

MISSIONARY MAN

Pakistanis would be amazed by the persecution of religious faith in Australia at the hands of the media and secular fundamentalists wielding an ideology of multiculturalism, says an Australian priest who lived in Pakistan for 34 years. From a lifetime's experience, Australian born Columban Fr Robert McCulloch has developed a unique view of the complexities facing Christians in Pakistan and what Australians could learn from them, writes Robert Hiini.



Against the setting afternoon sun, Australian Columban priest Fr Robert McCulloch talks with members of a local community in Pakistan's southern province of Sindh.

PHOTO: COURTESY COLUMBAN SOCIETY

Fr Robert McCulloch doesn't look shocked. Given the kind of news he is receiving down the phone line from Hyderabad in Pakistan's southern province of Sindh, one might have expected he would be.

It's September 17 in Rome and outside thousands of perspiring tourists are strolling past Propaganda Fide, the global headquarters of the Catholic Church's missionary work.

With their water bottles and maps in hand, they, like me, until several moments ago, are oblivious to the frightening events happening over a continent away; events sparked by a clumsy and offensive, anti-Islamic YouTube video so readily exploited by those wishing to whip up violence in the Muslim world.

"The Sisters' driver and another woman were shot," Fr McCulloch says, looking up from the desk

with the phone receiver pressed to his ear, repeating what his former right-hand man, St Elizabeth Hospital Administrator, James Francis, has just told him.

"Were they fired on directly or was it a case of bullets ricocheting," Fr McCulloch asks. It turns out it was the latter. "Well that's something. Keep the people's spirits up, James. You know what I mean."

At the time of the phone call, protesting mobs of around 500 people were still marauding the streets outside.

"When did this happen," the journalist from Fides, the mission society's news agency, asked.

"Now," Fr McCulloch replied. "It's happening right now."

More than 9,000 kilometres away from the place he called home for 34 years, the Melbourne-born priest still has his finger on the pulse of Pakistan, even after almost a year of being the Columbans' Procurator

General, their chief diplomat, in Rome.

The night before, an angry crowd of around 8,000 people had gathered at the gates of Hyderabad's St

On the phone he hears the Sister's driver has been shot. When did that happen, asks the journalist? Now, says Fr McCulloch. It's happening now.

Francis Xavier Cathedral in something of a ramshackle response to a far-right political party's call for nationwide protest.

Shots had been fired haphazardly into the cathedral grounds, probably from one of the nearby

houses, and two people had been injured. It was the kind of event which Catholics in Australia might think indicative of how Christians are treated in Pakistan. That kind of thinking would be wrong, Fr McCulloch told me.

After years of balancing local sensitivities and now, operating at the heart of Church diplomacy, Fr McCulloch knows the importance of describing things correctly.

"It would not be accurate to say Christians were 'persecuted' in Pakistan," Fr McCulloch told me when we first met in Perth in late August.

"Violence against Christians in Pakistan is so common you can't call it incidental but nevertheless it is not happening in every city; it's not happening in every place.

"You don't say 'there's no persecution, it's just discrimination.' Discrimination on religious grounds is a denial of human rights

so you don't trivialise and minimise that, but they are beasts of two different natures and you've got to recognise that."

'Persecution' jars with the harmonious relationship he and his Columban confreres have enjoyed with the Governor of Sindh, Dr Ishrat Ul Ebad Khan, he said, pointing to a plethora of Columban mission projects in a 2012 St Columbans Mission Society report:

"In a situation of persecution you wouldn't be able to do all this."

The mission initiatives are supported by Australians and donors throughout the world.

There is the work of the diocese-owned St Elizabeth's Hospital, on whose board Fr McCulloch still sits, having previously been its Chairman.

The hospital provides free medical care to around 12,000 villagers and to more than 20,000 improv-

Continued overleaf



Pakistani women from impoverished backgrounds study to be midwives at a Catholic hospital's school of midwifery, top. Fr McCulloch visits a local community in Sindh, above. Back in Rome, at right, he celebrates Mass at the tomb of Jesuit saint, Robert Bellarmine.

PHOTOS: TOP AND ABOVE: COLUMBAN SOCIETY; RIGHT: ROBERT HIINI

Continued from Page 9

-erished people through its Mobile Medical Outreach program; providing pre- and neonatal care as well as pioneering home-based palliative care training in the outlying areas.

Marginalised young women from underprivileged backgrounds can train to become professional midwives, benefiting from heavily-subsidised fees, food and accommodation at the hospital's school of midwifery which receives no financial assistance from the Pakistani government.

Fr McCulloch seems to delight in how the projects turn conventional wisdom on its head.

When the region was hit hard by flooding in 2010 and 2011, the Columbans mobilised to build more than 800 new houses for desperately poor tribal minorities, descendants of Dravidian peoples, whose social status is so low as to be outside the existing caste system. He was proud to join several representatives from those tribes, many of them women, for a formal reception at the Governor's house, eating and drinking from the Governor's china.

He also points to the Catholic Youth Development Centre (CYDC) the Columbans began in 2008 to educate boys who work as street sweepers and menial labourers.

Regarded as unfit and unworthy for education by their parents and peers, the boys are given the equivalent of a full high school

education within the space of two years and are then guided to technical training in local government polytechnics.

In another break with convention, the boys are taught by women, and are also given free vaccinations against Hepatitis B, a place to shower and food to eat after finishing their much-reviled work in the morning.

In March, the Governor of Sindh presented Fr McCulloch with the highest civilian award that can be

Pakistanis would be amazed by the demise of religion in Australia carried out in the name of multiculturalism. It's become an ideology.

given to a foreign national for his services to Pakistan's health, education and inter-faith relations.

Although he was honoured by the award, he balks at the idea that mission is principally about achieving social and economic justice.

"After Vatican II there was a temporary loss of nerve. I think the encyclical of Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, was very good in reaffirming the necessity of mission," he told *The Record*. "He said, when you look at it, everything falls

under the category of evangelisation and evangelisation is sharing the good news of Our Lord and Saviour – that's also what St Paul says.

There are two principal ways of missioning, as he sees it – direct proclamation and works of charity and compassion, but "whatever it is, it is a manifestation of the love of God."

The boys at the CYDC all attend a month-long basic Christian formation course in Multan as do the academically gifted but socially disadvantaged young men at the Columban's Catholic Centre of Academic Excellence.

Fr McCulloch once calculated that he had instructed over 1,000 tribal people in Southern Pakistan, at their request, in the 1980s.

"If anyone asks me what mission is, before you talk about what you are doing, the basic point is to proclaim the Good News of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ and everything flows out from that.

"A person becomes a missionary priest because of the conviction one has about Christ, Our Lord. Without that, I don't think anyone could survive as a missionary – I don't think anyone could be happy as a missionary – because there can be 'one step forward and two steps back'; so much digging and digging and you might not see much for it," he says.

"We labour but God gives the increase."

Australians viewing isolated, violent events in Pakistan committed



in the name of Islam also need to realise that Islam is not a united religion, he says; it's as divided as Christianity and has similar extremes of belief.

"One group insists on the importance of shrines and religious practices. Another group says it is heretical, smashing shrines that have been there for three to five-hundred years," he says. "Yes, there are fanatics – but you've got your crackpots

in Australia as well, really."

Pakistan could teach Australia a thing or two about authentic acceptance of diversity, especially where religion is concerned, he thinks. "Religion isn't an issue, you see. And there's great respect: Muslim, Christian and Hindu doctors working together harmoniously."

A day spent at St Elizabeth's Hospital in Hyderabad would be enough to convince anyone, he says.

"You would see women in head-to-toe burka; Muslim Mullahs; Hindu pandits [scholars] with their wives and children coming in for treatment; three Sri Lankan Sisters working there, walking around in their Pakistani-style Religious habits; at the end of the corridor, a Muslim attendant quietly on the floor saying his prayers; and up on the wall above him might be a picture of the Blessed Mother or the

Pope; and priests going around the hospital giving Holy Communion to the Catholic patients."

Australia, conversely, suffers from its own brand of "secular fundamentalism," he said, the roots of which go all the way back to the founding father Henry Parkes' desire to purge God from the public square. Fr McCulloch regards the militancy of green groups, particularly in the area of social policy, as



Fr McCulloch, top, listens intently on the phone at Propaganda Fide in Rome to a report of injuries to staff at a Catholic hospital in Pakistan caused during demonstrations against the recent offensive anti-Muslim YouTube video. Above, staff of St Elizabeth Hospital in Hyderabad distribute medical supplies after floods in 2011.

PHOTO: COLUMBAN SOCIETY

the latest iteration of this secular fundamentalism. Although lacking physical intimidation, religious people in Australia also know what it is like to face discrimination.

"I think that the harassment Catholics receive from the media here is on par with the harassment Catholics receive in Pakistan," he says.

"Pakistanis would be astounded by the evacuation of religion carried out in the name of multiculturalism.

"Multiculturalism has become an ideology and not a basic human reality; eliminating religion from the public domain. The Pakistani experience is 'no, you don't do that'.

"Yes, it is a homeland for Muslims but everyone is equal and I think what [Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali] Jinnah was saying was, "be believers. Go to your mosque, your church, your temple but be Pakistani!" Fr McCulloch says.

He believes Australia's foreign aid would be better spent if the government were more comfortable with aid groups who had a religious base.

"I think the Australian Government has got to be able to accept the "G" word," Fr McCulloch says.

"I would really like to see the Australian Government have confidence in the NGO sector. [Our medical work] is simply an act of compassion; it's not aimed at conversion or anything, it is just the compassion of God for all," he said.

Too much aid is being poured down the open throat of governments, he feels. He suspects that recent commitments to a doubling of Australia's foreign aid budget will likewise be government-to-government, sidestepping non-government organisations (NGOs) that might have a greater presence on ground.

"I just don't know where the Australian money is going."

That is not to say that the Columbans haven't been thankful for Australian aid. Last year,

The harassment Catholics in Australia receive from the media is on a par with the harassment Catholics receive in Pakistan.

they received a one-off payment of \$30,000. More regularly, the Columban mission in Sindh has received \$7,000 every two years since 2001.

"It is nothing to be sneezed at because you multiply it by 100 and you get the true value of it," Fr McCulloch said.

Although his location might have changed from Pakistan to Rome, his seemingly insatiable desire to meet the myriad challenges remains.

Last Monday, the Vatican's

head of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation, Archbishop Rino Fisichella launched Parts I and II of the Catholic Catechism in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan.

It was the culmination of a translation project Fr McCulloch has been spearheading for the past eight years and a launch, he told me back in August, he had hoped would coincide with the start of the Year of Faith.

"I mean, how do you translate 'transubstantiation' into Urdu, which reflects the original and contains meaning?" he says of the grueling but ultimately rewarding experience.

On October 16 he flew back to Pakistan for a week-long stay, to open new extensions to the hospital in Hyderabad and then onwards to Singapore to visit the Asia Pacific Hospice and Palliative Care Centre.

He told me during his brief visit to Perth, back in August, that Pakistanis had been enamoured by the witness of the Church, in the life and work of Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta and the outpouring of feeling at the funeral of John Paul II.

One suspects, that even from more than 9,000 kilometres away, his role in that ongoing witness will continue, as strong as ever.

Donations to the St Columbans Mission Society can be made on 03 9375 9475 or at www.columban.org.au