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# Why do mission in Asia?

Kevin Gallagher



Photos by Jean-Pascal Lombart CSSp

The question hit me with force one February day on a cold and wet Taiwan railway platform. A simple enough question from a Spiritan missionary. You would imagine that after my twenty-two years in Taiwan I would be overflowing with words, opinions and suggestions, bursting forth with creative ideas in response to his key question: Why do mission in Asia?

However, the silence I confronted when trying to find words to answer with real honesty was not quite what I expected. We have to dig deep into ourselves to reach those places where the real answers lie.

Let's not avoid the question "Why do mission in Asia?" Are we not preaching to a continent full of ancient cultural riches, mysticism and philosophies? Why bother?

In the Asian context of revealed truths we must be honest and admit that Jesus was a little bit late on the scene. But just because we may have a deep respect for the truth of other religions should not stop us from presenting the case for our own.

The words "mission" and "missionary" have slightly negative connotations in the modern world. But a man came on this earth 2,000 years ago to stand with the oppressed and speak out against oppression. Why is it in vogue to admit to one's Buddhist beliefs at some fashionable party, but to be thought of as strange when standing up for Christianity?

Concepts such as unconditional forgiveness, a personal God who resides among those who are most rejected, the idea of us all being brothers and sisters, can be quite alien to many living in Asia. The Christian message of walking with the poor and dispossessed — not just as a charitable act towards the less fortunate, but also because such actions bring us meaning in our lives and peace for our souls — may be very radical. But it is so life-giving that, in my opinion, how can such a message not be proclaimed to others irrespective of where

they live and what cultural background they may have. These Christian concepts resonate at such a deep place within our common humanity that they provide a very powerful liberating influence irrespective of nationality.

### Why do mission at all?

Take the example of Taiwan: where would the migrant workers go for help when they are mistreated, who would go and live with the aboriginal people in the mountains, who would offer shelter to abused foreign brides and who would dare work closely among those with AIDS?

These are the wonderful and powerful material things missionaries are doing, these are the things that show the beauty and closeness of God to us — a God of the poor and the downtrodden. These are the things that in a wonderful and mysterious paradox show us where we can find our own lives.

The practical side to missionary work, the concrete acts of compassion are necessary — but they are not the whole picture. What lies behind these acts of love? What makes the missionary travel from so far to carry out these compassionate activities, and carry them out with such joy?

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### What drives the missionary?

The missionary brings a message that God is alive, not in some obscure above-and-beyond place, or in some tree or plant, but alive in us personally, alive in the world and especially alive on the margins of life with those who are most rejected.

This message of a God who resides within us and is concerned for our welfare, can be radically different to many Asian religious beliefs. But as this Christian message is so life-giving and so deeply integrated with pure and simple human liberation, it is a message that must be shared in friendship with those who have not heard it. To discover that to be truly human is to be truly divine is such an enriching message that it must be shared with all who care to listen — and be a major reason why we should never stop doing mission in Asia.

Christianity also offers a gentle challenge to the darkest areas of ancient traditions which have perhaps reached a point of stagnation and which struggle to integrate with the modern world. With a firm basis in personal friendships, the missionary is able to shine some light on to those areas and offer opportunities not for condemnation of the resident culture, but for its transformation. The light they bring should offer



new possibilities and new insights into what might appear as intransigent and stifling cultural traditions.

### Missionaries come to stay

And don't forget that missionaries are rewarded with far more than they give. The missionary is not someone who is here for a good time, to enjoy the warm sunshine, cheap food and wine, and go home with a suitcase full of gifts from afar. Missionaries are people who come to stay.

In believing we are bringing something to the host country, we also believe that we are receiving and that the change in us will be beneficial to the country that is sending us.

In some ways the "Why do mission in Asia?" question does not have to be fully answered. There must be some inherent mystery, something about doing mission, that just does not

make sense with regard to standard values. Seeing a person or group from far away doing things beyond conventional social wisdom, and doing it joyfully, stands in itself as a witness to something beyond the rational material values of life.

If I were to choose one reason for doing mission in Asia it would be for Christianity's strong message of simple human liberation that I would say, "How can we *not* do mission in Asia?" ■

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Twenty-two years ago, Kevin Gallagher, originally from Scotland, left an engineering design position for a two-year volunteer position among the mentally disabled in Taiwan. Along the way he and two Taiwanese friends started an association to help the disabled get back into the life of society. Fluent in Chinese, Kevin is married to a Taiwanese lady who is a special education teacher.

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## A week in the life of the Spiritan Vietnam Novitiate

Dan Sormani CSSp

We start each new day with Morning Prayer at 5:30 a.m., then a half hour of meditation, followed by Mass. We end the day with Night Prayer and Office of Readings at 8:00 p.m.

Throughout the day there are two classes given either by me or other confreres who are able to come one or two days a week from Monday to Friday. We focus the classes on the developments of the Spiritual Life: personal and community prayers, Religious Life, Community Life, the history of the Spiritans, and especially the Spiritan Rule of Life.

Twice a week we have Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, praying for vocations and benefactors. The novices also spend time doing manual labour and playing sports.

Each Saturday afternoon they divide into two groups visiting Thien Phuoc Centre, where they serve and care for challenged children; and Mai Hoa center, a home for HIV/AIDS patients. Here the novices share the Sunday gospel with children and organize different activities for them.



Nhien visiting children in one of the centers.



Fr Brandon and the novices.