

Wishing you a very happy Christmas and a safe New Year in 2011 *Merry Christmas!*



'Tis the season of "Jingen Ben" ("Jingle Bells" to those who can pronounce a final "s" or "l". My Thai confreres call me "Michaen"). With that useless bit of information behind us, we move on. I went to the U.S. in October to visit some friends and relatives and to attend the Redemptorist chapter of election, as a representative of Thailand. It was a lovely time of year, with vivid colors as trees

began to shed their leaves. The last time I was home in autumn was 1986, when I returned to help my father put up the crops and prepare to auction our Aberdeen Angus cattle. Pa was 71 years old, a year younger than I am right now. My mother had passed the October before, and ours was a long, sad task. All the cows and steers had to be re-branded and inoculated, and buildings and machinery fixed up for the sale. The weather was cold and rainy, and my angst was nothing in comparison to my father's silent anguish at having to sell the farm and move on.

2010 was a rough year for us. We were battered a bit by the economic downturn. My best friend for 44 years here in the northeast of Thailand, Fr. Larry Patin, became very ill and returned home to our nursing center in Liguori, Missouri, to find out he has cancer in the brain. I now find myself the last American

Redemptorist missionary in the northeast of Thailand. When I came to Thailand in 1966, there were 18 of us Americans serving here.

We lost two teenage kids with AIDS and TB in the first half of the year. Miss Piyanut and Mr. Ben died within a month of each other, and it still hurts to see their tiny tombstones. Other kids came to take their places and fight desperately for survival. It always is a cause of concern and anxiety when new kids come into our raucous group. Newcomers are desperately sick, frightened and lonely, and it goes without saying that not all of our children are kind and considerate. Some kids have



Sarnelli House

their own mental troubles, and the staff has to be constantly on alert to police and monitor situations which could get out of hand. It is difficult enough to absorb the death of parents and the indifference or outright coldness of relatives and friends for a child or abandoned toddler.

The weather was also cruel to us. I had purchased as much rice paddy as possible last year, so as to try to grow enough rice to feed ourselves. We dug a huge fish pond and water reservoir. The Amanda Foundation donated a rice mill, so we can feed rice to the kids and the grist to our pigs, chickens and fish. We use the husks for fertilizer. We use straw for bedding. Dutch friends bought us a four row rice planter. We thought we were on our way to the 21st century, until the monsoons which usually arrive in late May, never showed up until August. We did have rice to harvest, but many paddies dried out from the lack of rain. But this is the plight of farmers everywhere. The worst part was devastating floods south of us which wiped out rice fields ready to harvest. In the end, the older kids harvested and were again proud of helping themselves. We will continue to expand and buy fields when we are financially able to do so. We want to dig more water reservoirs so as to be able to pump water during arid periods.

A very good friend of the children died and gave us the where-with-all to dig a small swimming pool. We use sea salt to keep the pool clean, since chlorine is too hard on the skin of HIV/AIDS children.

Thanks to our Australian nurse Kate, we have a very well run and successful Outreach Program. Her zeal and professionalism is truly remarkable. Both adults and children love her and she also has begun a newsletter, sent out every couple of months, detailing life at Sarnelli (The government calls all six of our houses "Sarnelli"). We have a really devoted staff who contribute greatly to making Sarnelli House a home.

As Christmas approaches, we are really grateful for friends who make all things possible. Children continued studying as sponsors dug in to help them, despite their own problems with the economy. We are so relieved to have wonderful kind friends like you all. The House of Hope has new little



babies who make up the heart of Sarnelli House. All the kids are doing as well as can be expected and we thank the Lord and His Mother. We were so happy to be able to host Fathers Chuck Beierwaltes and David Polek, two old war horses who sacrifice so much for the children, and who personify the sacrifice, kindness and concern of all of you. I guess we will have to wait for heaven to rejoice together in the opportunity the Lord has given us to serve his wee ones, and to testify to the Good News Jesus preached in His life time.

We will pray for you all at Christmas Mass at Holy Innocents chapel and at New Year, where we offer Mass up in the Nong Seng mountains while camping with the Great Unwashed. May the Lord and His Mother bless all of you each day for hearing the cry of the orphan.

Have a blessed and Happy New Year!

Fr Mike

