

Laudato Si' - from my Parish to Pathein

In June 2017 I was pleased to be one of three parishioners from St Etheldreda's, Ely who attended CAFOD's Laudato Si' course in Norwich. Father Augusto Zampini led the day and was knowledgeable, inspirational and passionate about *Laudato Si' - On Care for Our Common Home* (so much so that the Vatican subsequently stole him away from CAFOD)! He guided us through the thinking behind the Pope's encyclical, its dovetailing with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, the Pope's concoction of the word 'rapidification' to describe the ever-increasing and ultimately unmanageable speed of change in the developed world. He contrasted the saintliness of St Therese Lisieux's Little Things for God versus Archbishop Oscar Romero's big, ultimate sacrifice for his beliefs, urging us to do what we can - little or big - to diminish the effects of climate change and care for the earth in our homes, parishes and the world.

I had been going to Pathein (Bassein) in SW Myanmar (Burma) to teach English since I retired from my headteacher's post in 2013. That first invitation had come from Father Henry Eikhlein, then Director of KMSS Pathein, now the Coordinator for the Diocesan Socio-Pastoral Programme in Pathein Diocese. KMSS (Karuna Mission Social Solidarity) is CAFOD's main partner in Myanmar and in fact it is the case study of a Pathein family which appears on the CAFOD website's Myanmar pages.

The word Karuna comes from the Buddhist tradition and means 'compassion' and while our very first class consisted solely of seminarians and postulants, in subsequent years we have been pleased to teach students KMSS have gathered from a wide age range and a number of faith backgrounds including Buddhism, very much in keeping with the ethos of Charles Maung Bo, Myanmar's first Roman Catholic Cardinal who welcomed Pope Francis' historic visit to the country in November 2017.

The seventeen students in that first class were apprehensive and afraid. Most had never met a foreigner before. But two weeks of rather loosely planned English classes and much laughter and singing meant that we all shed tears when our time together came to an end and many friendships have endured and continued.

At that time Myanmar was still in the process of emerging from the effects of a long, brutal military regime which had lasted from 1962 until 2011, resulting in the significant erosion of education, social and medical services so it was more important than ever to support the teaching of English, the language of commerce, and develop critical thinking in students' learning to enable them to find appropriate work and improve their life chances.

Since that first visit, the general election of 2015 and the success of Aung San Suu Kyi's party in both houses has begun to open up the country's borders to allow more political and social freedom at least nominally. However a significant military presence within the government remains and this continues to slow the democratic process. The many border and tribal wars which have checkered Myanmar's recent history continue and in September 2017 what has become known as the Rohingya Crisis which had been evident and worsening for many decades, exploded, resulting in more than half a million mostly Muslim refugees fleeing the country to Bangladesh. They live there in dire circumstances in makeshift camps supported by a number of aid organisations including Caritas Bangladesh. The United Nations and other pressure groups continue to work with the Myanmar government to try to find a way of safely returning these people to their homes. Concerns that extremist groups may take advantage of the situation persist.

Meantime our English teaching went from strength to strength each year and in 2016 I was supported to raise \$1800 for flood relief: Pathein Diocese is in the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) Delta which was devastated by Cyclone Nargis in 2008, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths and injuries, many, many more, it is thought, than official statistics report.

In March 2017 I founded the charity Ahtutu, which means 'together' in the Myanmar language, and in January 2018, through the generosity of parishioners, friends and wellwishers and a grant from a Scottish charity, I was able to take \$6000 with us to support the needs of young people. Because of Nargis there are many orphans in and around Patheingyi. We donated a scholarship grant to take a girl from St Mary's Girls' Orphanage to university. We distributed 150 hygiene packs around the orphanages. We took 15 family hygiene packs and a sack of rice when we visited a flood plain village, where each year the roads become rivers and villagers create mezzanine floors in their upstairs rooms during the rainy season. So impressed and moved were we by their welcome that KMSS and its new director, Father Peter Myat Thu Ra, helped us start a Short Term Loan Bank in that and another three rural villages to lend money for tools and equipment to farmers and fishermen at a low rate of interest. The interest will go to resource the pre-school and school.

Our largest project has been to construct a new ceiling with fans and lights in the dormitory of the Family Home Boys' Orphanage, meaning they will be able to use the room all year round and no longer have to sleep in the crawl space under the concrete floor in the hot season.

So, Laudato Si. Our English classes are organised in ability groups and are intense (although done through active exercises and games) and we wanted to take the students out and use English in another way in mixed ability groups in the afternoons. To this end I introduced the young people to the main principles of Laudato Si' and to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals which the United Nations hope we can achieve by 2030. We talked about what we would like the world to look like for our children and the problems we would like to solve. We acknowledged that parts of beautiful Myanmar are a mess, particularly in poorer and more rural areas - plastic and rubbish lies everywhere. We asked that someone from Patheingyi City Municipality be invited to come and tell us about rubbish collection and recycling and suggest to us how we could help in small groups. When this did not happen we were left with a dilemma. How were we to work with our students to Care for Our Common Home?

My fellow parishioner, Katie Betts, had a lightning bolt of genius! She suggested we go to the the boys' orphanage, where we were going to build the ceiling, and look at what needed done and work there in groups each afternoon. Father Augustine, director of the boys' orphanage, welcomed us with open arms and gently suggested what might be done. We spent the first day day with all of our 38 students cleaning up any rubbish we could find and took 26 bags both to the recycling shop, even getting some money back, and the landfill site - yes, both exist!

We then went back to work on improving the wood store (all of the cooking is done on open fires), creating a relaxation space, making recycling bins, revamping and resourcing the chinlone and volleyball courts, making a vegetable patch and putting up bird feeders. All of this we filmed as the projects were to be entered for two prizes - most sustainable project and best film. Sadly, we could not get a regular time when we could see and get to know the boys as they were at school, except on the second last day when Father Augustine invited everyone for a late meal and we got to chat and make friends. We have wonderful footage of our students showing off what they had worked on, telling the boys how to use the bins and how important it is to recycle.

The feedback from our students was heartwarming and inspiring. "Thanks for coming to teach us, especially teaching us how to save the world." "It promoted our awareness of the SDGs, It started a fresh passion for me." "Caring for Our Common Home is a good plan and showed me how to give love to others, It also reminds you that you are never alone and someone is always ready to help you. I am also happy when I am helping them."

Our 2018 Motto from Oscar Romero, Aspire to be more not to have more, was inscribed on every certificate of achievement. And we found a new trophy and medal shop had opened right next to our hotel which was

able to put the Ahtutu logo onto our Best Film and Best Project trophies - once the shop owners understood that I was saying Ahtutu (sort of 'ahdudu' in Myanmar) rather than Ahtoootoo in my very Scottish accent! The vegetable patch project won Best Project as Father Augustine felt this would be most sustainable and useful in the future. The recycling project won Best Film as Father Henry judged that it showed the story of what had been done most effectively.

On the last morning, in our finery as we prepared for our Graduation Ceremony, I was interviewed and filmed by my other parishioner colleague Tony Sigrist for his charity Talking FreELY, a mental health project of which I am proud to be a trustee. He asked me what I felt we would be taking back to Ely from Myanmar. I said that we had noticed and had talked about the new developed world influences which have been inundating the country, the rapidification (sic) of the last four or five years, and how this was beginning to bring depression and anxiety to young people, particularly through the effects of social media. During our visit to Phan Khar Gone on the flood plain, I had asked the people what was the best thing about living in their village. They had immediately answered, 'The peace here.' I suspect that not many of us would say the same in the UK. So it would be the peace that those people find living in their village that I would wish to bring back from Myanmar for all of us, along with the desire and ability to care for our common home - together.

Mary Durkacz is a supporter of CAFOD, now living in Ely, Cambridgeshire but originally from Edinburgh. She leads a group to Myanmar for two weeks in January every year and can be contacted via ahtutucharity@gmail.com.