



An Interview with Fr. John Burger



Fr. John Burger

Columban Mission: Until the end of 2021 you were regional director of the Columbans and well-known to our readers; what have you been doing since?

John Burger: My term of office as regional director finished on November 23, 2021, and that same week I turned 75. It seemed a good time to hand over the director's office and responsibilities to someone else. The members saw that Father Saenz was a good choice to succeed me. I mentioned that my term was ending to a Sister in Philadelphia and she told me that Camilla Hall was looking for a chaplain. Camilla Hall is both a convent and a healthcare center for the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. I was taught by the Sisters in grade school and am originally from the Philadelphia area, so I applied for the position. It has been a homecoming for me.

CM: How did you decide to enter the Columban Seminary?

JB: During high school we had a series of religion textbooks that captured my imagination. It was quite a different approach from the catechism questions and answers I was used to. I also had a pen pal in Japan and discovered an interest in Asia. I was also reading books I found inspiring, such as "Deliver Us from Evil" by Dr. Tom Dooley. But I knew I would never be a medical doctor.

During those years, I met my first Columban priest, a friend of my mother's family who had spent 25 years in Burma (now Myanmar), and he was quite an interesting character! I had a couple of uncles and other relatives who were missionary priests. But I shied away from applying to that community. At that time they did not have any mission in Asia and I felt I did not want to go through life as "Father Bill's nephew."



Camilla Hall

CM: How long have you been a Columban priest?

JB: I entered the Columban seminary right after graduation from high school in 1964. I became a temporary member of the Columbans in 1968 and was ordained in 1973. A friend who knew that I have spent my whole adult life as a Columban remarked, "You have been doing the same thing for 50 years!" But that is not how it has felt to me. Over the years of my life as a priest, I have been a student priest, a parish priest, a teacher, a seminary rector, a counselor, an editor, an administrator and now a chaplain. Each assignment brought with it its own requirements for skills and even virtues.

Besides living in several states from New England to the Great Plains, I have lived outside the U.S. in Japan, Ireland, Hong Kong. And for various reasons, I have visited many others. It has not been a boring life.

CM: Do you have any achievements that you are most proud of?

JB: There is a Japanese proverb that says. "You are a fool if you never climb Mount Fuji and a fool if you climb it twice." I am a fool who climbed it twice. But not in recent years!

I have a couple of Master's degrees, but I consider my diploma from Japanese language school the top personal accomplishment. It was such an important key to being able to function as a missionary over there. It is not that I ever mastered the language, but I never gave up.

And, I once had a hole-in-one while on the golf course, but it was more good luck than skill. And catching sight of a little sign that read "rattlesnakes in the rough" helped my concentration!

CM: What talents do you wish you had?

JB: Maybe in the next life I will have a good singing voice! And it would not be bad to be better at sports. It would be great to have sufficient golf skill not to spoil a good walk with friends.

More seriously, as I mentioned above, each assignment for a priest has demands of a variety of different talents. As chaplain in a nursing home, being able to be present to the dying and respond to their needs is certainly important. Bringing confidence in God, and accompaniment in life's final journey makes for a demanding job description.

Columban Fr. John Burger lives and works in Pennsylvania.

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