

# MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A BLESSED NEW YEAR!!




For me, New Year of 2011 started out with tragedy. Fr. Larry Patin and I were friends from the early 1950's, when I went to the minor seminary at Kirkwood, Missouri. Larry was a year ahead of me, and I followed him through the minor seminary, to the novitiate and then on to Oconomowoc. Larry came to Thailand June 25, 1965, and I followed him February 2, 1966. We were the closest of friends for 44 years. Larry died of a brain tumor on January 8, thirteen months to the day when he first had a seizure that dislocated his shoulders. Thai Redemptorists paid the air tickets for Fr. Joe Maier and me to attend the funeral in Grand Rapids, MI. We were there only four days, and it was colder than a nun's kiss. Other friends and benefactors also passed on. Ken Eberhard was a Redemptorist priest who married and raised a family. He and his wife Sandy did great missionary work in Central America, and also were very generous supporting some farm projects at Sarnelli. We will all miss Ken. And Fr. Tony Dolski from De Pere passed in October. Tony was a super priest and awed anyone who met him. The story of his vocation itself is a legend! We miss all those who passed on; who helped Sarnelli House become a reality.

We had lots of guests and volunteers this year; friends from home and the incomparable Fr. Chuck, who is back again for a few months. The kids absolutely adore him and they regenerate him! I also had O'Connor cousins; my nephew Mike and my sister Brigid come and liven up my days in this bucolic setting. I am in danger of becoming a grouchy old recluse in my waning days!

I learned a lot of cold, sober reality this year. As sick and lonely and damaged little children came in; some with HIV/AIDS, and some from abuse, beatings and rape, others fled our little kingdom. Ta Dum, who has AIDS and who became blind when she caught chicken pox, left with another blind AIDS-infected boy. She was shy of her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, and they live in the Traditional Thai Massage center in Nongkhai and give massages, etc. We are monitoring her from a distance to make sure she is O.K. In the meantime, we have two delightful kids, a boy and a girl, who have AIDS and are blind. Our blind teacher, Dtap, comes to teach them Braille and English, among other things; two weeks a month.

When I first began working with kids, a great grandmother asked me to take her four great grand children, all cousins and from Don Wai. Their mothers were all in the "profession", and Ploern's mom had died of AIDS when she was 20 years of age. Three of them were bright girls, but they fell by the wayside one by one. The oldest is on her second husband; another has a husband who is in jail on drug charges. A third left us in October to live and "work" with her sister. Ploern is the only one left; the youngest. I took Ploern in at age 3, in 1999, when her mom died. Ploern flunked EIGHT subjects last year. I was livid, but she assured me that she had fallen among bad companions (??), but would make up. She buckled down and has only two subjects to re-do, as she continues her third year of junior high. She is a short, sweet little porker with a high squealy voice.

Some of our kids were given to us as mere children or older girls who were abused or pregnant. This year, five babies were born and live with us. Some of the girls had taken drugs, and we had to wean them off while they were still pregnant. Two of the girls have stayed on, nursing their babies and also returning to school. One girl from Bangkok gave birth to a baby boy who died. Her drugged up boyfriend had beaten her and kicked her repeatedly in the belly, causing a deformed baby to die. 



We have a newly ordained priest, Fr. May Tee with us. He is great with the kids and the staff. He runs little retreats and seminars for them, and works really hard. I will have three newly ordained priests filtering through to be trained, until Fr. Ole comes to live here in his first appointment. Fr. May Tee also runs the Outreach Program with Kate, our wonderful Aussie nurse. Kate took three months of Thai language study in Bangkok and does really well. The poor who live in squalor and hopeless poverty depend so much on this program. We also help another 80 + children go to school. Some were going to school without lunch or book money, and had to steal time to look at friends' books or sketches. They can only envy the "Notebooks", I Pads, etc., that their friends have. Some think we should limit help to our own kids, but when some desperate kid shows up who has never begged for anything but just wants a chance to flee the grinding poverty through a decent education, I cannot turn the boy or girl away. All 80 of them came in on October 29 for their second semester money. They are a happy bunch of kids! A foundation helps us help them!

Thanks to our German Lutheran friends at the Church of the Beloved Apostle in Oberhausen, we have a Kubota tractor with a plow and dirt mulcher. The Ananda foundation from Hawaii bought us another rice planter (They had donated our rice mill a while back). The Dutch Friends of Sarnelli Foundation is going to donate a machine to mulch and make pellets for natural fertilizer. The Thai Children's Trust in England is going to buy more rice paddy for us, and set up pigsties and chicken coops and houses for the boys who will live and work there. They are donating money to run electricity to the fields as well. An American friend of the children has donated money for the "Joseph and Mary Hall". It is a building which will have a stage; a basketball and volley ball court; a kitchen and bathrooms and a storeroom. It will be great for parties and plays and people coming in to entertain the horde. We hope to finish by July 2012.

This year, we should have a bumper crop of rice; unlike other years. We also were flooded, but our flood waters emptied quickly into the Mekong River. There was widespread destruction of rice paddies; but nothing like the central plains. We hope that this is the year we can finally feed ourselves rice for the whole year. The terrible devastation of the central Plains is going to drive the price of rice and food way up. Once we harvest, we are going to plant gardens and pump water from our fish ponds to irrigate. The last couple years have been hard on us, but thanks to so many kind and generous people, we lurch from pillar to post, always righting ourselves and keeping focused on what we should be doing, and relying on the generous Will of the Lord. It is His work, and His responsibility to inspire and guide us in our duty towards these children. I do thank the Lord for the staff I have and the people like you who support us. We pray for you daily.

Have a very happy Christmas and a blessed New Year, from Fr. May Tee, the staff, the children, the weak and the sick and this old codger!

Father Mike, Sarnelli House (November 2011)

