

Messages from Fr Neil Magill Columban Father Myanmar re use of funding from St Brigid's Third World Group

We received the following on 9 November 2017

Dear Kevin and members of St. Brigid's Third World Group,

Greetings to you all from this sad and troubled land of Myanmar/Burma!

I hope you and all your loved ones are well.

I am sure you have seen on TV and read in the papers about the brutality of the military against the Rohingya ethnic group. It is emotionally hard to accept as this is happening only some hundred miles from where I am. Thousands including children and women have been killed, their simple homes and villages burnt and about 600,000 have fled to Bangladesh and are living in squalid refugee camps.

As you know I started the Higher Education Center in Mandalay [HEC] 8 years ago with 30 poor but bright young women and men from remote villages [18-21 year olds]. We now have 100 students residing at the Higher Education Center and 180 have already graduated after the 3 year course. They are making a tremendous contribution now as teachers and development workers throughout Myanmar/Burma.

The reputation of the HEC has grown throughout the country for its excellence and it's the only kind of higher education center in the country for poor youth. We have students from 11 dioceses and from all seven major ethnic group. Inter-cultural living and studying together sends out a positive message in a country where there is so much racial tension and hatred as witnessed by the brutality towards the Rohingya and Kachin people.

The HEC is in an old building which was built over 100 years ago and in need of constant repair. It has sentimental significance for me as our Columban priests were interned in this building for almost 2 years towards the end of World War II. One was killed in this building. It was built as a leprosarium.

Each year we get over 100 applications from bright but poor young women and men from all over the country. For the new academic year starting in early January we have already 110 applications for 33 places and we have been informed that another 20 are applying before the deadline. They all travel to the HEC in early December for an entrance exam and interview. They come from as far away as 700 miles. Now young people are thirsting for a good higher education as the education in government schools is poor.

It is heartbreaking to have to turn away 90-100 crying young people now because of lack of funding, lack of classrooms and dormitories. What will their future be?

As Columban priests celebrating 100 years of mission next year it is my dream that we can give hope to more poor young people by extending a classroom and male dormitory [which was built by the people of Lavey 8 years ago] to accommodate more of these wonderful young people who are hungry for a holistic education. I hope to be able to take 50 first years instead of 33 so in future we will have 150 over the 3 year course.

Since 130 new students will be coming for the entrance exam and interview from December 4 – 7 I had to start the renovation so that it will be ready for them but I don't have the money to complete it. It will cost £4500 but I only have £1600. Can your St Brigid's Third World Group come to my assistance? By educating more young people it will be a blessing to the church and country.

We had terrible floods in August and a lot of destruction was done to the HEC but again the S Derry people pulled us through. I hope I am not putting pressure on you and your wonderful Third World Group. Any help will be greatly appreciated.

With prayers and best wishes to you all. May God bless you in times of need.

Neil

Kevin replied

I was about to write to you telling you we are about to send you £7000 so the timing is good!

Neil then said

Dear Kevin, Rosalie and St Brigid's Third World Group,

Since I started this renovation work on Monday I wasn't able to sleep much worrying if I was going to be like the man in the Gospel who started to build a tower but hadn't the money to finish it. But last night I got your most welcome email and I had a great sleep...the best I've had in a long time. Thank you.

Honestly, Kevin and Rosalie, when I read your email I burst out crying. I was just emotionally overcome at your generosity and your love and care for these good, poor and hard working students. What a blessing you all are to us and to so many others in different parts of our world.

£7000 is a huge amount and you are making a fantastic difference to the young people who have suffered so much under dictatorships and now with the genocide that is taking place against the Rohingya ethnic group. You give these young people hope for the future. God has to bless you all and your good parish benefactors.

I was taking one step at a time by trying to complete the extension of this classroom and the male dormitory. The next worry I had was how to get an extra 50 desks made for the big intake of students, get some more computers and books. Now you have answered my prayer. I hope it is alright to spend the remainder of your large donation on better food for the students, desks, computers and books. When the students come and some are orphans they are malnourished and their immune systems are low so I try to give them better food.

I don't want to withdraw any money from our Foundation Fund as it will be there for the sustainability of the Higher Education Center [HEC] into the future.

Kevin, Rosalie and Members of your Third World Group and all the generous parish benefactors thank you from the bottom of my heart. And I thank you on behalf of the students and staff at the

HEC.

May God pour out His blessings on you all. Be assured of my prayers,

Neil

We were able to send Neil £9000 - our normal donation of £5000 plus two individual specific donations of £1600 plus gift aid. Neil replied

Dear Kevin and friends,

Evelyn transferred your most generous donation of £9000.

The extension to the classroom and male dormitory is coming on well. I have bought more desks, chairs, blackboards, plates, spoon and books. I will send photos when it is completed and all is arranged again.

These fantastic changes would not have been possible without your generosity so please convey our thanks to all at St Brigid's who are so generous.

Pope Francis would be very proud of you and i hear he opened the Vatican to the poor for lunch on Sunday.

God bless you all.

Neil

We then wrote

Dear Neil

We are delighted to have been able to help with the extension of your education project - thank you for letting us know how it is progressing.

To help you with future planning we can tell you now that we will have another £5000 (at least) for you around this time next year.

We send every blessing for your work and for the success of your students.

God bless you all

Rosalie and Kevin

Neil replied

Dear Kevin, Rosalie, Hugh, Michael and all St Brigid's Third World Group,

Happy Advent! For me it has 3 meanings - memory, current situation and promise.

Memory of the birth of our Saviour, our present situation/challenge where we share Gospel Joy with the poor, forgotten, refugees and as a result the promise of being welcomed by God because we lived the Beatitudes. You are certainly doing this and God will reward you all. That is my prayer for you all and your families.

The extension is completed, just need to do some cleaning and before Christmas get it painted. What a difference you have made and the students, myself and staff are most grateful. It would not have been possible without you coming to our aid.

I attach some photos showing the class extension which we have to clean today; the male dormitory is much bigger with bunk beds and straw mats for the students to sleep. You can see the 25 new desks which we have in the assembly hall for class during the renovation. Two more classrooms are bigger by taking away partitions. We had to buy more fans for the dreadful heat in Mandalay [the locals say it is hotter than hell!], plates, spoons etc. It is just wonderful now and the only Higher Education Center in the country which caters for very poor but bright young women and men aged 18 -21. The students come all ethnic groups and for some two days travelling to get here.

Thank you for your email with the great news that you will be able to help again about this time next year. That means I can plan ahead and do more improvements and keep increasing the number of young people who are hungry for a good education and who will give great service as our graduates are doing to the church, the poor and the country. I am so proud of them.

Pope Francis was in the capital Yangon last week but i could not go as the bus journey is more than 12 hours and then a lot of walking and my old legs wouldn't carry me. The students here asked if i could find a wheelchair and they would push me!! He was walking a tightrope with the military here and they threatened there would be reprisals if Francis used the word 'Rohingya'. He did speak publicly about the dignity of each person and the human rights of each ethnic group. Aung San Suu Kyi is such a disappointment but the military controls her. But when Pope Francis got to Bangladesh he blasted the military here and the plight/ persecution of the Rohingya and Kachin people. He met a group of Rohingya people living in squalid refugee camps and as he listened to their stories of killings, rape and burning by the military here in Myanmar/Burma he was so emotional and almost in tears. It is psychologically hard for me to know this is happening only some hundred miles away. Almost 700,000 Rohingya people have fled to Bangladesh.

Pray for us as we do for you. I wish I were much younger. I have never cried so much as i have here in Burma for the poor people. Some of our students are orphans, others from refugee camps. Listening to their stories breaks my heart.

You will be bored reading this so I will stop. Please convey my deep gratitude to all your Third World Group and the good generous benefactors. You all are doing life saving work and living out the Beatitudes.

Thank you Kevin, Rosalie, Hugh, Michael and all. All we can do in return is say thanks and pray for you all.

Blessings.

Neil

