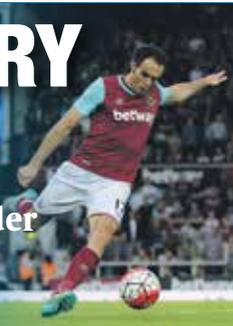


The Irish Catholic

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Bethlehem Christians send Christmas message of hope

Chai Brady, Ruadhán Jones and Jason Osborne

An Irish nun who works with struggling Christians in the Holy Land has said that the community will make the most of Christmas despite the fact that there will be no pilgrims this year.

"It will be hopeful and it will be joyful and it'll be family-based, but it will be so different from other Christmases," according to Sr Bridget Tighe.

Most Christian families in towns like Bethlehem rely almost entirely on pilgrims for their livelihoods and there have been none since March leaving many families destitute. "The reality is there's no income," Sr Bridget said, insisting that the Church is stepping up efforts to ensure people have a good Christmas. "The churches help a lot - they get food coupons and all kinds of things...if there are really poor families who cannot afford many gifts for their children, these organisations buy gifts for the children and they dress up as Santa Claus and they knock on the door and give them gifts.

"So Christmas will not be dismal for them," she told *The Irish Catholic*.

» Continued on Page 2



One-year-old Grace Le O'Sullivan enjoys the nativity scene in Holy Cross Church in Dundrum, Dublin. Photo: Chai Brady.

MARY KENNY

Learning what it's like to be lonesome

PAGE 5



CHRISTMAS WITH THE ORDERS

How religious congregations celebrate Christmas PAGES 24-25



DAVID QUINN

Ensuring artificial intelligence 'cares' about humans PAGE 8



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A year of flux on and off the box

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Make 2021 the year you walk in the footsteps of Our Lord

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep

The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth

The everlasting light
The hopes and fears of all the years

Are met in thee tonight.

We all have our favourite Christmas carols. My own is probably O Little Town of Bethlehem set to the tune of Forest Green.

I have stood many times in that 'little town' of Bethlehem as I have led pilgrimages to the Holy Land and sang that hymn. It never ceases to move me as I visit the site of the nativity. Far from the image on the Christmas card, the place of Christ's birth is a dimly-lit rock cave. A 14-point silver star on the marble floor of the Grotto of the Nativity bears the words *Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est* - Here Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary. The hopes and fears of all the years...

I only managed one trip to Bethlehem this year back in February before the Covid-19 restriction prevented travel. But, talk of vaccines is giving me fresh hope that 2021 can see a return to pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

Trust

Putting our trust in God, we've decided to go ahead and organise pilgrimages in the autumn of 2021 and I would like to invite you, dear readers, to think about joining us.

It really is the trip of a lifetime and I can promise you it brings the Gospel alive in a new and engaging way. The opportunity to walk where Jesus walked in Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem makes the biblical accounts real in a way that is hard to explain.

To walk the way of the cross – the *via dolorosa* – in Jerusalem to Calvary is an unforgettable and moving experience.

From the earliest times, Christians from all over the world have gone to the Holy Land to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. After St Francis visited the Holy Land in the 11th Century he was so inspired that he began creating nativity scenes in towns and villages in Italy so that people of Faith could have some experience of what it was like in the Holy Land that first Christmas.

“The No. 1 question I get asked when people speak to me about the Holy Land is ‘is it safe?’. My answer is always an emphatic ‘yes’

While towns like Nazareth and Bethlehem are now bustling cities far from anything Jesus would've known, the holy sites associated with his earthly life are preserved and revered to this day. Crucially, these places that roll off our tongues when we think of the Gospel are also home to a small but vibrant Christian community.

Through *The Irish Catholic* I have been privileged in recent years to be part of a series of Christian Solidarity Pilgrimages to the Holy Land. What started out as a once-off has now become a regular feature of our calendar due to the popularity of the trips and so we are already planning to go ahead this coming autumn. In recent years, we have walked in the footsteps of

Editor's Comment

Michael Kelly



Jesus and visited the sites around Galilee where he lived the three years of his public ministry.

Nazareth

In Nazareth, we have experienced the place of the Visitation and the hometown of the Holy Family, while in Bethlehem our pilgrims have been able to enter the Church of the Nativity and touch the place where tradition records that Christ was born some 2,000 years ago.

Some people call the Holy Land the 'fifth Gospel', for at these places the scriptures really come to life. Standing at the edge of the Sea of Galilee and remembering all the Gospel passages that speak of the sea instantly brings to mind the ministry of Christ and his encounters with his disciples.

As part of the trips, we have also been blessed to meet with local Christians and hear about their joys and struggles to keep their Faith alive in sometimes challenging circles.

I invite you to join us and be part of this unique pilgrim journey. The No. 1 question I get asked when people speak to me about the Holy Land is 'is it safe?'. My answer is always an emphatic 'yes'.

The people who live in

the Holy Land – what Pope Benedict XVI called the “living stones” – love to see pilgrims coming. They love to know that they are not alone, and that they have not been forgotten about. Much like during the conflict in the North of our own country, media headlines sometimes frighten people and distract from the reality of the situation on the ground.

The Holy Land is a vibrant and unforgettable journey of Faith, fun and friendship. It is also an unforgettable way to bring your Faith to life in a new and refreshing way. I hope you will consider joining us.

The Irish Catholic will organise two pilgrimages to the Holy Land in autumn 2021. The first will depart Dublin on September 28 and return on October 7. The second will depart Dublin on October 12 and return on October 13. If you would like more information, please see Pages 26 and 27 or don't hesitate to drop me an email on michael@irishcatholic.ie

i To join Friends of The Irish Catholic and support Catholic journalism, please phone the office on 01 6874094 for more information or to make a contribution.

Message of hope from Bethlehem

» Continued from Page 1

David Tabash is a Christian shopkeeper. He said that local people miss the presence of the pilgrims and the solidarity in brings. “There's normally tens of thousands attending the lighting of the [Christmas] tree beside the Nativity Church... but this year it was empty,” he said of the December 4 event.

“As Christians, we're a minority. Of four million Palestinians, there are 40,000 Christians and about 80% of these work in tourism, in shops, hotels, olivewood workshops,” he said.

“We're the worst-affected and we'll be the slowest to heal,” he says of the Christian community. However, while he is devastated by the consequences of the pandemic and the lockdown his faith is strong. “God is good. We keep praying”.

He is conscious that the Church is working hard to ensure that people do not go without. “The priests' phone is

ringing all day with requests for food, medicine, clothes,” he told *The Irish Catholic*.

Nabil Hazboun is a Christian guide who will be familiar to anyone who has participated on a pilgrimage organised by *The Irish Catholic*. “The situation as Christmas approaches is really terrible. Bethlehem relies on pilgrims all over the year, there are some seasons when the number of pilgrims is less but many would come at Christmas.

Louis Michel another Christian shopkeeper said that faith has been important in sustaining people. “Our Christian faith has helped us a lot...it makes us closer to God and we continue to pray with deep faith during this difficult time as we cannot guess when it will go away,” he said.

Mr Hazboun said he is hopeful for a brighter future but is putting his trust firmly in God. “My message to the world is to have hope in our Creator, in our God, in Jesus Christ. Once you have this faith inside yourself you can see light at the end of the tunnel,” he said.



Photo: Abbie Traylor-Smith / Concern Worldwide

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‘Couldn’t have got through hard times without God,’ says Irish centenarian

Ruadhán Jones

Despite a hard life in which she lost two husbands and three children, 100-year-old Anna-Mae Treacy carries on enjoying life with faith and trust in God.

Sharp as a whistle

Anna-Mae turned 100 on December 7 and is still “sharp as a whistle” according to her children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and great-great grandchildren!

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, Anna-Mae said she enjoyed her small, socially-distanced birthday, which included a virtual Mass in her honour.

“I did enjoy it and I want to thank my family for organising such a lovely day,” she said. “My friend Fr Patrick Tobin celebrated Mass for me and I watched it on the computer with my children.”

Faith is very important to Anna-Mae, who up until lockdown was a regular Mass-goer and continues to say her rosary every night.

“It’s very important, very impor-

tant,” she said. “At the end of the day, the only person we have to meet is God. My faith has kept me strong through all the ups and downs of life.”

Her faith helped her through the difficult period of the lockdown as well, she said: “I couldn’t have got through the hard times without my faith and trust in God.”

Before lockdown, she attended the community Day Care centre three days a week, independently went to the hairdresser each Saturday, and followed up Sunday Mass with evenings spent at the country dances with her friends - every week without fail.

Advice

She offered a small piece of advice to the people of Ireland as they go through the pandemic: “Work hard, eat healthily, face up to life’s challenges and stay safe.”

Though a hundred years have passed, Anna-Mae still hopes that she can continue “to live out every day in good health and contentment and to enjoy every day God sends”.



Anna Mae on her hundredth birthday.

A tree full of hearts



Healthcare chaplains Eden Dela Cruz and Gabrielle Murphy at the ‘Knitted Hearts’ Christmas Tree, which is dedicated ‘to the memory of those who have died during the Covid-19 pandemic, their grieving families and in gratitude to the hospital staff and the generosity of the community’ in the chapel at Tallaght University Hospital.



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Bro. Kevin 'heartbroken' as food queues increase due to virus job losses

Chai Brady

The number of people getting food from the Capuchin Day Centre in Dublin has increased with people coming who aren't homeless but "struggling to make ends meet" due to the pandemic, according to Bro. Kevin Crowley OFM Cap.

Speaking on *The Irish Catholic's* 'From the Editor's Desk', Bro. Kevin also expressed concern about the number of children brought to the centre for food. He described the situation as "appalling".

"I was really saddened and heartbroken that here we are in Ireland in 2020 and we have people queuing up for food, for food parcels for dinners," he said. "The biggest problem we have at the moment is the number of people that are coming for meals every day."

Bro. Kevin said they are currently open and giving out takeaway meals. In the morning about 200 people come for breakfast, in the afternoon it rises to 900.

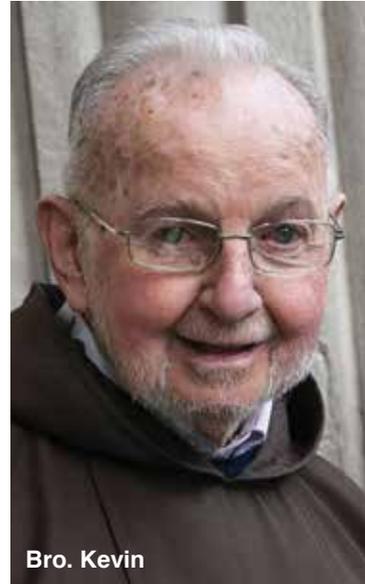
"What really concerns me most of all at the moment are the

number of people who are not just homeless people but people who are finding it very difficult to make ends meet, people who have lost their jobs, these are the people who are coming to us at the moment," he said

"The other big concern I have too are the number of children, we'd have anything up to 60 or 70 families with little children coming here every day again for meals. That saddens me because a lot of those have to go back to a hotel and sometimes maybe they're not getting food and maybe the only food they are getting is what we're giving them."

Bro. Kevin said the restrictions due to the pandemic will be "very difficult", especially for grandparents, over the Christmas. He asked people who won't be able to see their loved ones "to pray for them and to be with them in spirit".

"So many grandparents call me during the week making donations and what they say to me is 'the saddest thing for us this Christmas is not being able



Bro. Kevin

to meet our grandchildren, they won't be able to visit us and that's so sad for us'.

"My message to each and every one of them is to trust in God, trust in Our Lady and trust in the birth of the child Jesus come to their homes at Christmas time."

Ferns Diocese launch 'ambitious' youth project

Ruadhán Jones

The diocese hope to engage 100 youth representatives across the diocese as part of a three-year youth initiative, 'The Way Forward'.

In a statement, Ferns diocese said their aim is to "develop exciting and engaging programmes that our young people will want to be involved in; Caminos, yearly Retreats, Trips, Pilgrimages, JPIL awards, School and Parish Projects and so much more".

The project coordinator, Colette O'Doherty, told *The Irish Catholic* that they hope "to open the door to our young people to the possibility of God".

"Everything has to pass that test; will this open the door to the possibility of God for our young people," said Ms O'Doherty.

Ms O'Doherty said the project is ambitious, the realisation of a number of projects that were beginning around the diocese.

"They all seem to be coming together at this perfect time because really since 2005 the area of youth ministry halted here," she said. "It's just now that we see this is the perfect time to launch it again."

Bishop Denis Brennan of Ferns launched 'The Way Forward' youth-outreach project on December 17, lighting The Star of Hope.

Waterford Christian Brother School first 'School of Sanctuary'

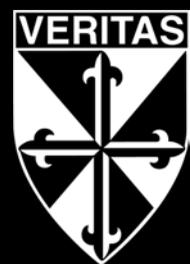
Jason Osborne

Mount Sion CBS has become Ireland's first 'School of Sanctuary' following an assessment process undertaken by the Places of Sanctuary Ireland charity in recent weeks, after years of welcoming students from many different nationalities to the school.

A School of Sanctuary is "committed to creating a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment that benefits everybody, including anyone in its community who is seeking sanctuary".

Mount Sion was founded in 1802 by Edmund Rice as an educational institution for boys from Waterford. Its designation as a School of Sanctuary is symbolic of the school's widespread appeal to those from many different nations.

The school's founder, Edmund Rice, is considered 'Blessed' by the Church, famed for his efforts in education around the country.



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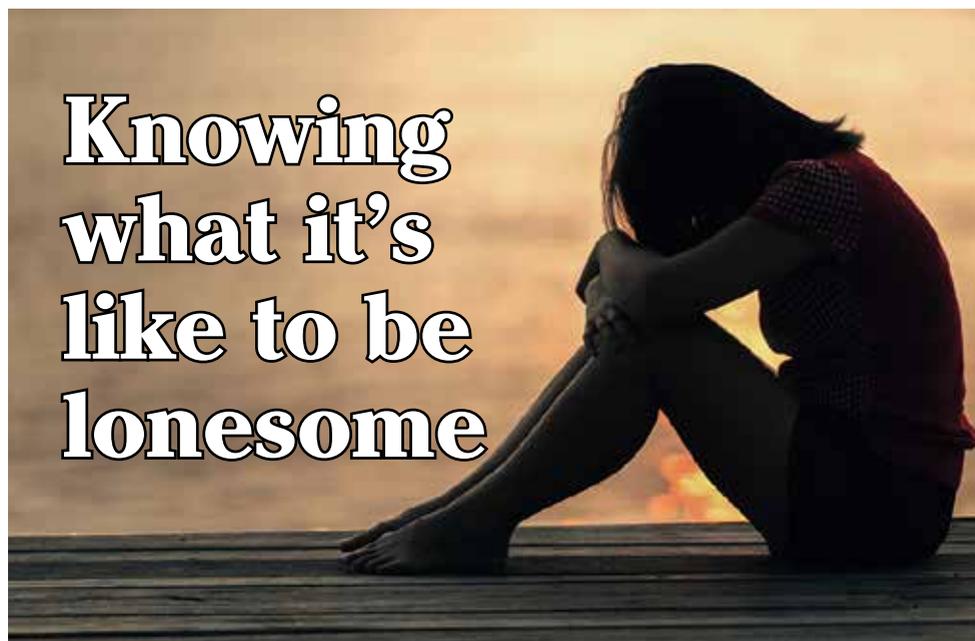
- Emily Dickinson

www.irishdominicanvocations.com

Well done, good and faithful servant



January 1 2021 will see Tadhgíe Fleming commencing his 60th year as parish sacristan at St Mary's Cathedral, Killarney, making him one of the longest serving sacristans in Ireland.



Knowing what it's like to be lonesome

'Goodwill to all' is one of the key messages of Christmas and maybe particularly relevant in this year of Covid-19 restrictions.



Mary Kenny

Social community

In all my life, of over seven decades, I don't think I've lived more separated or detached from a social community. Sometimes, it seemed, it was as if all of us had signed up to the monastic life – and yet, the monastery, though apart from the world, is at least based on community. Perhaps the parallel is rather more with the hermit in the desert – alone, in our own remoteness.

A daft exaggeration: hermits don't order takeaway food from pizza parlours or go online for their household purchases. And, as we've dipped in and out of lockdown, there have been times of meeting – though never of hugging – and sharing. But, generally, the world of coronavirus 2020 has been, in my experience, a lonely one.

I'm not normally given to loneliness, but this year, I've grown aware of what it is like to be lonesome – not to have everyday access to human company. It seems macabre to say so, but I was grateful to attend a funeral just before Christmas (and honoured to be included in the restricted number of mourners) from an old friend. A dozen friends

and colleagues have died this year – only one from Covid-19, aged 84 – but I've only attended one funeral. That's not natural.

Unedifying

And here's another unedifying little disclosure. God forbid I should turn into a crabby old crone, but, as a widow, I began to harbour certain resentments against couples. It's all very well for them, I'd grumble to myself: they have one another! They can help out each other, do chores for each other, and support each other. Singletons are on their own! This ungenerous thought emerged into consciousness when I made a mean-spirited complaint to a shopkeeper that her small boutique, which only allowed four customers at one time, was occupied by couples shopping together. Why couldn't she copy the supermarket chain which displayed a notice saying 'please shop alone' – so as to be fair to single shoppers?

Dear me: what a misery-boots!

Christmas

So, coming up to Christmas, I made a special effort to

remind myself to 'offer it up' a little more, and complain a little less. And so, Christmas cards and messages somehow became more meaningful than ever: prompted by the deep human need to reach out to others and feel that goodwill which is commanded of us at this time.

● On a related theme of community, Fr Michael G. Murphy, of Bishopstown in Co. Cork, has sent me a thoughtful message. "I feel that perhaps an opportunity was missed by the Church during the lockdown – to call forth the blessings of what was called at the Second Vatican Council, the domestic Church."

While the Mass is "the source and summit" of our faith, writes Fr Murphy, (who, incidentally, is a hale 92 years old), the domestic Church, in the home, was the only Church available during times of persecution. In his annual newsletter, he quotes the words of Jesus from John 15:4: "Make your home in me, as I make mine in you". There are many faith passages about the spiritual life being in our hearts and our hearths, as well as in the physical building of a Church.

All this is true and wise. But there is a female perspective to the issue: women in the past sometimes felt too cloistered in their homes. They attended to their home life all day – a visit to the chapel was a welcome change of scene. There they found both spiritual uplift, and also, community.

I'm far from being devoted to domesticity, and during 2020 I became aware of the confines of my kitchen, where, as I remember my aunts lamenting "a woman's work is never done". Fr Murphy was very understanding, too, of that viewpoint.

» See pages 14 and 15

Carolling through covid

It's sad that there will be no singing of Christmas carols this year, although we all understand why singing in a confined space is not recommended.

A woman in Sheffield, Yorkshire, Jan Thornton, came up with the cheering suggestion that people could appear at their front door each Thursday evening and sing carols, safely distanced. 'Sheffield Carols' even put out a programme

of carols on their website for Thursday nights when neighbours might carol together, socially distanced.

Aled Jones, the well-known Welsh baritone supported the initiative: Christmas, he says, needs celebrating with music. His own favourite is Away in a Manger, one of the simplest, and yet most affecting hymns to the Nativity.

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New Oireachtas Group to stand up for life and dignity of all

Ruadhán Jones

Pro-life TD's and Senators have formed a new group to challenge the Irish humanitarian crises of abortion, euthanasia and other life and dignity issues.

The Oireachtas Group for Life and Dignity (OLDG) was co-founded by independent TD's Carol Nolan and Peter Fitzpatrick and launched Wednesday, 2 December.

Carol Nolan

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, Carol Nolan said she was delighted to co-chair the group, saying it will stand up for "the right to life and the dignity of people young and old, born and unborn".

"Issues around the right to life at all stages will be paramount and indeed we won't be shying away from any contentious issues that go with that," Ms Nolan said. "Other issues would include human trafficking, modern day slavery, quality palliative care, freedom of conscience and disability rights."

She hopes that the group will provide a voice for Christian and social-conservative values, saying it's important

people "stand-up and stay strong in their views".

"We have a responsibility as Christians to challenge every injustice and what's happening unfortunately, we've seen that Ireland is turning to a culture of death," Ms Nolan said. "We've changed radically from the way we were as a country and I think now more than ever it needs to be challenged, we need every voice there to raise these issues and work with our group."

Unfinished business

Peter Fitzpatrick, Independent TD for Louth and co-chair of OLDG, said that the group formed because they felt they had "unfinished business".

"The pro-life side were accused of scaremongering before the referendum, but I think you can see now that we were telling the truth," Mr Fitzpatrick said. "If you look back at 2019, we lost 6,666 lives. There were 6,666 abortions that happened in Ireland."

"The good thing is that it's an all-party group and we all have the same goals," Mr Fitzpatrick continued. "What we want to do is talk about the born and the unborn,

young people and old people. We want to look at the quality of palliative care and disability rights. You know, all these things that come under freedom of conscience... it's a case of getting everybody's shoulder behind the wheel so that we can achieve our goal."

Senator Rónán Mullen, one of two senators who have joined the OLDG so far, said that he believes there's an urgent need for people who support life and dignity to raise their voices.

"There's the tendency in some quarters to think that the pro-life side of the argument lost in 2018," Mr Mullen said, "that somehow it's our duty just to shut-up and crawl under a rock and get on board with whatever the majority thinks or appears to think and never put out a contrary view. Or that it's not the duty of the media to cover such contrary views. But of course, that's not the case."

Public life

"We have a job to do to make our voices heard in public life and the media. Forming this group on public life is one way to ensure that happens," he concluded.

Greeting the birth of God with gifts



Sr Lucy and Sr Gabrielle of the Redemptoristine Monastery of St Alphonsus stand with the products of their Christmas baking.

Redemptorist SitOut looks to put food on every table

Jason Osborne

Fr Seamus Enright of the Limerick Redemptorists praised the "great generosity" of the Irish public as their 2020 Sitout, rather than the usual SleepOut, elicited an outpouring of support.

Positive reaction

"The people were generous, there was a positive reaction. It was hard work, but good," Fr Enright told *The Irish Catholic*.

Fr Enright said that the SleepOut was replaced by a SitOut this year due to the safety concerns raised by the pandemic.

The aim of the initiative was to raise money to put food on every table, with the Redemptorists and a team of volunteers using the funds to put together Christmas Hampers for delivery around Limerick and north Cork.

Launching the SitOut, Fr

Enright said, "The Redemptorists are working with the Limerick Food Partnership and partner organisations across the city and county to get hampers into approximately 6,000 homes in the lead up to Christmas. This is one of the biggest food initiatives in Limerick each year."

Fr Enright was pleased to report that the response was as generous, if not more so, as it has been since the Christmas Hamper Appeal began in 1972.

This year

"Two things: the needs were greater this year, and the people seemed to be more generous than ever before," Fr Enright said.

The money raised goes largely towards food poverty initiatives, with the Redemptorists working alongside 34 different organisations to provide relief and care for those in the most need.

New film chronicles the life of Irish 'Rosary Priest'

Jason Osborne

The life of Fr Patrick Peyton, an Irish priest who travelled the world promoting the rosary, is documented in the new documentary-style film, *PRAY: The Story of Patrick Peyton*.

The film is produced by Fr Peyton's own company, Family Theater Productions, famed for producing family-friendly content.

Fr Peyton is remembered for his advocacy of both the rosary and family prayer, the famous phrase "the family that prays together, stays together" being one of his.

Fr Peyton was born and raised in Co. Mayo, and his passion for the rosary was instilled here as he prayed it with his family.



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NEWS IN BRIEF

Thousands of counselling sessions for people affected by cancer

Over 3,200 sessions of counselling have been delivered to adults and children affected by cancer since the beginning of the pandemic.

The Irish Cancer Society is urging anyone affected by their cancer experience, or that of a loved-one, to contact their support line to avail of free counselling sessions.

Mother-of-two Sue Keegan (51) from Crumlin

Dublin received one-to-one counselling sessions. She had required hospitalisation for a stem cell transplant while her husband was also hospitalised for separate health issues meaning her children aged 18 and 12 were home alone for seven weeks.

"I got on to the Irish Cancer Society Daffodil Centre in the hospital and they referred me for counselling. It's been the best thing I've ever done, it's an amazing free service," said Mrs Keegan.

Those wishing to get in contact can call 1800 200 700, or email SupportLine@irish-cancer.ie

NI Marriage rate down 25% over 30 years

The number of marriages taking place annually in Northern Ireland has fallen over the last 30 years from over 10,000 in 1989 to 7,255 marriages in 2019, according to a new report.

Of the 22,447 births registered 46% occurred outside of marriage/civil partnership, compared to 17% three decades ago, the 2019 Registrar General's Annual Report also shows.

However, the report shows that the number of births to teenage mothers continues to fall to a record low of 631 (3%).

The estimated population of Northern Ireland rose by 12,000 people from mid-2018 to reach 1.89 million in the year.

The Spirit of Christmas -

Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy



FOCUS
Ireland

Thirty-five years ago, when I founded Focus Ireland, I would never have expected the situation to become as dreadful as it is today. In the past six years alone, the number of families presenting as homeless has increased by approximately 350%. Right now, there are over 1,120 families, including over 2,500 children, that are experiencing the trauma of homelessness across Ireland. It saddens me greatly to think of all these children; they are so innocent, trusting and impressionable. They too

deserve peace and happiness at Christmas, but their situation prohibits the chance of this. This is a terrible injustice and I do hope that you can continue to support Focus Ireland to provide the crucial help that these vulnerable children need this Christmas.

“It saddens me greatly to think of all these children; they are so innocent, trusting and impressionable. They too deserve peace and happiness at Christmas.”

I know 2020 has been a year filled with shock, uncertainty and fear; Covid-19 has caused unprecedented challenges and hardships for so many people across the country. I know that feelings of loneliness and isolation have been widespread. But I

also have faith in Ireland as a country; we will overcome this. And as we remain conscious of the situation that we are all in, it is also important to remain aware and compassionate to those who are even less fortunate than us.

The families and children that Focus Ireland work with have been navigating this pandemic whilst also suffering through homelessness. They have been experiencing those same feelings of isolation, loneliness and despair for much longer than you or I. Families forced to reside in emergency accommodation hubs across the country are often subject to very restrictive conditions, with or without the threat of Covid-19. This extraordinary health crisis has compounded the already adverse circumstances – families were unable to stray more than 5km from hotel rooms that are often in remote locations, rendering them utterly secluded and segregated. I wonder how hard that must be; children in completely unsuitable spaces with no outlet, the situation is truly terrible.



“The families and children that Focus Ireland work with have been navigating this pandemic whilst also suffering through homelessness. They have been experiencing those same feelings of isolation, loneliness and despair for much longer than you or I.”

At this time of year, I often think about the true spirit of Christmas. Particularly in such uncertain times, I feel strongly that we all need the

positivity and hope that it can bring. As you know, Christmas is an entirely different experience for the children that Focus Ireland work with. I am particularly concerned this year, in a time that we are not recommended to take physical donations of toys for example, as I know this means these children will receive even less support.

As we face into an uncertain future this Christmas, we need the power of that spirit, now more than ever. No one at Focus Ireland wants to enter 2021 without the provisions needed to begin the new year with a more positive view for these families than has been in 2020. And whilst it has been a challenging year for us all, I would like to take this opportunity to shine some much-needed light into the darkness of this year. A light that without our supporters, may not have shone as brightly.

Focus Ireland's Coffee Shop

Focus Ireland's Coffee Shop in Dublin experienced an increase of 101% in demand for hot meals since March,

support required, the Coffee Shop managed to remain open and meet the challenge. The dedication continued across the organisation; between March and August alone, the National Family Homeless Action Team supported 967 families, including 1,300 children. And they will continue to do so.

Focus Ireland is built on the generosity and dedication of people. A donation from you this Christmas can help children have a chance at achieving their full potential into the future and allow families make a seamless transition and stay long term in their new home. You can make a donation now by calling 1850 204 205 or if you would like to give the promise of hope and discuss how you can leave a lasting gift in your Will, you can contact Eve at 01 881 5917.

I cannot think of a more powerful or more important gift to give this Christmas, than the gift of hope.

Thank you so much. And may I wish you, and all of your families, a truly hopeful and peaceful



Nuala O'Loan

The View



Let's celebrate a truer Christmas after a hard year

Christmas is upon us. After a year which has been so strange, we look forward to celebrating the birth of our Saviour, the baby Jesus. For most of us it will be, and has been very different this year. Normally on the final Saturday before Christmas the St Vincent de Paul in Ballymena hold their annual street collection. It is almost always very cold, and collectors ranging from late teens to late eighties (and maybe older) stand for two hours at a time inviting people, by their mere presence, to contribute to those who are less fortunate. People are often so very generous, giving what they can. Children and teenagers give very willingly from what may be very limited pockets. People who never set foot inside a church recognise and know about the St Vincent de Paul – sometimes they tell the collectors that, as they give willingly.

“We cannot gather in the numbers we are used to. We cannot pop in and out of houses to wish people a Happy Christmas”

That street collection could not happen this year because of Covid, nor could the donation of hampers and toys, and because of this, that particular opportunity to focus on the true spirit of Christmas was lost. Joseph and Mary, homeless in Bethlehem eventually found a poor place to lay their heads, a rough bed for Mary to give birth to her precious baby boy. There are so many people in our world who do not have a real home this Christmas. There will be a lot of people who don't have the money needed to celebrate as they might wish, who cannot afford the special food for the special day.

Matthew

We have all listened to Matthew's account of how the Son of Man will come again in his glory, and all the angels with him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, putting the sheep on his right and the goats on his left and how he will say to those on his right, “Come,



you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

Our calling is so clear; our task so vividly articulated for us in these words.

There is something very frightening, demoralising and humiliating about not having a home, not being able to give the children what others are getting at Christmas, not being able to buy a gift for a loved relative or friend. Yet, with respect and genuine kindness it is possible to help those who at this time are in need.

Across Ireland millions of people will have given gen-

erously in the days before Christmas, so that the cold and the isolation of being poor can change and there can be warmth and happiness. Those who gave may even have been beneficiaries as I was, as a little girl after my father died and we were left, eight children and a 33-year-old mother, very poor but not forgotten, as the hamper with all its goodies arrived from the St Vincent de Paul and a tin of Roses chocolates came from the parish priest who knew that little children need sweets at Christmas! I hope that this Christmas, after a year of such hardship for so many people, the families who find life as difficult as we once did, will know the generosity which made all the difference to us over those difficult years.

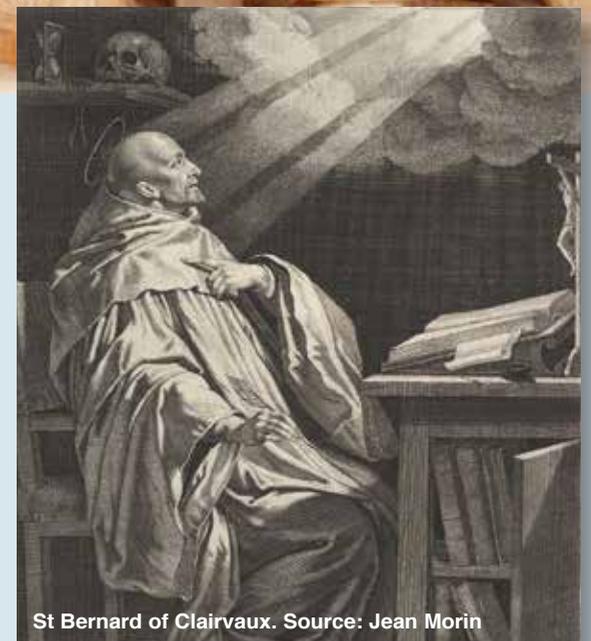
Gather

We cannot gather in the numbers we are used to. We cannot pop in and out of houses to wish people a Happy Christmas and leave a small gift. The focus will

be different. There will be great sadness for those who look on the empty chairs of those who have died since last Christmas. There will be sadness too, as elderly parents and families wait with love, but some people will not be able to come home because of the travel restrictions and uncertainties, and there will be those who choose to stay away. There will be loneliness, especially now, at Christmas.

“These are such unprecedented days. There is a massive lesson for us in what has happened this year”

Yet we will celebrate again the birth of the baby Jesus, our divine Redeemer. Some parishes have announced there will be no Mass for parishioners to attend on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. There will only be virtual Mass to be watched and prayed through



St Bernard of Clairvaux. Source: Jean Morin

on the computer. Others are being creative and are able to arrange outdoor Masses, drive in Masses, more indoor Masses for smaller congregations. We are blessed in our priests who will make it possible for us, somehow and somewhere, to attend Mass, that most precious part of Christmas.

These are such unprecedented days. There is a massive lesson for us in what has happened this year: we should never take for granted the life that we have. Covid-19 has isolated us and separated us from our friends and our families.

It has been a hard year.

Wherever you read this, I hope that a simpler Christmas will mean an easier, less rushed, truer Christmas, one which we will remember with fondness and joy. Perhaps you might want to pray to Jesus using the words of St Bernard of Clairvaux: “You have come to us as a small child, but you have brought us the greatest of all gifts, the gift of eternal love. Caress us with your tiny hands, embrace us with your tiny arms and pierce our hearts with your soft, sweet cries.”

“Some parishes have announced there will be no Mass for parishioners to attend on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. There will only be virtual Mass”

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Ensuring that artificial intelligence ‘cares’ about actual human beings



Some computers can think things through better than the cleverest of people, this has implications, writes **David Quinn**

The big scientific story of the year has, of course, been the development of various vaccines designed to protect us from Covid-19. But longer term perhaps the even bigger one has been the development by a company called ‘DeepMind’ of a means of predicting the behaviour of proteins. Apparently, this may open the door to all sorts of new medical breakthroughs in time.

But also of huge significance was the use by DeepMind of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to help it arrive at its goal. Science writers say the breakthrough shows how far AI has come.

AI is already able to ‘think’ through certain problems better than even the cleverest of humans. A good example is a chess game. A chess game is, in a certain sense, a problem to be solved. How do I win the game in front of me?

“Artificial Intelligence simply has far more computational power than any human being could possibly have”

Only the brightest people are truly excellent at chess because their minds are far better than those of us lesser mortals at working out how to win a chess game. They can work out a strategy, see many moves ahead and work out the numerous ways in which their opponent might respond, and how they, in turn, can respond to each move.

Chess

Computers are now better at chess than we are. Artificial Intelligence simply has far more computational power than any human being could possibly have (it’s where the word ‘computer’ comes from, after all). So, in the end, what chance did we have?

Proteins are fiendishly complex. How could any human being predict how they will behave? Well, DeepMind has gone some way towards answering that problem because of its huge computational power, and it is only going



A robot equipped with artificial intelligence is seen at the AI Xperience Centre at Vrije University of Brussels earlier this year. Photo: CNS

to become better and better at it, leaving our puny brains further and further behind.

Ordinary people are going to have to start thinking a lot more about AI and soon. Politicians need to start working out their policy responses to it. It needs to be discussed more in public, and that discussion must involve not just scientists, but everyone, because it will affect everyone and has massive ethical implications, as well as implications for how we live our lives.

A big concern is the one that has existed ever since the invention of machines, namely, will they put us out of work?

Fortunately to date, machines have helped us to grow our economies enormously, creating more jobs and raising living standards along the way.

But if truck-drivers, say, are replaced by intelligent machines that can read a route, read traffic and get goods from A to B safely and cheaply, why pay a more expensive, error-prone human to do the same job?

Will all those truck drivers find jobs elsewhere? Some might, others won’t. One of the developments that helped give rise to both Brexit and Donald Trump was the loss of manufacturing jobs in Britain and the US to coun-

tries with cheaper labour, not least China. Yes, new jobs were created, but not necessarily for those in manufacturing industries who have suffered greatly as whole towns and regions become ‘rust-buckets’. So, AI will create winners and losers.

“As we develop AI we have to be absolutely sure we know what we are doing”

But here is another possibility, which is vaguely terrifying. What happens if eventually we can no longer control AI?

This is something that seems to belong in the realms of science fiction. We’ve all seen the movies in which intelligent machines seek to displace and even destroy us.

That is where I thought such discussion belonged until I read recently about the existence of an organisation called the Machine Intelligence Research Institute (MIRI).

The members of it are serious scientists who are concerned about some of the implications of AI. They disagree among themselves about exactly how far AI can advance and in what timeframe,

but they agree that “AI is likely to begin outperforming humans on most cognitive tasks in this century.”

Worries

One of their big worries is that independent AI which is “not correctly designed to align its own goals to its best model of human goals, could cause catastrophic harm in the absence of adequate checks.”

To put that in plainer English, poorly designed AI may have goals of its own that have nothing to do with human goals and welfare and may actually conflict with them. The consequences of that could be disastrous.

Therefore, as we develop AI we have to be absolutely sure we know what we are doing, or like Dr Frankenstein, our creation might turn eventually turn on us.

This concept of ‘non-aligned intelligence’ is one I’ve only come across recently. It basically means an intelligence that does not think like us and is essentially, alien. It would have no sympathy for us and if it shared some of our goals, it would only be due to the way we have programmed it. But as the programming changes and evolves, perhaps it would lose those goals. When then?

The Oxford-based philosopher, Nick Bostrom, has come up with

something called the paperclip problem. What might happen if we designed a machine whose job it was to produce as many paperclips as it can as efficiently as it can?

It sounds benign enough, but if it took the command very literally, it would not know when to stop and might eventually decide that humans, who are made of matter, can be turned into paperclips which are also made of matter.

“Here is another possibility, which is vaguely terrifying. What happens if eventually we can no longer control AI?”

Obviously, his scenario is much more sophisticated than this and has many levels, but this very simplified view of how AI could go very badly wrong hopefully gives you some idea of what scientists and ethicists are trying to grapple with as they think about AI.

In fact, last February the Vatican organised a conference to discuss exactly this topic. Leaders from IBM and Microsoft met senior Vatican officials and agreed to collaborate on “human-centred” ways of designing AI.

Pope Francis prayed that AI be aligned with human dignity because if it is not, then the decades to come may see changes imposed on us by a non-aligned intelligence that are vastly incompatible with any such concept.

“A big concern is the one that has existed ever since the invention of machines, namely, will they put us out of work?”

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Christians in Bethlehem set for quiet Christmas



The town of Christ's humble birth would normally be packed with pilgrims at this time of year, but coronavirus has put an end to that, writes **Jason Osborne**

So many of the most beautiful Christmas carols conjure up idyllic images of Bethlem at that first Christmas. Each year we sing about that "little town" where "above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by". This year, Bethlehem is quiet. The Palestinian Authority (PA) which governs Bethlehem under the terms of the 1993 Oslo Accords has imposed strict restrictions aimed at slowing the spread of Covid-19.

The city would normally be packed with pilgrims from all around the world visiting the Church of the Nativity where Christ was born. Though Christians are now a small minority in the city, Christmas was always the most important celebration. This year the Christmas tree stands in Manger Square, but the restaurants and bars where pilgrims would've once had their Christmas lunch lie empty.

Most Christian families in Bethlehem rely on pilgrims. Many work

in hotels, souvenir shops or make olivewood products that are bought by tourists from all over the world. Many have been without income since early March.

“The Christians of this area have tried to make a living, it's a poor area we don't have any natural resources”

The Mayor of Bethlehem – a Christian – estimates that 800 families have been left without any income. He said that 67 hotels, 230 souvenir shops, 127 restaurants and 250 handcraft workshops have been forced to close in a city that is economically dependent on pilgrims.

Sr Bridget Tighe is an Irish nun who heads up the Church's welfare agency in the Holy Land, Caritas Jerusalem. The Church is at the forefront of trying to look after people.

Speaking from Jerusalem this week, Sr Bridget told *The Irish Catholic* "I talked to one of our staff who lives in Bethlehem... what they're saying is that of course people are poor and there's no income and all of that that we know about. But, for Christmas they will get a lot of help through the churches, through local organisations.

"It'll be a very different Christmas – it'll be just Palestinians in Bethlehem," she said, rather than the thousands of pilgrims who would normally make the city their temporary home at Christmas.

David Tabash is a Christian shopkeeper who sells beautiful olivewood nativity sets and other

religious items from his family store in Bethlehem. He says that local people miss the presence of the pilgrims and the solidarity in brings. "There's normally tens of thousands attending the lighting of the [Christmas] tree beside the Nativity Church... but this year it was empty," he said of the December 4 event.

"As Christians, we're a minority. Of four million Palestinians, there are 40,000 Christians and about 80% of these work in tourism, in shops, hotels, olivewood workshops," he said.

"We're the worst-affected and we'll be the slowest to heal," he says of the Christian community. However, while he is devastated by the consequences of the pandemic and the lockdown his faith is strong. "God is good. We keep praying".

He is conscious that the Church is working hard to ensure that people do not go without. "The priests' phone is ringing all day with requests for food, medicine, clothes," he says.

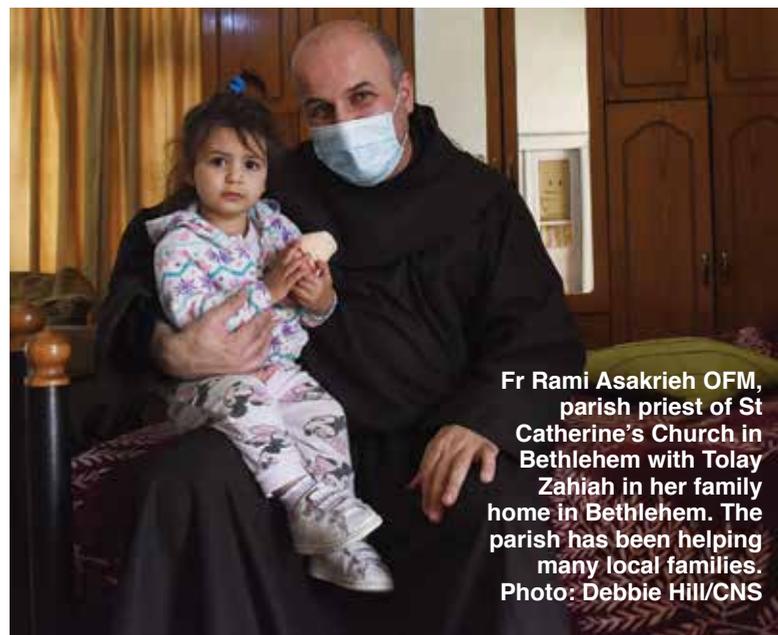
Nabil Hazboun is a Christian guide who will be familiar to anyone who has participated on a pilgrimage organised by *The Irish Catholic*. "The situation as Christmas approaches is really terrible. Bethlehem relies on pilgrims all over the year, there are some seasons when the number of pilgrims is less but many would come at Christmas.

"The Christians of this area have tried to make a living, it's a poor area we don't have any natural resources. We tried to make small things for the Christians that visit the Holy Land. Souvenir stores have developed, employing lots of Christian people inside them, and the products are locally-made by the Christian community, and all of them are closed now and they have to send home the workers," Mr Hazboun explains.

One of those Christians who runs a shop is Louis Michel – a man who



Khader Hadweh



Fr Rami Asakrieh OFM, parish priest of St Catherine's Church in Bethlehem with Tolay Zahiah in her family home in Bethlehem. The parish has been helping many local families. Photo: Debbie Hill/CNS

has so much love for Ireland that he has named his shop on Milk Grotto Street 'The St Patrick Store' and there is a large Irish tricolour outside. Mr Michel's interactions with Irish pilgrims over the years mean that he has even picked up a cúpla focal and is ready to greet visitors in Irish and share a local Taybeh beer with them. He says for the Christians of Bethlehem Covid-19 "has caused a huge lack of pilgrims so quickly and unexpectedly for the Christians in Bethlehem".

“Mr Hazboun is also hopeful for a brighter future but is putting his trust firmly in God”

Christians in Bethlehem are united in their trust in God. "Our Christian faith has helped us a lot," Mr Michel says, "it makes us closer to God and we continue to pray with deep faith during this difficult time as we cannot guess when it will go away – this virus".

Khader Hadweh runs a restaurant and bar along with his brother Osama in Manger Square. Both Christians, they would normally be preparing for their busiest time of year feeding hungry travellers.

"It should be the best month of the year [December]. But this year I don't think so. Because it's lockdown, there's no tourists. It will be totally different this year," he says. Asked if he is hopeful, Mr Hadweh is downbeat.

"Kind of, but not that much," he says.

Sr Bridget says that Christian families will make the most of the situation. "Families will come together, they will celebrate Christmas, they will have gifts for the children. The churches help a lot - they get food coupons and all kinds of things...if there are really poor families who cannot afford many gifts for their children, these organisations buy gifts for the children and they dress up as Santa Claus and they knock on the door and give them gifts.

"So Christmas will not be dismal for them," she says.

Sr Bridget insists that "It will be hopeful and it will be joyful and it'll be family-based, but it will be so different from other Christmases. And of course, the reality is there's no income."

Mr Michel says that Christmas for families will be "full of happiness and fun. Happiness because we are going to pray in the church, that the Christian family will join together for prayer in the church," he said.

"My hope is everything. I hope businesses will return as before and especially in our town of Bethlehem – 85% of the income comes from tourism," Mr Michel says.

Mr Hazboun is also hopeful for a brighter future but is putting his trust firmly in God. "My message to the world is to have hope in our Creator, in our God, in Jesus Christ. Once you have this faith inside yourself you can see light at the end of the tunnel," he says.

Additional reporting by Chai Brady and Ruadhán Jones



Sr Lara Kijazin, director of the Ephphata Institute for the Deaf in Bethlehem speaks with a student. Photo: Debbie Hill/CNS



David Tabash and his family.

Overseas missionaries in urgent crisis

Sister Marie Catherine serves people surviving on the margins in Niger, West Africa. Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world. Here famine and drought means that over 2.4 million, including 800,000 children, are starving and vulnerable. Women and girls endure the most. Female genital mutilation is still widespread in Niger. It is nearly always carried out on girls between infancy and adolescence; it has no health benefits, it only causes harm. All too often, child marriage sees little girls of just ten years of age being married to men old enough to be their grandfathers.

But there is hope

Sister Marie Catherine and her fellow sisters are fighting not just poverty and hunger, but also inhumane practices that violate human rights. In fact, much of their work is dedicated to the empowerment of girls. Their community gardens mean local people have the tools they need to tackle hunger. While hygiene programmes demonstrate the simple precautions needed to prevent the spread of diseases such as malaria, cholera and now COVID-19. Feeding centres allow the sisters to distribute maize to those families who need it the most. While their school offers children the hope of a brighter future.

But why should you care about overseas missionaries when we ourselves face such challenging times? It is true, we may be suffering, but just spare a thought for the men, women and



Sister Marie and her fellow sister, Sister Félicité Sampo (pictured), bring hope as they fight against child marriage and genital mutilation for girls.

children from communities served by missionaries. These people are already trying to survive alongside so many hardships like political unrest, violence, drought, extreme poverty, malnutrition and disease.

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Famed Welsh chorister Aled Jones speaks to Ruadhán Jones about faith, Christmas and his new album

With his features still youthful and boyish, it's not hard to link Aled Jones as he is today with the fresh-faced 15-year-old who shot to fame for his performance of *Walking in the Air*. A cover of a song from the animated short, *The Snowman*, Aled's version went to number 5 in the charts in 1985.

He jokes with me that "some would say I haven't really progressed that much in my career because I'm singing the same music now as I was when I was 11! But, you know, that's testament to the tunes." Now heading into his 50s, Aled has been performing professionally for 35 years, but he continues to perform around the world, as well as working on programs such as *Songs of Praise* on BBC.

He has recently released a new book, *Everyday Blessings* and an album simply called *Blessings*. The book and album draw together wisdom from different faiths and from Aled's own personal experience.

Speaking about the book and album, Aled says he recorded them hoping "that people will enjoy them and take them to heart".

"It's been a very trying time for the whole world," he says. "It's been a time where we've all had to stop our normal lives and in a way take stock. The album is in no way a product of lockdown because the idea for it came long before."

"But the book I suppose is because I don't think I would have finished it if it hadn't been for lockdown and spending time at home doing nothing, really. I just found myself going to these words, you know some making me smile, some hitting my soul, some going deep into my heart, some spurring me on."

"Everything seems to have worked out well, that it's broken up into sections and the blessings fit within those sections. They're not all religious blessings, some are. But I couldn't not have the Irish blessing, for instance it's what I sing all the time and it's actually on the album as well."

"I hope for people when they read them, if somebody turns to that day's blessing, that it gives them something for the whole day, you know, spurs them on."

Aled's new album *Blessings*, draws from a wide range of faith backgrounds, including Catholic, Quaker

and Muslim. Being able to explore each faith through the songs confirmed in his mind the fundamental qualities of all faiths: kindness and love.

"We're brought into this world not wanting to hate, not wanting to injure, not wanting to hurt and I think that's at the heart of every faith," he says. "So, you know, being able to sing a Christmas hymn with Sammy Yousuf performing a Muslim song was such a great experience. So was having Judi Dench on a Quaker hymn and singing a Jehovah's Witness piece."

“I've always felt the connection [to faith] through the music”

"But the thing that I most loved more than anything was that the feeling I get when I sing my religious music, I was getting from these other faiths as well, which is interesting in a way."

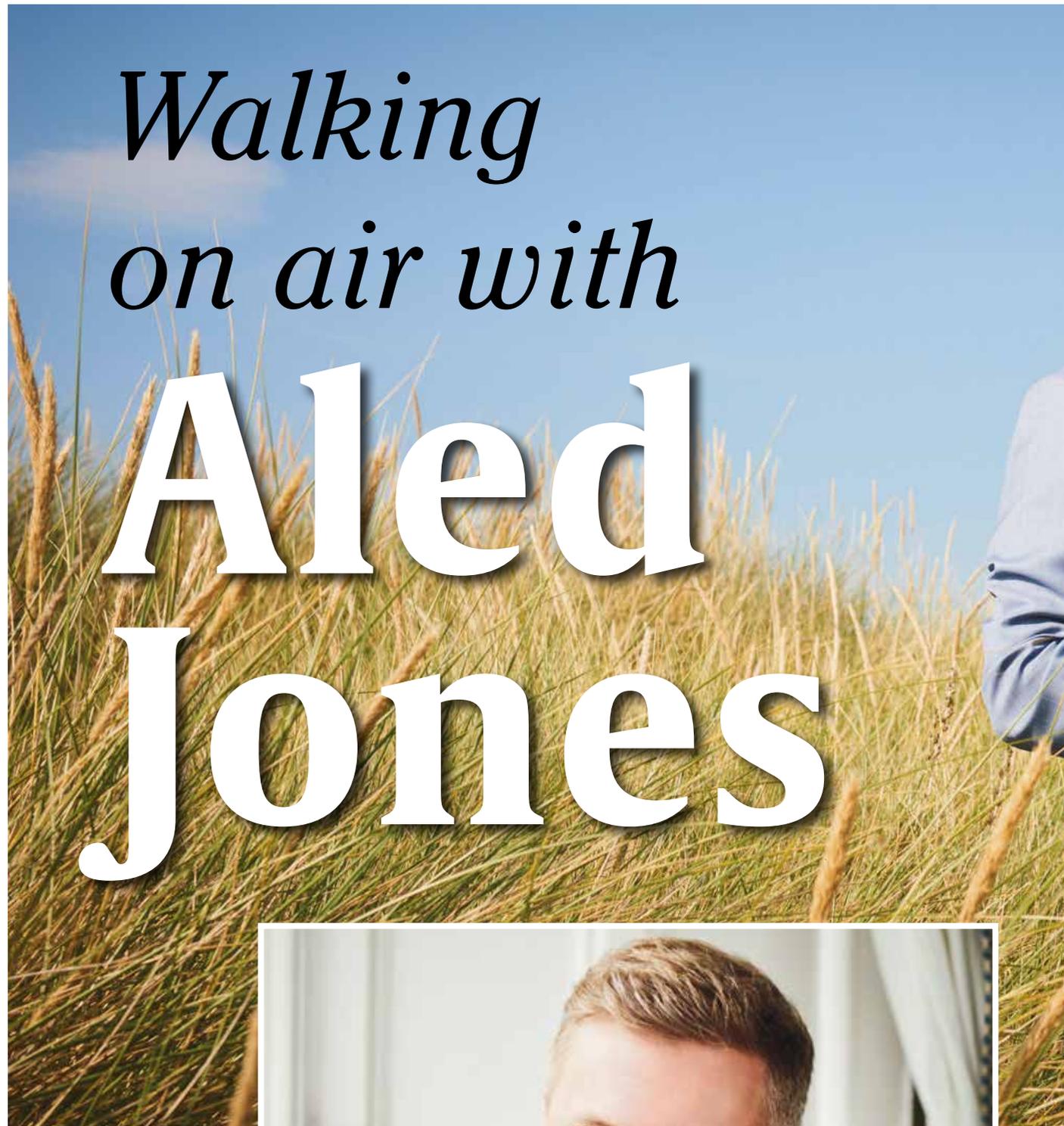
Early life

Aled's life has always been centred around singing – through this, it has also been centred around faith.

"I've always felt the connection [to faith] through the music, so even though I don't go to church now on a set date, I film in them all the time and whenever I do come to a church or I'm on tour my musical director and I will always go to an evensong or something like that. It just restores the spirit I suppose," he tells me.

From a young age, the two went hand-in-hand. He began his fledgling career as a member of the cathedral choir in Bangor Cathedral in Wales, at the age of nine. Within two years he was lead soloist, and the rigorous schedule meant that he spent many hours performing at services in the Cathedral. Through that, faith came to hold a central role in his childhood.

"I went to Sunday school when I was a very young child," he says. "Then of course I was a chorister at Bangor Cathedral for four years where, you know, there's no escaping faith, if you like. Because I was singing in a service on a Tuesday and Thursday, rehearsing on a Friday and two services on



Walking on air with

Aled Jones



a Sunday. So, you know, it's a big commitment."

Due to the remarkable quality of his treble voice, Jones' progressed quickly and he signed for a record company at the age of 12. In 1985, his fame rose to exceptional heights through his recording of "Walking in the air". By the time his voice broke at 16, temporarily halting his career, Jones had recorded 16 albums.

Faith music

All through this period, and on into his adulthood, Aled maintained his Christian beliefs. "It's always been there," he says. "I've never questioned it. I suppose there were about three or four years where I was at college where I didn't really – I wasn't really that bothered. But it wasn't as though I turned my back on it. It's just I didn't actively seek it out."

Aled feels blessed then to be able to consistently express himself through faith music, on which the majority of his career has been built. Singing faith music is both a career and a passion.

"I mean, it's what I do," he says when I ask him about what draws him to faith music. "It's what I've always done, I love it. I'm at my happiest when I'm singing that sort of music. I love singing music that has an impact on people and I'm very lucky that I get to sing – well did anyway – that I get to sing this sort of

music in places like cathedrals and churches.

"I'm sad that I'm not doing my [cathedral] tour this year, but thankfully I will get to do it in May next year. I've always had that connection through the music. I've always been very open about the fact that when I come to a church where there isn't any

music, it has no effect on me at all really. My connection is through music and it always has been."

When I ask how he finds the energy and drive to keep on touring all this time, Aled quickly brushed such concerns aside with a smile.

"If you're doing a cathedral tour and you don't feel



“If lockdown has taught us one thing, it’s to appreciate every moment that you’re given because it can be taken away from you. So yeah, I’m very privileged to be a Songs of Praise presenter”

inspired then you never will be,” he says. “A, the sound checks are amazing because they’re all so well built, and B they look amazing! So I’m taking my inspiration from some of the greatest architects in the world and have spent years and years building these testaments to what they believe in. So a Cathedral tour is such a delight.”

Lockdown

As with many millions of people around the world, Aled found lockdown a very difficult experience. As a performer, being stuck at home without an audience or an outlet for his passion was exceptionally frustrating.

“Being a performer, as time has gone on now, it’s been

horrendous,” he says. “We don’t know when we can go and do what we do again. It’s the longest I’ve gone not singing in front of an audience since I was 9. So, I’ve a hotel concert coming up at the end of the month and I’m not sure how I’m going to feel about it because it’s been such a long time coming.”

One of the things that helped Aled through, aside from the company of his family of course, was his music – and through that, his faith.

“I spent three weeks of lockdown learning the songs for the album,” he explains. “The orchestra had already been recorded because they were in New Zealand and their lockdown came before ours.

“I sang and sang and sang

these songs for three weeks and when I eventually got into the studio, the whole album was done in 12 hours. I think it was an outpouring, I really wanted to sing these songs and move people with them. It was probably the quickest album I’ve done.”

However, there were some ways in which it proved beneficial. In general, Aled hopes that people rediscovered the value of communities. For himself, it was a reminder not to become blasé about the many great opportunities his career offers him. One of these is the *Songs of Praise* program which he has been co-hosting since 2004.

“It’s a great program to be involved in because so much care is taken by everyone who is involved in it, from the bosses right down to the runners,” Aled says. “It’s a show that means I’m privileged enough to speak to people who talk much more eloquently about faith and

what it means to them – you cannot help being impacted by meeting these people.

“And it’s fantastic to film in these places. For instance last week I was in St Paul’s Cathedral – I mean, what an honour. In the past, because I’ve been presenting the program for 20 years now – in the past, I might have been a bit blasé about that – but if lockdown has taught us one thing, it’s to appreciate every moment that you’re given because it can be taken away from you. So yeah, I’m very privileged to be a *Songs of Praise* presenter.”

Christmas

For many, whatever else he does, Aled Jones will always be associated with Christmas music through his hit *Walking in the Air*. Christmas at his house, he tells me, is a very traditional affair, though this year will be slightly different.

“This year, I’m not sure

what Christmas will be like because we’ll be in Canada actually,” he explains. “My daughter’s in Canada filming at the moment, but usually it’s very traditional. All hands on deck, playing games we wouldn’t normally play during the year and just having quality time together.”

It will be an especially meaningful Christmas, however, after the experience of two lockdowns. The first was spent with his family and was, he says, “an incredibly powerful” experience. Now, however, he’s separated from them and immensely looking forward to being reunited.

“When lockdown first started, the fact that I hadn’t spent so long with the family in a long time, it was something so precious and I loved every minute of it,” he says. “It’s only as time went on where you know you then have to think about work and all this business, and real life gets in the way. But for those first few months and weeks, it was you know cooking together, spending time together and I’ve really valued that. And now, with my family being away, I miss them terribly.”

The magic of music simply won’t die for Aled and he

hopes to continue singing for a good many years to come. He’s already looking forward to being able to perform in front of crowds again. In fact, it brings out a little childlike glee in him. Perhaps that’s the key to his success, a childlike wonderment for faith and music. In keeping with that is his favourite Christmas hymn, one which may come as a surprise.

“It’ll always be ‘Away in a Manger,’” he says. “And sometimes people will say, oh, that’s such a childish carol and that’s why I love it. It sets the scene so beautifully for the story. It takes me back to being a child in Llandegfan primary school in North Wales and, you know, sitting there cross legged singing it for the first time and being so impacted by it. It has a childish quality, but that’s what I love about it.”

Aled’s new album *Blessings* is available on BMG; *Everyday Blessings* was published on November 6 by Hodder and Stoughton. Aled tours the UK from May 2021. Visit officialaledjones.com for more info.

“Being a performer, as time has gone on now, it’s been horrendous. We don’t know when we can go and do what we do again. It’s the longest I’ve gone not singing in front of an audience since I was nine”

Renowned Shamrock Rovers player opens up about faith and Christmas



Devout defender Joey O'Brien tells **Chai Brady** about his faith, football and Christmas traditions

Christmas is a time for faith and family and in difficult circumstances such as the current coronavirus pandemic the world is facing, God will always be there, according to Shamrock Rovers defender Joey O'Brien.

Joey started off playing for Bolton Wanderers aged 15 and continued with them into his senior career. He went on to play for Sheffield Wednesday and West Ham United before joining the Shamrock Rovers squad in 2018. He has also been called up for Irish international matches.

With almost two decades of experience, the professional footballer said it was his faith that led him through some of the more difficult and darker parts of his life.

“Joey explains that he gets ‘great comfort’ from his faith in God and how he was brought up”

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, Joey says his parents instilled a strong Catholic faith in him from a young age, which helped him when he left for England in his teens and through a serious knee injury that put the future of his footballing career in question. Practising his religion is never something he shied away from talking about. It has regularly come up in media interviews when asked about rituals before matches or how he dealt with his injury.

Before the cup final last November, when a journalist asked him what his day would consist of, he responded that it wouldn't be too different than most, he would get up and go to Mass and then go home to get ready for the match. “Obviously

to them it was out of the ordinary maybe,” Joey says, explaining that the journalist seemed surprised.

“Someone asked me then ‘do you pray for a win?’ before the AC Milan game and I said no, I say my prayers all the time but I don't pray for wins. I just pray that everything goes well in the match for me if possible whatever the result is going to be and hope that I come off the pitch in one piece.

“It's a huge part of my life, when I'm speaking to journalists it just sort of comes up. Throughout the years if I was talking about injuries, and how you get through injuries, it's always been something I talked about because they were really difficult times. Being in England I missed years with my injuries and stuff like that.”

“Faith is one of the things that ‘sticks with you’ if you're brought up that way, Joey says”

Joey explains that he gets “great comfort” from his faith in God and how he was brought up. During his injury, which saw him unable to play football professionally for years, he says: “At times I probably was praying for a miracle because I went two and a half years without playing a match and I had multiple operations on my knee.

“So at that stage for me I needed a miracle so I was praying for that but I was also praying for the strength to know that if it didn't work out and I wasn't going to get through the injury that I would always have God with me to help me.”

Faith is one of the things that “sticks with you” if you're brought up that way, Joey says. His mother was a daily Massgoer and his family would all go together on weekends. When he went over to join the Bolton Wanderers academy in England in his teens, which was the start of his footballing career, one of the first things he did was to locate the local Catholic church.

Great strength

“Through that it gave me great comfort, great strength, great help through obviously not being around my family and friends and for me I found it was sort of like a connection I had still with my family, I knew they were going to Mass, I was going to Mass, I knew they would be praying for me and I was praying for them. I found a great connection through it and that over there definitely helped me,” he says.

Regardless of where Joey ended up in the world, whether it was to do with football, in foreign countries for training camps or not, he would always find a church.



Asked what his experience has been, during his football career and outside of that being an openly practicing Catholic and looking for the nearest churches, Joey says, “I think people were very respectful of it if they knew that's what I do sort of thing, that's where I go”.

“So they would always be helpful in a sense of whether it was finding out where it was or organising a lift. At the start, when I was a kid, you probably needed a lift down to the church and the phone internet wasn't as handy as what it is now.

“Nowadays when you're going into a foreign country to play football

obviously just with your phone you can find out where the local Catholic church is and what the Mass times are, so it's a lot easier now.”

West Ham United

During his five-year career playing for West Ham United he said he was lucky to have a church right on his doorstep. The club have since moved from the Upton Park stadium after he left in 2016 and now are based at London Stadium.

“There was a Catholic church 20 yards away from the stadium, so it was really convenient in that sense, that was my local church. The two priests were fans of the football club,

so I was able to get a connection with them through that,” he says.

“The stadium was so big it was literally in the carpark, you could kick a ball from the church onto the football pitch it was that close like. The two priests were Westham fans so I suppose listen, one of the things of me going in there was I suppose a few free tickets I was able to give them to go and watch the matches.”

He adds: “There was some funny stories that I've had in regard to

going to church on a Sunday morning and playing a football match in an afternoon.”

Church

In one particular case when West Ham were to play Newcastle he found a church to attend Mass, the priest there was Irish. Joey was sitting in a pew with his West Ham tracksuit on before the game among a host of Newcastle fans. He says the priest was “having a bit of banter on the altar regarding me”, describing it as a “funny moment”.

With a huge number of aspiring footballers unable to play matches and train as the normally would during the pandemic, Joey says practicing on your own is always very beneficial and can help people stay sharp.

“Whether you’re in the garden or in your house... you need to keep doing it, that’s where you can get enjoyment,” he advises.

“Joey’s Christmas tradition, since he moved back home to Crumlin in Dublin, is to get up first thing in the morning to go to Mass”

“You can create a little world of your own, on your own, with football and that’s what I done as a kid. You wanted to be the best player in the world, taking a shot or scoring a goal or kicking the ball off your back garden. You can still do all that sort of thing, that’s the most important thing, those moments when you’re practicing but you’re still enjoying it and you’re waiting for the next time you’ll be able to get back out onto the pitch playing.”

Watching and playing football can help people “switch off” during the pandemic and help them through it, Joey says but at the end of the day it’s “only a sport”.

“There’s a lot of things way more important especially at this time with the situation, people losing their jobs, people in hos-



Joey O'Brien pictured playing for West Ham United.

pitals, people losing loved ones and stuff like that,” he says.

“But from my point of view we’re obviously a professional sport in this country so we’re still playing. I suppose the games are on TV and people are able to watch them and for that little period of time you’re able to maybe switch off your reality for that little hour and a half and whatnot you know and try and get carried away in the match, in the emotions of what a

football match means and if that can help people in any way I think it’s a good thing especially at this time.”

Christmas traditions

Joey’s Christmas tradition, since he moved back home to Crumlin in Dublin, is to get up first thing in the morning to go to Mass.

“I have two young children and they get up early so it’ll be an early Mass for us and then down to my mam and see her with the kids obviously and then get ready for Christmas dinner,” he says. (Before having children he used to go to the midnight Mass but says it’s just not possible now.)

He explains that’s been the case for the last couple of years since being back in Ireland, but that may change due to the Covid-19 pandemic, “I was going to say it won’t change this year but you never know with the way things are, the way the world is now”.

Family

Christmas would also be a big time for his family, they would also remember his father who passed away. “I’d always be around the house with my Mam and with my brothers and nieces and nephews,

so yeah it would be a big, big thing for us as a family.”

He adds: “Those are the two most important things in my life, my faith and my family.”

“Joey says that although football is an important part of his life, it can never trump his faith”

“I have my own children now, so for me I’m trying to start passing the faith on to them, what my mam and dad done for me.”

Asked whether it’s been difficult for him during Ireland’s two lockdowns leading to churches being closed for public Mass during the pandemic, Joey says: “Definitely, I know there’s people especially like my mother, she would go every day. I suppose there’s a lot of people out there who would miss it. I definitely miss it, again you get great comfort. For me personally you need to go to Mass, you need to hear the message, you need to be there. It’s OK saying you say a few prayers but for me you need to be practicing, you need to be going to Mass.”

After the first national lockdown when churches reopened for public Mass on June 29, Joey says when he returned he was impressed by the level of precautions that were taken to ensure people’s safety from the virus, describing them as “very, very good”.

He adds: “For me I find it a bit strange that they were closed down, because in these times I think people, there’s so much going on, to have that spiritual sort of side of things with you I think it could be really, really important to people.”

“Everyone is hoping to get over this period of time and for everybody to get back together for Christmas, for me as I said, that’s the two things that defines Christmas, going to Mass, going to church and being with your family.”

Faith

Joey says that although football is an important part of his life, it can never trump his faith. He says: “Regardless of football, I suppose I’m known as a footballer, I went to England when I was 15-16 I’m still doing it now, so I’ve been really, really fortunate to be able to do that as a job for so long.”

“But I know it’s going to come to an end sooner or later, but my faith is not going to leave me it’s going to be there until the day I die and after that as well.”



Joey O'Brien celebrates after scoring a winning penalty for Shamrock Rovers against Finnish football club Ilves in August this year.

“I’d always be around the house with my Mam and with my brothers and nieces and nephews, so yeah it would be a big, big thing for us as a family”

Allowing the past to breathe life into the present



Traditions offer us a Christmas full of meaning, writes Jason Osborne

This year we find ourselves moving through an Advent like no other, facing a Christmas like no other. Forced apart by the year's events, the chances of enjoying the cosiness and warmth – both social and physical – so typical of the season seem slim.

Recent years have seen the patient waiting that characterises Advent forgotten, replaced instead by hurried and flustered activity. Buying, wrapping, making and doing are all essential aspects of the usual festive season, but there is reason to believe that in the midst of it all, the only essential element of the celebrations has been neglected: the birth of Christ.

The birth of God into humanity changed everything. It is an event that continues to unfold today, and one of the key changes it instituted is the making meaningful of every particle of the world. If it wasn't before, the incarnation has rendered our material world deeply important, deeply spiritual. As such, Advent provides us with an opportunity to reflect on all of the meaning to be found in our world, and traditions are the perfect gateway into doing so.

With less to do this year, there has never been a better time to delve into the wealth of Christmas traditions our island and our Faith have observed throughout the years. Many of the traditions that we have taken for granted for years are laden with meaning, if only we have eyes to see it.

Fasting

While the run up to Christmas and the Advent season are often associated with enjoying a wide range of festive treats and cuisine, such as the customary Christmas

dinner, mince pies, mulled wine and the like, the Catholic Faith has always put stock in fasting – even during the run-up to Christmas. Out of all of the days of the year, only two are official days of abstinence and fasting for the Catholic Church: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

“The Church has always taught, and the incarnation exemplifies, the fact that the material and the spiritual are linked”

However, the tradition of the Nativity Fast, also known as Philip's Fast as it begins after the feast of St Philip the Apostle, encourages an alternative approach to the nativity of God. In so difficult a year, the thought of fasting during the Christmas season probably doesn't appeal to

many, but the reasons for doing so are numerous.

The Church has always taught, and the incarnation exemplifies, the fact that the material and the spiritual are linked. In other words, it has taught that what we do with our bodies can affect our souls. In this spirit, fasting is an attempt to clear distractions from our vision – and if you're brave enough to give it a try this Christmas, it might help you to reclaim some of the meaning this season has always brought to our doors.

Jesse Tree

Jesse Trees are often to be found in churches around this time, but rarely are they found in homes – this wasn't always the way. Jesse was the father of King David, and he's identified as a key figure in the genealogy of Jesus.

Throughout the years in Church art, a design developed which depicted the relationship of Jesus with Jesse and other biblical figures. The design showed a tree with many branches growing out of the reclined body of

Jesse, and the branches held pictures of various other Old and New Testament personages who were ancestors of Jesus. At the zenith was an image of Jesus and Mary. The design was mainly to be found in iconography in the eastern Christian tradition, and stained-glass windows in the west.

Over time, this artistic tradition developed into the modern Jesse Tree, which sees a small tree or artistic mock-up of a tree adorned with symbols depicting either the genealogy of Jesus or the story of salvation history, beginning with creation and running all the way through to the birth of Christ. Each day of Advent, a new ornament or symbol is added to the tree, each one corresponding to the story of our Faith.

The Crib

A staple of every Irish household and church in the past, the practice of displaying the nativity scene has waned in many places in recent years. The first nativity scene is

credited to St Francis of Assisi and goes back nearly 1000 years, so to set your own up is to imitate the spiritual steps of the saint as he attempted to home in on the event from which Christmas draws its meaning.

Inspired by his trip to the Holy Land, St Francis created the scene in an attempt to draw attention to the worship of Christ and did so by recreating the incarnational scene to the best of his ability.

From Assisi, the practice has spread all over the world, but the Irish tradition has certain customs attached to it. It was traditionally understood that to take straw from the scene, particularly from the infant's crib itself, and to keep it in your pocket was to ensure you'd never be without money throughout the year. Further to this, if holly or ivy were taken and kept in the house, it was said that you'd have comfort and luck for the duration of the year. With Ireland's Celtic roots, it's no surprise items of nature such as straw, holly and ivy were imbued with meaningful properties.

Carol singing

Perhaps an outlandish suggestion but getting family and/or friends together,

“The tradition of the Nativity Fast, also known as Philip's Fast as it begins after the feast of St Philip the Apostle”

whether by Zoom or otherwise, to sing Christmas carols provides ample opportunity to raise spirits that have been set low by the heavy events of the year.

Ireland has a rich musical history, and this extends into Christmas carols. *Curoo*, *Curoo*, *The Wexford Carol*, *Christmas in Killarney* and *Once in Royal David's City* are songs with tangible connections to Ireland, all shrouded in one degree of fame or another.

“To sing Christmas carols provides ample opportunity to raise spirits that have been set low by the heavy events of the year”

A famous quote says that “he who sings prays twice,” and if this is true, there’s no better way to bind a family together spiritually in the approach to Christmas.

St Nicholas Day

An oft-forgotten feast day as Christmas approaches, St Nicholas used to have a larger place in the mind of the Faithful. Conflated as he is now with Santa Claus, the original St Nicholas and his celebration has dropped out of circulation in some places entirely.

Little enough is known about the historical St Nicholas, but many legends have cropped up around him – from his attested miracles, to punching the heretic Arius during the First Council of Nicaea. However, it is believed his reputation for gift-giving is the basis for the usual model of Santa Claus.

His feast day celebrated on December 6, it was customary for the children of the house to leave their shoes out overnight in front of the fireplace or windowsill, so that St Nicholas could leave fruits, candies, and other small gifts and treats.

St Therese of Lisieux spoke of this tradition in her famous work *The Story of a Soul*, saying:

“When I got home from Midnight Mass, I knew that I should find my shoes standing at the fireplace, filled with presents, as I had always done since I was little...Father used to love to see how happy I was and hear my cries of delight as I took each surprise packet from my magic shoes”.

An easy tradition to re-introduce, one with deep roots in both the Church and culture, and one which will be welcomed by any children in the house as the opportunity is seized for further gifts.

Window light

A widespread custom in the Ireland of old was to place a candle in the window on Christmas Eve, for a variety



of reason. Some hold that it was for reasons of hospitality; in reparation for the poor welcome the Holy Family received on that night 2000 years ago. The warm light in the window was a symbol of welcome to all those passing by.

Other understandings of the tradition were of a more supernatural bent. Mary was understood to travel the country on Christmas Eve, and those with a lit candle in the window received her blessing. An alternative telling saw the infant Jesus seeking a home, only to find one in houses with candles on display.

Regardless of the reasoning, a flame burning in the window of every house around the country would prove a powerful symbol of Christmas hope as 2020 draws to a close.

The Wren Boys

A tradition typically associated with St Stephen's Day, December 26 saw the arrival of the Wren Boys in Irish towns and villages.

Wren hunting was an ancient ritual in Ireland, and the original hunts saw the wren killed and hung on a holly bush. The reason for the wren's punishment was because according to legend, the wren betrayed St Stephen's hiding place by chattering on the bush where he was hiding, which led to his discovery and subsequent stoning. This is but a loose connection to the story of St Stephen in the New Testament, with the reality of the

wren's unfortunate identity as the target of the hunt likely being connected to Celtic Ireland and its symbolism of the past year.

In more recent times, wrens were not harmed and those who would've engaged in the hunt now garb themselves in straw suits and tatty clothes, marching through the streets playing music and making merry.

“Wren hunting was an ancient ritual in Ireland, and the original hunts saw the wren killed and hung on a holly bush”

There were varying degrees of mischief conducted under the cover of this custom, with primary sources from decades past detailing how the Wren Boys would patrol the streets, calling into houses and pubs in search of money. If it was forthcoming, they continued on their way, but if not, they would rush into the house and lay claim to whatever they could.

As the day drew to a close, it wasn't unheard of for the money to be divided between the roving band, to be spent on alcohol and festivities for the evening.

Women's Christmas

January 6 most famously marks the feast of the Epiphany, the final day of

“St Francis created the scene in an attempt to draw attention to the worship of Christ and did so by recreating the incarnational scene to the best of his ability”

the Christmas season. It is usually considered the day on which to take down the remaining Christmas decorations, with bad luck threatening those who leave them up.

In Ireland, the feast of the Epiphany had an alternative title: Women's Christmas or Nollaig na mBan in Irish. Women would take this day to rest after all of the work they'd put into the bustling Christmas season. As *The Irish Times* noted in 1998, “God rested on the seventh day but the women of Ireland didn't get to do the same until the twelfth and last day of Christmas”. So it was left to the men of the house on this day to take care of the family and carry out what would usually be their wife's responsibilities.

In some cases, the men would cook the food for their wives, while in others, the women visited each other, taking turns preparing the food. In spite of this, the fare was usually quite simple, with the feast also being known as ‘Little Christmas’. This was a reference to the meekness of the meal, as all of the Christmas food

had long been eaten. In an interview with *The Irish Times*, one woman alluded to a simple slice of currant loaf and a cup of tea among friends.

Christmas day swim

In keeping with the fasting referred to above, another way to introduce a measure of asceticism into what can often be an opulent day is to take part in one of the many Christmas day swims that occur around the country.

On Christmas morning around the country, crowds flock to popular points along the coast to plunge themselves into the icy water surrounding our island. If swimming doesn't seem too desirable a prospect to you, it makes for a pleasant spectacle on a clear December's morning.

As mentioned above, the Church has long understood the importance of the link between the spiritual and the physical, and this is another way in which to bring your body under your control. The benefits conferred by exposure to cold-

water (health permitting, of course) are numerous: it boosts the immune system, which is particularly important this year, it improves circulation, it burns calories and reduces stress. A rush of endorphins is a sure-fire way to get one of the most important days of the year off to a good start!

“On Christmas morning around the country, crowds flock to popular points along the coast to plunge themselves into the icy water surrounding our island”

These are but a handful of the traditions that our homely little island has to offer, with many changing and taking on various forms in different times and places. With everyone making their way through a season like no other, perhaps it's time to allow the past to breathe life into the future.

Recalling glorious days in the



Fr Bill Dailey CSC presiding at the renewal of marriage vows in Cana



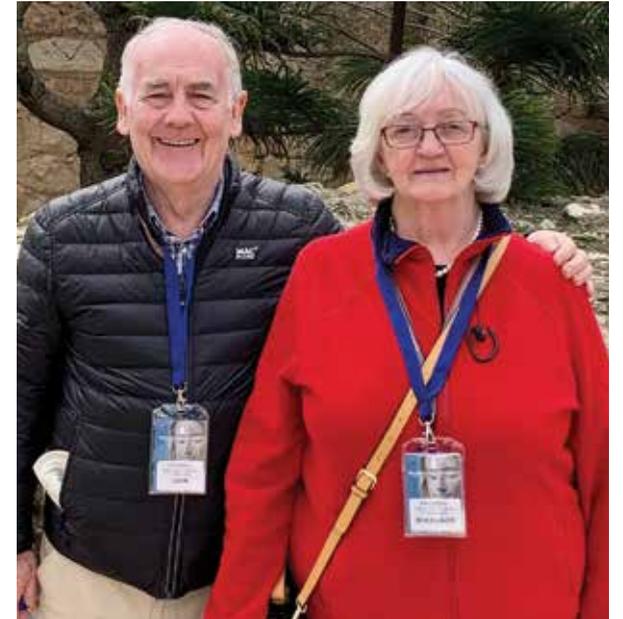
Just before the pandemic, a group of pilgrims led by *The Irish Catholic* returned from the Holy Land. Days later, the region along with much of the rest of the world went into lockdown. The end of pilgrimages has had a devastating impact on the local Christian community who rely heavily on pilgrims for their livelihoods.

This selection of photographs shows the pilgrims visiting the holy places associated with the earthly life of Christ.

Plans are afoot for pilgrimage to the Holy Land in Autumn 2021. See pages 26-27 for more details.



Pilgrims at the renewal of marriage vows at Cana



footsteps of Jesus in the Holy Land



Pilgrims with Bishop Kevin Doran at Mount Tabor





God remains the key ingredient, young couples tell **Jason Osborne**

Relationships have changed a lot in recent decades, with rates of dating, engagement and marriage plummeting amongst the young. According to the Central Statistics Office, the average age of marriage for a bride in Ireland is 34.8 years old, while it's 36.8 for the groom.

There are undoubtedly a number of reasons for this, but they haven't been enough to sway everyone. A pair of young couples, Katie and Edward (married 5 months), and Kristina and Darragh (married 7 months), spoke to *The Irish Catholic* about their decision to get engaged and marry young. In doing so, they shed light on what it is that attracts young people to marriage, and what they think will prove key in making marriage an appealing prospect to the culture again.

Never-ending choice

The first question I put to each of them was how, in this world of never-ending choice, they knew they'd found the person they desired to spend the rest of their life with.

"For me, it was pretty early on in our friendship, which definitely came first before our relationship, and then we were colleagues, we were working together. And then through working together at the Pro-Life Campaign, we formed this fantastic working relationship, we were really able to feed off each other's strengths and compliment each other's weaknesses and it was from there, sort of having a series of gradually more, I guess, intense conversations about what it is we're each looking for in life. Both sort of laying it out on the table very early on, you know, that we're both very family-oriented, that our Faith was very important to both of us," Edward says.

"We had (these conversations) very, very early on and we found that we actually matched up on an awful lot of those, what can be, sort of, hard topics. So yeah, for me it was, obviously you know there's the shallow side of being incredibly attracted to Katie physically to begin with," he laughs, "but beyond that we also needed to match intellectually and I think sort of morally and spiritually as well. That was really, really important and we managed to do that."

Katie echoed all of the above and emphasised the importance of the depth of their shared Faith: "Well yeah, just like a few examples, I guess because I think you cover most of it. So, definitely we had the foundation of our friendship and being very attracted to each other. I think that was obvious pretty early on.

"So, then there were a few conversations we had that really stood out to me. So first of all, finding

out you're a Catholic and you took your faith seriously, because I didn't know that when we first met, so that was a huge stepping-stone for me. Because, yeah, I just, I hadn't seen you in that light yet, so when I realised you were really serious about your faith, that was really exciting. And then I remember we were walking down some street in Dublin, I'm going to forget the name of it, but we were talking about family and it came to light that you were really intent on spending a lot of time with your family and really investing in your children and, just hearing how much family meant to you was another huge box ticked for me, a really important one. And then, the last thing: just shortly before we started dating I gave Edward a Jason Evert book, because that was kind of the last step for me, to make sure he was fully on-board with chastity and everything, that obviously would be in-line with our Faith, so I gave him the book and I think you read it in like, two days or less... One day. And you said you agreed with everything in it, and I was like, 'Ok, this is it'."

Litmus test

For Kristina and Darragh, it was a similarly Faith-centred discernment, with Kristina telling of the "litmus test" she used when considering potential suitors.

"Well, to be honest with you, for me it's like a litmus test in regards to relationships and dating. Anytime I didn't feel peace, I didn't go for it. Every time that I didn't feel that it was right, I never went for it, and for me, a litmus test would be peace. That's like a marker - 'Ok, go for it'. You know? And Darragh was the only one anyways ever since my conversion that I felt really at peace. He was pretty much the very first, kind of, boyfriend that I had, that I went for so look at me now! I didn't go on any more dates," she laughs.

Darragh's side of things was equally certain, if not more so: "I suppose, yeah, in my past I would have been in different relationships before my conversion and I had only converted about three months before I met Kristina. I grew up quite involved in the Faith but never really made my own decision to, kind of, immerse myself in Catholicism and was a lapsed Catholic for years. So, I had had my conversion and about three months after I had a conversion I met Kris-

tina. We met at a pro-life party in Knock in 2018, and I suppose for me personally in my experience of meeting people in general, she just blew me away. About a week and a half later, we met up for the first time since we first met in Knock and I would've given my whole testimony to Kristina on our first - I suppose, looking back, we kind of say maybe it's a date, but at the time it wasn't, it was just like a friendly meet-up. But she was the first person I'd ever given my whole testimony to and I told everything about who I was and, you know, my past and different things. Kristina just listened to the whole thing and I went home to my dad that evening. I had only known Kristina about a week and a half at that point, and I said to my Dad, 'If I start going out with that girl I'm going to marry her'. So I knew pretty quickly."

Kristina just listened to the whole thing and I went home to my dad that evening. I had only known Kristina about a week and a half at that point, and I said to my Dad, 'If I start going out with that girl I'm going to marry her'. So I knew pretty quickly."

Commitment

With both couples knowing they'd found the one they wanted to marry,

the obvious question was why to proceed with marriage so quickly - particularly when it isn't the done thing in today's world.

Katie tells me, "There was something really nice that the priest said in the homily at our Mass, at our wedding Mass. He said, 'There's something really beautiful about a couple giving their youth to each other'. And he mentioned how we're witnessing a human sacrifice today, but what he meant is us laying down our lives for each other, and especially to do that young, how that is, yeah, I guess a real, a real treasure and a unique thing in today's culture... I think that that's the kind of commitment that unfortunately the culture today is just kind of afraid of. I think our generation is really afraid of commitment. Like whether it's going out Friday night and who they're going to hang out with, or it's who am I going to spend my life with. I think we really struggle with commitment."

Edward added to this by saying, "Yeah, and also both of us being practicing Catholics, marriage is a lifelong commitment, which means no matter what, we are agreeing or placing ourselves in a covenant-relationship that we are going to be with each other for the rest of our lives, and that our vows actually mean something. That they're not just words - they are truly things that we believe in and that we're signing up to, for better, for worse, for absolutely everything that goes on. We're not stupid, we don't think that we're not going to go through periods in our marriage which, you know, please God will last 50-60 years. something like that?"

The young faces of marriage in Ireland

Darragh and Kristina Bailey

“We met at a pro-life party in Knock in 2018, and I suppose for me personally in my experience of meeting people in general. she just blew me away”

Edward and Katie Barret-Shortt
(née Ascough)



“Health going well and all that sort of thing. We’re not stupid to think that at some point, we’re not going to have ups and downs, but it’s just knowing that through all of those downs, that ultimately, we are always going to be together. That brings such a level of freedom to be more yourself, and this is very much something that we learned in our marriage preparation...as a man it can be difficult to actually fully open up and be like, the true version of yourself. And the freedom that comes with knowing that you can be the real you, you can say whatever is bothering you, to truly, I guess, be vulnerable.”

Darragh expressed the same notion – how radically important that ability to be vulnerable is, “You don’t realise how vulnerable you become, and then you get married. That vulnerability around your spouse is just the most incredible feeling.”

Darragh took a straightforward approach to things, citing the tendency to hang around after meeting someone wonderful as being a real danger to potential happiness.

“Yeah, it’s like, because even in the Catholic circles, there’s people wait a long time before they actually meet the one that they want to marry. And that’s understandable. But I suppose the fact that we met each other so young, we both knew. We met in June 2018, and by October, November, we both knew. We were both on the same page in the sense of, ‘We want to get married’. So then, why wait? You know? It’s like, there’s no point in waiting then, we know we want to get married, so you know, we could be going out

four or five years and not be married or not engaged, you know?”

Kristina then, referred to the suitability of youth for looking after children – a task that grows more difficult as energy wanes with age.

“I think, how your Dad always says that kids are for the young, and looking at it in a way that, yeah, we’re in our 20s, early 20s, which means we have so much energy, right?... It is true that while we’re so young, we can give all that energy to the kids, whereas later on at the stage when you are losing that energy and you can’t really give so much energy because you physically, you know, can’t anymore.

“But I don’t know, I think in that way, it is great to have kids at a young age. In another way, it’s great to get married because I think it’s better to marry within a short span. Like, not too short, like six months, but I think there should be like a year of courting and another year of preparing to get married. Around that, or even a little bit longer but not too long.”

“All that’s important was us getting married in the eyes of God. It couldn’t have been any more perfect”

Both couples acknowledge the centrality of God and the importance of prayer in their relationships, with Edward saying they

“I think our generation is really afraid of commitment. Like whether it’s going out Friday night and who they’re going to hang out with, or it’s who am I going to spend my life with”

understood that in getting closer to God, they knew they’d be getting closer to each other, and Darragh commenting about the priority of the Sacrament on the wedding day.

And a good thing they adopted this attitude too, as both couples experienced major disruption to their original wedding plans. Darragh and Kristina brought their day forward by over a year in an effort to cut through the uncertainty posed by Covid, with Darragh explaining, “the most important thing for us was simply getting married. Taking everything else away. It was like, this is a union between us and God, and stripping it back to the essentials, and all that’s important was us getting married in the eyes of God. It couldn’t have been any more perfect.”

Edward and Katie found themselves in an equally awkward position, their wedding postponed by over two months amid the shifting regulations. However, they too saw it as God’s doing, as they got to focus on what was truly important without distraction.

“We knew throughout all of that, the most important moment was the moment in the church. It was the Sacrament. That was what was truly, truly important to us. And all the other things around it are wonderful, but they are very much secondary. The day itself – so many

people came up to us on that day or texted us afterwards, or just, so many people said the same thing, but you know we felt as well, it was just a day full of joy. It was truly joyous,” Edward says.

Married life

Both couples were delighted with their day, regardless, and have strode forward together into married life, each confident in the other. Referring back to what they said previously, both Katie and Edward, and Kristina and Darragh point to the security and comfortability they feel with their spouse as one of the most enjoyable aspects of married life. It’s a feeling which cannot be replicated outside the bond of marriage, they assure.

Asked about some of the most enjoyable elements of their new life so far, Kristina explained, “It’s time together, but even to be together in peace. You know, like one reading something, the second person doing something else. And it’s just that being together without even a word,” which Darragh quickly affirmed.

“It’s almost like the other person becomes an extension of yourself. It’s just being there with the other person. Do you know, it’s having a best friend that’s always beside you.”

Katie voiced the same contentment as Kristina, explaining “I guess, the security in the, I don’t know if it’s the same as for a man, but as a

woman, there’s something particularly enjoyable and, I don’t know, something that just means a lot is knowing that our relationship is secure and for forever, and just being able to live that each day. Yeah, and just being yourself completely with the other person. That’s a daily joy that I think, obviously you can take for granted, but you are reminded of it quite often because there’s nobody else like your spouse that you have a relationship with in that way.”

The immense satisfaction and joy that both couples exude is evident, but rather than turning their gazes inward, they continue to look to God and his plan for their married lives.

Kristina comments, “But it’s funny, you know? The things that we learned. We thought that when you go into marriage, you’ll learn about the other person more, but it’s funny – you actually learn so much more about yourself...You find so many little things about you, like, ‘Oh my goodness, I’m so selfish in this way’ or ‘Oh my goodness, that is something I should work on’, and it’s such a beautiful way because marriage really is a prep. work to Heaven. I can genuinely speak through what we’ve gone through, only six months so far – it’s shown me so many ways where I can improve myself. You know what I mean? I think that’s the best thing about marriage, it really prepares you.”



Ruadhán Jones explores how religious orders around the country celebrate Christmas

We are blessed in Ireland by the presence of so many different religious orders, men and women. Cistercians, Benedictines, Dominicans, Franciscans and many, many more – each have a lively presence, even if it's one we may not always see.

The way in which they live their lives is somewhat inscrutable to most of us, quite deliberately alien to the life beyond the monastery walls. Alien, but not alienated – their differing levels of asceticism and withdrawal mark a deep reverence for the world, promoting an interior freedom that enables a greater appreciation for the origin of nature's wonder: God.

But one way in which their world and ours finds a concrete connection is through the liturgical seasons. They will join us in mourning and rejoicing in the Easter season, and celebrating Christ's birth at Christmas. But what does Christmas in the monastery and the convent look like? Does it differ much from our own? I interviewed three of the orders to get a sense of how they celebrate Christmas.

The Dominicans

The Dominicans have had a nearly continuous 800-year presence in Dublin and Ireland. In fact, 2024 will mark the 800th anniversary of the friars' arrival in Dublin in 1224, just three years after the death of St Dominic himself.

“For a start, the brothers spend Christmas day together, much as families would come together for the day”

The Dominicans are renowned for their intellectual tradition – St Thomas Aquinas being its most famous representative – as well as their devotion to the Virgin Mary. With regard to Christmas, however, their celebration is “mainstream” compared to other orders, says Fr Conor McDonough OP of St Saviour's.

“We've a few pieces of Christmas music that are strong in our tradition,” he explains. “Bits of chant and so on that we would sing. Apart from that the way we celebrate it, it's fairly mainstream. From my experience sometimes in houses of formation where we have broth-

ers in training – often the youngest brother will carry the Christ-child in procession to the crib at the beginning or the end of Mass.

“It's this idea of the youngest member of the community carrying Christ with him into the main church. In times past, the feast of the Holy Innocents (28 December), was a time when the youngest member of the community would become the prior for the day. In some cases that was observed as a day of special fun and enjoyment.”

In relation to the experience of the laity, there are significant similarities also. For a start, the brothers spend Christmas day together, much as families would come together for the day. This is very important, Fr Conor says and after Mass in the morning, they share a relaxed, quiet lunch.

After lunch, the priests and brothers have a chance to do their own thing for a time. Fr Conor explains that he has a personal habit of going out “onto O'Connell street, it's almost deserted, and visit the crib for the extraordinary sense of peace, simply just to pray there to pray the rosary at the crib on a very, very quiet O'Connell street in the twilight. That's a beautiful tradition that I personally have,” he says.

In the evening they come back together to celebrate, having dinner and a party before taking part in games and sharing a few party-

pieces. So passes Christmas day in St Saviour's Dominican Priory.

Advent

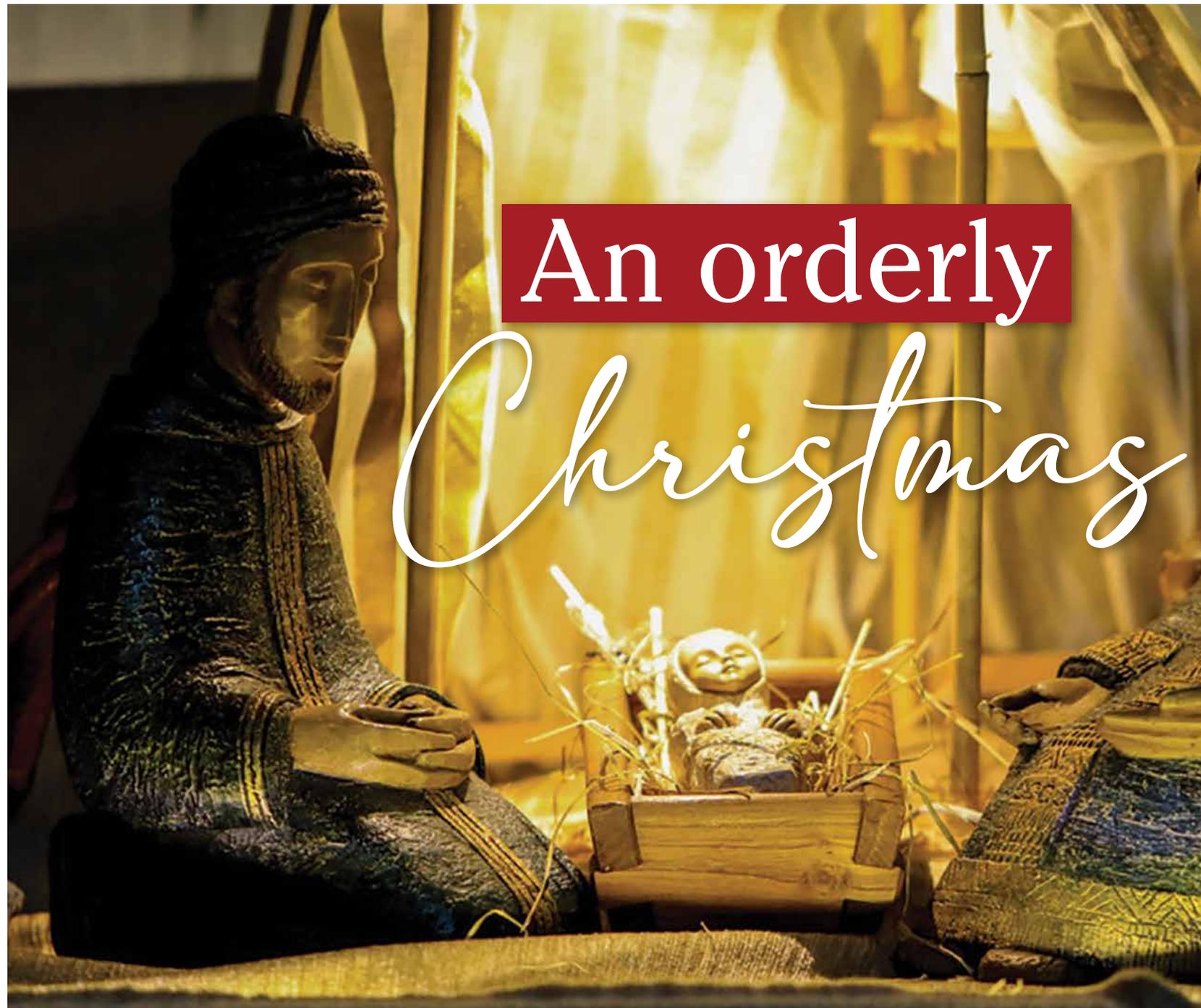
What is remarkable so far is how similar their celebration is to our own. However, where the paths of men and women religious and the laity diverge is in the celebration of Advent. While for many, Advent is seen mostly as an extension of Christmas, the Dominican's celebrate it as a distinctive season of its own.

“Where Christ is addressed as O, Root of Jesse, O Key of David, all these ancient, ancient antiphons are sung that go back to the 8th century and so on”

“Christmas comes later in a sense because Advent is observed so intensely,” Fr Conor explains. “When I first entered religious life, it was strangely out of kilter with the commercial world and the world of parties. We're still very much in Advent

An orderly

Christmas



mode, six or seven times a day we're singing about waiting, waiting, waiting – but that has its own excitement as well.

“Especially the O Antiphons, the Magnificat antiphons that are sung on the last days leading up to Christmas. Where Christ is addressed as O, Root of Jesse, O Key of David, all these ancient, ancient antiphons are sung that go back to the 8th century and so on. Those antiphons have their own excitement attached to them and there's a great build up then.

“I really love the season of advent, that building of expectation. Each year for me it's like a slight separation from the incarnation and then a sudden return on Christmas day to a new appreciation of the presence of God among us in Jesus Christ. For me it's that each year, there's a new appreciation, a new desire for Christ, that's built into the waiting in Advent. It's then finally at midnight Mass that you allow yourself to fully celebrate Christmas. That midnight Mass is all the more special for that.”

The Cistercians

When the Normans arrived in Ireland in 1169, there were already 10 Cistercian monasteries in Ireland. The order's first monastery was established in Armagh in 1142, in part the result of the local bishop's enthusiasm for the order's way of life.

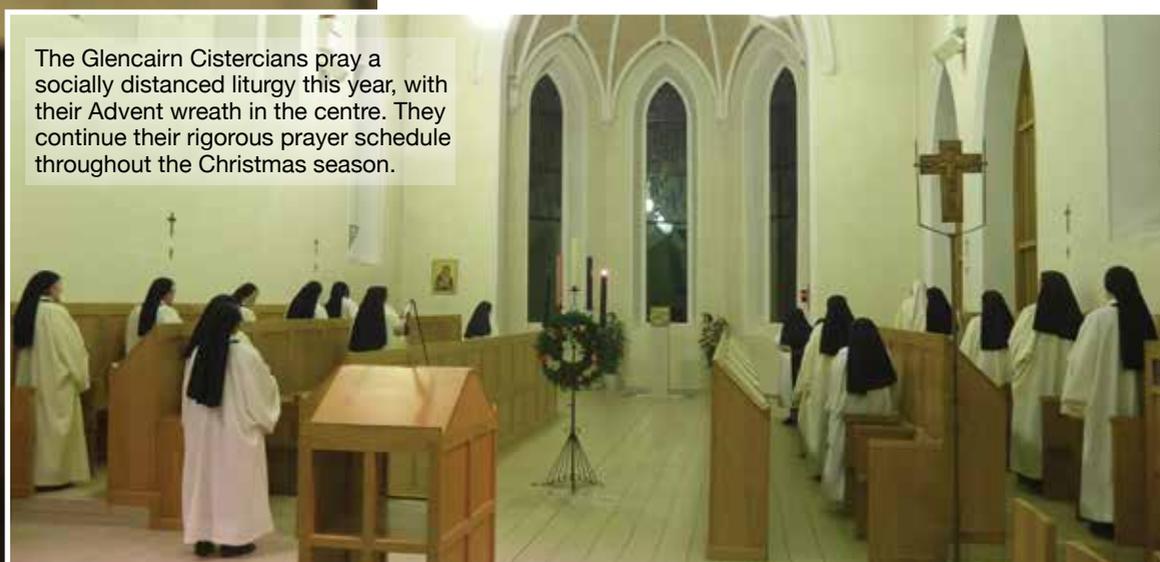
The Cistercians were readily welcomed by the Irish, who appreciated their orientation towards pastoral and agricultural activities. Equally, the austerity of the Cistercian practices was reminiscent of Ireland's traditional, native asceticism.

“We also make Christmas cards, this is the busiest time for our cards department”

St Bernard of Clairvaux, who is largely responsible for popularising the order, described the true Cistercian spirit when he wrote: “Our order is humility, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Our order is silence, fasting, prayer and labour; and above all, to follow the more excellent way, which is charity.”

A number of monasteries continue the order's tradition in Ireland, including men's orders in Roscrea, Tipperary and Waterford, and a women's order in Lismore. Sr Eleanor Campion of St Mary's Abbey, Glencairn explains how the order celebrates the season of Christmas. Much like the Dominicans, it is striking the emphasis placed on the season of Advent.

“The first thing is that we don't begin to celebrate Christmas until



The Glencairn Cistercians pray a socially distanced liturgy this year, with their Advent wreath in the centre. They continue their rigorous prayer schedule throughout the Christmas season.



Sr Clothilde (R) and Sr Eleanor of the Cistercian convent in Glencairn have Christmas dinner and a little chocolate.

it's actually Christmas," Sr Eleanor says. "We keep Advent as Advent. For example, we wouldn't have our Christmas lights turned on or our lights put up until as close to Christmas as possible. Advent is a quiet time, almost a time of retreat.

"It's still busy because of our industries, we do altar breads – now, there's not much doing because of Covid, but usually it's a busy time because of Christmas. We also make Christmas cards, this is the busiest time for our cards department. And one or two of the sisters make candles. But in general we try to have more of a retreat time leading up to Christmas so that we can begin the celebration of Christmas at Christmas and keep it up until the Sunday after Epiphany."

Liturgy

The focal point of monastic life is the liturgy and this doesn't change during the Christmas period, Sr Eleanor explains. They observe all the hours of the Divine Office, also known as the liturgy of the hours, a set of prayers to be recited at fixed hours of the day and night.

"Our focus is on the liturgy, we sing all the hours of the Divine Office every day," says Sr Eleanor. "When Christmas comes, the week between Christmas and New Year, we would have more of a relaxed atmosphere in the house. We watch some TV or DVD's or something similar.

"Nevertheless, we're still up at 4:10 am every day. We're conscious that yes this is a season of joy, but it's not for everybody – there's still a lot of people in suffering and pain, people in isolation and hardship and we're keeping all those people in our prayers even in the hours of darkness."

“The feast of the Epiphany and the idea of the recognition of Christ spreading out through the Magi to the whole world”

Christmas day itself is also structured around the different hours of prayer, such as Matins in the morning through to Vespers later in the day.

"It's definitely still structured around the hours of prayer," Sr Eleanor says. "But we would have a more – our commitment to silence would be more relaxed than usual, we all like going to the kitchen and helping out a bit with the lovely dinner. After dinner, just giving ourselves a good rest especially if we've been up for midnight Mass the previous night.

We'll have ourselves quite a lavish spread compared to other days."

Reflecting on the Christmas season and the Cistercians' celebration of it, Sr Eleanor says she finds it beautiful and emphasises the contribution enclosed religious orders such as the Cistercians are able to offer to the world.

"It's all very beautiful isn't it," she says. "The feast of the Epiphany and the idea of the recognition of Christ spreading out through the Magi to the whole world. And in the same way our life has meaning for the whole world, even if we are obscure and hidden in many ways, not out there in the thick of things, but through our prayer and the whole gift of our life we are sending out the grace of Christ through the whole world."

The Benedictines

The Order of St Benedict, also known as the Benedictines, came to dominate monastic life in Europe during the Early Middle Ages, spreading to England by 597. In Ireland, however, it did not establish a major presence until late in the 11th century. A number of Benedictine monasteries are still active today, including Glenstal Abbey in Limerick and Kylemore Abbey in Connemara.

For the Benedictines, much like the other orders, Advent and Christmas are distinct seasons, Fr Luke McNamara OSB of Glenstal Abbey explains. For the Benedictines, the Advent season is marked by the singing of chants and melodies specific to the season.

"There are many special chants and melodies which we sing at the

offices in the church," says Fr Luke. "In the last week of Advent leading up to Christmas, we have solemn Vespers each day with the singing of the 'O Antiphons' acclaiming the coming of Christ by a series of titles drawn from the Old Testament, showing that Christ is the fulfilment of God's promises to his people."

“They communicate something of the indescribable joy of Christ's birth for the world but also for each of us”

The O Antiphons are traditionally sung during the last week of Advent, from December 17 to 23. The popular hymn 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel' is probably the best known of the antiphons, and is the last in the series. Each antiphon denotes an attribute of the coming of Christ, such as *sapientia* (wisdom) or *rex gentium* (king of the nations). They have been practiced for more than a thousand years in the monastic tradition. For Fr Luke, "the melodies of the Christmas Gregorian chant speak to the heart".

"They communicate something of the indescribable joy of Christ's birth for the world but also for each of us," he explains. "The contrast between the long sleep of nature so visible in the bare trees and shrubs in the depths of Winter and the joy

of Christ's birth, point to the life that Christ can bring, perhaps especially to us in this year of the pandemic."

Christmas day

Come Christmas Eve, the focus turns to the liturgy. Fr Luke emphasises how the liturgies on Christmas Eve and Christmas day bring life to the story of the nativity.

"We begin the celebration of Christmas at first Vespers at 6pm on Christmas eve," Fr Luke says. "Afterwards we process to the crib where the infant Jesus is laid in the manger and the crib is incensed. The most junior monk prepares the crib every year, so while the figures of the crib are the same, the style of the crib varies greatly and it's a reminder that Christ has come not only 2,020 years ago, but comes anew to us each year. Afterwards the nativity Gospel from Luke is read. The combination of hearing the proclamation of Jesus' birth and seeing the figure of Jesus in the manger of the crib brings to life the story of Jesus' birth."

“Much the same as Catholics beyond the Abbey walls, different orders have slight variations in their Christmas celebrations”

"On Christmas eve night at 11.20pm we have a vigil office before Midnight Mass, where we sing a hymn, chant the psalms and have two readings. This provides a great way to prepare for the Midnight Mass. The Abbey bells, named after the first Benedictine monk and nun, Benedict and Scholastica, and also named after the patrons of the Abbey, Joseph and Columba, are all rung together to celebrate Christ's birth."

On the big day itself, the morning begins as you might expect at this stage with morning prayer (Lauds) at 8am. This, Fr Luke says, allows the brothers a much-needed lie-in after midnight Mass!

"The community Christmas day Mass takes place at noon with the prior as chief celebrant," Fr Luke says. "After this, there is a buffet lunch. We bring forward solemn second Vespers (evening prayer) to 5pm and at about 6 we have predinner drinks and then our Christmas dinner from 6.30 onwards. We have a fairly traditional menu of turkey and ham with the trimmings and then plum pudding and brandy butter for dessert. After the chat and fun of the dinner and the washing up, we have night prayer at 8.30 in the chapter room before going to bed."

Much the same as Catholics beyond the Abbey walls, different orders have slight variations in their Christmas celebrations. Where they differ is in their celebration of the Advent season, so firmly a period of waiting and anticipation, a season in its own right rather than an extension of Christmas. But the central traditions – a communal gathering, dinner and the celebration of Mass – unify their traditions with ours as we all come to celebrate Christ's incarnation and his Second Coming.

MAKE 2021 A YEAR TO GO TO THE HOLY LAND

This September and October will see two groups of pilgrims depart on an unforgettable trip to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. In recent years, these trips have become an integral part of The Irish Catholic year with hundreds of pilgrims making the journey from every corner of Ireland to take part in a unique opportunity to visit the sites associated with the earthly life of Christ. The pilgrimage also helps the Bible come alive for people as they visit Nazareth, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Here are some highlights of this year's itinerary:



The Sea of Galilee.

Day One: Ireland to the Holy Land

Depart Dublin Airport in the evening for an overnight flight direct to Tel Aviv on El Al.

Day Two: Nazareth

Upon arrival in Ben-Gurion Airport, pilgrims will be met by a Marian Pilgrimages representative and guide before boarding our tour coach to Nazareth. En route we will see stunning views of the sun rising over the Galilee region – site of much of the ministry of Jesus. After breakfast, check-in to the four-star Legacy Hotel for five nights with dinner and breakfast.

After time to rest and freshen up, we will walk the short distance to the nearby Basilica of the Annunciation to celebrate Mass. On the lower level of the basilica we see the remains of Mary's house and where the Archangel Gabriel visited her.

Adjacent to the basilica is St Joseph's Church, where we will visit the site of Joseph's workshop and the house of the Holy Family. A short walk from the basilica is Mary's Well here you have the opportunity to draw water from the same well as the Virgin Mary followed by free time in Nazareth before dinner at the hotel.

Day Three: Mount Tabor and Cana in Galilee

After breakfast, we have a short drive to Mount Tabor to ascend by taxi for Mass at the Church of the Transfiguration where Jesus is transfigured and speaks to Moses and Elijah. There is time to enjoy the view of the Valley of Armageddon and the Jezreel Valley – bread basket of the Holy Land.

After time for lunch we take the short coach journey to Cana in Galilee. Here we visit the Wedding Church, the site of the first miracle of Jesus. Couples on the pilgrimage can take part in the special ceremony to renew their wedding vows and there is also prayers and blessings for spouses at home and deceased husbands and wives. In the lower level of the church, we will see artifacts from the site before having an opportunity to taste and purchase some of the famous wine from this sacred site before returning to Nazareth for dinner in the hotel.

Optional Eucharistic Adoration at the Basilica of the Annunciation at 8.30pm.

Day Four: The Sea of Galilee

This morning we make our way to the Mount of Beatitudes overlooking the Sea of Galilee where Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, Capernaum and Tabgha. Visit the site of the multiplication of the Loaves and Fish at Tabgha, and the Church of the Primacy of St Peter.

After lunch on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, continue to Capernaum and see the old synagogue and the excavations of St Peter's house before taking a boat trip on the lake, with relevant Bible readings. Before returning to the hotel we visit Magdala, the home of Mary Magdalene, a prosperous fishing village at the time of Jesus.

Optional rosary at the Irish icon at the Basilica of the Annunciation at 8.30pm.

Day Five: Acre – the Crusader capital

We take the short coach ride to the coastal city of Akko, famed throughout history as the Crusader capital of the Holy Land. After Mass, we return to Nazareth for free time in the town of the Holy Family before dinner at the hotel.

Optional candlelit procession at the Basilica of the Annunciation at 8.30pm.

Day Six: Jericho and Bethany

We leave Nazareth and drive south along the Jordan Valley into Jericho. Here we can see the Mount of Temptation and the Sycamore tree of Zacchaeus. Continue to the Dead Sea and enjoy a 'dip' near Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Drive by the Inn of the Good Samaritan, to Bethany to celebrate Mass at 16.00 and visit the Tomb of Lazarus. Continue to Qasr el Yahud, the baptismal site of Jesus on the River Jordan, here we can renew our baptismal vows.

After we drive to Bethlehem and check-in to the four-star Manger Square Hotel, located just a stone's throw from the Church of the Nativity for four nights, with breakfast and dinner.

Day Seven: Jerusalem

We drive to Jerusalem and enter the Old City to the Church of St Anne and nearby, see the Pool of Bethesda. Close by we begin the Via Dolorosa and follow the stations of the cross through the markets and narrow streets of the Old City to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the site of

Calvary where Jesus was crucified and His tomb. Here we will celebrate Mass at 11.00 and take some time to reflect at this sacred site. Enjoy some free time in Jerusalem for lunch before visiting the Western Wall.

We will then drive to Taybeh – a town where Jesus stayed before going to Jerusalem to endure the Passion. It is the last all-Christian town in the West Bank and here we will hear about efforts to keep the local Christian community vibrant, including local wine-making before returning to the hotel in Bethlehem for dinner.

Day Eight: Mount of Olives

Drive to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem where we take our group photo and enjoy the view of the Old City below. We make our way to the highest point on the Mount of Olives to the Ascension Dome. Continue to visit the Pater Noster Church, Dominus Flevit, the Church of the Assumption and grotto and the Garden of Gethsemane.

In the afternoon we celebrate Mass at 15.00 in the Church of St Peter in Gallicantu or 'cock's crow', where St Peter denied Jesus

three times and see the dungeon where Jesus was held the night of Holy Thursday. We walk around Mount Zion and visit the church of the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Tomb of King David and the Room of the Last Supper. Return to the hotel for dinner.

Day Nine: Bethlehem

After breakfast we take the short walk to the Church of the Nativity and celebrate Mass at 10.00. Here you can visit the birthplace of Jesus, and the Holy Manger as well as the chapels of St Joseph, St Jerome, the Holy Innocents and the Church of St Catherine.

Visit the Milk Grotto before lunch and meeting with members of the local Christian community in Bethlehem. Afterwards, we take the short drive to the Shepherds' Field and Ein Karem to the Church of the Visitation before returning to the hotel for dinner.

Day Ten: Emmaus

After breakfast at the hotel, we have some free time in Bethlehem before boarding the coach for the journey to Emmaus where we will have Mass and lunch before proceeding to the airport for the direct flight back to Dublin.

PRICING NOTES FOR THE PILGRIMAGE

The package on offer is all inclusive of the following:

Travel and accommodation

- Flight from Dublin to Tel Aviv;
- Transfer on arrival from Tel Aviv airport to the hotel in Nazareth with guide assistance;
- Five nights in the four-star Legacy Hotel in Nazareth
- Four nights in the four-star Manger Square Hotel in Bethlehem;
- Breakfast and evening meal served each day at hotels;

- Transfer to Tel Aviv airport for return flight;
- Flight from Tel Aviv to Dublin;
- Luxury air-conditioned coach throughout the itinerary;
- Guiding audio system (earphones for listening to the guide).

Tours and religious programme

- Full religious programme with a spiritual director including daily Mass;
- Services of Marian Pilgrimages representative.

- English-speaking guides throughout the pilgrimage;
- Full day guided tour of Jerusalem including visits to the Western Wall, Dome of the Rock, Church of St Anne, Via Dolorosa, Holy Sepulchre and Shrine of the Book;
- Complete programme of sightseeing and visits to sites of interest in the Holy Land;
- Boat ride on Sea of Galilee;
- Return taxi transfers to Mount Tabor.

Entrance fees included

- Dominus Flevit;
- Capernaum;
- Mount of Beatitudes;
- Muhrakha;
- Qumran.

Optional

- Travel insurance €25 for passengers up to 85 years. Please note that an additional insurance premium of €25 is charged for persons aged 86 to 94 years;

passengers 95 years and over should secure private travel insurance.

● Price per person sharing twin/double/treble rooms with private facilities. Passengers are entitled to check in one standard piece of luggage subject to airline's conditions. Single rooms are subject to availability at a supplement.

- Taxes, charges and government levies are included.
- Porterage at hotels are included in the package price.
- All tips and gratuities everywhere are included.

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World Report

IN BRIEF

Religious schools must accept 'gender identity', LGBT activists tell Biden

● A leading LGBT activist group is calling for the Biden administration to create accreditation regulations of religious schools that would enforce acceptance of so-called transgender rights.

The pro-LGBT Human Rights Campaign (HRC) issued its list of policy priorities for the incoming Biden administration, *The Daily Signal* reported on December 14.

Among its priorities, the group's Blueprint for Positive Change 2020 calls for the Education Department to update its regulations on school accreditation— including requiring religious schools to accommodate students based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Record low births the future for Italy

● Italy's national statistics institute is predicting that the country will see a significant decline in births in the years immediately following the coronavirus pandemic.

In a July report, Istat said that the climate of uncertainty and fear caused by the coronavirus may result in 10,000 fewer births in Italy in 2020 and 2021. It also predicted that if unemployment rises as

expected, the birth rate could drop even further.

In 2019, births in Italy already hit a historic low since Italian unification in 1861. Across Europe, countries are facing what has been dubbed a "demographic winter."

That year, Italy's birth rate was 1.29 children per woman— just ahead of Malta and Spain's rates of 1.23 and 1.26 respectively for the lowest rate in Europe.

Argentina lawmakers pass abortion bill amid pressure from activists

● The lower house of Argentina's legislature has passed a bill that would legalise abortion-on-demand up to 14 weeks in pregnancy, drawing dismay from pro-life groups and Catholics in the country.

The bill would permit abortions up to 14 weeks of gestation for any reason. The bill now proceeds to the upper house, the Senate, where it is expected to face greater opposition.

Fulfilling a presidential campaign promise, Argentine president Alberto Fernández introduced the bill to legalise abortion into the country's legislature November 17. Mr Fernández took office a year ago and has made abortion legalisation a focal point of his tenure as president.

Following a 20-hour debate, the country's lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, passed the measure 131-117, with six abstentions.

St John Paul II: 1,700 professors respond to 'wave of accusations' against Polish Pope

● Hundreds of professors have signed an appeal defending St John Paul II following criticism of the Polish Pope in the wake of the McCarrick Report.

The "unprecedented" appeal was signed by 1,700 professors based at Polish universities and research institutes. The signatories include Hanna Suchocka, Poland's first female prime minister, former foreign minister Adam Daniel Rotfeld, physicists Andrzej Staruszkiewicz and Krzysztof Meissner, and film director Krzysztof Zanussi.

"An impressive long list of John Paul II's merits and accomplishments is being challenged and erased today," the professors said in the appeal.

"For young people, who were born after his death, the deformed, false and belittled image of the Pope could become the only one they will know."

The professors acknowledged the importance of carefully investigating the lives of significant historical figures. But they called for "balanced reflection and honest analysis," rather than "emotional" or "ideologically motivated" criticism.

Vatican allows priests to celebrate four Masses on Christmas feasts

The Vatican decreed that priests can celebrate as many as four Masses on several important feast days, including Christmas, to accommodate the participation of the Faithful.

Worldwide

In a decree published in Latin December 16, Cardinal Robert Sarah, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, said the decision was made "in view of the situation brought about by the worldwide spread of the pandemic."

"In view of the situation brought about by the worldwide spread of the pandemic," the decree reads, "by virtue of the faculties conceded to this Congregation by the Holy Father Francis, and due to the persistence of the general contagion of the so-called Covid-19 virus, we willingly grant to the local Ordinary permission to allow priests resident in their dioceses to celebrate four Masses on certain days during the Christmas season. This year only, permission is granted to say extra Masses on the following days: Christmas Day (25 December); the Solemnity of Mary the Most Holy Mother of God (1 January); and Epiphany (6 January). The concession is granted "whenever [the Ordinary] deems it necessary for the benefit of the Faithful."



People maintaining social distancing attend Mass in the Basilica of St Mary in Kevelaer, Germany, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Photo CNS.

According to the Code of Canon Law, while a priest "may not celebrate (Mass) more than once a day," a bishop may "for a good reason allow priests to celebrate twice in one day or even, if pastoral need requires it, three times on Sundays or holy days of obligation."

The decree would allow for more Catholics to be able to participate at Mass, especially in churches with limited seating due to social distancing measures.

In Italy, new restrictions enacted to slow the spread

of the coronavirus have prompted the Catholic Church to find different ways to celebrate Mass during the Christmas season while observing current regulations.

Christmas Mass

The Vatican announced December 10 that Pope Francis will celebrate the Christmas "Mass during the Night" December 24 at 7:30 pm local time so that the few people invited to attend can get home in time to observe Italy's 10 pm curfew.

The announcement comes on the back of a rise in Covid cases in multiple countries around Europe, with Germany, Poland and England among others either implementing or stating an intention to implement heavier restrictions in an effort to combat this.

The restrictions have raised concerns about the availability of Christmas Masses, with many countries searching for innovative solutions in an attempt to balance public worship with adherence to public health guidelines.

Bishops in northeast Italy permit general absolution at Christmas

Catholic bishops in northeast Italy have said that the risk of illness amid the ongoing pandemic constitutes a "grave necessity" permitting priests to confer the Sacrament of Reconciliation under the "third form," also called general absolution, before and during the Christmas season.

General absolution is a form of the Sacrament of Reconciliation which may be imparted, as defined by canon law, only in moments when death is believed to be imminent and there is no time to hear the confessions of indi-

vidual penitents, or for another "grave necessity".

The Apostolic Penitentiary, a dicastery of the Roman Curia, issued a note in March saying it believed that during the Covid-19 pandemic there were cases which would constitute grave necessity, and therefore make general absolution lawful, "especially in places that are most greatly affected by the pandemic contagion, and until the phenomenon subsides."

A penitent who receives absolution in such a manner – sometimes known

as collective absolution – must also individually confess his or her mortal sins when possible.

The decision was made in consultation with the Apostolic Penitentiary, which is responsible for issues related to the forgiveness of sins.

The bishops stressed the importance of keeping community penitential celebrations separate from the Mass and giving proper instruction on "the extraordinary nature of the form adopted for the sacrament".

Nigerian nun cares for abandoned children labelled 'witches'

Three years after taking in 2-year-old Inimffon Uwamobong and her younger brother, Sister Matylda Iyang finally heard from the mother who had abandoned them.

"Their mother came back and told me that she (Inimffon) and her younger sibling are witches, asking me to throw

them out of the convent," said Sister Iyang, who oversees the Mother Charles Walker Children Home at the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus convent.

Such an accusation is not new to Sister Iyang. Since opening the home in 2007, Sister Iyang has cared for dozens of malnourished and

homeless children from the streets of Uyo; many of them had family who believed they were witches.

The Uwamobong siblings became well and were able to enroll in school, but Sister Iyang and other social service providers are faced with others in the same position.

Health care and social workers say parents, guardians and religious leaders brand children as witches for different reasons. Children subject to such accusations are often abused, abandoned, trafficked or even murdered, according to UNICEF and Human Rights Watch.



Edited by Jason Osborne
jason@irishcatholic.ie

Travel by land and sea to worship thee



A Nativity scene designed by Francesco Orazio is displayed over the water surface in a lagoon near the island of Burano in Venice, Italy. Photo CNS.

Hungary defines family as having a mother and a father

Hungary's Parliament passed a law December 15 defining the family as having a woman as the mother and a man as the father, effectively banning adoptions by same-sex couples and complicating adoptions by single people.

The change is the latest of several to be made in recent years in what the government has said are attempts to preserve Hungary's Christian identity and to boost its plummeting birth rates.

"If we give up on our Christianity, then we will lose our own identity, as Hungarians, as Europeans,"

Katalin Novák, Hungary's Minister of State for Family Affairs, told *CNA* last December.

Ms Novák told *CNA* in 2019 that Hungary's leaders were concerned with the country's future due to a plummeting birth rate, which is 1.48, well below replacement level at 2.1 children per woman.

"We have a demographic challenge ahead of us," Ms Novák said.

While some countries may rely on immigration, Hungary is trying to reverse the trend with a two-pronged approach: finan-

cial incentives for families to have more children, and promoting a culture that is pro-life and welcoming of large families, she added.

In that vein, the Hungarian government started offering financial incentives for couples in the country to marry and have children, including subsidised loans to those who marry before the bride's 41st birthday.

Incentives to have children are built into the loan. One-third of it can be forgiven if the married couple has two children, and the entire loan can be forgiven if they have three children.

Women with four or more children will be exempted from income tax for life. Families with at least three children are eligible for a grant to purchase a car that seats seven or more people.

Hungary claims the policies are working, as its central statistics office recently reported a 20% increase in marriages in 2019.

But the bump in fertility is yet to be seen, and other European countries, such as France and Germany, that have attempted to increase fertility through government subsidies have not seen a significant increase in birth rates.

Pre-Christmas celebration gives hope to Iraqi refugees still in Lebanon

Toddlers could hardly contain their excitement as they danced in the church aisles to the Holy Missionary Choir's Christmas songs during a celebration that was a bright star of hope for Iraqi Syriac Catholic refugee families.

While the little ones are too young to know their ancestral roots, Christmas memories for their parents are those of large, joyous extended family

gatherings and prosperity in Iraq. Life there centred around the Church, as it still does while they are in exile.

The families are among the more than 100,000 Christians driven out from Iraq's Ninevah Plain by the Islamic State in the summer of 2014. Lebanon is only an intermediary place in their quest to be resettled to a Western country.

"Even though I am sad, I am very happy to sing in the choir," said

Ranwaq Kajoo of the Iraqi town of Qaraqosh, which was completely emptied of Christians in a single night six years ago. She was proud that her 3-year-old daughter, Darine, also sang a song during the St Behnam and Sarah Church gathering on December 12.

"It is very difficult," Ms Kajoo said of her family's life in Lebanon as they wait to immigrate to Australia.



Art teacher defends Vatican's much-maligned nativity scene

● Since it was unveiled last Friday, the Vatican's nativity scene in St Peter's Square has elicited diverse reactions on social media, many of them strongly negative.

"So the Vatican presepe has been unveiled....turns out 2020 could get worse..." wrote art historian Elizabeth Lev in a post that went viral on Twitter. Presepe is the word for manger scene in Italian.

But Marcello Mancini, a teacher at the art institute where the ceramic nativity set was made, defended it, telling *CNA* that "many [art] critics have appreciated this work" over the years.

"I'm sorry about the reactions, that people don't like it," he said, emphasising that "it is a nativity scene that must be framed in the historical period in which it was produced."

This year's nativity comes from the region of Abruzzo. The 19 ceramic figures, which include the Virgin Mary, St Joseph, the Christ Child, an angel, the three Magi, and many animals, come from a set consisting of 54 pieces made over the course of a decade in the 1960s and 1970s.

Pope Francis celebrates 51 years of priesthood

● Fifty-one years ago, on 13 December 1969; and just a few days before his thirty-third birthday, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was ordained to the priesthood.

Eleven years earlier, on 11 March 1958, he had entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus where, less than four years after his ordination, he made his perpetual profession on 22 April 1973.

The future Pope discovered his vocation in 1953, on 21 September – the liturgical commemoration of St Matthew. On that day, the 17-year-old Jorge Bergoglio, passing by the parish he normally attended in Buenos Aires, felt the need to go to confession. He found a priest he did not know, and that confession changed his life.

"For me this was an experience of encounter," Pope Francis later recounted. Speaking at the Pentecost Vigil on 18 May 2013, the Pope said of that long-ago visit to the church, "I found that someone was waiting for me. Yet I do not know what happened, I can't remember, I do not know why that particular priest was there whom I did not know, or why I felt this desire to confess, but the truth is that someone was waiting for me. He had been waiting for me for some time. After making my confession I felt something had changed. I was not the same. I had heard something like a voice, or a call. I was convinced that I should become a priest."

Vatican City to start coronavirus vaccinations in January

● Vatican City will begin to offer coronavirus vaccinations in January, according to the Vatican director of health and hygiene.

"We believe it is very important that even in our small community a vaccination campaign against the virus responsible for Covid-19 is started as soon as possible," Dr Andrea Arcangeli, head of the Vatican health service, told *Vatican News*.

"In fact, only through widespread and widespread immunisation of the population can real benefits in terms of public health be obtained to gain control of the pandemic."

The Pfizer vaccine is expected to be made available to Vatican City residents, employees and their family members over the age of 18 in the first months of 2021.

Suffering in Somalia will reach Ireland's ears and hearts



Paul Healy is Trócaire's Country Director in Somalia.



Paul Healy

The entire world is hurting from the Covid-19 crisis, but it's in places like Somalia where you see how the pandemic is tipping people who were already desperately poor over the edge.

Somalia is a country already struggling due to conflict and the awful impact of climate change. Now a global pandemic has been thrown in on top of everything else. It is a country I dearly love and it breaks my heart to see the people facing so many challenges to their very survival.

Devastation

Ireland knows only too well the devastation caused by Covid-19. Over 2,000 people have lost their lives, while many thousands more have lost their livelihoods. In countries like Somalia, the real damage being caused by the pandemic will only be known over the next few months. That

is because it is over the coming months the food crisis sparked by this pandemic will be felt.

Trócaire runs four hospitals and 24 outreach centres in Gedo, a region of Somalia a little bit larger than Ireland. Despite its size, we are the only healthcare provider in Gedo.

We put a huge amount of effort into containing the virus. We trained over 400 staff and issued protective equipment to all of them. Our community health workers visited 125,000 people. We were able to do a lot of testing and contact tracing. It was a real challenge but we managed it.

“In countries like Somalia, the real damage being caused by the pandemic will only be known over the next few months”

Like in Ireland, people in Somalia lost their jobs and lost their ability to sell products. Unlike in Ireland, there is no safety net in Somalia. People unable to earn income are left with nothing. As well as casual labour being gone and markets being closed, remittances from abroad also collapsed. Just as Irish families used to rely on money being sent home from Britain or America, so many

Somalis rely on those remittances. The global economic crisis has really been felt by those families.

On top of everything, a very bad drought meant that crops didn't harvest. There has been very little rainfall this season. It should be raining now and it is bone dry. We're now seeing a perfect storm of crises.

Malnutrition

Children are being re-admitted to Trócaire medical centres with severe acute malnutrition and that is a massive concern. What is even more alarming is that some children are being admitted to our centres with malnutrition, staying with us for six weeks and then being readmitted again shortly after. It shows how deep the crisis is.

Somalia was already one of the most fragile and complex countries in the world to manage large health projects, but the Covid crisis has made it even more complicated. It is already a challenge dealing with malnutrition, chronic disease and water borne diseases. To have Covid-19 on top of that has stretched our resources. We have had to create new centres for isolation wards. We have had to train staff. We have had to spend a lot of money on doing that rather than focusing on what we were set up to do which is care for mothers and children under the age of five.

All of these stresses have created an environment where

A photo from a Somali food distribution effort conducted by Trócaire. Photo: Allan Gichigi.



the health services that we provide are under serious strain. Our resources are obviously finite but we do the best we can with what we have. For example, one nurse midwife carried out over 250 successful deliveries on her own last month. The strain on the staff is significant when you are trying to manage Covid-19 and malnutrition as well as normal health services.

“People in Somalia know that people back in Ireland are standing with them”

My biggest worry is that we won't have enough food and we won't have enough staff to respond to the emerging crisis. That is always my fear; that the people in Gedo won't have enough.

The locals in Gedo call Trócaire 'the mother of health'. That is something people back home in Ireland should be incredibly proud of. The health systems we have put in place are there because of them. We have been here for almost 30 years. People here really rely on us.

When it comes to helping our less fortunate brothers and sisters who are struggling, there is nobody better to stand up and respond than the people of Ireland.

The next six months are going to be really tough. People in Somalia know that people back in Ireland are standing with them. That is really important for them. It is important for me too. The support we receive from parishioners all over Ireland gives me great energy. It gives me the hope to keep going.

To donate to Trócaire's Christmas Appeal, you can visit trocaire.org or call 1850 408 408 (0800 912 1200 NI).

Letter from Rome

Pope's pandemic year in review: Prayer, online meetings, hopes for change



Pope Francis leads a prayer service in an empty St Peter's Square at the Vatican March 27, 2020, in this file photo. Photo: CNS.



Cindy Wooden

Like everyone else, Pope Francis' 2020 was dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lockdowns, livestreamed Masses, video messages and even something akin to Zoom meetings became a regular part of his life, just like for millions of people around the world.

But when he walked alone into St Peter's Square March 27 for an "extraordinary moment of prayer," Pope Francis was unlike anyone else.

Standing in the rain, he articulated the world's suffering.

And before blessing the city and the world with the Blessed Sacrament, he began what would become months of pleading with people to use the crisis as an opportunity to rethink the way they treat their neighbours and the way they decide what and how much to buy, as well as to ask themselves larger questions about ways to make the global economy more fair and more respectful of the environment.

The year began normally enough. Italy's severe lockdown went into effect less than three weeks after the 15th and final group

of US bishops made their weeklong "ad limina" visits to Rome to pray at the tombs of Sts Peter and Paul, to meet Vatican officials and to spend more than two hours in a freewheeling conversation with Pope Francis.

“Pope Francis spent much of the year trying to get his own house in order”

Pope Francis told members of each group that a bishop must be close to God, close to his priests and close to his people. And, part of the way through the "ad liminas," he began talking about the importance of bishops being close to one another. Several bishops said the admonition was a recognition of how election-year political divisions in the US risked dividing US Catholics as well.

The topics in the "ad limina" conversations with the Pope included: the clerical sexual abuse scandal; youth and young adult ministry; being joyful witnesses of the Gospel; creating a more welcoming environment for migrants and refugees; abortion and the sanctity of all human life; racism; safeguarding the environment; the growing Spanish-speak-

ing Catholic population; and the importance of Catholic schools.

And, repeatedly, US bishops asked the Pope to release, as promised, a report on how Theodore E. McCarrick managed to rise to the position of cardinal and archbishop of Washington despite decades of rumours of sexual misconduct. The report finally was released November 10.

Also in the pre-pandemic period, Pope Francis released "Querida Amazonia," his apostolic exhortation reflecting on themes discussed during the 2019 Synod of Bishops for the Amazon. Some people were hoping or fearing that he would mention the idea of ordaining married men to the priesthood so that far-flung Catholic communities would have regular access to the Eucharist.

Missionaries

Instead, he focused on encouraging more missionaries to devote at least part of their lives to serving the communities and on efforts to ensure the rights of the region's poor and indigenous are respected, local cultures are preserved, nature is protected, and the Catholic Church is present and active with "Amazonian features."

While the Pope said "Querida Amazonia" was his

"dream" for that region of South America, his encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti, on Fraternity and Social Friendship," addressed burning social, political and religious issues on a global scale and his dream for a world marked by greater solidarity and concern for the poor and the Earth.

Published October 4, the encyclical insisted Christians, and all people of goodwill, must recognise that they are brothers and sisters and start living that way.

Doing that, he wrote, would mean recognising and taking concrete action against "certain trends in our world that hinder the development of universal fraternity" and of acting as a neighbour to one another, including racism, extremism, "aggressive nationalism," closing borders to migrants and refugees, polarisation, politics as a power grab rather than a service to the common good, mistreatment of women, modern slavery and economic policies that allow the rich to get richer but do not create jobs and do not help the poor.

Pope Francis spent much of the year trying to get his own house in order, too.

On the first of the year, Jesuit Father Juan Antonio Guerrero began working as prefect of the Vatican Secretariat for the Economy, a position that had been

vacant since Australian Cardinal George Pell took a leave of absence in 2017 to fight charges of sexual abuse in his homeland.

In June, the Pope approved new laws governing the awarding of Vatican contracts with rules designed to prevent fraud and corruption, including barring Vatican employees from awarding contracts to their relatives.

“When he walked alone into St Peter's Square March 27 for an "extraordinary moment of prayer," Pope Francis was unlike anyone else”

And, as questions continued over the Vatican's massive financial loss in a property investment deal in London, in late September Pope Francis forced the resignation of Cardinal Angelo Becciu, who had been instrumental in making the deal before being appointed prefect of the Congregation for Saints' Causes.

In November, after the Vatican Secretariat of State missed a papally imposed deadline to hand over the management and monitoring of its financial assets to

two separate Vatican bodies, Pope Francis set up a commission to make the transfer and external oversight happen. The London property deal was made with funds from the Secretariat of State when Cardinal Becciu worked there.

Council

Throughout the year, the Pope and his international Council of Cardinals also continued working on the new constitution governing a reorganised Roman Curia; as the year ended, the council was reviewing suggested amendments.

As he has done every year since 2014, Pope Francis created new cardinals, adding 13 prelates – including Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory of Washington – to the College of Cardinals in a November ceremony.

Like everything else the previous nine months, the consistory was held with Covid-19 restrictions in place. Cardinals from outside the European Union were tested for the coronavirus and quarantined for 10 days before the ceremony. Each was allowed a maximum of 10 guests, though those who came from abroad had fewer. And the public reception to greet the new cardinals was cancelled.

As the year was ending, the Vatican announced it would vaccinate all its residents and employees early in 2021 and that Pope Francis plans to travel to Iraq in March – both signs of hope that the pandemic's days are numbered.

“In June, the Pope approved new laws governing the awarding of Vatican contracts with rules designed to prevent fraud and corruption”

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Letters

Letter of the week

Jesus isn't invited to his own birthday party

Dear Editor, As all Christians know the birth of the baby Jesus is the reason for the festive season. Indeed without Christ there would be no Christmas. However, our society has now become so secular that Jesus is increasingly not invited to his own birthday party.

How can so called Christians send a secular Christmas card to their friends and ignore the birth of Jesus? Wishing our colleagues, family, friends, neighbours the season's greetings or happy holidays is an insult to our Lord. In Matthew 10:33 Jesus says "But whoever denies me before men, I will also deny him before my Father who is in heaven."

So please can we all make an effort to send a religious card ideally one that supports a Christian charity or a religious organisation to all our acquaintances this month.

For those concerned about the cost of postage why not use an online service to email such a card to all you know. Using such a service you can promote a Christian service to a multitude for a minimal outlay. Jesus will then be able to say to you someday "well done my good and faithful servant".

Another point, why does RTÉ not broadcast Holy mass during the Covid-19 crisis on Saturdays and what are the hierarchy doing about

this serious omission.

In 1866 the Redemptorists were entrusted with the mission of making Our Lady of Perpetual Help known throughout the world. At St Joseph's Monastery in Dundalk, the Redemptorists celebrate a Perpetual Novena in honour of Our Lady of Perpetual Help every Saturday at 9.30am Mass.

Surely this Holy Mass could be celebrated on RTÉ which is funded by hundreds of thousands of Irish Catholics, the largest Christian denomination on the island of Ireland.

*Yours etc.,
Liam de Paor
Carrickane, Cavan*

'Wow-factor' of Raphael's painting of child Jesus

Dear Editor, Raphael's 'Niccolini-Cowper Madonna' [IC 26/11/2020] has a powerful wow-factor.

The expression on the face of the child Jesus is full of mischief, with his little tongue lolling in a slightly open mouth. How evocative is the position of the child's hand (something one often sees in little boys and little girls) soliciting a feed.

Mary's face is tranquil but suggestive of a determination to begin the weaning process!

*Yours etc.,
Judith Leonard
Raheny, Co. Dublin*



Recognising the need for us to celebrate Christ's birth together

Dear Editor, I for one can't wait to go to a Christmas Mass. I know we are being advised not to expect to get a place, as space is very limited and in high demand (who would have thought 'high demand' and 'Mass' would be words put into the same sentence in modern Ireland!) but that doesn't mean I won't try my best.

Reading the Association of Catholic Priests statement about public Christmas Masses needing to be cancelled to protect health etc... I was overcome with disbelief [IC 10/12/2020]. After so many months this year of not being able to celebrate Mass as a community, for an association of priests to

say, of all people, that the public celebration of our Lord's birth ought not to go ahead is depressing. They even describe it as a "token Mass".

If a priest feels he can't make a church safe enough for his congregation, for whatever reason, then by all means move it online. However, a blanket statement like that seems extremely defeatist and unhelpful as so many Catholics have struggled due to the restrictions on worship. So many priests are working hard to put on extra Masses and make sure they can cater to the needs of their parishioners and they are doing this not because of all the supposed pressure

they are being put under – according to the ACP – but because they want to do it. They seem to acknowledge the extreme trauma caused by subsequent lockdowns, which I do believe needed to happen to some extent, and have measured the risks and made a very reasonable decision. Why is it that the Government are happy for people to attend public Mass, with Covid restrictions in place, but the ACP think it's too dangerous?

*Yours etc.,
Gerry Doyle
Tallaght, Co. Dublin*

ACP don't do the Church any favours

Dear Editor, I was absolutely stunned to see the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) describing Christmas Mass as a 'token'. It seems as if they have forgot what it means to be a Catholic priest. There is a constant stream of disappointing and dispiriting messages coming out of a group that claims to represent a huge number of priests – although I really don't believe this is

actually the case. I know so many of Ireland's clergy have risen to the occasion during this pandemic and have found the strength and resolve to do everything in their power to allow people to go to Mass as safely as possible. For the ACP to now say that Masses should move online, even though the Government have specifically stated that public worship is allowed over the Christmas,

is so profoundly strange. The number of people leaving the Church is growing in the western world, the virus has undoubtedly sped up this process, the last thing we need is a group of priests asking people not to go to Mass.

*Yours etc.,
Jamie Donnelly
Naas, Co. Kildare*

'Little to no substance' in RTÉ Mass homilies

Dear Editor, For the past several months, I've been putting a question to myself repeatedly, asking: "Can I be the only person who feels greatly dissatisfied and undernourished by the weekday Mass on the RTÉ News Now channel?"

While it's most welcome for believers to be able to tune in for daily Mass, and I've been able to watch it on average three to four times weekly since March, I find there's little to no substance in the homilies and there are glaring omissions in the Prayers of the Faithful. I allow for the possibility that there may have been a different experience during the Masses I've not seen.

Regarding the sermons given, especially with time constraints for same, with a priest from St Brendan's Cathedral in Loughrea being the one notable exception, every other priest, and indeed bishop, has consistently ignored the numerous challenging Epistle and Gospel passages, and instead have picked a feel good phrase or sentence completely out of context, providing nothing more than any positive secular humanist could offer.

Alternatively, they speak on populist topics like climate change or they continue to reiterate the endless comments in the media and political world about best practices in looking after each other during Covid-19.

Just as glaringly obvious, relating to the bidding prayers, with the one exception mentioned above, no other celebrant has ever mentioned, even remotely, the growing scandal of the huge and ongoing rise in the killing of the innocent unborn in Ireland since January 2019.

What I've communicated verbally to several people, I now suggest here; namely, that there seems to be what can only be described as a "conspiracy of silence" from the hierarchy and clergy across the board in refusing to address even in the mildest way both the abortion issue and the now large looming possibility of a euthanasia bill, designed to further undermine our whole Judeo-Christian values.

*Yours etc.,
Flann Dwan
Nenagh, Co. Tipperary*

Donald Trump exhibited anti-life credentials

Dear Editor, I agree entirely with Ann Campbell [IC 10/12/2020] when she writes that "being pro-life extends beyond voting pro-life, it is a way of life in thought, word and deed". Genuine pro-lifers and clergy cannot congratulate anyone who is anything but pro-life in word and deed.

Donald Trump, however, exhibited significant anti-life credentials during his time in office. These include his separation of migrant children from their parents, his support for the death penalty, his attempts to expel the dreamers who were born in the US, his efforts to overturn the affordable healthcare provisions that would leave 20 million US citizens without health insurance, his treatment of women and his failure to provide adequate leadership in the face of the death of 290,000 Americans from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Pro-Life? I don't think so.

*Yours etc.,
Micheál Ó Braoin,
Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare*

Letters to the Editor

All letters should include the writer's full name, postal address and telephone numbers (day and evening). Letter writers may receive a subsequent telephone call from *The Irish Catholic* as part of our authentication process which does not amount to a commitment to publish.

We regret that we cannot give prior notice of a letter's publication date, acknowledge unpublished letters or discuss the

merits of letters. We do not publish pseudonyms or other formulae to conceal the writer's identity, such as "name and address with editor". We do not print letters addressed to someone else, open letters, or verse. Letters to the Editor should only be sent to *The Irish Catholic*, and not other publications. Letters should not exceed 300 words and may be shortened for space requirements.

📷 Around the world



▲ **USA:** A man and a woman pose for a selfie in front of a Christmas tree made of lobster traps in Key West, Florida. Photos: CNS
◀ **PHILIPPINES:** Men wearing protective masks arrange a Nativity scene at a church in Manila during the Covid-19 pandemic.



VATICAN: The Nativity scene and Christmas tree are pictured in St Peter's Square at the Vatican.



LEBANON: Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan is pictured with the Holy Missionary Choir during a pre-Christmas celebration for Iraqi Syriac Catholic refugee families.



TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO: Venezuelan migrants arrive on shore at Los Iros Beach after their return to the island in Erin. After a different boat carrying refugees was allegedly denied entry into Trinidad and Tobago and subsequently shipwrecked, Venezuelan bishops said the treatment of migrants fleeing the country constitutes serious human rights violations.



BRAZIL: A man dressed as Santa Claus inside a plastic bubble greets a child wearing a protective mask at a shopping mall in Brasilia during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The rich meaning of Christmas



A girl holds baby Jesus figurines for Pope Francis to bless during his Angelus

What does Christmas mean? Christmas is like a perfectly-cut diamond twirling in the sun, giving off an array of sparkles. Here are just some of its meanings:

- A four-year-old child woke up one night frightened, convinced that there were all kinds of spooks and monsters in her room. In terror she fled to her parents' bedroom. Her mother took her back to her room and, after soothing her fears, assured her that it was safe there: "You don't need to be afraid. After I leave, you won't be alone in the room. God will be here with you!" "I know that God will be here," the child protested, "but I need someone in this room who has some skin." The word was made flesh and dwelt among us. John 1:14.

“When halos are pre-tested by focus groups for inclusion in mass market campaigns, they are hard to see”

- God is not found in monasteries, but in our homes. Wherever you find husband and wife, that's where you find God; wherever children and petty cares and cooking and arguments and reconciliation are, that's where God is too. The God I'm telling about, the domestic one,



Fr Rolheiser

www.ronrolheiser.com

not the monastic one, that's the real God. Nikos Kazantzakis.

- Every year of life waxes and wanes. Every stage of life comes and goes. Every facet of life is born and then dies. Every good moment is doomed to become only a memory. Every perfect period of living slips through our fingers and disappears. Every hope dims and every possibility turns eventually to dry clay. Until Christmas comes again. Then we are called at the deepest, most subconscious, least cognizant level to begin to live again. Christmas brings us all back to the crib of life to start over again: aware of what has gone before, conscious that nothing can last, but full of hope that this time, finally, we can learn what it takes to live well, grow to full stature of soul and spirit, and get it right. Sr Joan Chittister.
- After a mother has smiled for a long time at her child, the child will begin to smile back; she has

awakened love in its heart, and in awakening love in its heart, she awakes also recognition. In the same way, God awakes himself before us as love. Love radiates from God and instils the light of love in our hearts. Hans Urs Von Balthasar.

“Some of the Church Fathers compared Jesus to a singer with a strong voice and a perfect pitch who joins a discordant choir and completely transforms it”

- At Christmas, through his grace-filled birth, God says to the world: "I am there. I am with you. I am your life...Do not be afraid to be happy. For ever since I wept, joy is the standard of living that is really more suitable than the anxiety and grief of those who think

they have no hope...This reality, this incomparable wonder of my almighty love, I have sheltered safely in the cold stable of your world. I am there. I no longer go away from this world. Even if you do not see me. I am there. It is Christmas. Light the candles! They have more right to exist than all the darkness. It is Christmas. Christmas lasts forever." Fr Karl Rahner SJ.

- Even at Christmas, when haloes are pre-tested by focus groups for inclusion in mass market campaigns, they are hard to see... This is how halos are seen, by looking up into largeness, by tucking smallness into folds of infinity. I do not know this by contemplating shimmering trees. Rather there was a woman, busy at the Christmas table, and I looked up to catch a rim of radiance etching her face, to notice curves of light sliding along her shape. She out-glowed the candles. All the noise of the room left my ears and silence sharpened my sight. When this happens, I do not get overly excited. I merely allow love to be renewed, for that is the mission of haloes, the reason they are given to us. ... But when haloes fade, they do not abruptly vanish, abandoning us to the lesser light. They recede,

as Gabriel departed from Mary, leaving us pregnant. John Shea.

- Some of the Church Fathers compared Jesus to a singer with a strong voice and a perfect pitch who joins a discordant choir and completely transforms it. It is not that Jesus gave us a different set of songs to sing, but helped us instead to perform our standard repertoire in an entirely new and more beautiful way. Fr Richard McBrien.

“God awakes Himself before us as love. Love radiates from God and instils the light of love in our hearts”

- The incarnation does not mean that God saves us from the pains of this life. It means that God-is-with-us. For the Christian, just as for everyone else, there will be cold, lonely seasons, seasons of sickness, seasons of frustration, and a season within which we will die. Christmas does not give us a ladder to climb out of the human condition. It gives us a drill that lets us burrow into the heart of everything that is and, there, find it shimmering with divinity. Cardinal Avery Dulles.
- Looking for God these days requires the willingness to investigate the small. Aztec Poem. Merry Christmas!

“After a mother has smiled for a long time at her child, the child will begin to smile back; she has awakened love in its heart”

A year of flux and change on and off the box

Sometimes when I look back on the year in TV and Radio there's a certain sameness, but not this year. So many columns I wrote featured Covid-19 in some shape or form.

One effect of the coronavirus was the proliferation of repeats in the media schedules with broadcasters finding it increasingly difficult to make programmes under the restrictions. I'm sure lots of filming had been done before that, and editing could be done remotely by individuals in various stages of lockdown. From now on no doubt we'll see more dramas where the characters are masked and maintain social distance as we've already begun to see in the soaps. I'm wondering how that will look in those intense interrogation scenes in **Line of Duty** – filming of the new series was originally suspended when Covid-19 struck first.

“Guests joined virtually through Zoom or Skype, as they did for the nightly Press Preview programmes on Sky News and BBC One”

BBC One's religious and ethical affairs programme **The Big Questions** started well early in the year, then the audience was reduced for distancing and then finally the programme was suspended – its continuation made difficult because the show travelled to so many different locations. By the time its replacement **Sunday Morning Live** came along, coping strategies were in place, made easier by the fact that this show was more studio bound. Guests joined virtually through Zoom or Skype, as they did for the nightly **Press Preview** programmes on Sky News and BBC One. It worked reasonably well, and I'd suspect TV execs will consider sticking with this formula – it must surely be cheaper. **Gardener's World** (BBC Two) returned in March and coped very well with lockdown – there were lots of repeat clips but it prompted a welcome new feature where viewers sent in video clips of their gardens – both the



TV & Radio Review 2020
Brendan O'Regan

participants and their garden innovations were enjoyable, so I hope they keep that slot going next year. In similar territory **Heavenly Gardens** (BBC One) was a timely Easter series linking gardening and religious faith.

Broadcast

Radio fared better and so many presenters broadcast from home – Michael Comyn kept **The Leap of Faith** going throughout with the usual high standard (I remember some interesting programmes about religious life in Covid-19 times), and religious regulars like **Sunday Sequence** (BBC Radio Ulster) and **Sunday** (BBC Radio 4) provided excellent service and a welcome degree of normality in surreal times. An interesting addition to the airwaves this summer was **Times Radio**, available online and as an app – worth listening to.

The boundaries between traditional media and new online and social media became more blurred than ever. In the past year I found myself reviewing material on Facebook Watch, and Apple TV+, and the new Disney+. Another consequence of the pandemic was the closure of cinemas, with film companies launching their big movies through the various streaming services. I enjoyed the film **Greyhound** on Apple TV+ – with Tom Hanks as a man of faith who was also a naval commander during World War II. A staged version of the hit musical **Hamilton** impressed on Disney+ and yet seeing that show reminded us how devastated the theatre industry was this year.

As we get to attend Mass in person yet again it seems incredible that we were deprived of it for so long. This time last year people would have been puzzled if I referred to Zoom Masses, Facebook Masses, and live YouTube Masses. Now they are second nature to us, but the overall impact into the future leaves us guessing.

RTÉ did a huge service during lockdown in providing daily Mass for Lent, streamed on the RTÉ News Now channel, and it was great that the practice continued for the rest of the year – it was a wonderful facility for the housebound.

“I'm not a Donald Trump fan, but a fan of having news and current affairs journalism as even handed as humanly practicable”

The US election was the other big story – building up to a frenzy in November. (The Irish election in February seems so long ago!) I found the media over here biased against Donald Trump, often less than subtly, but I was taken aback by the intensity of the bias on the US stations, on both sides, with CNN on the left and Fox News and Newsmax on the right. It's no wonder US society seems so divided – they badly need a prominent and scrupulously neutral news channel.

After the election

It wasn't great over here. I particularly didn't like the bias on news programmes, which should be as objective and neutral as possible. And so we got all those claims by Mr Trump after the election tagged as 'without evidence' or 'baseless claims', a description not applied to the often dodgy claims of other politicians. The fact that most outlets, here and in Britain, adopted this practice was deeply suspicious. And do I need to say it



Colm Flynn continues to get around – appearing on EWTN's 'Vaticano' and BBC World Service's 'Heart and Soul'.



John Rhys-Davies stars in 'I Am Patrick'. Photo: CNS

again? I'm not a Donald Trump fan, but a fan of having news and current affairs journalism as even handed as humanly practicable.

So, what shows stood out for me this past year? Alex Fegan's **The Confessors** (RTÉ and BBC) was a particularly good documentary about priests and Confession, and I'm looking forward to the feature length version. The more recent **Hunger: The Story of the Irish Famine** (RTÉ 1) was a comprehensive treatment of the topic, with a wide breadth of scholarship and an effective use of original sources. **Unquiet Graves** (RTÉ 1) packed quite a punch, telling the story of loyalist murder gangs during the Troubles. **Nationwide** (RTÉ One) focused on religious faith from time to time – I remember episodes on Kylemore Abbey and on lockdown faith in Co. Donegal. With assisted suicide becoming a hot topic I was glad to see Kevin Dunn's film **Fatal Flaws** on EWTN in January – a must-see for anyone reflecting on the issue. Back

in March **Toras Cosnocha** (RTÉ 1), broadcast on BBC as **Oilithreach** was a most enjoyable documentary about the Lough Derg pilgrimage, where enthusiastic young people figured prominently. **Dana, The Original Derry Girl** (also BBC and RTÉ) was an entertaining and thought-provoking look at the singer-politician's life. **Priest School** (BBC Two) was a cheerful and thoughtful exploration of the training of priests in the Scots College in Rome.

On the drama front **Messiah** (Netflix) was a strange imagining of a modern day guru – messiah or charlatan – a drama that intrigued but that seemed unwilling to stray beyond studied ambiguity. Also, on Netflix **I Am Patrick** was a well-made docudrama, best when it concentrated on original sources. **The Split** returned for a second series (BBC in March, RTÉ in November) and maintained its high standard of adult drama – mostly adult in a good sense. It didn't suffer that much from the tendency to make so many dramas graphic, sleazy or insufferably woke. **Quiz** (ITV, April) was a one of the most riveting dramas, based around possible contestant cheating on Who Wants to be a Millionaire. **The Nest** (BBC One) was a cautionary tale about the perils of surrogacy, while **Belgravia** (UTV) was an old-style costume drama with interesting themes of morality and redemption. **The A-Word** (BBC) returned for a third season and continued to provide a moving and often funny exploration of family life revolving around the challenge of a boy with autism. **Mrs America** (BBC Two, summer, RTÉ autumn) featured Cate Blanchet very

intense as Phyllis Schlafley, conservative campaigner in the USA. It was absorbing and sometimes even-handed but mostly skewed in favour of the feminist activists she crossed swords with.

Media landscape

There were several personnel changes in the media landscape during the year – I was sorry to see Sean O'Rourke retiring from his morning slot on RTÉ Radio One – his old-school professional journalism will be sorely missed. I enjoyed Sarah McInerney's stint in that slot in the summer, and Claire Byrne is a logical replacement for the current season. Meanwhile, Sarah McInerney and Cormac Ó hEadhra make an enjoyable double act on **Drivetime** (RTÉ Radio One) with Mary Wilson moving from the latter show to **Morning Ireland**. Ivan Yates could be irritating but wasn't overawed by any political correctness or agenda driving. He was replaced on **The Hard Shoulder** (Newstalk) by Kieran Cuddihy, light but cheerful and also mercifully free of axe grinding. I could say much the same about Andrea Gilligan on Newstalk's **Lunchtime Live** show. The former incumbent Ciara Kelly, who wasn't averse to agenda-driving or axe grinding has moved to **Newstalk Breakfast** pairing up with the always reliable Shane Coleman. Colm Flynn, moved on from the sadly discontinued **Life and Soul** (RTÉ 1), continues to get around – appearing on EWTN's **Vaticano** and BBC World Service's **Heart and Soul**.

I'm hoping for a much more normal and conventional year ahead. I'll pass on upheavals.



BookReviews



Peter Costello

BOOKS OF THE YEAR

Some of our regular reviewers select the book or books they most enjoyed or were impressed by over the course of the last year...

TJ Morrissey SJ

The most interesting book of the year for me was *Paul: A Biography*, by Tom Wright (SPCK Publishing, £19.99). The author is recognised as one of St Paul's greatest living interpreters.

He brings Paul to life, clarifies his letters, and sets him in the complex array of Jewish and non-Jewish communities within the Roman Empire from Tarsus to Jerusalem, Damascus, Tarsus again, and countless journeys to numerous places before coming to Rome and still hoping to go on to Spain, the limit of the known world.

The author explores the ten years Paul spent in his home town of Tarsus, following his vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus, and explores the significance of those years for his future teaching. The highs and lows in Paul's life are explored, especially his time of doubt while in prison in Ephesus when many of his Corinthian Christians as well as those in Ephesus turned against him and made him question if all his teaching had been mistaken and vain. He eventually found peace when he came to realise after much prayer and pain that just as Jesus' testimony came with suffering, so, too, his message to the world comes with suffering.

Paul's Christian message spread with remarkable rapidity, attracting people by its assurance that the death and resurrection of Christ brings forgiveness for all peoples, Gentiles as well as Jews. One could go on... This is a rich and well-written book, a book for reflection as well as for reading.

Frank Litton

Francoi Manni's excellent study of the writings of Herbert McCabe, *Herbert McCabe: Recollecting a fragmented legacy* (Cascade Books, £30.00), which I read with growing admiration this year, makes it clear that he belongs to the top rank of Twentieth Century English-speaking philosophers and theologians.

Fr McCabe did not win his reputation with learned monographs accessible only to academics. He

gave talks and preached sermons. Dr Manni prompted me to return to an earlier collection of these, *God Matters* (published in 1987 and still in print). What an inspiring read - his sharp intellect and wide learning elucidate complex theological truths and related philosophical issues.

J. Anthony Gaughan

There is nothing more ridiculous than to judge the past by the social standards of the present. Hence it is regrettable that Flannery O'Connor, the renowned American Catholic writer, has become a victim of the latter-day culture neo-Puritans in the US.

Her crime was that she resided at a time in a place where, notwithstanding her objections to it, discrimination against black people was socially acceptable and practised.

The dishonour which has been done to the memory of Ms O'Connor is unjust. It is also misplaced for another reason. At the heart of much of her writing there is ever a redemptive theme. No matter how racist and devoid of moral compass her characters are, there is always a hint that human decency will ultimately prevail.

This is portrayed skilfully by Lorraine V. Murray in her splendid biography: *The Abbess of Andalusia: Flannery O'Connor's Spiritual Journey* (St Benedict Press, 2009)

John F. Deane

Of the books I most appreciated this year, I must mention, firstly, the new and wonderfully lyrical poems by Padraig J. Daly, *A Small Psalter*. But the book that stirred my own imagination this year is the biography of an exciting, challenging and Catholic composer, *The Life of Messiaen*, by Christopher Dingle (Cambridge University Press, £59.00)

Olivier Messiaen died in 1992, having survived part of World War II in a Nazi camp, where he composed and performed some of his music. The book is lucid, precise and emi-

nently readable, outlining the life and giving clues to what is a body of music unique and precious, music that focuses on Christian beliefs such as the Eucharist and the Christ-Child, and presenting the most unusual, uplifting homage to bird-song in much of the work.

“He brings Paul to life, clarifies his letters, and sets him in the complex array of Jewish and non-Jewish communities within the Roman Empire”

Gabriel Fitzmaurice

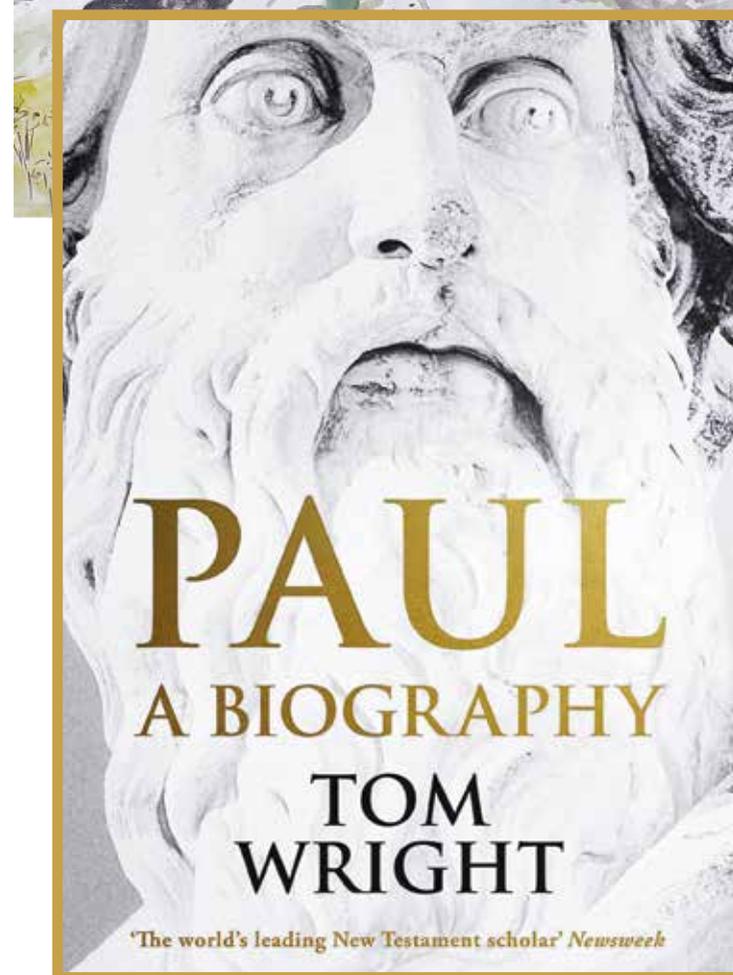
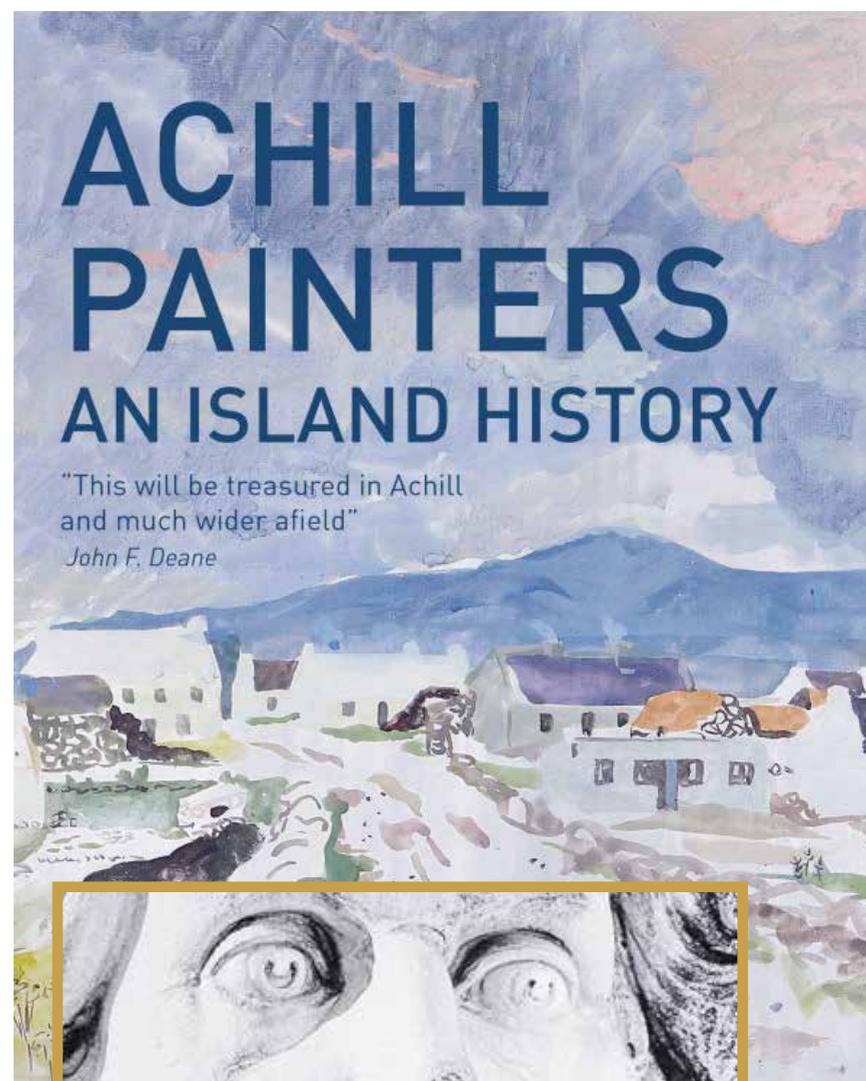
The book I enjoyed most this year was *A Ghost in the Throat* by the poet Doireann Ní Ghríofa (Tramp Press, €16.00), it is a loving account of her personal and poetic engagement with the experiences and imagination of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, whose lament for her murdered husband, composed after 1773, Ms Ní Ghríofa here brilliantly translates into English.

Washing Up, Derek Mahon's final collection published posthumously by Gallery Press is a thing of beauty, a joy forever. Technically and formally flawless, his poems range from the celebratory, to the contemporary, to the radically political and conclude with a memorable tribute to our poet-president Michael D. Higgins.

And finally, *The Catholic Writer Today* (Wiseblood Books) by American poet Dana Gioia is an invaluable collection of profound and lucid meditations on Catholicism in contemporary culture and the Catholic literary tradition.

Desmond Egan

Early in the year, coming to know of my interest in Gabriel Marcel (1883-1973), whom I once had the privilege of hearing lecture, the distinguished Marcel scholar and editor of the *Gabriel Marcel Journal*, Prof.



Brendan Sweetman prompted me to write about that experience.

His *A Gabriel Marcel Reader* (St Augustine Press, £18.27) is a valuable compendium of Marcel's thinking, with its central emphasis on the uniqueness of individual experience without abandoning (as Sartre and others did) the need for core value.

This approach made Marcel reject the description of himself as an 'existentialist' even as he addressed basic human problems in the context of

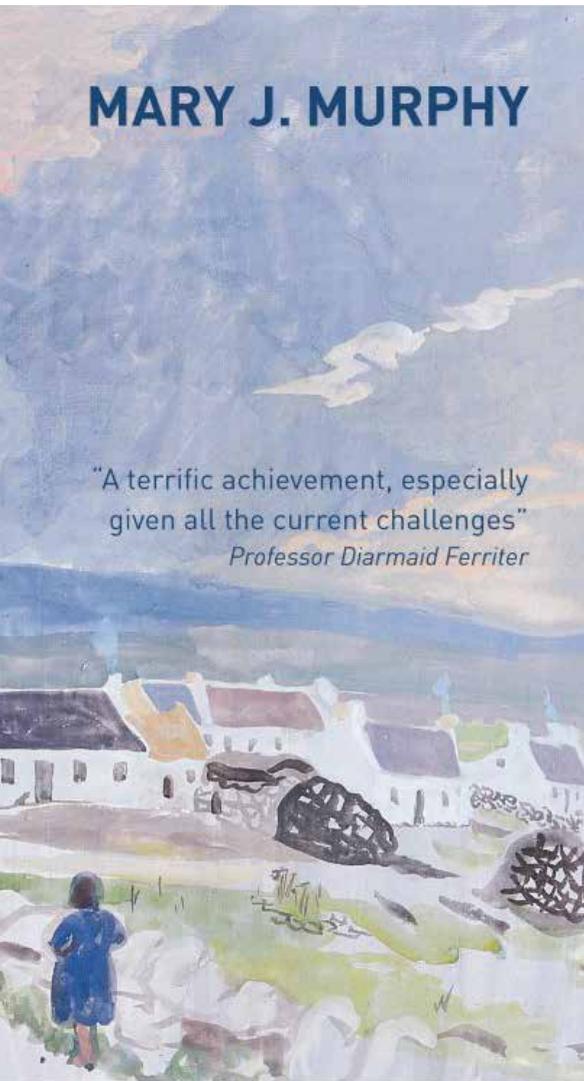
modern post-war questioning of the existence of an objective moral code. Importantly for me, Marcel does so as a committed Catholic.

Presence is mystery in the exact measure in which it is presence, he insists. It leads him to the insight that "Artistic creation...excludes the act of self-centring and self-hypnosis which is, ontologically speaking, pure negation". How much contemporary 'poetry' falls under such examination.

Readers should note that *The Irish Catholic* circulates throughout the island of Ireland and the book prices listed are the retail price recommended by the Irish or British publishers, in either euros or sterling, as a general indication of what purchasers may expect to pay.

MARY J. MURPHY

"A terrific achievement, especially given all the current challenges"
Professor Diarmaid Ferriter



“Achill has always attracted painters and writers and exquisite reproductions of art works by such as Mainie Jellett, Marie Howet and Alexandra Van Tuyll, interwoven with narrative text, make this book a treasured gift”

His writings are filled with such relevant insights. Marcel also points out that atheism has been progressively replaced by an anti-theism, whose mainspring is the will that God should not be. Always, he emphasises the concreteness of living and mistrusts any philosophising which is not grounded in experience. This seems to me fundamentally important.

Ian d'Alton

One never wholly understands John Banville. Is he laughing with us, or at us? I really don't know. But what I do know is that this whodunnit-cum-police-procedural, *Snow* (Faber & Faber, £14.99), works on all sorts of levels.

It's 1957 Ireland, in Mr Banville's formative decade. A priest is brutally murdered. The police must get involved. The twist is to have the murder take place in a Wexford country mansion cut off by a snow-fall, a Protestant house full of the eccentric relics of 'oul dacency'.

'The body is in the library' indeed! So far, so Agatha Christie. But Mr Banville injects a shot of dissonance: the investigating Garda inspector is also of horse-Protestant stock.

This is not just a classic detective novel but, through its characterisation and sense of place, a commentary on the Ireland of its time. The

Catholic Church is at the apogee of its power. Archbishop John Charles McQuaid glides through Mr Banville's pages, manipulating and managing the scandal, with the Protestant policeman tip-toeing through the minefield.

This wonderfully written novel is ultimately about the quirks of the human condition. And in that, it resonates with all of us.

Teresa Whittington

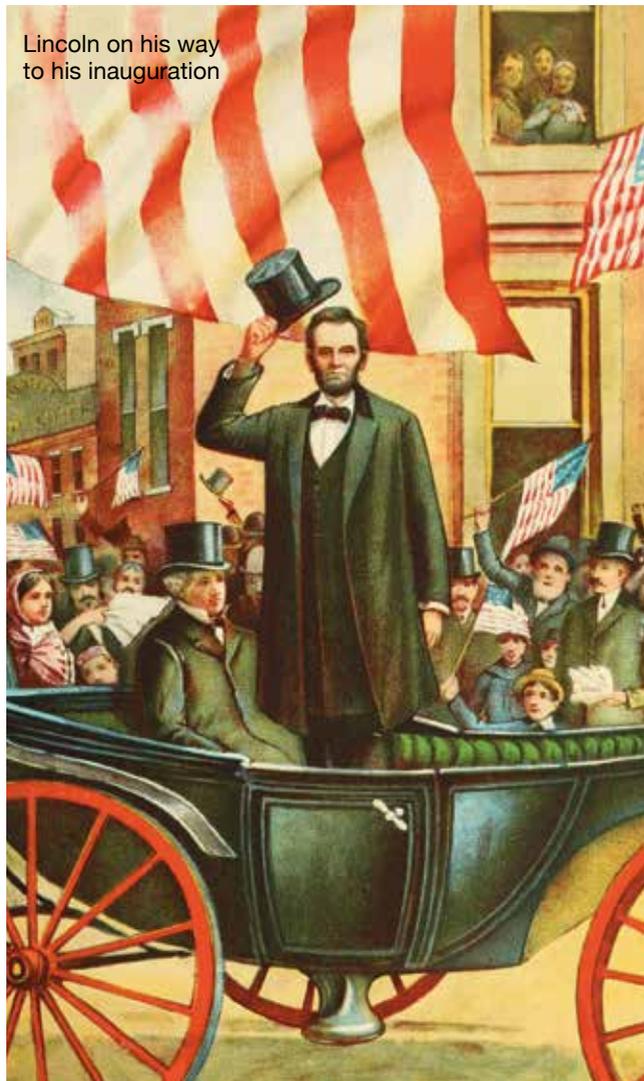
I most enjoyed *Brian Dillon's Suppose a Sentence* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, £10.99)

Each of the essays in this collection is inspired by a single sentence, and explores that sentence as an exemplar of its original author's literary sensibility and vocation.

Brian Dillon, already an accomplished essayist, classifies this latest project as an exercise in 'slow reading'. In each of the 27 essays, Mr Dillon both enacts a moment of reading and slows that moment down by attentive description – of the language used and the lived experience it represents.

Mr Dillon made his selection of sentences from notebooks he has compiled over years of dedicated, reflective reading. The 27 authors chosen range from the canonical to the contemporary. We get fresh perspectives on all.

Lincoln on his way to his inauguration



effortlessly simple. You feel you want to follow this young explorer of life as far as he will let you.

Charles Lysaght

Both my favourite books relate to Fine Gael, a party I could never quite bring myself to join. One is iconoclast Shane Ross's irreverent, refreshingly self-mocking, highly entertaining memoir *In Bed with the Blueshirts* (Atlantic Books, £14.99) which gives a unique insight into the process of government, while also laying bare the obstacles he encountered trying to put an end to cronyism and what he believed to be a low standards of conduct when he was an independent minister in a Fine Gael led government between 2016-20.

The other, a scholarly well-written history of Fine Gael by Stephen Collins and Ciara Meehan entitled *Saving the State* (Gill Books, €25.00), is more positive about the party, stressing its honourable role when the State has been most under threat; to its credit it does not conceal the self-seeking, the intriguing and lack of loyalty that has afflicted the party in the last half-century.

Anthony Redmond

Peadar King is the presenter/producer of RTÉ's *What in the World?* In his new book *War, Suffering and the Struggle for Human Rights* (Liffey Press, €19.95) he relates heart-breaking stories of about 13 different countries affected by war, racism and human misery.

He writes about Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, the Palestinian Territories and Yemen among others. He talks about the sheer cruelty, grief and propaganda involved. He brings home to us the human stories and the unspeakable sadness and sorrow behind these stories.

This is a book that gave me sleepless nights. Peadar King covers so much ground in this utterly riveting, heartrending book.

Mary Kenny

Strange Flowers (Penguin, £12.99) by Donal Ryan begins with a young girl's disappearance from Tipperary in 1973, and her parents' bewildered search for her: and what happens five years later, when it becomes something more complex. Mr Ryan has a compellingly lyrical style, and the novel is submerged in spiritual references.

The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity (Bloomsbury Continuum, £9.99) by Douglas Murray brilliantly explains how the destabilisation of our institutions has been brought about by rapid, even instant, social change.

Achill Painters: An Island History (Knockma Publishing, €20), by Mary J. Murphy is a delight. Achill has always attracted painters and writers and exquisite reproductions of art works by such as Mainie Jellett, Marie Howet and Alexandra Van Tuyll, interwoven with narrative text, make this book a treasured gift. (Obtainable from info@charliebyrne.ie)

Christopher Moriarty

A remarkable book by a very remarkable person, *Here's the Story: A Memoir* by Mary McAleese provides her own view of a plethora of public events of which she was the centre.

If that were all, it would be valuable work. What makes it so special is her intimate account of growing up in Ardoyne, among other aspects of her life, family and faith.

The revelation that she is an accomplished and compelling writer, with entertaining, and mostly benign, views on a number of very well-known people, would be quite enough to constitute a 'book of the year'. But there is so much more to it than that.

Rev. Robert Marshall

Anthony Trollope one of the giants of Victorian literature, found himself as a writer during his years in Ireland. His most important work, his series of novels about Barchester, was begun while he lived in Donnybrook, then outside Dublin, in the 1850s.

The six Barchester novels ought to be read chronologically in order to fully understand the personalities and intricacies involved. *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867) concludes Mr Trollope's series narrating life in the Victorian cathedral city of Barchester and its shire in the west country of England.

Two chapters, 'Requiescat in pace' and 'In Memoriam' record the death of Mrs Proudie, the evangelical and managerial spouse behind the public face of her weak Episcopal husband. These chapters are amongst his finest as the bishop and others react to her passing. The book is a wonderful example of a great novelist addressing timeless issues in human life.

Felix M. Larkin

When Joe Biden is sworn in as president of the United States on January 20, he faces the task of restoring the prestige of the presidency. On three previous occasions incoming presidents faced a similar task: Ford after Nixon in 1974; Franklin Roosevelt after Hoover in 1933; and Lincoln after Buchanan in 1861.

The transition from Buchanan to Lincoln is the subject of my favourite book this year: *Lincoln on the Verge: Thirteen Days to Washington*, by Ted Widmer (Simon & Schuster, \$35).

For his inauguration, Lincoln had to make his way by train to Washington DC from his home town of Springfield, Illinois. That journey is traced in meticulous detail in Mr Widmer's book. Given the tensions over slavery that would shortly erupt in civil war, Lincoln's safety was always in doubt. His route was circuitous, passing through no Southern state.

The journey of 1,900 miles took 13 days. On the way he was hailed by enthusiastic crowds. This short, but vital time, is richly recreated. At Philadelphia, Lincoln exhorted his fellow countrymen to live up to their founding ideals: a call that needs to be heard again.

Classifieds

The deadline for advertising in the classifieds is 10.30am, the Friday before publication. Contact the Classified Team on 01 687 4094 or email advertising@irishcatholic.ie



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WORDS OF WISDOM

BISHOP JUAN GUEVARRA, Nicaragua approved the divine revelations to Luz de Maria at www.revelaciones-marianas.com/english.htm. An important message given on 16/11/2020.

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trócaire

Please pray for the beatification of

Little Nellie of Holy God

"May God enrich with every blessing all those who recommend frequent Communion to little boys and girls proposing Nellie as their model"

– Pope St Pius X, June 4, 1912

Notebook

Fr Conor McDonough



Being at home means being with God

ONE OF THE MOST moving moments of my first four years of priesthood was celebrating the Vigil Mass of Christmas in a homeless shelter for women run by the Legion of Mary.

When I was preaching the sermon, I casually mentioned that Jesus was born into homelessness. I thought it was a totally normal thing to say, but a few of the residents sat up in their chairs as if this had never occurred to them, that their awful condition – loneliness, hostility, uncertainty, cold – was a condition shared by their Saviour.

They seemed never to have made the connection, so I improvised a bit on the theme and the look on their faces was extraordinary. As I mentioned some of the struggles the Holy Family would have gone through, being homeless in a strange place, one of the women whispered out loud, “God love them”.

Chesterton

I had just read G.K. Chesterton’s wonderful poem about Bethlehem, so I was able to share with them his insight into the homelessness of the Child Jesus: “A child in a



foul stable,/Where the beasts feed and foam;/Only where He was homeless/Are you and I at home”.

In Christ, God became homeless so that we could cease to be homeless; he stepped into the darkness to lead us into the light; he allowed himself to feel the freezing cold so as to draw us into the warmth of his presence. Very simply, the child born in Bethlehem is our way home.

And this year above all years, we feel the need for home. How often have we described 2020 as a “strange year”? It has certainly been an unhomely year for many of us. Even our Christmas celebrations have been muted. Comfort, contact, community – all

Enduring in a place of danger

“Only where he was homeless are you and I at home”: the Cistercian monks of Tibhirine knew how true this was. They were martyred 25 years ago in Algeria, but before their murder they received many death threats. They knew perfectly well that staying on in this mission territory was dangerous. Their north-African home had become a strange, unhomely place, and some encouraged them to return to the comfort of France. But in the mystery of Christmas they found the strength to stay. Their prior Christian de Chergé wrote:

“We must find in the mystery of the Incarnation our true reasons for staying here, despite the threats. Christmas is about Emmanuel, God silently present”.

They found the strength to stay, to endure joyfully in a place of danger, to live hopefully in strange times, because they knew that God was with them in the child Jesus. This little child, Fr Christian preached at their last midnight Mass, came to each of them to be held in their arms, and to offer to each a way forward, “the little way of Christmas”, a way home.

Making homes merry with Christ-centred carols

● It has been very painful for congregations not to be able to welcome the birth of Christ by singing familiar Christmas carols. Churches normally filled with joyful voices have been strangely silent this Christmas. All the more reason, then, we should make sure our homes are filled this season with the merriness of Christ-centred carols. With the help of the Internet, we can even access Christmas music from around the world. I love the ‘Carol of the Birds’ and ‘Riu Riu Chiu’ from Spain, as well

as the French song, ‘Il est né le divin enfant’. But nothing can beat the Kilmore Carols, especially the haunting ‘Jerusalem, our happy home’, which stirs up the Christian hope of heaven, a hope made possible by the Christ-child: “Jerusalem our happy home, When shall we come to thee?/When shall our sorrows have an end? Thy joys when shall we see?/There’s cinnamon that scenteth sweet, there palms spring on the ground;/ No tongue can tell, no heart can think what joys do there abound”.

these things which make us feel at home, all have been taken away to varying degrees, plunging us into a certain kind of homelessness.

Painful

This is immensely painful, but it can be a reminder too that, for us Christians, this world is not our ultimate home, and being at home – truly, safely, peacefully at home – means being with God, in this life and the next. And at Christmas we recall with joy that it is God

who takes the initiative in this encounter, God who comes to be with us: “Only where He was homeless are you and I at home”.





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The Little Way Association receives numerous requests from missionaries throughout the world asking for help to feed, support and educate needy, deprived children. Due to COVID-19 they are faced with many sufferings. They tell us of orphaned children left alone with no one to love or care for them, of families so poor that they cannot afford to send their children to school, and of street children, totally abandoned, hungry and homeless, experiencing much anguish and hardship during their most tender years. The whole future of these children often depends upon whether a missionary can find sufficient funds to care for them.

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As we prepare to welcome the Christ child at Christmas, please consider making a gift to The Little Way Association’s fund for children.

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In your prayers at the Crib, please ask the Holy Child to bless and protect all missionaries as they labour to bring the knowledge of His love and saving power to the world.

“Jesus wills that we give alms to Him as to one poor and needy. He puts Himself as it were at our mercy; He will take nothing but what we give Him from our heart, and the very least trifle is precious in His sight.”

- St Therese

We wish all our friends and benefactors a very happy and peaceful Christmas and many blessings in the New year.

May St Therese reward you in a special way for the sacrifices you make to support our work, and may she obtain many graces for all our benefactors during 2021.

In gratitude for your kindness a CHRISTMAS NOVENA OF MASSES is being offered for YOUR INTENTIONS

IC/12/24