

A healthy distance

The Japanese Catholic community in Hong Kong celebrated the Fifth Sunday of Lent with a Eucharist by teleconference. Church gatherings had been cancelled for over two months in Hong Kong because of the Coronavirus pandemic forcing a restriction on all large gatherings. So three of us on the Columban General Council here in Hong Kong decided to reach out and concelebrate the Eucharist while beaming it live from our house in Kowloon. It was the first time we had tried praying with a community in this way and it went surprisingly well. People were able to participate by their prayerful responses together and by reading the Scriptures and the Prayers of the Faithful.

It was this Japanese Catholic community's first opportunity to share prayer together for over two months, so people were delighted to meet up, greet each other on the screen, and lift their spirits while they prayed in their own language. It was a rich spiritual experience and many are planning to log in for the next Mass which will be on Easter Sunday. Like most parts of the world, we do not know when this Coronavirus pandemic will run its course and when we will be able to return to our weekly Eucharist downtown.

Social distancing is a new word for us to try and understand, let alone put into practice, and it was a new experience for me to be interacting with a Eucharist community up on a large screen. Here in Hong Kong people are well disciplined at keeping a distance since this pandemic occurred as they have strong memories of previous viral outbreaks and so regular hand washing and the wearing of masks whenever one leaves one's house was not too difficult to accept. However, it puts a strain on the social fabric of a city which has not yet recovered from a long bitter period of public demonstrations last year.

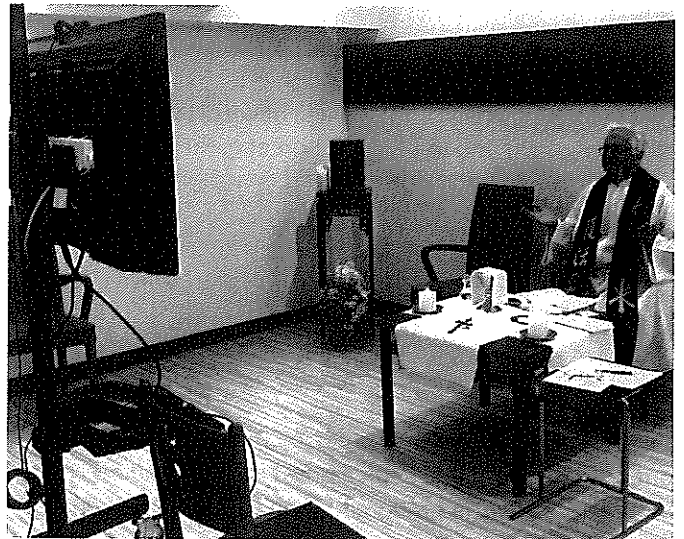
Columbans in various countries have been caught away from home with the new travel restrictions and not been able to take up their assignments or return to previous assignments from vacations. One Columban was not able to return home in time for his mother's funeral because of the new quarantine restrictions and travel difficulties. It is not new for Columbans to be caught in transitions as they often spend months waiting for the granting of visas but this time there is fear and anxiety in the air as there are so many uncertainties about the future. Mobility was an issue during the Second World War too when many newly ordained Columbans were not able to take up assignments overseas and moved into other ministries as they waited

for peacetime. So Columbans are rediscovering that part of their history and are again sharing those experiences with most of the world as we all develop new understandings for words such as "isolation" and "lockdown", whether it is in places like mainland China or most other countries of the world.

Our societies are discovering how we are all interconnected with each other and with our universe which is a healthy process and yet at the same time we are moving into an age when we are again living with more uncertainties. Building trust across cultures and faiths is so important at this time and missionaries have a role to play. In many countries, politicians do not classify religion as an "essential service" but it has a huge role to play in bringing hope, love and sound values to our society. This is a time to be generous, patient and kind to each other. As our house-bound small Japanese Catholic community here in Hong Kong moves toward the celebration of Easter we are sharing with you our prayer for the healing of the sick and a quick discovery of a vaccine. We are trusting in the presence of the Risen One who is walking beside us every step of the way.

Recently the Pope gave a talk and blessing on a rainy day in a deserted *St Peter's Square* with an international television audience estimated at about 11 million. We had just over 11 people tuning in to ours in our small chapel.

Columban Fr Brian Vale is the Vicar General for the Missionary Society of St Columban.



Fr Brian Vale celebrating the Fifth Sunday of Lent by teleconference.