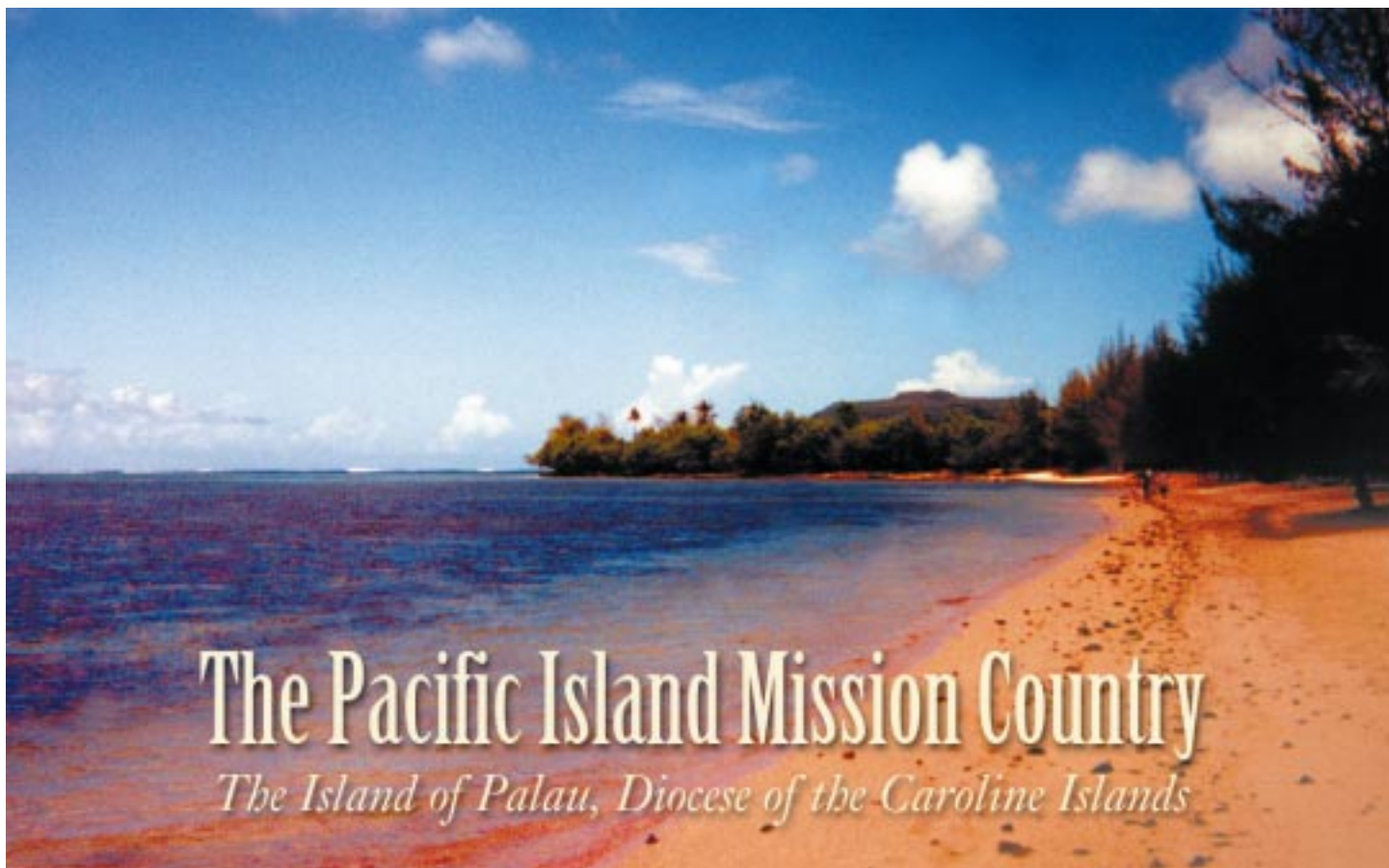




# neighbors

FALL-WINTER 2002

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA



## The Pacific Island Mission Country

*The Island of Palau, Diocese of the Caroline Islands*

**B**efore I knew it, we were in the mudbank. The 4-wheel-drive Toyota had heaved and bucked for two hours along a broken track in the rainforest, but it couldn't handle slick red clay. We slid sideways and ground to a halt, my side of the car plastered to the

embankment. I looked across at Fr. Rusk Saburo, who grinned mischievously. "We'll make it," he said, and gunned the engine. After a bit of backing and filling, we did. The Toyota rattled out of the hills onto the coast of Babeldoab, where small villages front tidal coves on the edge of the endless Pacific.

Babeldoab is the largest island in Palau, a nation of about 25,000 people scattered on three groups of tropical Edens ranging across 200 miles of ocean just north of the Equator. The Philippines lie 500 miles toward the sunset, and New Guinea is 500 miles south. About 60 percent of the population of Palau is Catholic, thanks to

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# From The Chairman



**Dear Friends,**

**W**hen I mention to people that I chair the bishops' Committee on the Home Missions, their first reaction is often surprise. "What are home missions?," they say. For older Catholics, the word "missions" conjures up memories of picture stories in *Maryknoll* magazine, always about heroic priests and sisters in faraway places. Younger people may have little contact with the missions beyond the priest from Papua New Guinea or Kenya who occasionally appears in the pulpit at Sunday Mass.

I usually respond to questioners by describing the unseen missions of New Mexico, Mississippi, Kentucky, Wyoming, Alaska. For the most part, "home missions" are relatively close at hand: you can drive to them. (That's why we call this newsletter *Neighbors*.) They are dioceses, organizations, and religious communities here in the United States that need outside help to provide local Catholics with a parish church to gather in, Mass and the sacraments, religious education, and clergy and other trained ministers.

However, our feature story this time tells a more exotic story. It describes home missionaries working on the reef-fringed coral atolls and forest islands of the central and western Pacific. Besides serving the fifty states, the Home Missions Committee assists Catholic institutions in U.S. territories or former territories—fragments of green earth that lie in a vast watery arc from south of Hawaii almost to the Philippines. Samoa, the Marshalls, the Carolines, the Marianas, Palau—to most Americans, they are dots in the open sea, strange and full of mystery.

Catholic institutions are relatively new in the islands of the equatorial Pacific. America won the bulk of them from Japan during World War II, and the Church, which had been established by earlier waves of missionaries, had to start over. Now these small bits of the Church, remote members of the Catholic community, survive because U.S. Catholics lend a hand.

So how best to answer people who ask what "home missions" are? These lands stretch halfway around the Earth. Perhaps it is best simply to say they are missions in a particular place. If I lived in Nairobi, the parishes of rural Kenya would be home missions. Because I live in North Dakota, the home missions are poor parishes and dioceses in the southern and southwestern and western United States—and in all those cloud-capped islands of the Pacific. Missions are where the Church is striving to take hold and to grow. Whether "home" or "foreign," missions, with steady support, strive to spread our saving faith.

† Most Rev. Paul A. Zipfel  
 Bishop of Bismarck  
 Chairman  
 Committee on the Home Missions



The Republic of the Marshall Islands is a young 500,000-square-mile nation, 75% of whose 50,000 people are under 21 years of age. Four religious priests struggle to serve 4,500 Catholics in parishes and missions scattered throughout the islands. The *Prefecture Apostolic of the Marshall Islands* is under the care of the Micronesian Mission of the Jesuits' New York Province.

A U.S. territory located about five and one-half flying hours from Honolulu, remote American Samoa has a population of 62,000 people. About 23% are Catholic. The *Diocese of Samoa-Pago Pago* is blessed with ten Samoan priests and fourteen seminarians.

The *Diocese of the Caroline Islands* faces a remarkable challenge: forging a sense of unity when the diocese covers well over a million square miles of lonely ocean, takes in two different nations, and seeks to serve 135,000 people speaking four different languages. The thirteen diocesan priests and thirteen religious priests travel by motorboat and plane among the 100 or so inhabited islands.

## Remember the Missions

Your request to support the work of the Committee on the Home Missions may be made as follows:

*To the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, for the exclusive purpose of assisting Roman Catholic home mission dioceses in the United States.*



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the work of Jesuit missionaries who arrived here in 1891.

At present, Fr. Rusk is the only diocesan priest in the country, as pastor of a thriving parish on the neighboring isle of Koror; he can only visit the remote missions of Babeldoab every six months or so. Even when the regular pastor is “on island,” he visits about once a month. The rest of the time, the missions are on their own. They stay together through the efforts of lay leaders, who conduct Sunday services with consecrated hosts that Fr. Rusk provides and offer the children sacramental preparation. There is no regular religious education.

Even if you’ve seen Mass being said in log cabins in the Alaskan woods, or in rented funeral homes in Tennessee, or in a “house-church” on the back streets of a dusty Utah town, Palau stretches your notion of “home missions.” It was easy going once Fr. Rusk and I reached the coast road on Babeldoab, the first paving in a couple of hours. We soon found *Delal a Klentigarrheng* (Our Lady of Sorrows), the parish in the village where Fr. Rusk’s father grew up, and where he himself spent summers as a boy. The church was a low concrete-block building with a failing roof. When Fr. Rusk stays overnight, he sleeps in a 12-by-12-foot “rectory” made by nailing together sheets of corrugated tin. He explains that this church was filled to capacity with 250 people for Easter Vigil service. But we’re really a long way from St. Patrick’s Cathedral.



*Holy Family Mission, Babeldoab, Palau*

Palau is part of the Diocese of the Caroline Islands, which stretches 2,250 miles along the Equator. It takes in about 1.7 million square miles, nearly all open sea. The dozens of inhabited islands within diocesan boundaries add up to only 440 square miles, and their populations range from 20,000 to a few hundred. Besides Palau, the diocese encompasses the Federated States of Micronesia, four island groups whose people follow their own ways and speak their own languages. Bishop Amando Samo, a native of the nearby Mortlock Islands, doesn’t try to run diocesan-wide pastoral programs. Even if he could gather all the Catholic leaders in the same place, they couldn’t talk to one another. Everything has to be done piecemeal.

I left Palau on a rainy night—actually, 2:30 in the morning—last April. I saw Fr. Rusk again in June at my office in Washington. He is devoting part of five summers to earning a degree in canon law from The Catholic University of America, and he stopped by to chat, dressed in clerical garb instead of his more usual shorts and T-shirt. I remarked that there were no diocesan priests at all in Palau for the past two months. No, he replied. But there was a Micronesian Jesuit at his home parish, and several American Jesuits from the New York Province were stationed in the islands. He himself would be home that weekend, after crossing eleven time zones in twenty-two hours of flying. They would manage. It would be all right. ■

# St. Francis of Assisi, Majuro atoll—Marshall Islands

Sometimes, the home missions can seem very foreign indeed. A visitor at St. Francis of Assisi on Majuro atoll could be excused for feeling a little out of place. The walls and roof of the building are constructed of overlapping pandanus leaves, looped and sewn together over strips of bark. The window letting in the sea breeze is a wooden panel cinched up like a stubby wing. Finally, the visitor can't speak Marshallese, as do the priest and lector. He can follow along only because the Mass is the same everywhere in the world. He understands the language of Catholic worship, even though the local language is strange.

One Marshallese word, repeated often, does make sense. "Iroij Jesus Christ," the priest says during the canon of the Mass, *Iroij Jesus*."

The word is used to translate "Lord." Here in the Marshall Islands, a 200-mile-long splash of flat coral atolls five hours southwest of Honolulu, the *iroij* is the chief, the head man, the father figure. For the 4,500 Marshallese Catholics (about eight percent of the total population), Jesus is their spiritual *iroij*, the one they have chosen to follow.

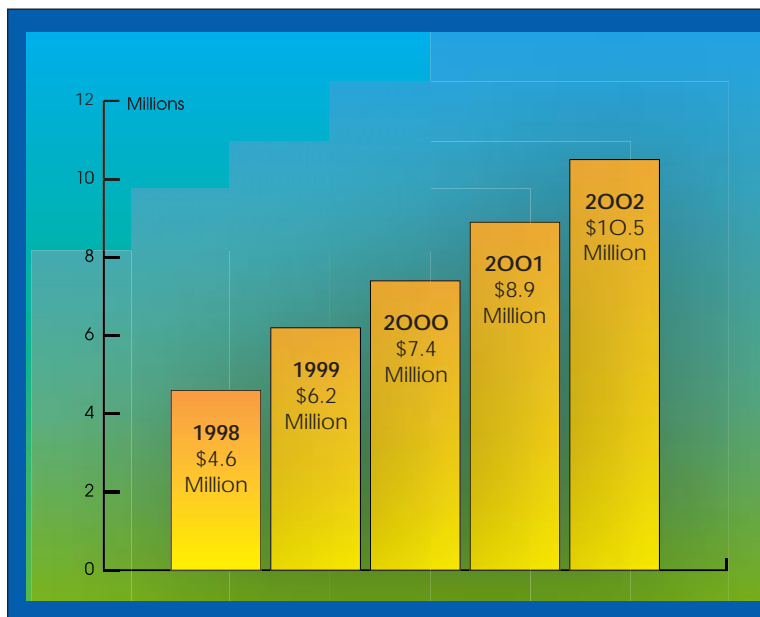
Although he would be uncomfortable with the title, the priest celebrating Mass at St. Francis was *iroij* in another sense. He was Monsignor James Gould, a wiry, bearded Jesuit from Buffalo who serves as Prefect Apostolic of the Marshalls. He came to the islands eighteen years ago and fell in love



*Msgr. James Gould with altar boys at Queen of Peace Parish, Ebeye, Kwajalein.*

with the tropical Pacific, with the beach- and-forest atolls strewn like shadowed necklaces on the sea, and most of all with the people. The Republic of the Marshall Islands is a poor country

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## FUNDING TO HOME MISSION DIOCESES DRAMATIC INCREASE IN FIVE YEARS

Funding from the Bishop's Committee on the Home Missions has more than doubled in the past five years. For 2002-2003, the Bishops' Committee on the Home Missions awarded a record \$10.5 million in grants to 85 home mission dioceses and 21 mission organizations. Due to the growing success of the annual Home Missions Appeal, the committee was also able to give a supplemental \$30,000 to each of 23 dioceses that were already receiving the maximum grant of \$150,000. These poor dioceses are especially thankful for the continued generosity of Catholics in the United States.



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under the protection of the United States. The housing varies from one- or two-story concrete block buildings on the high end to plywood shacks with tin roofs on the low end. Sad to say, it is unlikely to escape from poverty for a very long time. As one man put it, “We have nothing here that the rest of the world wants—except scenery.” But the Marshallese are people of the Beatitudes, with a simplicity and composure that comes from growing up in a small island society where every day is pretty much the same, where one’s neighbors are permanent and where feuds, once begun, can last a lifetime. Cultivating a spirit of Christian harmony is a life-skill here.

Monsignor Gould spent years learning Marshallese so he could better serve his people’s spiritual needs. Most have some English, but use their native tongue when “speaking from the heart,” the seat of their

faith. The monsignor maintains an office in Majuro, the capital city. (No employees, just an office; he jokes that his laptop is his secretary.) He is there only about one week out of every month, however. Having appointed himself pastor of the Outer Islands, he spends most of his time flying from one tiny community to another, offering Mass, administering the sacraments, officiating at ceremonies, counseling, even serving as materials purchaser and construction chief. Energetic, driven, faithful, he is at once the public face of Catholicism in the Republic and a gentle pastor in its farflung villages.

Why should one man take on so much? Well, someone had to. There are only five priests in the Marshall Islands, and one of them is ninety years old. A priest from Fiji handles Queen of Peace Parish on Ebeye, a dramatically poor islet in the Kwajalein lagoon where 12,000 people, with an average age of about fifteen, jostle together on half a square mile of

superheated land. The other priests, U.S. Jesuits, are stationed on Majuro or at the big U.S. army base five miles by water taxi from Ebeye. Msgr. Gould serves the rest of the Republic’s islands, or no one does.

Missioners like Monsignor Gould, for all their gentleness of manner, are tough, resilient people. They would not last otherwise. Some of the Maryknoll sisters in the Marshalls have been there for fifty years, teaching, serving, enduring disease and scarcity and the occasional dunking on the reef, always ready to go and do. Obviously, they believe they are following God’s will for them. Monsignor Gould says: “This is God’s mission, not mine. It will survive if God wants it to, maybe in my lifetime, maybe not.” But even the most dedicated can’t survive on a sense of duty alone. Missioners are also lovers and optimists. I would not be giving my life to these people if I didn’t think they could make it,” the monsignor adds with a wry smile. ■



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## Committee on the Home Missions

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## COMMITTEE ON THE HOME MISSIONS Who Are We?

**T**he bishops' Committee on the Home Missions was founded as the American Board of Catholic Missions in 1924. In cooperation with the Black and Indian Missions Board (1885) and the Catholic Church Extension Society (1905), the Committee 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. The principal beneficiaries of the annual Catholic Home Missions Appeal are approximately 85 home

mission dioceses, which include the Eastern Catholic Church eparchies.

**Bishop Paul A. Zipfel**, *Chairman*  
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Want  
to See  
More?

We invite you to take an Internet journey to a few of our home missions and learn what's happening in their part of the country. Just log on to [www.usccb.org/hm](http://www.usccb.org/hm) and click on **Stories and Pictures from the Field**.