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Fr. Robert McCulloch of the Missionary Society of St. Columban attends a seminar on safeguarding children in Rome in this March 23, 2017, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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When Columban Fr. Robert McCulloch arrived in Pakistan in 1978, he eagerly thanked the superior general for selecting him for missionary service there.

"You were the only one who volunteered," his superior replied. "I had to order the rest here under the oath of obedience!"

For nearly 50 years, McCulloch has developed an unflinching love for the country that he came to call home, working tirelessly to improve the country's health care and education systems, and in the process, boosting Catholic-Muslim relations. In 2012, his record would [earn](#) him the country's high civilian honor, the [Sitara-i-Quaid-i-Azam award](#), for his services to Pakistan.

"For me and my life, it was a perfect fit," McCulloch told National Catholic Reporter as he reflected on his missionary work in the country that is made up of [some 96% of Muslims](#). "There wasn't a single time when I thought to myself, 'What am I doing here?' "

Despite his deep conviction in his work, McCulloch admits it has been an unexpected journey.

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The 78-year-old Australian priest entered the Missionary Society of St. Columban in 1964. After completing seminary studies in Sydney and doing four years of pastoral work in the Philippines, he ventured off to Rome for licentiate studies in liturgy and to Washington, D.C., for graduate work in church history. In 1977, news reached him — via snail mail — that the Columbans would be opening up a mission in Pakistan. He immediately signed up for the adventure.

Today, McCulloch divides his time between Pakistan, Rome and his native Australia. But wherever he finds himself, he's busy continuing to advocate for the country and raise funds for the various Pakistani projects that he helped initiate — a laundry list of successes that has earned him praise from the highest ranks of both church and state.

When he first arrived in the country, the first two years were spent learning Urdu. At the time, he recalled, the large swaths of the population were illiterate.

"I stepped into a world that they were in, which I came to know very well," he said, describing his early forays into learning the language. But in time, he quickly mastered it and led the major undertaking of translating the Catechism of the Catholic Church into Urdu.

According to the most recent [report](#) from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, religious freedom conditions have continued to deteriorate in the country and minorities are often targeted for their beliefs.

While McCulloch acknowledges that it can be "an intruding and intrusive environment," he maintains that he "never found an oppressive problem at all."

"I think it's because I'm a foreigner that helps," he said, adding that he always wears clerical garb when he is out and about town.

But primarily, it's the fact that he's earned the respect of local officials for his commitment to caring for all of its residents — Catholic and non-Catholic alike — that has allowed him to serve as a trailblazer in both education and health care.

Dr. Ishratul Ebad Khan, former governor of Sindh, Pakistan, pictured with Columban Fr. Robert McCulloch

Dr. Ishratul Ebad Khan, former governor of Sindh, Pakistan, pictured with Columban Fr. Robert McCulloch (Courtesy of Robert McCulloch)

From serving as chairman of the board of [St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Hyderabad](#) — where he oversaw the opening of the first home-based palliative care unit in the country — to founding the [Catholic Centre of Academic Excellence](#), which has provided formation to over 300 Pakistani boys, McCulloch has served as both a priest and a social entrepreneur.

In the education sector, McCulloch's center provides four hours of additional after school education to enhance the academic, spiritual and social dimensions of the student's education.

"We ask absolutely nothing except 100% commitment," he said.

McCullouch explained that it takes less than \$40,000 U.S. dollars a year to run the program for some 70 students and teachers, making it less than the price of one student's tuition at many U.S. private schools.

The result, he said, has been a "game-changer" not just for the students — who have gone on to complete degrees in journalism, dentistry, theology, medicine and more — but also for their parents, which he said has led to a confidence boost as Catholic families have experienced upward mobility thanks to improved education.

One by-product of that, he noted, is that it has improved their confidence as they live alongside their Muslim neighbors, seeking peaceful coexistence and harmony.

In September, Pope Francis returned from a successful 12-day [trip to Asia and Oceania](#) where the theme of interreligious dialogue was one of the pontiff's major talking points. While Francis has been invited twice to Pakistan by two different governments, the conditions were never right for him to accept.

Drawing on his own experience, McCulloch, who has served as an informal liaison between the Holy See and Pakistan, says he believes the Vatican can and should take a harder stand against the violence that Christians often face when they are in the minority.

While he has cautioned against using language such as "persecution" — he says that phrases such as "intense discrimination" are more helpful in order not to immediately cut off lines of communication.

And as his own work in the country testifies, it's possible to be clear about where you stand and still work within the system to live out your faith, both in word and deed.

Editor's note: NCR's coverage from Rome is made possible in part by the generosity of Bob and Joan McGrath.