

# Mission Connections

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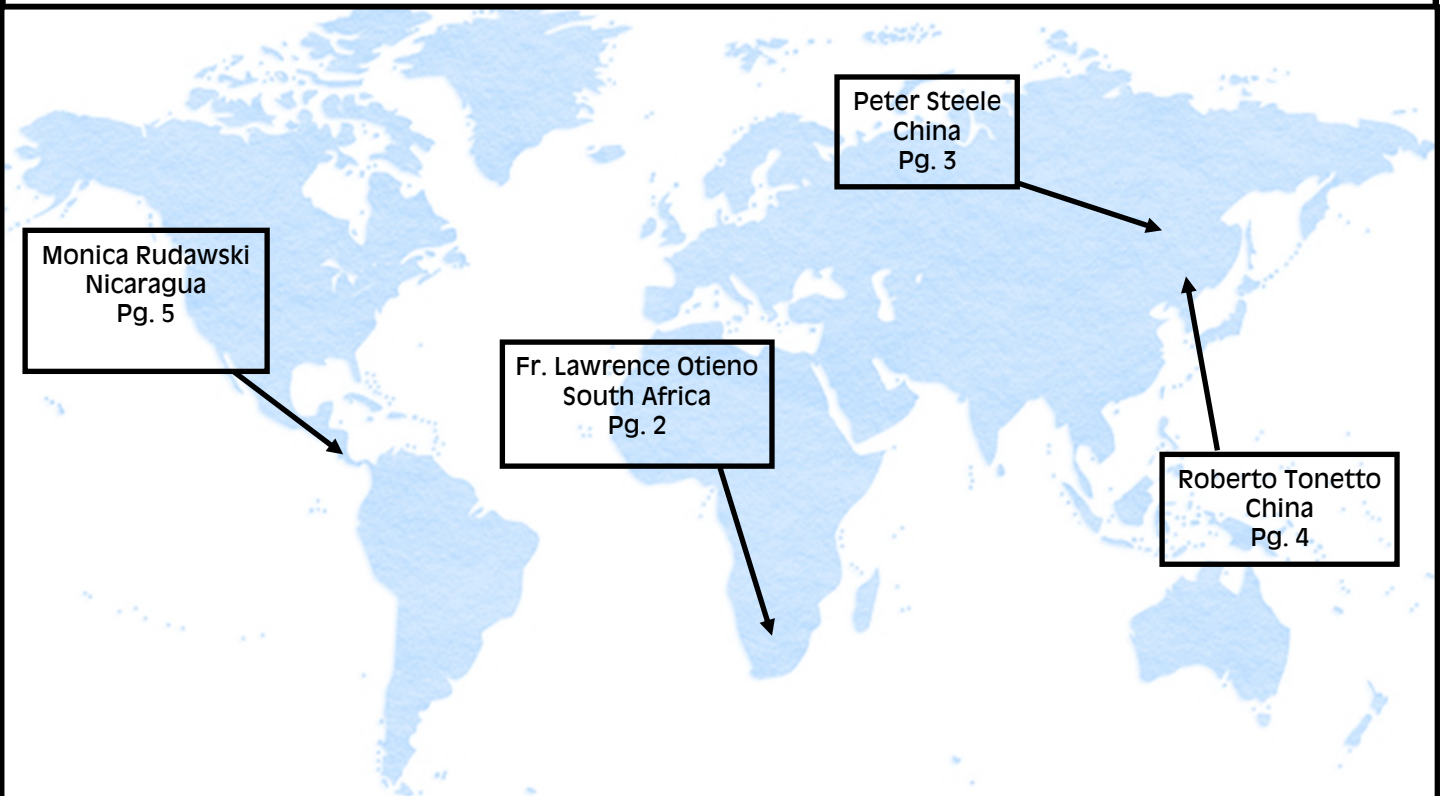


## *Prayer for an Open Heart*

God, give me an open heart, a generous heart, a humble heart. Give me a heart so free, so fearless, that I offer love without requirement. To love as You love, holding others as beloved. Loving them in this moment exactly as they are, praying they follow their true path in life, regardless of where it takes them.

Give me a heart gentle and willing to love them as they would be loved, with honor and respect, kindness and humor, joy and friendship. Give me a love so pure and vast, so simple and strong, that it cherishes the loved and the loving asking nothing in return.

Amen.



From Whom and Where in the World do our stories come from?

## Mission of Love

*Story and Photos by Fr. Lawrence Otieno, MHM*

Christ the divine physician ministered to the sick. He reached out to the sick who believed in him with love and compassion, (cf Mk 6: 53-56). His encounter with them became a grace filled experience which enabled them to meet with God, His mercy and the healing touch that restored their health, relationship with Him and their neighbors. His mission to the sick was a revelation of the presence of God and his saving love at work in the world by overcoming human suffering. The sick too were included in the circle of this saving love of God at work in Jesus of Nazareth.



Seen above: Fr. Lawrence Otieno at a celebration for the 23rd Anniversary of Fr. John Kaiser's death

Visiting the sick and the elderly is part of my missionary work in the parish. Moved by the spirit of love and service, I visit them in their homes and in health centers around the parish twice a month. And every visit gives me the opportunity to meet them individually, see their health conditions, listen to their stories, pray with them, listen to their confession and give them the Blessed Sacrament. Some of them live alone; others are living with their family members but in a very difficult conditions which can even prevent them from going to the hospitals for better treatment.

Those living alone and those who are very poor are also

given a donation of food and their family members are encouraged to take them to hospitals. They are happy and grateful for the regular visits, they feel that they are part of the Church and grateful for the support they receive from the parish. Mission to the sick has been good, through it, I learn the local language (Sesotho), accept my helplessness in the face of human misery and keep on giving my time and support to the sick in the parish.

Catechists too have been helping a lot in the mission to the sick. Catechists are *co-workers* in the work of evangelization and their contribution for the growth of the Church and faith in the parish cannot go unmentioned. Through working with them I found that they need an on-going formation and I am glad this formation has extended to the diocesan level. With Fr. Thabo, we organize team meetings, recollections, and retreats, workshops on liturgy, the Bible and teachings of the Church for the catechists.

Mission to these *co-workers* is bearing fruit in the parish. Their commitment and participation in the work of evangelization is improving. Their knowledge of the word of God and teachings of the church have improved and they are reaching out more to the people of God, teaching catechesis with renewed understanding and leading the communion services in the absence of the priests.

Monthly team meetings are also occasions of listening to them, planning pastoral activities in the parish, praying and celebrating the Eucharist and for socializing as a discipleship team. Catechists are gifts to the Church, paying close attention to them and planning some on - going formation programs for them can improve their participation in the life and mission of the Church and make them authentic witnesses of Christ.

May Jesus, the Lord of the mission renew our zeal for mission and inspire us to bring glad tidings to those around us, the sick, and the catechists who go extra miles to strengthen the faith of the people of God and give them hope in our parishes.

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Donations for any of the missionaries or mission connections mentioned here may be made in care of the Mission Office.

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## Unexpected Joy



*Story and Photos by Peter Steele*

Greetings, I am writing this from Southeast China, where I have been living and working since August 2007. I married a local lady here named Jenny and we have five kids ranging from age 4-11. Having five kids in China makes us feel like minor celebrities. We sometimes get stared at or commented on when we go out in public as a family. It is rare to have more than a couple kids in China due to the One Child policy that had been instituted for decades. It has recently been relaxed. While I don't like the extra attention, I cannot help but laugh or smile when I see people's baffled reactions when they realize there's five kids. I have literally seen someone's mouth drop as they counted.

A brief history of my story. During my last semester studying at St. John's University I had no job prospects, no clue what I wanted to do, and no girlfriend at the time. While studying in the library I saw a last minute reminder for a lecture being given by Fr. Scott Harris on the Maryknoll Lay Missioner Volunteer Program in China. After one hour, I was wholeheartedly convinced this program was for me: live in China for one year, teach oral English to university students, receive a small living stipend to eat and live a life, meanwhile experiencing their very dissimilar and longstanding culture, and even get some time to travel around. I went through their interview process, was accepted, and in mid-August of 2007 I was on a plane for Hong Kong for a 2-week orientation. After those two weeks, I was sent to a city in Guangdong province, a city of roughly 5 million people, small by Chinese standards. There I was to be a native English-speaking teacher at a university.

The day I left for China, my eldest sister said I was going to find my wife there, get married and never come back. I retorted in complete disagreement, but one week into my time in China, I met Jenny. Two years later, we got married. I hate it when my sisters are right! My dad was able to come to marry us, while a Maryknoll priest, Fr. Mike Sloboda, presided over the wedding. We also did a small traditional Chinese ceremony at Jenny's hometown, an island village

smack in the middle of the Pearl River Delta. Jenny's grandmother, who at the time was in her upper 80's thought I hailed from the neighboring Guangxi province. Bewildered, I asked if she was of sound mind. I found out she had never stepped off that tiny island, never went to school, and when she was 14 she entered an arranged marriage. For her, the furthest place she could imagine was Guangxi province.

Fast forward to today. Since 2012, I have been operating a small English language center where students come on the weekends for small-sized English classes during the Spring and Fall semesters. We also do Summer and Winter camps, with which we have taken students abroad to Ireland, Minnesota, the United Kingdom, and in August 2023 we did a camp in Southwest California. These camps are great opportunities to help build bridges between China and the West.

During the Fall and Spring semesters, I teach English to Kindergarten through 9th grade students using a sort of didactic or moral approach of teaching. Through this I am able to combine learning English with the importance of good manners, kindness toward others, and even add in several Benedictine core values I gleaned from my time at St. John's University. Culturally I cannot be too overt on working these values into classes, it would not be my place as a guest in this country, and I am unqualified to teach such. However, I can work with kids teaching them to be good stewards of their beautiful country while engaging topics of morals, justice, and hospitality without delaying or disrupting their mastery of the English language.

My classes are conducted during weekends. During the rest of the week Monday through Thursday, my family and I spend our time at a Hansen's Disease rehabilitation center located upon a mountain out in the country about an hour from the city. This center was built by Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers over 100 years ago. A testament to the original missionaries' incredible talents and God-given gifts, most of the patients here are Catholics and all the buildings erected are still standing strong today!

I was introduced to this center during my time with Maryknoll. A year later in 2009, my dad visited the center with me. This became an annual trip, that annual trip turned into a weekly trip with my family to pray with them. It further developed into a meal and prayers, then a whole day each week, and now we spent most of our time there. Many of these patients, now in their 60's or older, were cast out from their homes and families years ago due to their affliction and misunderstandings of the disease. They enjoy our visits and relish spending time with our young children, as they seldom see or hear young children. The time we have spent with the volunteers and the patients there has been the most incredible blessing. We get to pray with these people, hear their stories, and build bonds with them. We are grateful for our time there and for God in how he opened our hearts to bring us there. We wouldn't have it any other way. Thank you for reading this and letting me share a bit of my story!

## Spotlight on Mission

*There are countless mission activities happening all the time both in the St. Cloud Diocese and around the world. All these mission activities are important to the work of celebrating our global Church. In this issue we highlight Roberto Tonetto serving in China.*

*Story and photos by Roberto Tonetto.*

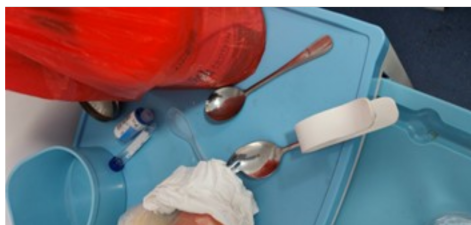
Today I want to share the flavor of hope, albeit in a simple experience that has become profound and full of life thanks to love and gratitude. I want to share it with you, because without you, nothing I am about to write would have happened.

As you may have heard, before Christmas 2022 they lifted all restrictions for controlling the pandemic policies, or COVID Zero policies here. At the turn of the holidays until the Chinese New Year, almost all of us caught Covid. After which they finally allowed us to resume visits to villages even outside the region where we live.

During the first tour, we deliberately chose to go and visit those who were the most isolated, since they needed our attention the most. We travelled mountain roads where our van passed with difficulty, but the joy was worth it. Entering the villages everyone came to meet us and, embracing us, told of their fear we would no longer come to visit them. Others then wore what remained of their “overused” shoes... the same then also with the prostheses that needed maintenance and were now unusable.

But the greatest emotion was reserved for a new tool, which we developed and designed during the months when, due to the pandemic, we could not leave the village because it was in lockdown. What is it? A spoon! Some will laugh, but try to think of all our friends who have lost their fingers. Imagine the difficulty they have to face daily while doing a simple activity that is as normal as it is extremely necessary, eating. Those who are fingerless cannot hold a fork, a spoon, and of course not even chopsticks. Often, eating with them, we observed with what skill, using their mouths, they tied a spoon onto the palm of their hand with a piece of fabric. They did so in such a way to make the utensils usable.

Looking around on rehabilitation tools, we saw cutlery that carried a kind of sting that allowed them to be fixed to the palm of the hand, but even here the string could only be tied using the mouth. We tried our solution to the problem: using a thermoplastic material, such as that of water pipes, we could give it an “S” shape so that it could be fixed with rivets on the top of cutlery. This created a



groove used to insert the palm of the hand in a simple and stable way without fixing it with strings of cloth that involved the

use of the mouth. While looking for a spoon suitable for our needs, we found one that its edge is half spoon and half fork. It can be used for both drinking soup and eating noodles or meat.

When people saw this new product, they immediately started calling those who needed it most. We put them to the test and realized the great usefulness of the simple tool that, literally, is making people’s lives easier and therefore also more joyful. I think I felt what an elderly priest here used to say: “my joy is the happiness of those I am called to serve.”



In a society that incites us to think first of ourselves, of our race, of our close circle of friends, we find ourselves more and more isolated, distrustful, and above all, less and less happy. The solution, I believe lies precisely in this principle: the more one loves and takes care of the needs of others, the more one finds peace and happiness in his/her heart. This is the spirit we share and live together, despite the kilometers that separate us, and the different paths our lives have taken. As far as I know, the Spirit that makes sense in our Faith is precisely based on this principle where everyone is called to do everything possible to make the lives of those who suffer, a little better. Living this Spirit the benefit does not come only to those we serve, but also to ourselves because our heart, opening itself to Love, is flooded with it. Only Love can make our hearts on fire, so that our feet are set up for roads of Happiness.

I conclude with an immense “thank you!” to all of you because your generosity allows us in the field to work with serenity and effectiveness. Sure, that the Jesus who told us to be in the person in need will not delay in making Himself present with His Providence in our lives. As Don Bosco said, “Always be cheerful.”

*We want to hear from you!*

If you are in contact with a Missioner from our diocese that you believe we might not be aware of, or, if you yourself have had a mission experience and are interested in sharing about it, please reach out and let us know!

## Self-Giving for Mission

*Reflection and Photos by Monica Rudawski*

Around October of every year the appeals begin to fill our mailboxes and emails from churches, NGO's, shelters, food banks, religious communities, and human service organizations around the world. Needs abound everywhere and our financial support is urgently required for them to be able to continue with their mission. I don't know about you, but it feels like a lot of pressure to me. My mind goes around in circles as I debate how much cash flow I have available and who to give it to. In the end, I don't really have a sense that I did the right thing or truly participated in Missions.



I know this experience from both sides as we sent out our Mission appeal in November 2022 and only six people responded. My friend Joe Martin from New York told me, "You know, Monica, I think people are feeling fatigue. I will say for myself that the number of organizations asking for help seems greater than ever."

One may be able to set aside the overwhelming nature of it all and rise to the occasion sending off your donation, but I wonder if either side has had the sense that we are participating in mission together? It must be more than "donors" sending money and "missioners" receiving it for the work at hand.

In her book *Wisdom Jesus*, Cynthia Bourgeault writes: "The act of self-giving brings new realms into being. It shows what God is like in new and different ways. The act of self-giving is simultaneously an act of self-communication; it allows something that was coiled and latent to manifest outwardly."

The self-giving that Jesus modeled for us was, as Cynthia describes, "giving himself fully into life and death, losing himself. It was not love stored up but love utterly poured out that opened the gates to the Kingdom of Heaven."

Cynthia goes on to describe the story of Della and James from the book *The Gift of the Magi* written by American author O. Henry. A newly married couple without a penny to buy one another a Christmas gift, each sell their most treasured possession without the other knowing. James sells his cherished watch to buy his wife beautiful silver combs for her hair. And Della sells her long, beautiful hair to buy her husband a gold watch chain. "On Christmas Eve the two of them stare bewilderedly at their completely useless gifts. It has been a pointless sacrifice —pointless, that is, unless love itself is the gift of the magi. In the voluntary relinquishing of their most cherished possessions, they make manifest what love really looks like; they are give tangible shape to the bond that holds them together."

When we pray for our missionaries, when we assist with financial resources, when we visit a mission project, when we share with others about mission work, we are supporting, when we write words of encouragement to those in the far off places... We are giving tangible shape to the mission bond we share together. When the missionaries pray for those back home, when they express gratitude for their support, when they return home to share about their work, when they tell the people they work with about the person who is providing the support, when they give updates on the work and personally write to those who are helping... They are giving tangible shape to the mission bond we share together.

The reality is that we desperately need one another in order to manifest Jesus' mandate to go out and preach the gospel. We are truly in this together whether we feel it or not. What Mission really looks like and what Love really looks like are identical. Neither happens through acquisition or attainment. Rather both happen through self-emptying. Cynthia adds, "As we learn not to harden and brace even in the face of what appears to be ultimate darkness, but to let things flow in that river of kenosis, we come to now and finally become the river itself. Which circulates through all things as the hidden dynamism of love."

To give tangible shape to our mission bond. I would like to say thank you for your continued support. Because of your support we were able to purchase food for a small rural school. We used to deliver food supplements, school supplies, and even reading books to this small elementary school. But that was six years ago before all the political unrest and Covid. With the withdrawal of so many donors, it was hard to continue to include them in our mission.

Thanks to the generosity of the St. Cloud Mission Office and their faithful supporters, we will be able to give them a much needed boost! We will be able to continue this assistance during the next few months thanks to you. The government provides the schools with what are our 'staples' rice, beans, cereal, and oil. With you special gift, we are able to provide a daily treat (such as a glass of milk and a nutritious snack) as well as filling out their lunch menu with eggs, spaghetti, chicken, and soup. Their teacher, Gloria Gutierrez says these children have "come alive" in their studies and class participation over the past few weeks. "They are excited to study again and they have newfound energy which is both exciting and exhausting!"

We truly appreciate your support, and the ongoing outreach we are able to do with out Sister Elizabeth Salmon Mission here in Nicaragua.



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## Advent Fair Trade Sale

We wanted to let you all know that our Advent/Christmas Sale is back again this year!

From December 1st to December 22nd, during our regular business hours, stop in and get all Fair Trade items, quilts, and more at 10% off! This is a great time to get Christmas presents, stocking stuffers, or treat yourself while supporting Fair Trade.

Contact the Mission Office with any questions! We look forward to seeing you!



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