father reminded his audience that, "The gift you have received is not for yourselves, but to serve the cause of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You have been chosen and called to be sent as Apostles of the Lord and as servants of the Faith ... a bishop is called to serve the faith of the people entrusted to his care." Pope Leo encouraged the newly appointed bishops to be caring and attentive pastors, "I ask you, therefore, always to walk in humility and prayer, always to be close to the people to whom the Lord sends

you, and always to serve your sisters and brothers in the Faith". Echoing the words of the late Pope Francis, Leo reminded the gathering that, "The only authority we have as bishops is one of service, and a humble service at that!"

The Holy Father went on to touch upon a number of other relevant issues to his listeners: the spiritual life of bishops, the service of administration, the difficulties of transmitting the faith to younger generations in the modern world, the social teaching of the Church and the aspiration of many to a more fraternal world, the sufferings of the poor, the climate crisis, the plague of war and violence with the ethical challenges that question believers on the value of life and freedom. Embracing all these challenges, admittedly of a more spiritual, cultural or social nature, Pope Leo underlined the universal call to Mission for all the Faithful by calling on the assembled

bishops to assist the People of God in re-discovering the passion and courage needed for a new proclamation of the Gospel.

During his tenure as Superior-General of the Comboni Missionaries, Bishop Tesfaye had the opportunity of coming to know the then Cardinal Robert Prevost when he oversaw the Dicastery (Congregation) for Bishops in Rome. The Holy Father greeted Bishop Tesfaye particularly warmly and assured him that from his time as a missionary working in the foothills of the Andes in Peru, he has prayed in a special way for the work of the Comboni Missionaries in that country and indeed throughout the world. Through Bishop Tesfaye, Pope Leo offered his prayerful good wishes to the Members of the Order and to all those who support their missionary endeavours, especially their work with the more marginalised and disadvantaged in the South of the world.

On a Mission from God

On May 8, 2025, as white smoke rose above St. Peter's Basilica, history was made. The world learned that a humble priest from the South Side of Chicago — Robert Francis Prevost — had been elected pope. As Pope Leo XIV, he became the first American to hold the office and the second Latin America-formed pope in a row.

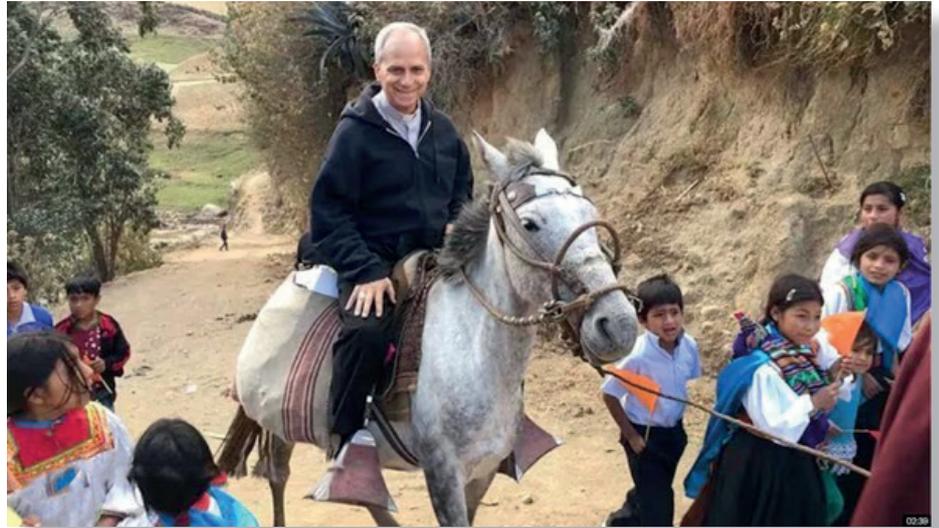
While Pope Francis brought to the papacy a deep missionary spirit rooted in pastoral service in Argentina, Leo XIV's formation was shaped by decades of direct missionary work abroad — not just among the poor, but as one of them. His years in northern Peru, living among forgotten communities, fixing parish trucks, delivering oxygen to flood victims, and walking dusty roads as both priest and neighbour, gave him a missionary identity forged not in theory but in daily presence. His papacy rises not from prominence, but from proximity.

Chicago-Born, Peru-Formed

Born in 1955 on Chicago's South Side, Robert Prevost joined the Order of St. Augustine in 1977 and was ordained in 1982. His early academic and pastoral work suggested a bright future, but his heart was drawn to the missions. In 1985, he accepted an assignment to Peru, joining the Augustinian mission in Trujillo, where he would spend the next fourteen years.

According to America Magazine, Prevost's arrival in Peru coincided with one of the country's most turbulent eras. The Shining Path guerrilla movement had ignited widespread violence, leaving entire regions gripped by fear. Prevost, however, embraced the risk.

"He served the Augustinian mission in



Fr Robert Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV, visiting communities on horseback. Credit: comboni.org

Trujillo for eleven years during a period of great disorder," writes Vatican journalist Gerard O'Connell, noting that he remained "calm and grounded" even amid the chaos.

In a 2023 interview, then-Archbishop Prevost reflected on the meaning of that missionary identity: "I still consider myself a missionary. My vocation, like that of every Christian, is to be a missionary, to proclaim the Gospel wherever one is."

A Missionary on the Margins

Prevost's missionary work was not flashy. He did not seek headlines or titles. Instead, he offered faithful presence. In the parish of Our Lady of Grace in Trujillo, he celebrated Masses in chapels made of adobe and tin, baptized children whose parents had no formal documents, and walked alongside people who had been forgotten by government and Church alike.

This simple, consistent ministry earned

him deep affection. As AP News reported, locals in Chiclayo referred to him as a "priest of the people," remembering how he washed parishioners' feet during Holy Week, visited sick children at home, and made emergency pastoral visits to remote areas — even if it meant crossing rivers or traveling by motor-bike.

In 1999, Prevost returned to the United States to lead his Augustinian province and later served as prior general of the entire order. But his heart remained in Peru.

Return to Peru: Shepherd of Chiclayo

In 2015, Pope Francis appointed Prevost bishop of Chiclayo, a sprawling, coastal diocese with more than a million Catholics. There, his quiet missionary charism found new expression in leadership. He launched formation programs for lay leaders, improved seminary training, and collaborated closely with Indigenous communities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Bishop Prevost coordinated diocesan efforts to provide oxygen tanks, food baskets, and medicine to rural communities, drawing praise from local civic leaders. But he did not just lead from a distance — he delivered supplies himself.

A Church That Goes Out

These years in Peru marked Leo XIV's deep embrace of what Pope Francis often called a "Church that goes out." He lived the very missionary spirit he now brings to the papacy: walking with the poor, listening before speaking, and serving before commanding.



Mission amongst the poor in Peru

Credit: comboni.org



Chiclayo on the northwest coast

Photo: pop-job

When he first appeared on the Vatican balcony as Pope Leo XIV, he greeted the world in Italian, English, and Spanish. But his most emotional moment came when he addressed Peru directly. “To my dear people of Chiclayo, of Trujillo, and all of Peru: Thank you. I carry you in my heart always,” he said.

Charism of a Missionary

In an interview with his Augustinian Order, Pope Leo XIV emphasized the consistent nature of the Church’s mission: “The mission of the Church has been the same for 2000 years, when Jesus Christ said: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...’ We must announce the good news of the Kingdom of God while we understand what the Church is in its universal reality.”

Quiet, But Not Passive

Though reserved by nature, Leo XIV was not passive. In 2020, when political unrest shook northern Peru over land rights and water access, Bishop Prevost stepped in as a mediator. His moral authority was respected by all sides. “He didn’t take sides, but he listened,” a community organizer told Reuters. “He helped us speak to each other again.”

This gift — building bridges — is central to his papacy. His first message as pope emphasized that the Church must be “a place of open arms, where all are welcomed, especially

those most in need.” He used the word mission repeatedly, signalling that his vision of Church is not one of retreat but of outreach.

Legacy and Promise

Now at the helm of the Catholic Church, Pope Leo XIV brings with him the smells and sounds of Chiclayo — the prayers of children, the laughter of catechists, the tears of grieving mothers. He brings a missionary charism that is not merely theoretical but lived.

He also brings a clear understanding of the Church’s priorities. “The three words we are using in the work of the Synod — participation, communion, and mission — provide the answer,” he said in 2023, summarizing the framework for a synodal Church with global reach.

Upon being named a cardinal, he offered this reflection that now takes on added meaning: “Being a cardinal is a mission of love with Christ, our Saviour... a cardinal is called to give his whole life in service to the Church.”

Shared Mission with the Combonis

Pope Leo XIV’s deep missionary spirit echoes the heart of the Comboni Missionary vocation: presence among the marginalized, dialogue rooted in respect, and service shaped by love. Like St. Daniel Comboni, Leo XIV has lived a mission grounded in humility and local empowerment — walking with the people rather than ministering from above. His papacy affirms the value of the path the Comboni Missionaries have walked for generations.



Travel in the countryside

Photo: holgs

National Relics Tour 2025

It was a privilege to receive in our chapel of the Sacred Heart, Sunningdale, the reliquary containing the relics of three great saints, St Andrew, St Margaret of Scotland and St Columba /Columcille on a fine evening in September. It was part of the National Tour 2025 organised by the Knights of St Columba and as such two Knights from the Ascot district, Tony Berkley and John Lynn, placed the reliquary at the side of the altar.

Mass followed, celebrated By Fr John of the Sunningdale community, and a large congregation filled the chapel. At the end of the Mass, members of the congregation approached the reliquary and devoutly revered the relics. We invoked the intercession of the saints for our all our friends and benefactors. Here we are pleased to place before our readers a summary of the saints' lives for you to reflect on and ask their continued protection!



Fr John, Tony Berkley, and several members of the congregation, gather at the Reliquary. Photo: Comboni.org

St Margaret of Scotland Feast Day - 10th June

St Margaret was born in Hungary an English princess and a Scottish Queen. She married Malcolm III of Scotland. She was a very pious Christian and it is reported that she had a civilising influence on her husband.

Queen Margaret is depicted as a strong, pure, noble character who had a huge impact on the Ecclesiastical history of Scotland.

Her notable works included:

- Sponsoring a ferry over the Forth of Firth for pilgrims to reach St Andrew's.
- Serving orphans and the poor every day before she ate
- Washing the feet of the poor in imitation of Christ
- Rising at midnight every night to attend the liturgy
- Inviting the Benedictine Order to establish a monastery in Dunfermline, Fife in 1072

Margaret was as pious privately as she was publicly. She spent much of her time in prayer, devotional reading, and ecclesiastical embroidery.

She was Canonised by Pope Innocent IV in 1250.



St Columba of Iona Feast Day - 9th June

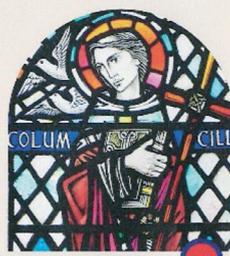
Columba, whose Irish name of Colmcille means Dove, was born in Gartan district, County Donegal, to aristocratic parents. He is believed to be descended from the line of High Kings of Ireland. He is regarded as one of the 12 Apostles of Ireland, as he completed his studies under St Finnian at his famous Clonard Abbey, County Meath.

In 563, following difficulties in Ireland and the advice of a hermit, he traveled to Scotland with twelve companions in a wicker curragh covered with leather.

According to legend he first landed on the Kintyre Peninsula, near Southend. However, being still in sight of his native land, he moved farther north up the west coast of Scotland. The island of Iona was made over to him by his kinsman Conall mac Comgall King of Dal Riata. Here he founded his famous monastery.

It is in the stories of St Columba we also find the first recorded story of the Loch Ness Monster, which legend says he banished from the River Ness.

To this day he is famous for his scholarly work, training missionaries and carrying Christianity into the farthest corners of Scotland. He is revered throughout Scotland and Ireland.



St Andrew the Apostle Feast Day - 30th November

He was born between 5 AD and 10 AD in Bethsaida, a village on the Sea of Galilee. He was the elder brother of Saint Peter, and was called by Jesus to become a 'fisher of men'.

He was baptised by John the Baptist. Andrew is involved in many of the major moments of Christ's life including the last supper.

Andrew preached about Christ around the Black Sea and through Greece. It was in Greece that he was told to stop spreading the teachings by the governor Aegeas as he still believed in the Roman gods.

When he refused, Andrew was sentenced to death by crucifixion in the city of Patras. It is believed that St Andrew refused to be crucified as Jesus was, it was reported that he was crucified on a cross in the shape of an X.

St Andrew the Apostle became the patron of Scotland as a result of St Regulus' mission to Scotland, where he brought the relics of St Andrew to Cil Rìmhinn in Fife. Not long after, St Andrew was declared the Patron Saint of Scotland following the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320.



Sister Mary Scholastica, Sister Of Mercy. “The Angel Of Mercy”

Since 1958 Sister Mary Scholastica has walked the streets of “canny auld Sunderland”, as the locals belovedly call their city and knocked on many a door asking for help from the various generous Catholic parishes of Sunderland, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Legion of Mary. She has appeared in several Catholic Primary and Secondary Schools of the Local Borough of Sunderland. For the past sixty years she has lived her life with simplicity and conducted the corporal works of mercy according to the rich charism and profound tradition of Catherine McAuley’s Religious Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy. With outstanding dedication, she has welcomed countless seafarers to the Port of Sunderland from all over the world.

Christmas is always a busy time for her and her group of helpers. With whole heart and soul, plus tireless energy, in the true spirit of Christmas, she will arrange for a Christmas Mass Celebration on board of the ships berthed on the banks of the River Wear. Several times whilst being at home Sister Mary Scholastica invited me to participate in such meaningful liturgies. With Filipino crews you always get a lively turn out and an enjoyable encounter.

She certainly does not have shiny wings and would not want to be considered as angelic in any way or form. I know she would take umbrage if you put her on the Christmas tree as an angel. From early infancy we are taught that God loves us, that He protects and guides us to our destiny. The Bible represents angels-archangels as God’s messengers to people, to help them conduct His plans: These ministering spirits –Heb.1,14, are often presented in human form. Michael as the angel who leads the fight against the



Sister Mary with the plaque recognising her mission to seafarers. Credit: Sunderland Echo

powers of evil. Gabriel is the messenger of the Annunciation. Raphael is the angel companion and healer in the Book of Tobias. Angels then are the sign of God’s guiding love and concern for us. Many people like Sister Mary Scholastica guide and help us in many ways by their love and care. They too, are God’s angels to us. God can send in human form any different messengers in our lives who simply live their lives the best as they can.

What would the Christmas Story be without the angels? Messengers of God abound in the Bible around Jesus’ birth. Angels visited Mary, Joseph, and Zechariah. The very night Jesus was born, a multitude of the heavenly hosts gathered to announce the great news to the shepherds. The glory of the Lord shone around them. In our case they will not have big white wings or robes. Instead, they will be clothed in human attire. They

will be people just like Sister Mary Scholastica who is well known in the Sunderland vicinity soften taken for granted.

She will receive the freedom of the City of Sunderland with great honour. She is a native born – and bred – colleen from Galway. She has coherently lived in the true spirit of Sunderland’s coat of arms -Nihil desperandum, auspice Deo – Never despair, trust in God. Working for and working with the poor is never easy, I know this from my many years of experiences as I am sure she herself experienced this many a time. Thanks to many of her colleague Sisters of Mercy and Wearside helpers they have made invaluable contributions to the lives of the “mack-ums.” God only knows how she and they have cheered so many sad utterly broken hearts with their unique MERCY touch.

By Catherine Ware

Angels in the Maelstrom

Mrs Catherine Ware, a faithful member, of the Sacred Heart Church Sunningdale, with her husband Michael, sends us her reflections on a period she spent in the local hospital. It reminds us of our hospital carers and health services that, despite so many obstacles, can bring comfort and renewed strength to patients at a time of their great need.



Attentive and compassionate nurses and carers

Credit iStock - ChrisSteer

My recent two-and-a-half-week hospital stay gave me a fresh perspective on both the challenges we face and the quiet miracles within our society. A 'uti' infection exacerbated the symptoms of my MS, a condition I have lived with for 30 years, turning a medical emergency into an unexpected education in the heart of our National Health Service.

Challenges included wards with a mix of regular patients like me and many suffering (sadly) from dementia. At first, the noise felt overwhelming. But gradually I began to see stories of courage, resilience, and the extraordinary care that holds it all together.

The nurses, though stretched thin, never faltered. With calm attention and unflinching compassion, they rose to every demand, proving that true care is as much about presence as it is about medicine.

Then there were the carers, I managed to

talk to quite a few of these good souls the majority of which were young Africans. Typically, they had attended missionary schools and were comfortable talking about God. Some of their names were related to God in some way such as being a 'gift of' or 'blessed by'. They were attentive, caring kind and unphased by their surroundings. In my view they were like angels.

I met Brenda, a spirited 90-year-old, who found herself back in hospital after her care plan fell through, yet even her misfortune revealed the safety net the NHS provides. Later, I was moved to Woking where I shared a ward with four remarkable women, all in their ninety's, including Pamela, a fiery retired army major. She was frustrated and demanding. I made it my mission to befriend her, and she mellowed a bit, but it was Prince, a gentle young carer, who truly worked wonders, even turn-

ing her frustration into laughter.

Through it all, I realised how blessed I was: still clear-minded, still supported by family and friends, when so many had no visitors at all. Community, I saw, is as vital as medicine.

Yes, the NHS is under strain. Yes, it is often criticised. But living within its embrace, I witnessed something extraordinary: a promise that no one faces illness alone. The nurses with endless patience, the carers with faith-filled hearts, the safety net that caught people like Brenda, all of it proof that compassion still thrives.

These are the angels in our modern maelstrom. What I witnessed was not perfection, but something rarer: people who choose compassion despite exhaustion, who bring dignity where it could so easily be lost, and who remind us that healing is not only physical, but deeply human and spiritual.

A pilgrimage to PATMOS

Patmos is one of many Greek Islands but has something special that caused me to visit.

Saint John says in the book of Revelation:

“I was on the island of Patmos for the sake of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

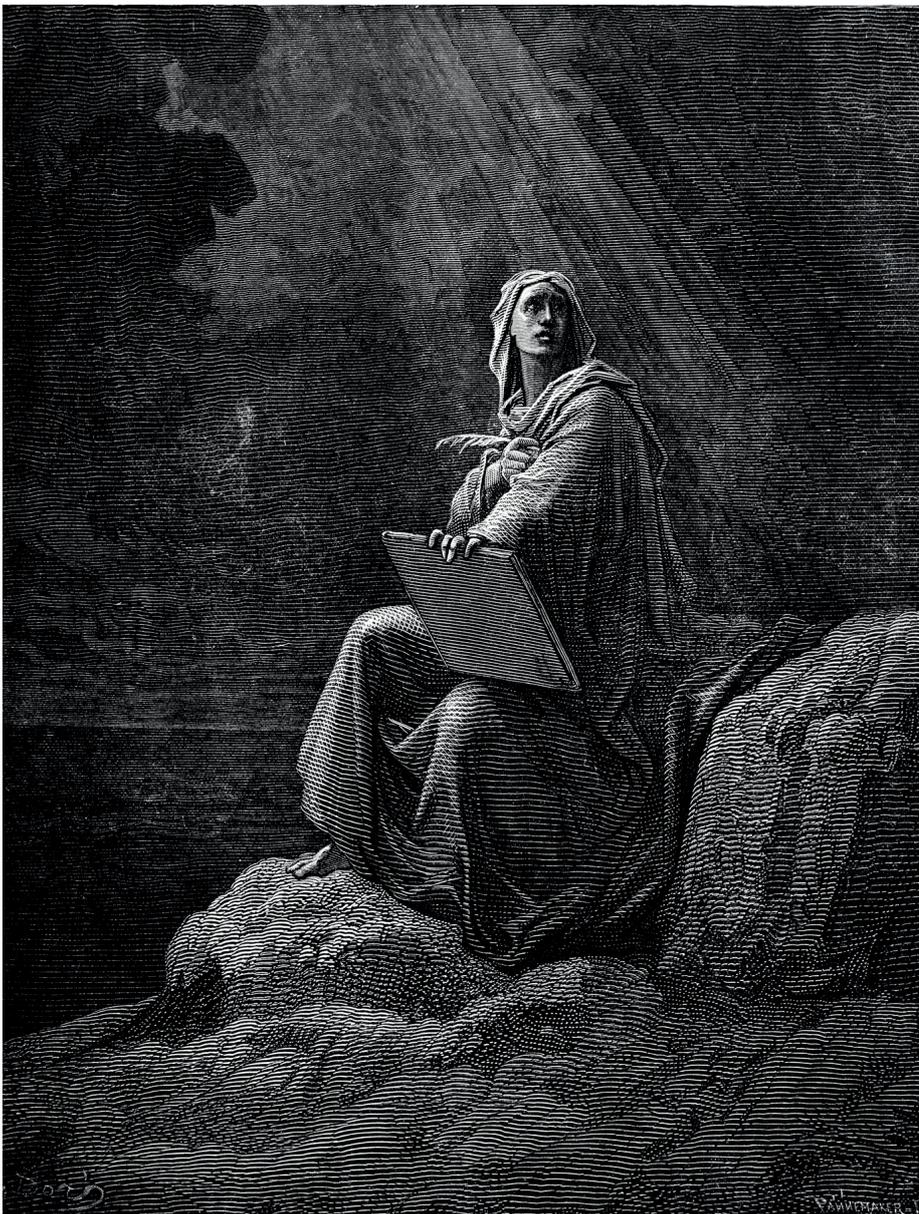
I too was on the island because of my faith in Christ; for this is where Saint John drafted the book of the Apocalypse or Revelation as it is more commonly known; and I was there on a pilgrimage/ holiday.

Saint John was believed to be the youngest of the Apostles and brother of

James, the sons of Zebedee. Known as the Apostle whom Jesus loved; as Jacob in the book of Genesis had a special feeling for Joseph his youngest son; Jesus had the same kind of feelings towards John, him being the youngest. John is the writer of the gospel of John, three letters and of course the book of Revelation. He was part of a leadership group, along with his brother James and Peter. The three singled out to be with Jesus for the raising of Jairus's daughter, the Transfiguration and close to him in the Garden of Gethsemane. For John, the transfiguration was a prefiguring of the appearance of Jesus at the cave on Patmos. He was also the only one not to desert his Lord at the crucifixion; being at the foot of the cross with Mary the mother of Jesus; and given Mary as his mother by Jesus; and he took her into his home. John was the only Apostle not to be martyred, being instead exiled to Patmos by the Roman authorities. At the end of the gospel of John, Jesus says to Peter referring to John, “If it is my will that he remains until I come, what is that to you?”

Rumour spread that John was not going to die; but Jesus was referring to his appearance to John in the cave at Patmos.

The Cave of the Apocalypse is a steep hill climb from the main port town of Skala, about a half hour's walk and nestles just below the main town of Hora. The original cave made of volcanic rock has been extended and now includes an entrance corridor where there is a shop selling religious items and further on a small chapel built onto the cave. There is one small window that looks down upon the port of Skala and the gloriously blue Aegean Sea and distant mountains. There is an enthusiastic sense of



Painting depicting St John at Patmos.

Credit iStock - duncan1890



Inside the Cave of the Apocalypse where St John drafted the Book of the Apocalypse.

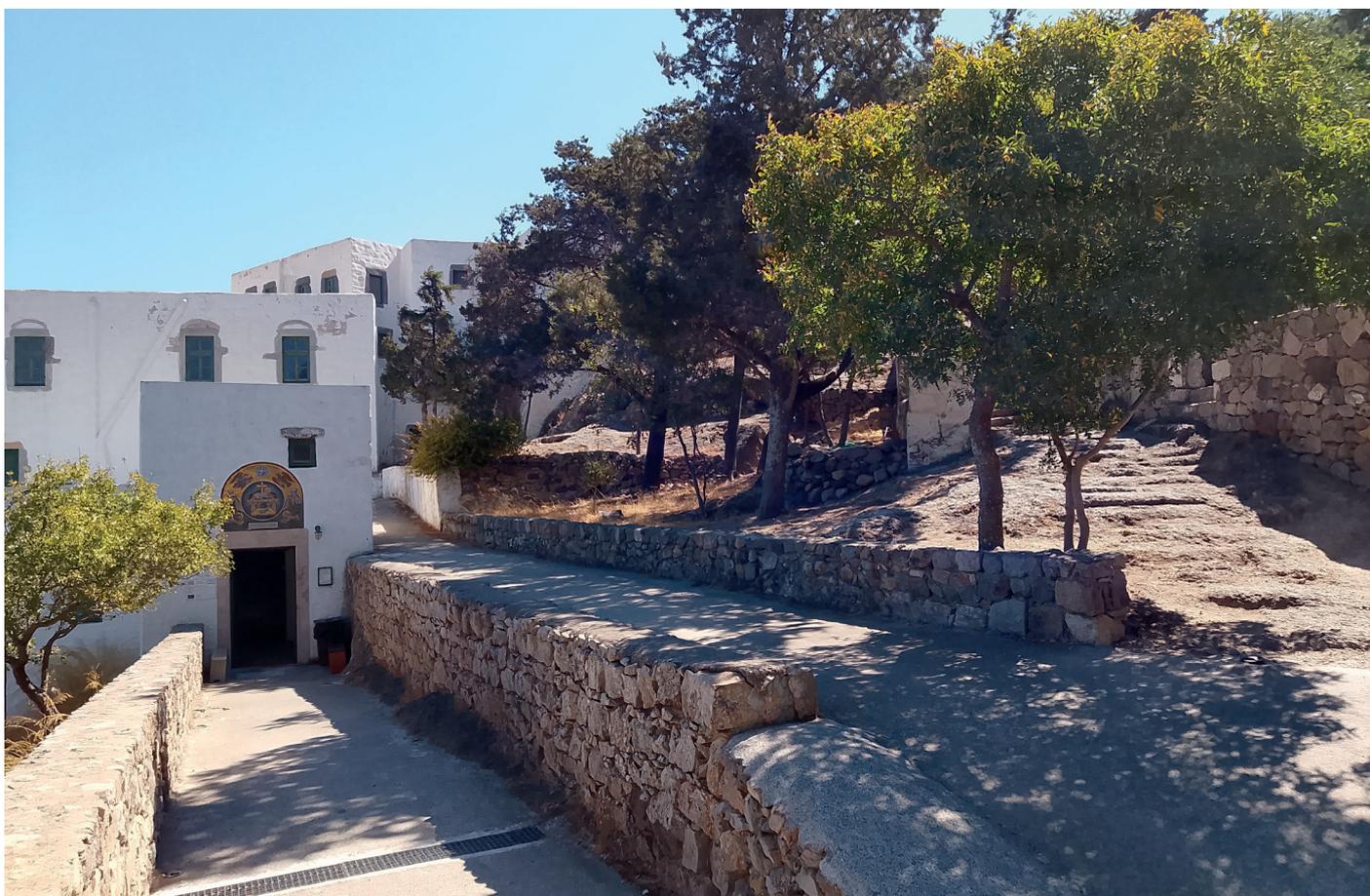
Credit iStock - Constantinos-iliopoulos

history about the place as I imagined John fasting and praying in the cave, receiving words of prophecy from the Lord. The chapel is adorned with icons, important in Orthodox worship and they are seen as windows into Heaven. There is an ornate wooden screen with

a red curtain where the priest enters to consecrate the bread and wine. He is hidden away and has echoes of the Old Testament where only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies. Under the roof of the cave there is another screen that shows images from his life.

Tradition says that when he heard the voice of the Lord three cracks appeared in the roof of the cave, believed to represent the Holy Trinity.

The book of Revelation is a complex book. It begins with John experiencing the Glorified Lord and being told to



Entrance to the Chapel /Cave of the Apocalypse

Photo: Comboni.org

write to the seven churches, calling them to repent and renew their commitment to their faith. It goes on to talk about the end times and the destruction of the wicked; but ends with the New Jerusalem coming down out of Heaven and the Lord being with the faithful forever. It is the last book of the Bible and ends with the call for the Lord Jesus to come. This is something we pray for as Christians which brings fulfilment when we will be united to our Lord and be with him forever.

yet know him. I also went to a service there on a Saturday morning. It was a special occasion. There were three priests and a Bishop. They all wore colourful vestments of red and gold; and the bishop had a crown of rubies and gold; along with a gold crozier. There were three lay men chanting the psalms; and one priest came out from the curtain with incense. The congregation did not seem to participate apart from occasional bowing and making the sign of the cross.

kissed his hand and he gave us the consecrated bread; The service lasted two and a half hours.

Above the cave is the town of Hora, where there is no traffic, just narrow pathways, and white flat roofed houses. At the very top of the mountain is the Monastery of Saint John, with huge castle like walls, dating back to the 10th century. There is access to parts of the Monastery, where they have ancient mural paintings, scenes from the gospels; and a museum with many icons and biblical texts, dating back to the fifth century. The monks are dressed in black robes known as enderi which represent death to the world. They wear tall flat-topped hats, (kalimavkion,) long beards and long hair tied back. They appear like living icons, closely resembling the icons that adorn the walls of the monastery.

On the Sunday morning, I went to a service in the port town of Skala. It was like the Cave service and many locals attended. In the cave everyone received communion, but here only the children. I was told afterwards that the adults are supposed to fast and attend the sacrament of reconciliation to be able to receive communion and nobody adheres to this ruling, so nobody receives except the children! A twelve-month-old baby also received communion. Recently baptised and allowed communion for three services.

I also visited the Convent of the Annunciation; which is set in beautiful grounds; and the church has ceiling and wall paintings from the scriptures. There are numerous churches on the island; some so small they can only accommodate half a dozen people.

The island itself is incredibly beautiful; with quiet beaches, surrounded by mountains. There are three main towns: Grekos, Skala and Hora. The landscape is very dry; but has olive groves, pomegranate trees and lemon groves. It was blue sky and sun every day; a veritable paradise on Earth, tasty Greek food at reasonable prices and Greek lager, very thirst quenching and only 4 Euros. And of course, the wonderful cave of the Apocalypse! I recommend it as a perfect holiday and pilgrimage place.



An icon portraying an orthodox monk.

Photo: Comboni.org

There are many pilgrims that visit the cave; but I was fortunate one day to be alone there and had an hour of quiet prayer where I experienced a great peace and the Lord seemed to emphasise the importance of sharing the Good News of salvation to those who don't

Holy Communion was ministered by one of the priests using a long silver spoon containing the body of the Lord soaking in the blood; a tradition that goes back to the 12th century. When the service ended the bishop held pieces of bread in one hand; the faithful

Funds Allocated For Projects Requested From The Missions 2025

Through the generosity of our many benefactors we have been able to provide aid for the following mission projects.

Fr. Jemil Araya from Eritrea has submitted a project proposal for the repair and maintenance of old cars.

£6,000.

Drilling of a borehole to increase the provision of water to the youth centre of “Chikowa Youth Development Centre,”

\$5,000 USD.

Request for the Province of Peru: a contribution for further works needed in the house which is to host the Scholastics in Lima.

£5,000

“Dignity for girls: protecting and empowering young girls through education, health and Christian formation.” Project present by Comboni Missionary Sisters of Malindi province, Kenya

£4,000

Help to provide accommodation for an elderly woman in Kenya (mother of a Comboni sister).

£3,000

Request for financial help for formation of catechists and evangelization. Presented by Fr. Mitiku Habte mcccj of Nakwamekwii, Lodwar, Kenya. Total cost of the program

£4,000

'Life'

House in Fort Portal Uganda

For many years Jean Johnson has been bringing education and development, the Good News, to many parts of Africa, and particularly Uganda. A long-time contributor to 'Comboni Mission' and friend of the Comboni Missionaries she now offers our readers an insight into her latest project in Uganda: a heart-warming account of her work with homeless and pregnant girls at the Life House.

Relecting on twenty years of retirement projects in Uganda, I am sure God's hand was behind events which led to cooperation to help homeless, pregnant young women. I met a Ugandan missionary priest at Edgbaston Oratory, where we both went to hear a bishop from Iraq. Approaching retirement, I told him that I wanted to use my skills in chemistry and education to help people in Africa. He arranged a two-week exploratory stay, in November 2004, at a Ugandan Catholic boys' school, whose Head was Fr Aloysius. Whilst I was there, the President announced that, instead of many doing only biology, all three O level sciences would be compulsory from 2005. I had the skills to train teachers, and as a Fellow knew I could get initial support from the Royal Society of Chemistry, and, through them, at the right time, help from the Institute of Physics. On returning home, at my local church, I found Fr Am-



Jean brought aid to victims of famine in Uganda.

Photo credit - Jean Johnson

brose, brother of Fr Aloysius, saying Mass! He was then a senior member of staff at a Kampala seminary, briefly in Europe. He arranged to meet me at the airport in Feb-

ruary 2005, and on every subsequent visit, and for me to stay overnight with Sisters based in the grounds of his seminary. On our journeys, we found a common interest in Prolife; I met his seminary Prolife group on every visit. At the proper time, we arranged a national Prolife conference with speakers from UK LIFE and, soon after, a visit by Jack and Nuala Scarisbrick, founders of LIFE, who spoke in many schools, universities, seminaries, and churches (Catholic and Anglican). The idea of a LIFE House was planted.

At our Conference, individual delegates attended, and also one outstanding group: Rwenzori Prolife and Childcare, founded by Gorret and her brother, a priest, after their father received 'please stop abortion' leaflets from Japan. They had a base in



A group of girls at the Life home.

Photo credit - Jean Johnson



Children gather for Mass at the Newman primary school.

Photo credit - Jean Johnson

Fort Portal town, offering counselling support. Subsequently, Gorret, Fr Ambrose and I decided to buy a plot of land just outside Fort Portal. My Pro-life interest had been inspired by De Maire Heley, one of the earliest LIFE members. She was terminally ill, so I decided to build a Pro-life house, which would be in her memory. Our first building opened in 2017, with two girls, aged 16 and 17, both pregnant,

homeless and with little education. Typically, in our extended facilities, we have around twenty-five girls. Currently there are twenty-six girls and seven babies. Another fifty or so youngsters attend our town centre base which offers learning support skills. Schools give pregnancy tests every term; pregnant girls are expelled. Usually, their parents also throw them out, so the girls we help are preg-

nant, penniless, and homeless.

I spent around ten weeks a year in Uganda until Covid, and much of my time at home fund raising. Facilities were simple and costs manageable. As time passed, I also needed funds to support students doing degrees in science, nursing or medicine; also buildings and equipment for the chemistry training, as it expanded nationally, as well as for my beloved Newman Primary School which I built in a very poor village. I did appeals at any church or institution that would have me, resulting in a nucleus of generous supporters, a few of whom still help. My own funds now go mainly to Newman Primary and individuals like Dr Moses, recently returned to S Sudan after postgraduate surgical study in Uganda. Occasionally, projects overlap for example, Gyaviira, who I supported to study chemistry, is now deputy Head of a coed secondary school. I arranged a visit to our House to learn how girls could make reusable sanitary protection.

Apart from my own emergency interventions, and my provision of Christmas lunches, our House has wonderful support. Kathleen, who studied chemistry with me in the 1960s, introduced me to her parish in Scotland. They have raised many £1000 donations for improvements



Jean at the canonisation of John Henry Newman in Rome

Photo credit - Jean Johnson



Caring for cows.

Photo credit - Jean Johnson

such as decoration, furnishings, security fences, and solar panels (low cost and without frequent power cuts!)

We have a plantation where girls grow vegetables such as matooke (plantain bananas cooked and eaten as vegetables) and spinach, along with some fruit. Disaster struck in 2024: the expected rainy season did not come so we had no harvest. Thus began our latest project: Kathleen's parish bought one cow and Joseph from the West Midlands another. Early this year each

produced a calf, giving a steady supply of milk for the girls and a surplus to sell each day, giving money to buy food. Cows eat grass in the rainy season, but I need to intervene with funds for food for the dry season. Three cows are now pregnant so we should have ample milk in 2026. Kathleen also has a young Legion of Dairy! They collected Bric a Brac, from toys to plants, and made home bakes to auction, raising £500. Some donations and a generous financial gift await the next auction.

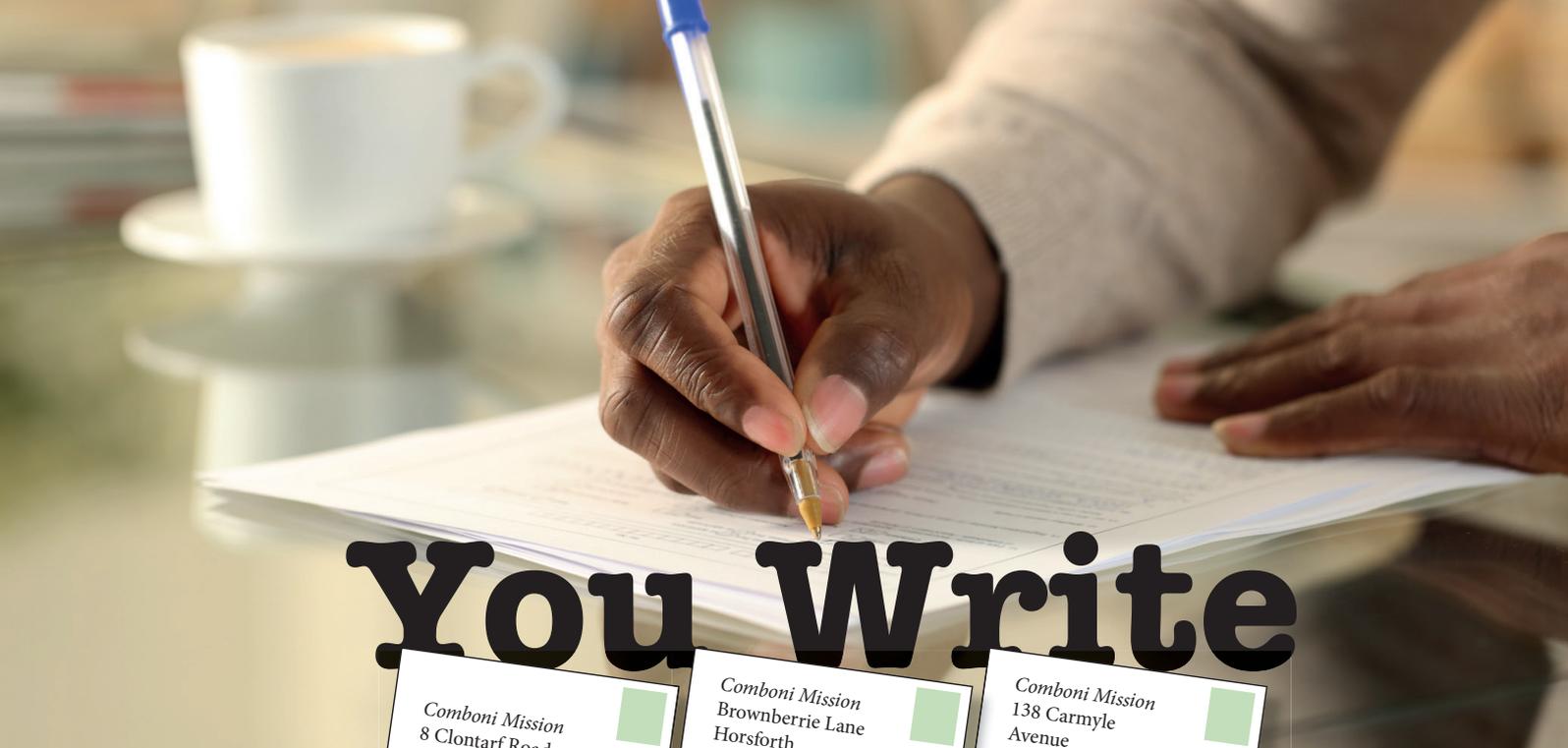
Aside from employment, and running the House, Gorret, who has Catholic and secular University degrees in education, human rights and counselling, helps organisations including a refugee's settlement, a remand home, and a prison for young people. She gives regular Pro-life talks to schools, Christian radio, and others, from an Anglican women's retreat to Muslim university students. Belgian university internship students visit annually, social workers offering life skills and mental health support to the girls. Girls learn how to live together, care for their babies, grow food and care for cows. They learn skills like hairdressing, knitting and sewing.

As we approach our annual Christmas remembrance of the birth of our Saviour, in a manger, this project displays many features highlighted by Pope Leo in *Dilexite*. It is part of 'the church's mission to all those living in the existential peripheries, who need to be welcomed, protected, promised and integrated.' Most of the girls are truly amongst 'the poorest of the poor' who 'have a special place in God's heart.' example.' Pope Leo says, 'Christians must not abandon almsgiving.' This project, with financial generosity of UK friends and of our Ugandan friends, with their time and skills, offers an example this Christmas of the 'preferential option for the poor.'



Girls learning skills in the centre.

Photo credit - Jean Johnson



You Write

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Thank you once again for your most welcome letters. It reminds us that some people do read our missionary magazine! Reading today is becoming less and less a daily pleasure. To encourage you all our readers: to let us know your thoughts and opinions, I will post here my address so that your comments come directly to our office!

**Editor, Verona Fathers - Email: jdcomboni@gmail.com
London Road, Sunningdale SL5 0JY#, Berks, England**

Dear Fr John,
We have just received the Autumn edition of your magazine. Thank you very much!

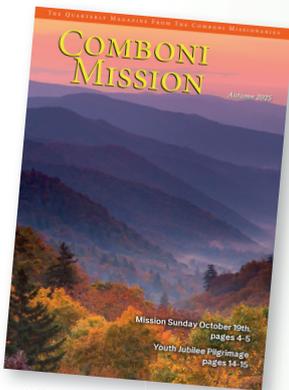
You were saying that reading today is becoming less a daily habit. Not

at all for us! We love your magazines, and our children love to read them!

We keep all the copies.

They are wonderfully edited, and we thank you so much for your work. They are most important in our life as we get a glimpse of the difficult but wonderful work of the Comboni missionaries. We hope that our regular donations can help maintain your wonderful mission.

*With our best wishes
Peter and Claudia Dobo.*



Hello Fr John,

I love to stay connected with your magazine. I knew the Combonis at Elm Park church and in particular Frs. Toninello and Grace who were always ready to serve our school needs.

I collaborated with the Apostles of Jesus in Uganda. I have been to Moroto often and loved the article published this month. It is a tough place, and your bishop does a wonderful job.

I recently visited Limone the home of your Founder, St Daniel Comboni but in the process suffered a slight accident and crushed several vertebrae.

*God bless you and all your work,
Jean M Johnson*

Dear Fr Clark,
I have just read your article 'Unmitigated Slaughter in Gaza,' page 6.

Thank you for having the courage to speak on this delicate subject. I agree wholeheartedly with you.

*Yours sincerely,
Mr Noble,
Houghton Le Spring*

*Destruction in Gaza.
Credit iStock - emanuel acosta*



Poem and photo by Fr David Bohnsack mccj



When Love took flesh that silent night
Our deepest hope now to reveal
Emmanuel has come to heal
And angels sing with sweet delight

No palace halls no throne of might
Twas humble shepherds came to kneel
When Love took flesh that silent night
Our deepest hope now to reveal

As darkness must give way to light
God's tender mercy's made so real
That every heart its joy can feel
A new day dawned so pure and bright
When Love took flesh that silent night



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www.combonimissionaries.co.uk
www.combonimissionaries.ie
www.southworld.net

