

neighbors

SUMMER 2010

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

Pacific Island Mission Prefecture of the Marshall Islands

The Catholics of the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean are a small group of persistent and patient people. They subscribe fully to the Marshallese saying “*Anij ej idenwone*,” or “God is just; he will correct the wrong.”*

Missionaries brought Catholicism to the Marshall Islands in 1891. In 1899, German missionaries arrived, establishing parishes and schools, and were joined by

religious brothers and sisters. They were chased out by Japanese invaders in 1919.

Intermittently since then, groups of tenacious priests and sisters have served the small Catholic community on the far-flung atolls of this republic, through wars and deportations. The faith is strong, but it is constantly challenged by the geography of the country and the very limited resources of its people.

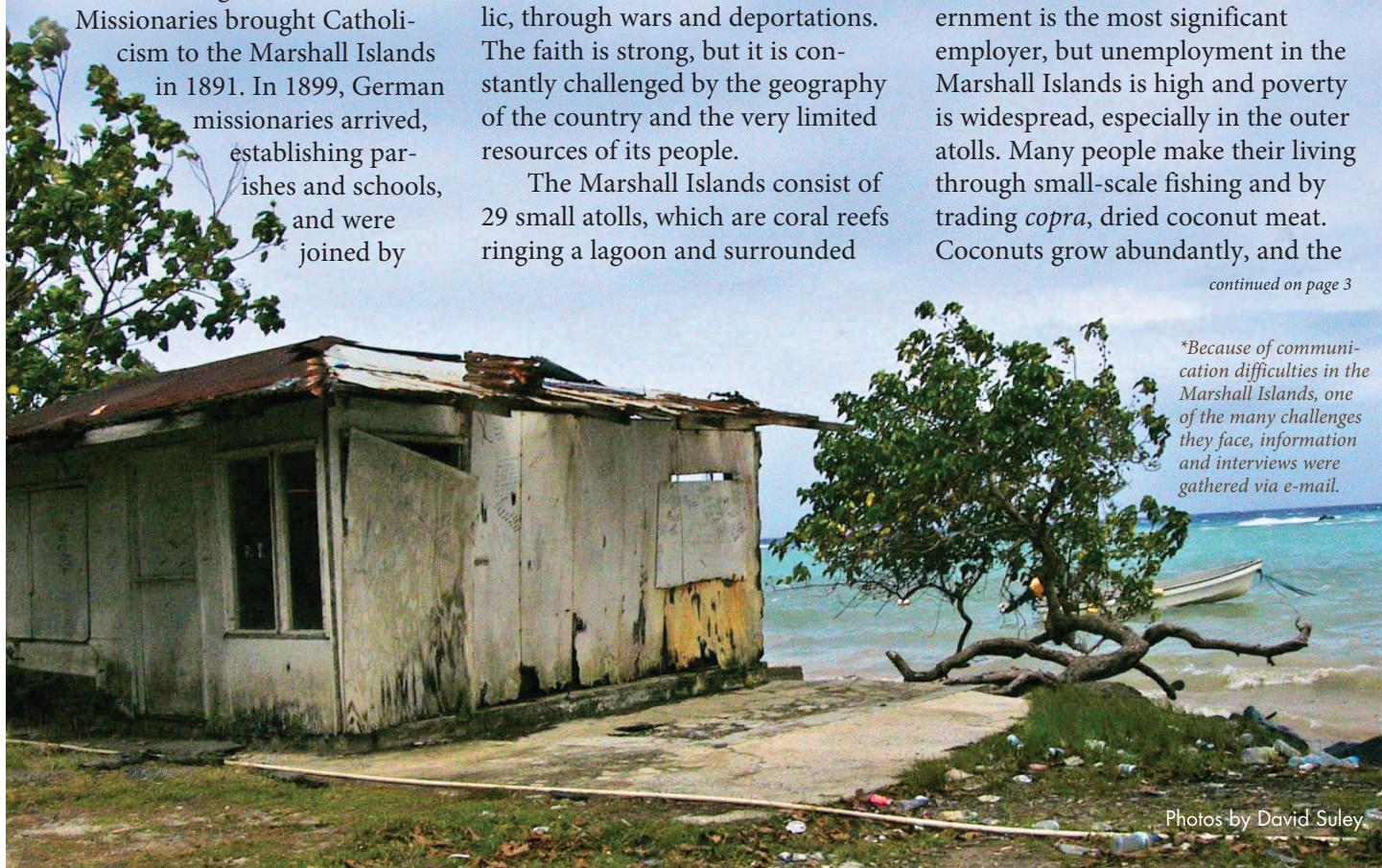
The Marshall Islands consist of 29 small atolls, which are coral reefs ringing a lagoon and surrounded

by the open sea. The atolls and five remote islands are spread over 500,000 square miles. They are home to 62,000 people. Fewer than 5,000 of them are Catholic.

In the two largest towns, the capital Majuro and Ebeye, the government is the most significant employer, but unemployment in the Marshall Islands is high and poverty is widespread, especially in the outer atolls. Many people make their living through small-scale fishing and by trading *copra*, dried coconut meat. Coconuts grow abundantly, and the

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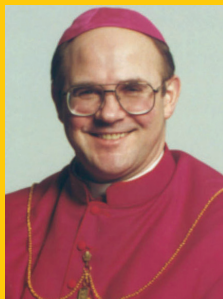
**Because of communication difficulties in the Marshall Islands, one of the many challenges they face, information and interviews were gathered via e-mail.*



Photos by David Suley

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

SUMMER
2010



DEAR FRIENDS,

In February 2010, I visited the Pacific Island mission dioceses that the Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions financially supports: the Marshall Islands, Caroline Islands, and Chalan Kanoa (Saipan). The Pacific missions appear like a movie set of tropical rainforests framed by a brilliant sea and sky.

However, I soon discovered another side to this idyllic tropical scene. Micronesia is distinctively third-world. One- or two-story concrete block houses, unpainted and capped with rusty tin roofs, represent the upper end in housing; the lower end consists of tarpaper and plywood shacks. Grit, dilapidation, muddy dirt roads, and the dripping rain forest are virtually universal. In addition to the usual range of pastoral problems, missionaries and indigenous church leaders must deal with widespread poverty, education challenges among the laity, unreliable communication networks, and the need to evangelize a culture that can seem quite alien by our Western standards.

This summer newsletter features the Prefecture of the Marshall Islands, a nation of about 62,000 people living on 29 atolls and five small islands spread over 500,000 square miles of ocean. About half the population lives on the Majuro atoll. Ebeye, a half-square-mile island within the lagoon of Kwajalein atoll, is home to 12,000. The rest of the population is scattered among the outer islands in small communities. For the six priests and eight women religious, travelling by plane or boat to the 12 Catholic missions on the eight inhabited atolls is a constant challenge.

Though it possesses limited resources, the Prefecture of the Marshall Islands is indeed rich in faith and culture. As one of the island pastors said, "We are not just a dot in the vast Pacific Ocean but a proud people with a vibrant culture and faith." Your support of the Catholic Home Missions Appeal keeps this local mission church alive.

Most Rev. Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee
on Catholic Home Missions



The Republic of the Marshall Islands is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, west of the International Date Line and just north of the equator.

The Marshall Islands were administered by the U.S. Navy from 1947 to 1951 and by the U.S. Department of the Interior until 1986. It is now a republic, which gained its independence from the United States in 1986.

The Marshall Islands are related to the United States under the 1986 Compact of Free Association, where the United States provides defense and guaranteed financial assistance for 15 years in exchange for continued use of military facilities. An amended compact went into force in 2004.

There are 12 Catholic communities on eight atolls. They range in size from 40 people in Wotje to 2,000 in Majuro, the nation's capital. Most have fewer than 300 parishioners. Some see a priest only three times each year.

Catholics are served by 6 priests, 1 Marshallese sister, 1 Marshallese deacon, 3 lay missionaries, and 36 lay Marshallese prayer leaders.

The French Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (MSC) were the first Catholics to evangelize the Marshall Islands. They were followed by German MSC missionaries, Spanish and American Jesuits and Maryknoll Sisters, Mercedarian Sisters, Sisters of Notre Dame, and the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart.

Marshallese is the national language, but English is widely spoken, through the teaching ministries of missionary orders.

In the Pacific, Catholic Home Missions also supports the Diocese of Chalan Kanoa on Saipan and the Diocese of the Caroline Islands, which encompasses two countries: Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia.

Prior to Bishop Michael W. Warfel's February visit, no American bishop had been to the Marshall Islands since 1975.

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Marshallese people have cultivated them for generations.

Some 90% of Marshallese are indigenous Micronesian. Others are expatriates or descendants of locals who married people from other countries.

Half of the country's population is under 25 years old. The literacy rate is very high, and there are two post-secondary schools that offer two-year degrees. Because economic and educational opportunities in the Marshall Islands are limited, many people leave the islands for college or work.

USCCB Catholic Home Missions supports the work of the Church in the Marshall Islands and other current and former U.S. territories in the Pacific Ocean. The Marshall Islands do not have enough Catholics to be considered a diocese, so it is called a prefecture. It is led by Fr. Raymundo Sabio, a Missionary of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who is the prefect apostolic and functions with the authority and responsibility of a bishop.

The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a French congregation with its headquarters in Rome, assumed responsibility for the Marshall mission from the Jesuits in 2008.

Fr. Sabio says the Church is strengthened by the parish leaders and prayer leaders in 12 Catholic communities; they keep the faith alive through participation and motivation. "The parish leaders are officers of the parish council, who discuss, deliberate, and decide on matters related to the parish activities," Fr. Sabio says. "On the other hand, prayer leaders lead the Sunday liturgy and Holy Communion in the absence of the priest, and other religious exercises including the Way of the Cross, rosary, novena, prayers for the dead, and house blessings."



"Here, our parishes are far apart and separated by the sea! And my closest neighboring diocese is two and a half hours by jet plane and \$500 round trip."

**—Fr. Raymundo Sabio, MSC
Prefect Apostolic**

The largest parishes in the prefecture are Assumption in Majuro, with 2,000 members, and Queen of Peace in Ebeye, with 1,100 parishioners. Both draw people from neighboring atolls.

Catholics in Majuro, Ebeye, Jaluit atoll, and the Kwajalein U.S. Army base worship at regular weekend and weekday Masses. Others of the prefecture's less than 5,000 parishioners are spread out among outer islands and atolls. Some see one of the six priests only three or four times a year. Their prayer leaders conduct weekly Liturgies of the Word with Holy Communion.

Fr. Sabio says, "It is not easy for those on the Mainland to understand mission in places like the Marshall Islands. In the U.S., a priest can visit the neighboring parish with a 20-minute drive. Here, our parishes are far apart and separated by the sea! And my closest neighboring diocese is Chuuk, which is two and a half hours by jet plane and \$500 round trip."

According to Fr. Sabio, the Church is challenged to attract vocations. "There are no local Marshallese priests yet, because there have been no local role models in the clergy," he says, "but we go on trying to attract young people. We have one seminarian studying at the university in Cebu City, Philippines, and two high school aspirants. We have one Marshallese permanent deacon and

are exploring ways to start a diaconate program in the future."

Fr. Sabio, a Filipino, was ordained to the priesthood in 1971. He studied in the Philippines and in Chicago and served in his home country and in South Korea. Before arriving in the Marshall Islands in 2005, he worked for the Vatican Apostleship of the Sea branch office in South Korea for 14 years.

Transitioning from ultra-modern Seoul to Majuro was fascinating, he says, because it reminded him of his childhood days in the Philippines. "It was a small, laid-back town and there were no amenities of life there. After a few days, I easily adjusted to the place and the people. And it was only at this time that I started to appreciate the beauty of the nature that surrounded me."

Despite the daunting obstacles of vast distance, weak economy, and spotty communication, the Catholics of the Marshall Islands enjoy vibrant faith communities with deep roots.





neighbors

Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions

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In this issue . . .

The bishops and staff of the Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions celebrate the life of

MOST REV.

BASIL M. SCHOTT, OFM, who died on June 10 after a long struggle with cancer. Archbishop Schott was a beloved member of the Subcommittee and will be greatly missed. May his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, rest in peace.

Eternal memory. Eternal memory. Grant to your servant, O Lord, blessed repose and eternal memory.

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The USCCB Committee on National Collections, through its Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions, provides financial support for missionary activities that strengthen and extend the presence of the Church in the United States and its island territories in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

Help us improve our communications and outreach. Tell us what you think about this newsletter in the survey enclosed. No postage required.