

THE SUNDAY BUSINESS POST
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The face of Mercy

The slum children of Bangkok had little hope of redemption until Irish American priest Fr Joe Maier brought them to the Mercy Centre

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Fr Joe Maier with one of the young children at the Centre

In the slums of Bangkok, an Irish-American priest has dedicated his life to enriching and improving the lives of those who live in almost unimaginable poverty

Words and pictures: **Kieron Wood**

In the middle of a sentence, the old man leaps to his feet and strides swiftly to the edge of the open verandah. Waving his arms angrily, he shouts at the teenager with the tattooed back, who is grasping a terrified young boy by the arm, about to beat him with a long cane.

The teenager lets go of the boy and looks up vacantly at the furious old man, who continues to shout and gesticulate for a few moments at someone down the road, out of sight. The tattooed teenager stumbles off into a narrow alleyway opposite.

On the way back to his seat, the old man stops to remonstrate with the security guard, shaking his finger angrily at him.

Sitting down again, the old man explains: "Just some fucking drug addict, out of his

head. He was going to beat the shit out of that young boy. I told him to let him go. And I told the guard that he should have seen what was happening and stopped it."

It's all part of a day's work for Fr Joe Maier, an Irish-American Redemptorist priest who has spent most of his life in the slums of Klong Toey in Bangkok, helping those least able to help themselves.

to page 20



On the rig



A child stands on a railway track that runs through Klong Toey, Bangkok's huge shantytown

CORBIS

ht track



Children from Klong Toey: life in the slum can be dangerous as well as arduous

from page 19

Now aged 72, Maier has been in Bangkok since 1969. Originally, he was appointed to assist another Irish-American Redemptorist, Fr Edward O'Connor, who used to celebrate daily Mass for the Catholics who slaughtered pigs in the slum.

"The Buddhists and the Muslims wouldn't kill the pigs, it was against their religion, so the Catholics had to do it," says Maier. "Many of the Catholics were immigrants from Vietnam who had lived in Thailand for more than 100 years.

"Fr O'Connor had a great fondness for the drink, and sometimes he'd be unable to say Mass, so I'd stand in. When he eventually went back to the United States – where he died about eight or nine years ago – I offered to take over. I lived in the back of the slaughterhouse. I wanted to be a worker-priest and to help kill the pigs, but they wouldn't let me because it would have been unheard of for a priest to be involved in slaughtering animals.

"As a young priest here, I made my mistakes, but I've paid for them. I did a lot of drinking, and fighting for civil rights. Sure, sure, there are the temptations of the flesh, but you get used to that."

Maier is dressed in an off-white T-shirt and combats – he seldom wears his clerical garb. "I have worn full battle array three times since I've been here, once to speak to a group of drug dealers. The poorer the people are, the better I dress – they gasp when I wear the blacks. One time, I took a gun away from a man who was drunk and waving it about. I shit my pants. I'm not a brave man."

Maier stops talking again as a group of children approach and respectfully *wai* him with joined hands, before greeting him less formally, fist to fist.

The priest chats easily to the children. The spectre of clerical child abuse which has so damaged the Church in Ireland is conspicuously absent in the Mercy Centre, despite Bangkok's unenviable reputation as a Mecca for child abusers. "No man, includ-



The Mercy Centre: the premises include an Aids hospice

ing me, is ever, ever alone with any girl – or boy," says Maier.

"That little boy is eight or nine and he has Aids," Maier adds under his breath as the children walk away. "The nurse has to make sure he takes his pills at 6am and 6pm on the dot, otherwise there can be all sorts of problems."

But the most important people in the centre are not the nurses or teachers, says Maier. "The most important people are the cooks, the cleaning ladies, the security guards. They're the ones who see what's really going on, who the children talk to."

At the moment, there are 64 children in the House of Aids. Emergency cases go to the hospice. "It used to be that they'd live a month, then they'd die. We'd cry and then we'd cremate them.

"Now we have 15, 16-year-olds, which we never had before. Many of the girls want to

get married, to live a normal life, to have sex – I hate that word, to have a normal loving relationship – and to have children. Two to three days before the birth, we give them drugs every six hours to counteract the Aids virus – wham, wham, wham.

"When they take the anti-virals for those 72 hours before birth, the chance of getting HIV/Aids through the woman's birth canal is way, way down to almost nothing – though, of course, there are exceptions. But the very poor may not go to the doctor during pregnancy, so they mostly take no anti-viral drugs in those vital 72 hours before birth, so one in three has a chance of passing on Aids at birth."

The Human Development Foundation (HDF) began in 1973, when Maier and a nun, Sister Maria – who taught catechism to local children in a disused pig pen – were taking their daily morning walk through the

slums. Children from Klong Toey mostly didn't attend school, and those few who did were held up as examples of failure to the other children. The priest and the nun decided to set up a pre-school in a slum hut, charging one baht – 2.5 cent – a day. Today, more than 2,500 slum children attend the Human Development Foundation's 22 Mercy kindergartens.

In 1976, the first shelter for street children was founded and the following year, the slum's first free health clinic for the poor opened its doors. The HDF housing programme began in 1981, with hundreds of homeless and elderly slum residents moving into homes built by local people.

Bangkok's first free Aids hospice was opened by the HDF in 1994, with an Aids home care programme being launched three years later. A home for mothers and children with HIV or Aids was opened in 2000.

In 1999, the HDF began accepting children through the criminal court system as an alternative to sending them to detention centres. Today, six members of staff have passed a government exam to be allowed to interrogate children in police custody, and they're called to around 20 police stations every week. The HDF's legal aid department represents more than 20 children a week in court.

Since 2009, the HDF has run a "movable" bamboo pre-school for children living on a construction site in Samut Prakan province. The foundation has also handed over 11 former Mercy pre-schools to local slum communities to prepare children for entry to primary school.

Today the Mercy Centre – rebuilt in 2000 close to a former Buddhist temple site – includes a shelter for street children, orphanages, a hospice, a home for mothers and children with Aids and a 400-pupil kindergarten.

There is a credit union with 600 members – mostly women – plus a co-op with more than 1,500 houses for the parents of children in seven kindergartens, working with the port authority which owns the land.

"We are part of a coalition of 24 street kids' organisations and are on the streets daily working with the kids," says Maier. "We can actually say we know most of the street kids in Bangkok, and we're now known throughout Thailand, as the street kids move from town to town."

Life in the slums of Klong Toey is grindingly poor, and can be dangerous. There have been 87 fires here over the past 40 years, often caused by drunks or open cooking fires.

"One little boy who was badly burned in a fire used to show the keloid scars on his arms to the other kids in his kindergarten for two baht," says Maier.

Although the Mercy Centre has now built 10,000 homes in the slums, most residents are still packed into tiny, one-room shacks often made out of packing cases, scraps of plastic and waste cardboard. Streams of dirty water run down the centre of the alleyways, with huts built over the open sewer. Fleas and lice are everywhere, and occasional piles of rubbish attract rats, despite the ubiquitous presence of mangy dogs. Outside the doors of the hovels, the owners leave their flip-flops and sandals so that, in traditional Thai style, they will not dirty the floors of their homes.

In the bigger side-streets or *sois* which intersect the alleyways, there are machines for slum-dwellers to buy fresh water or to do their laundry, as well as food stalls. The heat is overwhelming and the smell is overpowering – a mixture of sewage, cooking and occasional incense from the street shrines to the Buddha or other gods worshipped by the Thais.

Drugs are a prevailing problem here – any sort of drugs, from heroin to amphetamines to glue – and living conditions are

appalling, with whole families squeezed into a single room.

Maier stops talking again as a woman and a young girl – aged perhaps 11 or 12 – approach. He gets up and talks to them in an undertone, then they are joined by another woman.

“The mother of that girl wants to take her home,” he tells me, sitting down again. “I asked her who would be at home, and she says there are brothers and sisters and the stepfather. I ask will the stepfather sexually abuse the girl, and she promises he won’t, that she will prevent him touching her. I tell her she’d better, or she’ll have me to answer to.”

When a child arrives in the Mercy Centre – there are 202 there at present, including children Maier has “bought” from their parents – they are educated with a view to their eventual departure, sometimes 20 years later. Maier’s eyes light up as he talks about the previous week’s ‘graduation ceremony’ for kindergarten children. “We dressed them up in graduation robes, and I wore my honorary PhD robes and gave each of them a certificate. It was a memorable day,” he says.

“But we can’t get into the thing that they are ‘our’ kids. They have to concentrate on school, school, school and eventually we hope to send them home.” Last year, 24 children returned home to live with their families.

Part of the children’s education consists of learning about their own culture. Maier takes me to a class where a trained Thai dancer has volunteered to teach a group of small girls how to do traditional Thai dancing. They walk unselfconsciously in a circle, carefully copying the movements of the young teacher as she gracefully bends back her fingers and sways from side to side in traditional Thai style.

“That little girl over there,” says Maier pointing to a child who can be no more than six, “came to us after her stepfather raped her. Like all the girls here, she wants to grow up to be a normal child, so it’s particularly important for these girls to learn the grace of dancing and music.”

Next door, another group of boys and girls learn to play the traditional *ranat ek* xylophones and *glong yao* drums, with the male teacher demonstrating the instruments at the front of the class.

In another class, an American volunteer teaches boys the martial art of *tae kwon do*. “Then they can kick the shit out of the rich kids at school,” says Maier with a laugh.

The priest’s latest venture, which is to be the subject of an RTE radio documentary, is working with sea gypsies who live on the Andaman Sea coast of southern Thailand. “One in six of the women dies in childbirth,” he says. “They can’t read or write. They have no words for the days of the week, but they know the moon and the tides. The elders pray in their own language, Moka, to the spirits of the sea.

“There are 60 kids on that island who go to our shack kindergarten, and we feed and teach them daily. Without that, they will starve, not go to school and have no future, and the sea gypsy language and their culture will die with them. The 80 families on this island are the last ‘pure’ Moka speakers on the planet.”

Maier became involved with the sea gypsies after the 2004 tsunami which left more than 8,000 Thais and tourists dead or missing. The Mercy Centre received funds from a variety of international sources to provide boats for fishermen whose livelihoods had been destroyed in the disaster. “We’d have dozens of meetings with villagers,” recalls Maier. “Maybe 20 meetings with one village committee. We’d offer to buy second-hand boats and engines, and the committees had to decide what sort of boats were needed, who would own them and so on.”



A trained dancer leads the kids in a class of traditional Thai dancing



Learning the *ranat ek* xylophone and *glong yao* drums in the music class



Maier enjoys a lighter moment with a volunteer at the Centre

Working in 20 villages, the HDF and local carpenters also rebuilt or renovated more than 500 damaged homes and installed 50 village wells, school water tanks and 12 water purification systems by the end of 2005. “The Irish government gave us

€100,000 through its Irish Aid programme and we got another €100,000 from Trócaire,” says Maier.

The cost of sponsoring a Mercy Centre child is around 100,000 baht a year – that’s €2,500 – but most sponsors give between

8,000 and 25,000 baht. Money remains a constant concern, but Maier has attracted some big-name support. From the United States, billionaire Chuck Feeney “met us a few years ago and gave us \$3 million. Now he’s given us money to establish a business plan”.

Many musicians are among the sponsors, including Irish-American folklorist Mick Moloney, the Johnson Sisters and Paul Brady, who organised a concert in Drogheda last year in aid of the Mercy Centre. Moloney plans another fundraising concert in Omagh in July.

Moloney’s brother-in-law, Gerry Morrissey of Mount Merrion in Co Dublin, set up an Irish company to support the Mercy Centre last year.

“It is low-key: no collection boxes in Grafton Street,” says Morrissey, a freelance trade consultant who formerly worked with Enterprise Ireland. “We focus more on awareness raising and networking. We encourage Irish people who are visiting Thailand to drop in; we find that a high percentage of them are then keen to support the work in one way or another.”

Riverdance composer Bill Whelan has been to Klong Toey two or three times, and a video about the Mercy Centre is due to be shown on RTE in the next few weeks.

The Redemptorist order in the United States is “finally” giving Maier more help, providing him with 7,000 baht a month and a car.

Others help in less tangible ways. KPMG does the books for the Mercy Centre, which is a registered Thai foundation, and the centre is under the patronage of Princess Srirasm, the daughter-in-law of ailing King Bhumibol. This is of fundamental importance in a country where the monarchy plays a central role in public life.

Volunteers – especially English speakers – come to work with the centre for three months or more. “We consider living with us to be a life-changing experience,” says Maier. “We take gap year [pre-university] students in exchange for their school taking one of our students for the last two years without charging any fees.

“Altogether, we have put 50,000 kids through the Thai school system, with some of them going on to university and becoming teachers or lawyers.”

While waiting for Maier to return from celebrating Mass at a technical college on the far side of Bangkok, I wandered round the two-storey Mercy Centre, built around a small garden. In one ground-floor room,

to page 22

INSIDESTORY

from page 21

with the doors wide open in the stifling heat, I am shocked to see elderly people in hospital beds – part of the hospice for those dying of Aids. “We are slowly closing the hospice, as the urgent need for it has lessened a lot,” Maier tells me when we meet. “When we began, there was no place, but now there are.”

Scattered through the rest of the complex are the classrooms where, even on a Sunday, the sound of children’s laughter can be heard. Pictures of happy faces are stuck onto class posters, like in an ordinary Irish classroom, and I notice crucifixes on the walls.

How does Maier reconcile his Catholicism with the Theravada Buddhism mingled with Hinduism and animism practised by the overwhelming majority of Thais?

“Oh, we don’t flaunt religion here, but we are a Catholic house,” he says. “We have a minute’s silence before every meeting, and we pray when we get up, and before and after meals. When I go to the [Buddhist] temple, I pray silently.

“I always remember the words of an Italian priest I knew in Laos many years ago: I believe in the Gospels, the Sacraments and the holiness of the Mass.

“Every Saturday – there’s too much to do on a Sunday – everyone has to attend 9am Mass. No one misses unless they are dead. We grew up with that regularity. If anyone misses Mass, they will say prayers to the Mother of Perpetual Help or pray the rosary. A lot of them will say a Hail Mary with a joss stick in one hand, in front of a statue of the Buddha.

“Around the school here, there are



Maier with one of his students at the Mercy Centre

Catholic crucifixes and statues. This week and last week, we are using the Stations of the Cross to teach the children, because Buddha is not like a father or a brother to them. We also have a great devotion to Mary because a third of the children don’t have mothers, and the others have been sold by their own mothers. Mary is an example of the loving mother most of them never had.”

Another Mary who is an example to the children is Macau-born Sister Maria Chantavardom, 81, founder of the Daughters of the Queenship of Mary Immaculate, who runs the Mercy Centre with Maier. “She’s the one woman I’m afraid of,” says Maier with a smile. “She’s very strict with the children. If they come to me to ask for something, I might say ‘Oh, okay’, but then Sister

Maria will tell them ‘No’ – and I don’t contradict her.”

Maier occasionally goes to hear the nuns’ confessions. “Arrogance and self-righteousness are the worst sins, as far as I’m concerned,” he says. “I say to the nuns: ‘You’re so close, you’re almost there. Throw yourself into the arms of Our Lady.’”

Maier is of Irish-American stock. Born in the US to a German Protestant father and an Irish Catholic mother, he was raised in Wisconsin by his maternal grandmother, Annie Bradley, whose mother came from Donegal. “I still listen to a lot of Irish music – protest songs and the religious songs of John McCormack, which I grew up with. I said my first Mass in our parish church of Our Blessed Mother Mary, a little wooden

church in Athol, South Dakota, built by my Irish ancestors.”

Originally, Maier planned to work as a priest in Mexico, so he did his seminary studies in Spanish in the US. He has been to Ireland a couple of times for the weddings of regulars from his “local”, Bangkok’s Dubliner pub, which is owned by a Tipperary man. “What goes on in the pub stays in the pub,” says Maier.

He used to have an Irish passport, but “lost it 40 years ago”. He planned to apply for Thai citizenship, but was discouraged by the Cardinal of Bangkok, so now has a permanent residents’ visa, which he renews every five years.

The work of Maier has been officially recognised in his adopted country. In 2004, Queen Sirikit presented him with a lifetime achievement award for his work with mothers and children. In 2009, he was the first foreigner ever to be named child protection ambassador to Thailand, with the award presented by the prime minister at the Thai Parliament.

But after more than 40 years in the slums of Bangkok, doesn’t he get discouraged? “I don’t get discouraged, but I do get weary,” he says.

“But the work will go on when I am gone. I am reminded of the old monk who was sweeping leaves and was asked what would he do if he was told the world would end or he’d die in the next ten minutes. He said: ‘I’d probably keep sweeping leaves.’”

Donations for the Mercy Centre may be sent to its Irish bank account, number 84317370, at Bank of Ireland, Merrion Road, Dublin 4, sort code 90-12-12

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