

# The Irish Catholic

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# Suffer little children

## Housing crisis is driving youth leaving care to drugs and prison

Chai Brady

Children leaving State care face spiralling into crime and addiction due to an inability to find housing, with the situation getting "definitely worse" according to campaigners.

The Peter McVerry Trust is supporting dozens of young adults who turn 18 and leave State care in dedicated housing, but this accommodation is already "stretched".

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, founder of the charity Fr Peter McVerry said State care is hugely expensive and that keeping children out of homeless services is "critical" to saving lives.

"If you are put out at 18 into adult homeless services, that money has all been wasted, as some people will go downhill very quickly. Depressed, fed up, mixing with all sorts of difficult adults with addiction and mental health issues, they will – in my experience – quickly spiral down into drugs, into crime and eventually into prison," Fr McVerry said.

"Housing is particularly critical for young people leaving care. Because if we can prevent them from sliding down into depression, into crime, into drugs – that saves their lives and it also saves the State a fortune."

Head of Youth Services at Focus Ireland, Neil Forsyth, said the housing situation for care leavers is "definitely worse" now than before Covid, as the private rental sector is "effectively gone as an option" and accommodation offered by local authorities is "patchy" at best.

"The situation is dreadful, and aftercare social workers are struggling. It is the single biggest challenge they face and it is still a massive stress for young people coming up to 18 years of age, who are asking 'where am I going to live?'" Mr Forsyth said.

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## Irish youth go to Assisi to see what they can see-see



Young people from across the country went on a four-day visit to Assisi with some Franciscan Friars from Galway. They stayed in the friary of San Damiano, the church St Francis started to rebuild after hearing God's call 'rebuild my Church', and the place which became the first home of St Clare and her sisters.

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# Suffer little children

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"It's bad enough being in care but also worrying about having to leave at 18 – unlike other kids in the population who are staying on with their parents into their 20s or 30s – is very distressing. We do lose quite a number of young people when they leave care because of the awful loneliness and isolation and all the unresolved issues that they bring with them after being in the care system in the first place," he said.

He added that many children who leave State care do wish to be reunited with their parents "but sadly a lot of those situations break down pretty quickly and they can end up in homelessness".

Tusla's aftercare service provides a range of services for eligible young people from the ages of 18 to 21, or 23 if the young person is in full time education or accredited training. In a statement to *The Irish Catholic*, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, stated that at the end of Q4 2024, there were 2,935 young people in receipt of aftercare services. Of these, 2,196 (75%) were 18-22 years inclusive and 739 (25%) were under 18 years.

Tusla is currently struggling to employ social workers and faces significant staff shortages. According to its most recent figures the agency has 67 aftercare workers and 10 aftercare managers for almost 3,000 young people, averaging out at 38 cases per social worker.

Mr Forsyth, who is also the Chairperson of the Irish Aftercare Network Committee, said that "20 is supposed to be the caseload they have, and even

at 20, how often can you see a young person if you have that caseload? What kind of support can you give them? It's very, very minimal".

Director of Child and Family Services for The Peter McVerry Trust, Tanya Blyth, said that the their 'semi-independent' dedicated aftercare housing focuses on helping young people build skills for independent living.

"We've been working with Tusla and with some of the local authorities looking at different options... what we're seeing at the moment obviously is that the housing crisis is very significantly impacting care leavers" as private landlords will overlook them, Ms Blyth said, adding that the charity's services "are stretched".

"I suppose where we're finding difficulty is that you are seeing placements coming to an end and if young people haven't sourced something out, sometimes the alternative is going into homeless services for a period of time. We're trying to do what we can to provide alternative solutions but it definitely is more of a feature now," she said.

With the number of care leavers due to age-out of the care system known each year, Ms Blyth said that the charity, along with local authorities and Tusla, are trying to come up with housing solutions "and come up with the right level of support at the right stage of the young person's journey".

In a statement to *The Irish Catholic*, a Tusla spokesperson said: "When an eligible young person in care turns 16 years of age, their social worker refers them to the aftercare service to begin

planning for their future for when they leave care. As part of this preparation, the aftercare worker works with the young person and important people in their lives to assess their needs, which will inform the development of their aftercare plan.

"The assessment takes account of all aspects of the young person's need, including their accommodation, as they transition into adulthood. Tusla's aftercare drop-in service is also available to anyone of any age who has spent time in care and needs advice or guidance, including with finding accommodation. Aftercare is a voluntary service and requires the engagement of the young person concerned."

## 150 children Confirmed in Clane Parish last weekend

Renata Steffens

The Clane and Rathcoffey Parish celebrated the confirmation of 150 children last weekend. Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin Denis Nulty said that "Confirmation is a wonderful moment of encounter with the young *confirmandi*... I had two celebrations in Clane on Friday and one in Rathcoffey on Saturday."

This year, the bishop is "focusing on the life story and witness of Blessed Carlo Acutis, and what his message has to offer young people today.

## Secularisation of schools could put parental choice at risk, Senator Mullen

Renata Milán Morales

In a recent debate on *Newstalk*, Senator Rónán Mullen expressed his opposition to the secularisation of Irish schools. He said, "If you only want children taught to read, write and to be good tools for the economy, then you might as well let AI do the job. But everybody who is sensible about what education is about knows that you can't separate it from values."

He continued, "The question then is, whose values do you want? Do you want the values of Jesus Christ? Karl Marx's? Or Donald Trump's? For all the ups and downs of the story of the Catholic Church in Ire-

land, many people still say 'Christianity', 'Jesus Christ', I want my child to have some of that in their life."

Senator Mullen talked about the importance of parental choice in the educational system, saying, "It's parents' rights that are there under the Constitution. And if parents want some kind of underlay of Christian values for their children in school, they are entitled to it."

In November 2024, Senator Mullen raised questions about the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) consultation processes regarding changes to the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum. He said

that "many parents do not know the primary curriculum was being revised."

"You can't divorce education... It is about creating an environment for children where they receive certain value. Values are important to parents, and they don't necessarily want... civil servants and NGOs deciding what values their kids are going to have... All over the world, there are people who want to send their children to Catholic schools in non-Christian countries... you could say [it is] because of the quality of the Catholic education. Most people want it, and they don't buy into politically correct arguments."



Bishop Denis Nulty celebrated Confirmations in Clane and Rathcoffey Parish.

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## Down and Connor Diocese invests £10M in youth, QUB Chaplaincy

**Renata Milán Morales**

A £10 million investment in the redevelopment of the Queen's University Chaplaincy has been made by the Diocese of Down and Connor, *The Irish Catholic* has learned.

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, Shannon Campbell, director of the QUB Chaplaincy

said, "It's really encouraging to know that our local Church is prioritising faith support and pastoral care for young people at such a critical stage in their lives. We're very conscious that today's students will be tomorrow's leaders, especially within our Church, so the investment is well worth it. We are very much looking forward to moving into our state-of-the-art

world class facility at the end of this calendar year."

"As an expression of commitment to young people, the Diocese of Down and Connor is investing £10 million in a redevelopment of the Chaplaincy building, located at the heart of campus," explained Fr Dominic McGrattan, Catholic Chaplain at the university.

The Chaplaincy weekly

newsletter reaches "over 9,000 inboxes, and hundreds visit the Chaplaincy over the course of the semester for coffee and chat in their popular cafe," explained Fr Dominic. The Chaplain has witnessed a prominent interest in "daily and Sunday Masses, daily confessions, women's and men's group, intellectual formation, quiet time in chapel, and social

time in the common room," among the students.

Almost half of Queen University's students identify as Catholic or from a Catholic background, according to Fr Dominic. The investment will improve the facilities - café, common room, reading room, garden, and a renewed chapel worthy of the sacraments and sacred liturgies. For the first

time in its history, the Chaplaincy will offer high-quality and value-led residential options offering nearly 50 student apartments.

The upgrade has been planned since over two years ago, but the works started on February 2024. The new Chaplaincy facilities will be open in December 2025.

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## The Resurrection of the Christ to begin filming | Kilmore Diocese on board of native forest plan

**Pedro Esteve**

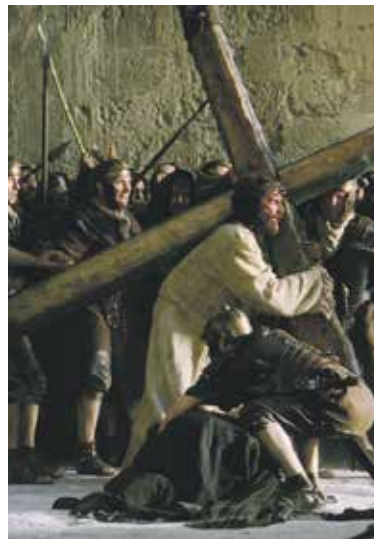
Despite the controversies surrounding Mel Gibson's 2004 biblical dram *The Passion of the Christ*, the film proved to be highly successful grossing over \$612 million at the box office. For more than 20 years, it remained the highest-grossing R-rated film in the U.S.

Now, over twenty years later, Mr Gibson is preparing to film a sequel, *The Resurrection of the Christ*, which is set to begin production in August at Rome's Cinecitta Studios, with a release expected in 2026. Catholic actor Jim Caviezel, whose portrayal of Jesus turned him into a cultural icon, will reprise his role. In a recent interview with podcaster Joe Rogan, Mr Gibson revealed that Jim Caviezel, now 57, will be digitally de-aged for the new film. Also set to return are

Maia Morgenstern as the Virgin Mary and Francesco De Vito as St Peter.

While the script remains under wraps, Mr Gibson has mentioned that the sequel will cover a broader historical scope, from "the fall of the angels to the death of the last apostle." This expansive approach may address one of the criticisms aimed at *The Passion of the Christ*, which focused primarily on the last 12 hours of Jesus' life. Critics, including Gerri Pare and David DiCerto of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, noted that the film's narrow focus left little room for Christ's teachings, making it challenging for viewers to understand the events leading to his arrest.

With *The Resurrection of the Christ*, Mr Gibson aims to expand the narrative, offering a fuller portrayal of Christ's life, death, and transformative resurrection.



*The Passion of the Christ.* Photo: OSV News/Philippe Antonello, Icon Productions.

**Renata Steffens**

Cavan County Local Development (CCLD) are launching a pilot programme aimed to empowering local community groups to create small forests with a free training programme.

The initiative ties well with *Laudato Si'*, Season of Creation, and the Bishops' pledge to return 30% of Church grounds to nature said Patricia Keenan, Chair of the Diocese of Kilmore Creation Group. "It will be suitable for larger church grounds that are open and accessible to the public. Once planted the parish can stand back and allow the ecosystem to evolve, learn and perhaps take cuttings, seeds to plant elsewhere."

Daniel Monaghan from Earth-

bound Ireland, said, "the groups will be planting native tree species at high density." The Cavan Community Forests Initiative has spaces available for up to 30 groups. The programme will be offered across the county from April 2025 to June 2026 and includes four training sessions.

The 25m2 "densely packed" forest will take 5 to 10 years to grow, and will be developed with the Japanese technique Miyawaki, said John Toland, Senior Development Officer at Breffni Integrated CLG.

Mr Toland said they "would encourage church groups to come forward to access this support to put a small forest in their area... Communities will be given the empowerment and the skills" to create bigger forests in the future.

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# Irish College priest laments Myanmar tragedy

**Renata Steffens**

Myanmar is facing the aftermath of a 7.7 magnitude earthquake which hit the country on March 28. Fr Simon Young, a Myanmar native priest who lives in the Irish College in Rome and spent the Summer of 2024 in

Knock said the tragedy broke his heart.

"Two cities, Sagaing and Mandalay have the largest number of deaths and damages, according to local reports. Many pagodas, churches and houses have been destroyed due to the earthquake," Fr Young said it's difficult to know the exact

number of affected people due to the loss of internet connection in the area.

On Monday, the death toll was at just over 2,000, but the figures are expected to exceed 3,000. The tremor was felt in other places, including Thailand and south-west China. In Thailand, at least 20 people died due to the earthquake.

## Young people should know who they are voting for - priest

**Staff reporter**

Members of the DCU Chaplaincy and St Dominic's Society in DCU visited the Government buildings with Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin Donal Roche. Fr Seamus McEntee, President of the St Dominic's Catholic Society said this visit is important to give students the opportunity to see where the decisions for the Republic are made, and to bridge them to those they voted for.

Fr McEntee said the trip was important as they are over 18 and voting is a citizens' responsibility. "To vote and who you're voting for. And also, to be in touch with the social issues of the day, and what elected politicians are advocating for... That's a great chance for them to stop and chat with people of the faith. TDs, elected members... are people of faith as well."

This visit was organised by Conor Brennan,

treasurer of the Society. Some students were asking him "could they go in for a tour" so the treasurer contacted his local TD Malcolm Byrne who facilitated the visit.

"The tour basically consisted of a tour of Leinster House and a meal, and I invited Bishop Donal along," Mr Brennan said. "It was lovely to have the bishop as well, because I know one of the things out of the Synod was a recommendation that bishops and priests should be more accessible."

Fr Seamus said that from Bishop Roche's point of view "he was inspired by the students he met, and was encouraged by their faith. Because he said, very often, the faith of young people it's underground. He used that word. It's hidden, it's not out there on top. You think sometimes young people are afraid or don't practise their faith, and the whole point of the Society in DCU is like the charcoal fire. If you leave one piece of charcoal carbon by itself, it will go out."

"Even though I haven't heard from my family members for two days, they are well," Fr Young said. Due to the lack of direct communication access "the people are worried about their family members and the after-shocks."

The priest said that people in the affected areas "are facing water shortage, transportation breakdown, and lack of shelter. [However,] both local and international organisations effort to help the people, even though [there are] some restrictions from the Myanmar military."

"As a priest from Myanmar, I regard the tragedy of the earthquake in Myanmar as a challenge to solidarity... This

is important because we have our religion, the charity of the universal Church, which in its times of crisis gives us both material and spiritual abundance."

Myanmar has a history of facing difficult times, the priest said. "In Myanmar, 2020 was difficult due to COVID-19; 2021 saw a military coup; 2022 was a spread of civil war; 2023 experienced hyperinflation; 2024 was a flood, and 2025 brought an earthquake. Myanmar people deserve better lives."

The priest thanked the prayers and support his country is receiving from people and organisations from around the world.

## Bishop Doran calls for more youth involvement in the Church

**Bláthnaid Gunawardana**

Bishop Kevin Doran was installed Bishop of Achonry. Now, he is officially Bishop of Elphin and Achonry. The event took place in the Cathedral of the Annunciation and St Nathy on March 30.

During his homily on the day, the bishop said that there's a need "to review our structures to make sure that they are appropriate to the needs of the 21st Century, and of our relationship. But we also need to remember that the whole reason for undertaking this journey is so that we can more effectively carry out the mission".

Bishop Doran said: "We need to find ways to facilitate the active involvement of young adults in the liturgical and pastoral life of the Church" and "need to rediscover the social mission of the Church; the outreach to those who are on the margins, and the work of justice."

"Bishops come and go," he said, but "if we walk with Jesus, we will eventually get to where God wants us to be."



Bishop Kevin Doran who was recently installed as Bishop of Achonry celebrated the Sacrament of Confirmation of 20 young children in the Tubbercurry Cloonacool Parish on March 29.

## Bishops decry abortion services in Irish hospitals

**Pedro Esteva**

"As people of faith called to protect the sacredness of human life, we are saddened by the availability of abortion services in our hospitals," said Bishops Martin Hayes of Kilmore and Larry Duffy of Clogher expressing sorrow over abortion services in Irish hospitals, emphasising the sacredness of life and the role of hospitals in preserving it. They reaffirm their commitment to protecting human life from conception to natural death.

They call for protections for healthcare staff who conscientiously object to abortion procedures, ensuring their careers are not impacted. "We stand with those staff who refuse to be involved in abortion procedures and, in this way, promote and protect human life."

They urge support for women facing unplanned pregnancies and commend organisations like Gianna Care and Community Connect for assisting expectant mothers. They also encourage participation in the 'March for Life' in Dublin on May 5, 2025.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Pontifical Charity to run Irish bishops' publications

The Episcopal Conference has written to parishes to advise them that forms and ritual books previously published by Veritas are now available from Aid to the Church in Need (Ireland). The pastoral magazine Intercom, the Irish Catholic Directory and the Liturgical Calendar for Ireland will be also published by ACN who will also manage the associated social media and online platforms.

### New film Sins of Ireland reflects on reconciliation

Premiering on Good Friday, April 18, *Sins of Ireland* explores the legacy of the Catholic Church in Ireland through the lens of confession. Directed by Alex Fegan (*Older Than Ireland, The Irish Pub*), the documentary features fifteen priests reflecting on a sacrament that once shaped Irish identity but has since faded.

Confession, first introduced in its private form by Irish monks, has been both a source of solace and a tool of control. The film does not condemn but instead explores forgiveness as a reckoning with the past and a path to renewal.

For Fegan, the film is personal. Watching his son's first confession, he wondered—do people see this rite as sacred or obsolete? *Sins of Ireland* invites viewers to reflect on faith, forgiveness, and the future of the Church in a changing Ireland.

### The Pilgrim Passport: journeying through Ireland's sacred sites

Ireland's new Pilgrim Passport connects three major pilgrimage sites – Knock Shrine, Croagh Patrick, and Lough Derg – allowing pilgrims to collect official stamps at each location. Completing all three earns a special lapel pin as a memento of the journey.

Stamps are available at Knock Museum, Lough Derg's visitor centre or on the island, and at various locations at Croagh Patrick, where pilgrims must take a selfie at the summit. The initiative encourages both travel and spiritual exploration with prayer cards and QR codes for sharing experiences.

Inspired in part by the Camino as well as the focus of the Jubilee year on pilgrimage, the passport offers a meaningful way to engage with Ireland's sacred heritage. Learn more at [www.pilgrimpassport.ie](http://www.pilgrimpassport.ie).

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# Mr O'Leary is wrong – ceremony and ritual are important

**W**hen the history-books are written, it is quite likely that the most influential Irishman of our time will be Michael O'Leary, CEO of Ryanair. Yes, Clongowes-educated



**Mary Kenny**

Mr O'Leary has probably made more impact on our world than all the

politicians, leaders and general celebrities put together.

He has made his low-budget airline the most dominant in Europe, even in the whole globe. If airports are always crowded, if people always seem to be flying off to some exotic location, if staff can commute from Barcelona and Berlin to Dublin, it's because of Ryanair – and the competitive influence it has had on other airlines.

**“Mr O'Leary is such a colossus that it's even been suggested that he should be President of Ireland, when the office falls vacant in November”**

Emigrants can now fly home for the weekend – they don't need to weep about the coast of the Emerald Isle disappearing forever, as in the old exiles' laments.

Mr O'Leary is such a colossus that it's even been suggested that he should be President of Ireland, when the office falls vacant in November.

But, in his robust manner, he has dismissed the idea and the position itself as “the most useless and overpaid office in the country.” The Presidency is, he says, “a makey-uppy job”.

His Jesuit teachers must have instructed young Michael in the pursuit of many goals, but they seem to have

missed out teaching him about the Constitution, and the importance of ceremony and ritual in the governance of a nation.

An Irish President's role is guardian of the Constitution and ceremonial head of state. Somebody has to embody what the British Constitutionalist Walter Bagheot called the ‘dignified’ role of governance.

The President's role is to represent the nation without being directly political.

True, the present incumbent has sometimes sailed close to the wind in voicing his opinions; but overall, Mr Higgins has performed the ‘dignified’ role of Head of State with grace and authority. Even if he has been occasionally controversial, that can be a kind of safety-valve – saying what politicians dare not. The previous two Presidents, the two Marys, have also adorned and indeed elevated the office they occupied.

## Prism

Mr O'Leary sees the world through the prism of business and management, so he misses the value of ritual and symbol. (If he must vote in the Presidential election, he'll back Mairéad McGuinness – who has been a vocal

opponent of Brexit, which O'Leary loathed, as being anti-business.)

**“Michael O'Leary is wrong – the job is far from ‘useless’ in a changing Ireland”**

We will see a raft of candidates proposed for the role of Uachtarán, including Bertie Ahern, Francis Black, Michael McDowell, Catherine Connolly, Fergus Finlay, Heather Humphreys, Eurovision song host Linda Martin and even Fintan O'Toole. Some commentators are even suggesting it's becoming a kind of parallel Eurovision contest.

But the growing speculation about the next Presidency shows that people are interested in the personality of who will represent the nation; and that the public feels involved.

Michael O'Leary is wrong – the job is far from “useless” in a changing Ireland, representing a national “identity” may be one of the most vital roles.



Michael O'Leary, CEO of Ryanair

## A mark of our time

**A**part from being Taoiseach and Prime Minister, what do Michéal Martin and Keir Starmer have in common?

They both made a point of wishing their Muslim electorate a happy Eid (the end of the Ramadan fast – occurring last Sunday and Monday).

This prompted a chorus of complaints on social media – some from Christians saying “What about us? Do we ever get a

Happy Easter – or even an acknowledgment of Lent?”

It is indeed a peculiar mark of our time that politicians often go out of their way to show respect for Islam, while ignoring, or even seeming to abolish, Christian religious feasts.

Is this for a good or bad motive? Are they just keen to show kindness and hospitality to a sector of the public which is likely to have come from a migrant background?

Ironically, is this a practice of a long Christian tradition: welcome the stranger and give hospitality, as St Paul preaches?

Or is it a cannier calculation about votes? As the Muslim electorate increases – and usually has higher fertility too – are the politicians just playing a shrewd numbers game?

Knowing the way a politician's mind works (“is there an opportunity here?”) I may veer towards the second thesis!

**T**he earthquake in Myanmar, also affecting Thailand, is terrifying, and the suffering pitiful. One of the most afflicted places seems to be Mandalay, whose name

hasn't been changed since colonial times.

Rudyard Kipling wrote a famous poem, ‘Mandalay’, later set to music, but now condemned as colonialist, racist and sexist. By our

measures, I daresay it is. Yet, I remember my mother playing it fondly on the piano, since her brother had served in Burma – as many Irishmen did. “On the road to Mandalay/Where the flyin'-

fishes play,/An' the dawn comes up like thunder outer China 'crost the Bay!”

The poem is dated, yet it evokes affection for Mandalay, now so broken and destroyed.

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# Climate change pushing millions of families all over the world further into poverty



David O'Hare

“According to the World Bank, climate change could push as many as 130 million people into extreme poverty by the year 2030, wiping out many of the development gains lower-income countries have made,” said Caoimhe de Barra, Trócaire’s CEO.

Ms De Barra says the effects of climate change are having a particularly negative impact on children’s education and their futures. “The communities and families we work with are increasingly being affected by erratic weather patterns caused by climate change. As many of these rural communities rely on growing and selling crops to earn an income, the loss of livelihood has knock-on effects for families. Often families can’t



Miriam and her family with their failed crops. Photo: Mark Stedman

afford to pay for classes, books or transport. This is aside from the very direct effects when schools are destroyed by floods or cyclones and roads become unpassable for children travelling to school.”

## Livelihoods

“In developing countries, storms and droughts are wiping out livelihoods and often mean that children have

to leave school permanently so they can work to help support their families. Countries where people are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change are also regions where children already receive fewer years of schooling. The effects of climate change have had a disproportionate and disastrous impact on children’s education in some of the world’s most fragile countries.”

“The Trócaire Box appeal for Lent this year centres around the story of a family in the small community of La Paz, in central Guatemala. Ilma and Julio have four children, Miriam (13), Julio Jr (10), Debora (4) and baby Gloria. They depend on farming to feed themselves and earn an income. Like many families and communities Trócaire works with, they are experiencing increasingly erratic weather patterns due to climate change. This is having life-changing consequences on their livelihoods, wellbeing and future.”

“When there’s drought their crops die. And then when it starts raining it also kills all their crops. They don’t know what to do anymore”

“Climate disasters disproportionately harm young girls’ education. 12-year-old Miriam’s parents used to plant crops twice a year but now only plant once because of the extreme weather conditions. A drought devastated their crops which meant they had no income. Miriam was due to go to secondary school, an hours drive away, but her parents are struggling to afford the €5 a week for the bus that would take her there,” said Caoimhe de Barra.

“Miriam’s mother, Ilma, told Trócaire it is now hotter and they have more droughts. Then it starts to rain, and it won’t stop raining. A more intense rain, more frequently. It affects their crops. When there’s drought their crops die. And then when it starts raining it also kills all their crops. They don’t know what to do anymore and she’s afraid that her children will suffer and won’t be able to go to school. This sums up the massive challenges facing Ilma’s



Miriam dreams of becoming a teacher. Photo: Mark Stedman

community and many like them in Guatemala and indeed right across the Global South.”

Particularly severe flooding in 2020 due to hurricanes Eta and Iota destroyed Ilma and Julio’s crops. The family were cut off from the rest of the community and had to take refuge on higher ground to save their lives. The community shared their food and supported the family and others affected. Ilma’s daughter Deborah, who was only four months old at the time, had diarrhea and vomiting which lasted for a week. They were unable to take her to a health post as they were cut off by the flooding. The community feels that excessive rain coincides with getting sick.

Miriam (12) recalls the hurricanes. She said, “We didn’t have any classes because the teacher was not able to come to the community and we didn’t have any food. But we were able to get help from neighbours. We waited a month for the water to go down.”

## Marginalised

“Trócaire supports marginalised rural communities to sustain their livelihoods and to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. This Lent we are asking the public in Ireland to help us support communities like La Paz as they mitigate and adapt to the effects of the climate crisis so that they can continue farming, protect their homes from flooding, make a fair living from their crops, send their children to school and become more resilient,” said Caoimhe de Barra.

“This support is even more crucial in light of the recent drastic cuts to Overseas Development Assistance. The US, the world’s richest country, cancelled 90% of its international

aid programme recently. The UK immediately followed by substantially reducing its international aid commitments. This is part of a broader trend which is seeing the world’s wealthiest countries reducing their support to the world’s most vulnerable people. The consequences for millions of people across the world is devastating. The cuts are happening at a time when the global need for humanitarian assistance has never been higher and global commitment to addressing this need perhaps never weaker. Thanks to our generous donors, congregations, clergy, the Irish public, Irish Aid and other institutional funders, Trócaire will continue to support our partners as they provide essential services and carry out vital work. In the face of this unprecedented and repugnant attack on the world’s most vulnerable we need the support of the Irish public now more than ever,” said Caoimhe de Barra.

In 2023/24 Trócaire supported 2.2 million people across 20 countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East. Trócaire’s climate and environmental justice work supported 288,200 people in countries including Guatemala, Honduras, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Malawi, Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Syria.

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David O'Hare is the Communications Officer and Internal Communications Specialist at Trócaire (NI).

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# Stop kicking the can down the road – Churches need to close so new life can take hold



Ronan Doherty

**T**he example of the unfortunate aftermath of the closure of the Clonmel Friary offers us lessons for what to do when we close churches and when our church closes. There is no doubting the goodwill of the passionate volunteers that sought for the Church to remain open in Clonmel but in cases like this, we need to embrace a bigger, longer term vision. As the Franciscans said in their statements, they had a duty as it is a listed building to ensure that it had a viable, long term future if it remained as a church. The Franciscans offered the building to other religious groups that were willing to take the building over but no suitable offers were forthcoming. In cases like this, there is a duty



on us as Catholics to humbly accept the decision to close a church, if legitimate reasons are given.

## Sympathise

I sympathise with parishioners being forced to leave their parish that they hold dear and has so much history for them but sometimes it has to happen. Now that the Friary has closed, Clonmel still has four open

Catholic churches. Declaring my bias with Tipperary as a Kilkenny man, I would still argue that four churches is more than enough for Clonmel. The larger population in Kilkenny City has seven churches and from my experience four would suffice. No-one wants their parish to be the one that closes but we have to be ready to accept that it might be the one that has to shut

its doors. We must also remember how lucky we are that Ireland still has so many churches and priests. In parts of the world, people regularly travel hours to attend Mass. We have been too comfortable for too long with the untenable status quo in Ireland and the illusion of churches staying open only at the cost of exhausting priests who are forced to travel long distances, managing multiple parishes and in the process not able to properly connect with any of those parishes.

With the closure of a church by the Franciscans, it is mainly an issue of not having enough Friars to form a functioning house. A Franciscan church can't be run by one Franciscan living alone, they live in community. It is worth reflecting upon that Diocesan Clergy should be living in community too.

**“The group in Clonmel promised a future for the church, but it must be a future that is viable in the long term for the Catholic Church in Ireland”**

It is a modern phenomenon of priests living alone in parochial houses, serving parishes alone. It can be unhealthy both from a mental health point of view but also the absence of fraternal support and correction. As seen elsewhere in coverage done by *The Irish Catholic*, priests are experiencing serious burnout levels. For decades we have been putting new wine into old wineskins, trying to keep the church of McQuaid on life support with its vast infrastructure and thousands of churches.

Actions taken on churches need to be permanent and well thought out. While it is regrettable that the Clonmel affair ended up in the courts, avoiding unpleasant decisions and trying to keep everyone happy only postpones a problem. The group in Clonmel promised a future for the church, but it must be a future that is viable in the long term for the Catholic Church in Ireland. In a similar case, a number of years ago another church in the midlands was kept open by a group of hard-working volunteers. But this worked only temporarily. Reassigned priests were then obliged to travel long distances across the country to say Mass occasionally. These already over stretched priests did their best with this makeshift arrangement until the situation became untenable and the church finally closed. This long goodbye went on for two years. Sentimental short term solutions such as these aren't workable and only prolong the inevitable. The can can't be kicked any further down the road.

Often forgotten about, there is also work to be done concerning the historic contents of churches when they are being closed. Records should be kept documenting the process of closing a church. Inventories and catalogues of the contents of churches and sacristies should be made. Aside from items of obvious importance such as chalices etc., sacristies can often contain historical items that should belong in Diocesan Archives such as selections or examples of vestments or records relating to Confraternities or Sodalities. Archival material that has remained hidden, unseen for years in sacristies should be kept for future generations and the patrimony of the church. If items are going to be sold in auctions, experts be they archivists or historians need to be consulted in advance to advise what should be kept. There have been too many examples recently of items that should have ended up in archives or museums sold to the highest bidder.

## History

When one looks at Church history, we see a series of peaks and valleys, triumphs and tragedies. Orders that were dominant like the Cistercians are in their twilight. Some male and female religious orders will reach the end of their life cycle soon. That has been the way in the Church

from the start that for the most part Orders come and go, having their moment. But amidst the decline there are seeds of growth such as the Dominicans in Ireland with their numerous vocations. Other orders such as the Franciscans of the Renewal show that there is always cause for hope. But to paraphrase Chesterton, only a living thing can go against the stream. Call it Ratzinger's 'Small Church', 'The Benedict Option' or whatever, but it is only by pooling resources and taking stock that we will be able to begin to re-evangelise the culture. The current approach of trying to keep all the spinning plates going isn't working and will come to a shuddering stop sooner than we think.

**“If tough unpopular actions aren't taken now, the future will be an unsightly mess. The tough measures that are needed, such as closing churches or restructuring of Dioceses/parishes”**

With fewer churches we will have more volunteers available for the churches remaining open. This pooling of resources can result in better liturgies, more effective outreach initiatives to the poor or evangelisation and desperately needed catechetical programmes. With less assignments, priests will be spread less thin so that they can spend less time on administration, more time on the pastoral needs of their flock and importantly reduce burnout.

If tough unpopular actions aren't taken now, the future will be an unsightly mess. The tough measures that are needed, such as closing churches or restructuring of dioceses/parishes, will be unpopular with some in the laity and many of the post-Christians or Cultural Catholics in society who darken the doors of a church every few years. However, doing nothing and attempting to maintain the status quo at all costs is curtailing the missionary goal of the Church in Ireland. We need to stop floating with the current and going against it.

**i** Ronan Doherty is an archivist and is involved with his parish as well as conducting historical research on the 1932 Eucharistic Congress.

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# Nine signs of hope for Catholic faith in Ireland 2025



Martina Purdy

**T**he sticker plastered on a Belfast lamp post made me smile. "I've read the last chapter - God wins!"

A source of hope in a world of death, destruction and doom. How easy it is for us to forget that the battle for salvation, for our lives, has already been won. Despite death and darkness all around us, those words are a light which, unlike the sun last weekend, cannot be eclipsed. Our Church is going through a challenging time but there are plenty of signs of light in this year of hope, omens that the good news continues to take root.

Yes, I've seen and heard the bad omens. Indeed, the other day a priest shared an anecdotal study of around 100 Irish college boys who had been raised in the faith, only to find that just one of them still attended Mass - and that was only occasionally!

Yes, we long for the crowds, but let us remember that crowds are fickle. Jesus attracted large crowds - as many as 5,000 for the miracle of the loaves and fishes - during his ministry. But at his crucifixion, there was only a remnant of loyal and loving disciples to witness the birth of the Church. The numbers grew with the resurrection.

## Signs

And as we approach Easter, I see nine signs, a little novena, that I have observed in this pilgrim year!

1. At Queen's University, Belfast, there are remarkable signs of a vibrant and growing faith community in the heart of the campus. There

Queens University Belfast



**“Jesus attracted large crowds - as many as 5,000 for the miracle of the loaves and fishes - during his ministry. But at his crucifixion, there was only a remnant of loyal and loving disciples to witness the birth of the Church”**

were so many people coming to Catholic Chaplaincy on Ash Wednesday that Fr Dominic McGrattan had to find bigger premises. Services were moved to the historic Whitla Hall, which is usually reserved for graduation ceremonies. Indeed more than 2,000 students, staff and friends gathered for Mass that day. Also, Fr McGrattan reports that around 150 students at Queen's University participate in small-group Bible studies each week, and 40 have committed to intensive discipleship training, preparing them as future Catholic leaders.

2. Around 40% of Queen's 25,000 students identify as Catholic or from a Catholic background. And, in a bold expression of faith in our young people, the Diocese of Down and Connor is investing £10 million in a major redevelopment of Queen's University Chaplaincy. The investment will improve

existing facilities: the café, common room, reading room, garden, and—most importantly—a renewed chapel worthy of the sacraments and sacred liturgies. And, for the first time in its history, the Chaplaincy will offer high-quality and value-led residential options offering nearly 50 student apartments. “As faith flourishes in the next generation,” said Fr Dominic, “this renewed Chaplaincy will stand as both a home and a beacon of Christ's presence on campus for years to come.”

3. During Lent, my parish priest, Fr Ciaran Feeney has offered an extra Mass at St Michael the Archangel at 7am every weekday. And the response has been amazing! Many are up with the birds to praise the Lord. The church is regularly at least 60% full. And what is especially heartening is that some students from local secondary schools are coming in their uniform before class. The Parish also

just introduced an extra half hour to our Sunday evening Holy Hour to intercede for church vocations, for priests especially, and the numbers are growing. Praise the Lord!

4. Novenas of Hope are popping up across the island. And I have attended such novenas in St Agnes's Church, Belfast, Our Lady of Lourdes Moneyglass, County Antrim and The Graan, in Fermanagh which just concluded on March 31. Among the faces of hope I encountered were staff and A-level students from St Michael's College in Enniskillen. And this weekend Newry Cathedral is offering a special mass of Hope in a year packed with events.

**“I credit this prayer with the signs of hope that I see - and a sense that there is a shift back towards faith”**

5. The queue for confessions in St Mary's, Chapel Lane, Belfast where priests offered almost seven hours of confession last Saturday for the Jubilee Year of Hope. This was part of a '24 Hours for the Lord' initiative in three Down and Connor churches including All Saints, Ballymena, and St Patrick's Church, Downpatrick. While many still run from confession, fearing a 'torture chamber', Pope Francis has described the sacrament of reconciliation as a hug from the God the Father.

6. A young man I know called his parish priest in Belfast a few weeks ago. He wanted to talk about returning to Mass. And he is back, along with his daughter. 'Come and celebrate with me,'

is the appropriate response to this, an echo of the Lord's parable of the Lost Sheep.

7. Our parish, St Michael the Archangel, advertised a three-day pilgrimage to Knock Shrine for the Year of Hope. Within a fortnight we had 40 people signed up - and more have followed. The seats on our big luxury bus went a lot faster this time compared to last year.

8. The priests who continue to serve, despite being past retirement age. While some in society retire in their late fifties, we have priests who are close to 75 or more, still giving joyful service. They pour themselves out, and it is heartening. I know a trinity of such priests in Downpatrick. The same for religious men and women - and indeed I had a lovely conversation with Bro. Victor, a Cross and Passionist, at The Graan this week. He has served in religious life for many decades

and he was full of joy, despite the challenges of growing older. And he is a faithful reader of *The Irish Catholic*.

9. I hear the Bishop of Down and Connor Alan McGuckian is set to launch another Sacred Heart Novena this June. The inaugural novena last June last year was a great success, with school children, parishioners and individuals joining in the Novena. Frankly, I credit this prayer with the signs of hope that I see - and a sense that there is a shift back towards faith.

## Hope

We have a mountain to climb, one step at a time. The rock from which we are hewn has not been forgotten by all the Irish, and we have every reason to walk in joy, praying that Ireland will be a holy nation, once again. So, let us hope in the Lord, hold fast and take heart!



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**S**t Paul tells us that where sin abounds, grace is ever more abundant. Indeed, the goodness of people everywhere outweighs the bad. A World Happiness Report that suggested places which believed in the 'kindness of

strangers' are happy places - and that Belfast was a leading example. The BBC's Home Editor Mark Easton decided to check it out. His plan was to drop 10 wallets across the city with a £10 note and a phone number. He happily reported that all ten were returned.

**I**t's not too often you see a 'barefoot minister' these days - but there is a chance you might spot The Rev. Stephen McWhirter of Rosary Parish Church between now and

Palm Sunday. This Church of Ireland minister is walking 100 miles barefoot for charity from Enniskillen, Fermanagh to St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. In light of the Gospel, he wears no

shoes as a sign of servanthood - and has no purse. He is reliant on the kindness of others. May the sun shine warm upon his face with many hands to help him on his way!



# Hugo Duncan: The wee man from Strabane

'I get down on my knees and thank God that I'm still standing'



Joanne Savage

**N**orth of the border, Hugo Duncan is a household name on the radio, an ebullient, sprightly entertainer who regales his listeners with funny anecdotes, quips about his inordinate love of cream buns, shout-outs to aficionados in far-flung parts of the province and hours of the best country music from Dolly Parton, Patsy Cline and Willie Nelson to contemporary stars like Nathan Carter.

The 'wee man from Strabane' as he is affectionately known, or 'Uncle Hugo' for the easy familiarity he has with his loyal audience, is also a talented singer and performer who was spot-

ted on an RTÉ Talent Show in the early 1970s and signed by the then fledgling Release Records which later spawned such stars as Philomena Begley, Ray Lynam and Eurovision star Johnny Logan. In 1971 he even had a number one hit in the Irish charts with the ballad Dear God wherein he sings to the Lord of not being worthy, "but please won't you hurry, dear God."

A stalwart on *BBC Radio Ulster* and *Radio Foyle*, where he has graced the airwaves for 25 years, he is also a man of Catholic faith and who credits faith, friends and family with not simply his musical and broadcasting success, but also in overcoming bankruptcy, a battle with alco-

holism, and standing firm against his demons to stay a source of solace for isolated listeners: "I think of that one person sitting at home on their own and I just want to make them happy. Maybe I'm a bit foolish on the air, but I just want to make people smile, to brighten their day in whatever small way that I can. I try to give them the best country music to listen to and a bit of company, even though I am sure I talk a lot of nonsense. Every day I get down on my knees and thank God that I'm still standing."

Duncan, 74, was born to his single mother 'wee Susie,' as he describes her, "always so dainty with size two shoes", in 1950, at a time when being born out of



**"As a man said to me once, I'm a sick Catholic. I asked him what he meant. He said, well, I only pray when there's something wrong with me. I prayed when I was in the grip of alcoholism"**

wedlock was still very much a source of social stigma in all parts of Catholic Ireland.

**"She shielded me from everything. She kept me and she reared me with dignity and with pride. I never wanted for anything"**

"Back then to be an unmarried mother was a very difficult situation and something that people talked about. I'm sure that behind her back she was called everything, and that she suffered privately and quietly. She shielded me from everything. She kept me and she reared me with dignity and with pride. I never wanted for anything. All our neighbours helped us. I was an altar boy, a choir boy and the nuns in the convent used to joke that one day I could be a bishop. Well, that was wide off the mark, to be sure, but

I was never made to feel anything other than completely loved."

He continues: "I have no idea what kind of struggles my mother faced in having me out of wedlock at that time. I regret that I never had that conversation with her. I was her son, her wee Hugh, as she called me. I never knew my father. We never talked about it. Those were different times. We lived at 27 Townsend Street, Strabane, her and I, and the community always looked out for us. My godmother lived three doors down and doted on me and made me cakes.

## Family

We had a family called the Campbells next door, a family of brothers and sisters next to us, and I was always in and out of people's houses as you did in those days. I was popular. I was happy. I was really spoiled. The only time I remember her being angry was when so many other boys from regular families were being put through for the 11-plus [equivalent to the Leaving Cert] and I wasn't and she

went to the parish priest to ask why not, but really, I probably didn't have the brains for it. But whatever negativity my mother faced she always brought me to Mass and I was very much raised to believe in God. I never have doubts about God. I have doubts about myself."

**"Duncan has an impressive number of albums under his belt, a passion for charity roadshows, a forensic knowledge of Irish country music and an army of listeners who tune in religiously to his shows"**

After working in a nylon factory on the cusp of adulthood, Hugo became immersed in the showband scene and eventually auditioned to be frontman of his own band, almost missing out on the job because all the frontmen tended to





**“Here I am about to turn 75 soon and still lucky enough to be on the BBC Northern Ireland schedule with an army of listeners who are like a second family to me. And I’m just a wee man from Strabane”**

be dashing six footers while Hugo, as he laughs, was five foot nothing and felt he didn't look the part. But a music promoter named Pio McCann emphasised his skills as a vocalist and performer – and lo and behold Hugo Duncan and the Tall Men was duly formed. They gigged and toured and Duncan has an impressive number of albums under his belt, a passion for charity roadshows, a forensic knowledge of Irish country music and an army of listeners who tune in religiously to his shows for the banter and the melodies and the uplift. He also still regularly tours and performs across Ireland and the UK.

#### Married

Duncan married Joan McGuigan in 1970 and within weeks of exchanging vows he lost his beloved mother. He thinks of her often and tears up while talking of the sacrifices that she made in order to raise him and of how she would feel about his recent letter from Buckingham Palace to announce that he will soon receive an MBE for services to music and to the community.

When Dear God topped the charts in 1971 he may not have been thinking of theological matters but the simple ballad wowed Catholic Ireland because it is a simple message of unworthiness before the Lord and a call for divine succour in the midst of life's trials and tribulations, from which none of us are spared.

“I was a practising

Catholic but as a twentysomething back then theological matters did not come into my mind at all. But thanks be to God, Dear God worked. We were touring, I was a professional singer. And then I became a professional alcoholic. That was a big struggle. My wife and my daughter Suzanne suffered a lot because of my struggles with alcohol. I turned to drink more and more as a social thing and, being part of the music scene, it was always so readily available to me. I didn't realise I had become so lost in drink until I was really bad. I would realise I was doing the wrong thing but every time go back to it and I couldn't stop. I was drunk every day until I realised everything that I stood to lose. But on December 28, 1983 I had my very last drink. I like to think that God played a part in that, in turning my life around. Thanks be to God and his Holy Mother that I have not touched a drop since.”

**“I go to Mass as often as I can and I credit God with the many blessings in my life, but I wouldn't necessarily sit down with a man and talk about religion”**

Hugo continues: “As a man said to me once, I'm a sick Catholic. I asked him

what he meant. He said, well, I only pray when there's something wrong with me. I prayed when I was in the grip of alcoholism. So, God must have been listening because things turned around for me. I go to Mass as often as I can and I credit God with the many blessings in my life, but I wouldn't necessarily sit down with a man and talk about religion. I see prayer as simply chatting to God.”

#### Radio

Duncan got into radio in the 1980s and producers immediately saw that he had an easy way of chatting to listeners, of bantering, choosing the right tracks for the right moment and very obviously being in possession of the gift of the gab, that most Irish of traits. His shows are unscripted, completely free form, all spontaneous craic, and he's a natural at creating an easy mood of bonhomie. Which is not to say that he always feels personally full of the joys of spring, but rather that as both a performer and a broadcaster he is wholly adept at putting his own personal problems to one side in order to lift others up, and surely this is always an act of Christian altruism, to seek to emanate and disseminate joy even when one feels personally low.

Hugo is happy-go-lucky, humble and full of gratitude for the many blessings that have been granted to him.

“Wee Susie was the greatest blessing I ever received, then my wife Joan



and my daughter Suzanne and my four grandchildren, Jake, Katie-Sue, Ellie-Mae, and Mollie-Jay. My wife and I courted for 18 months, were engaged for 18 months and have now been married for 55 years. Joan is a woman of strong faith who goes to Fatima and to Lourdes every year. “One of the worst things that I've been through in life was watching my daughter Suzanne go through bowel cancer in 2017 at the same time that I was declared bankrupt. My daughter had a two-year struggle. Her bravery inspired me. She overcame her illness and is now driving buses.

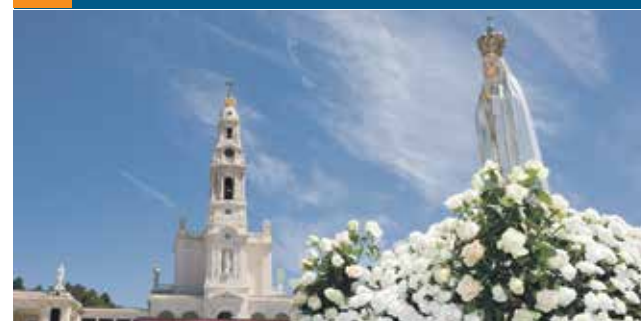
#### Bankrupt

“When I was declared bankrupt it was a dark time. It was on the front page of all the newspapers in Northern Ireland. But I got lots of calls from people supporting me, including from Daniel [O'Donnell] telling me not to give up, that the show and what I do is a great service to the community. And here I am about to turn 75 soon and still lucky enough to be on the BBC Northern Ireland schedule with an army of listeners who are like a second family to me. And I'm just a wee man from Strabane.

“God is good. I am grateful for so much.

“Everybody falls. Our Lord fell three times. Each time he got up again. That's what all of us need to do when we fall. Get up again.”

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# The enduring legacy of Flannery O'Connor at 100



Pedro Esteva

This year marks the 100th birthday of the legendary Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor. Her hometown of Milledgeville, Georgia, drew admirers from all over to take part in the festivities, which included a cake and a 'Dress Like Flannery' contest. Writers from all over came to her grave to place their pens, described Fr Damian Ference, Vicar for Evangelisation for the Diocese of Cleveland and author of *Understanding the Hillbilly Thomist*. He said he celebrated Mass at her home parish, Sacred Heart, in a conversation we had discussing O'Connor's enduring significance—both as an artist and in the realm of evangelisation. As the Church navigates this era of secularisation, he emphasised that her work is as vital as ever. Her centennial birthday provides an opportunity to reflect on how her life and work serve as a model for women, the faithful, and artists alike.

Fr Ference noted that Gen-Z is the first generation where more young women are leaving the Church than men—a concerning trend. He sees Flannery O'Connor as the perfect counterpoint to this decline. She exemplifies intellectual rigor, unwavering faith, and artistic excellence. She wrestled with how to be both a great artist and a faithful Catholic without compromising either. *A Prayer Journal* provides a glimpse into her struggles with faith, doubt, ambition, and suffering, demonstrating a deep interior life shaped by her relationship with God.

## Distrustful

Many young women, Fr Ference explained, remain spiritual but have become distrustful in the institutional Church which comes from a whole range of scandals and failings. O'Connor herself was not blind to the warts of a church made up by fallen people, yet she never wavered in her fidelity. Instead, she saw it as



Flannery O'Connor, seen in this 1962 photo, was born on the feast of the Annunciation. Her centennial was celebrated with socials, tours, author talks, live music, and a birthday event featuring vendors, games, and a look-alike contest. Photo: OSV News/AP, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Joe McTyre via PBS.

her responsibility to make it better. To this end, Fr Ference points to her as a prime model for evangelisation, not through conventional preaching but through her radical commitment, her deep and vibrant faith, and her storytelling.

**“If her stories put people off at first, it is because they demand a willingness to engage with suffering and the human condition in its rawest form”**

For some readers, O'Connor's fiction can shock or even repulse. A friend of mine once recommended her work to someone who later returned saying they hated it. Fr Ference offered some crucial insights into understanding her work. Primarily, her stories are not meant to be comfortable but transformative. Her work confronts readers with grace, sin, redemption, often through grotesque and violent means.

If her stories put people off at first, it is because they demand a willingness to engage with suffering and the human condition in its rawest form. Fr Ference gave

three key indicators that one is beginning to understand O'Connor.

1. You laugh. Her stories contain dark humour, and recognising the absurdity in them signals a deeper engagement.

2. You see yourself in a despised character. Just as Christ's parables reveal uncomfortable truths, O'Connor's characters hold up a mirror to the reader.

3. You leave the story more human than before. If her work deepens your self-awareness, your relationship with God, or your compassion for others, then you are reading her well.

## Realities

O'Connor's stories often conclude with shocking violence, a method she employed to awaken her readers to spiritual realities. As she says, “I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work.”

She rejected sentimentality and intellectualism in favour of hard truths. Like Simone Weil, she understood affliction—not as something to be avoided, but as a means of purification, drawing the soul toward God.

Though for her, it is never

violence for its own sake. Rather it is there to showcase the intensity and seriousness of the faith. Fr Ference also highlighted how O'Connor's writing aligns with the apophatic tradition, revealing where God is not in order to emphasise where He is. As she famously wrote, “To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.”

For Flannery O'Connor, writing was a discipline akin to prayer. She considered it a vocation, and she believed that a true vocation involves limitation—a paradox only an artist can fully understand. “Vocation implies limitation, but few people realise it who don't actually practice an art.”

**“The question then remains: what does this mean for human suffering, where things are not so quickly remedied?”**

O'Connor maintained that a Catholic writer's primary duty is to create great art; faith naturally infuses the work when the artist is serious about their faith. As she put it, “Not every Catholic novelist needs to be a



Attendees at the new Interpretive Centre at Andalusia Farm sang 'Happy Birthday' to Flannery at noon, followed by cake cutting featuring the signature peacock-feather motif. Photo: Kelly Hart.



Aspiring writers leave pens on O'Connor's grave to seek her blessing. Photo: Fr Damian Ference.

Catholic, but they do need to be a novelist.”

When asked about how Flannery O'Connor can help us in this Jubilee year of Hope, Fr Ference made it clear quoting from *Spes non confundit*, the declaration of the year of hope, that hope is linked with patience, a virtue which is lost in a world of instant communication, next day deliveries. The question then remains: what does this mean for human suffering, where things are not so quickly remedied?

For Flannery O'Connor, hope is not mere optimism but endurance. She understood that grace is often violent, that redemption is costly, and that the

world's brokenness can lead to transformation. She suffered from lupus for 14 years, lived in relative isolation, and faced criticism for her work from those who didn't understand it - yet she never abandoned her faith nor her writing. Hers is a hope which comes through the Cross from the Resurrection.

Flannery O'Connor is not an easy writer, but she is a necessary one. As Fr Ference highlights, reading her teaches us not only to be better readers but to be more human. As we celebrate her centennial, her legacy calls us to deeper faith, deeper art, and deeper engagement with the world around us.



# Notes in haste – March 2025

## Does loneliness affect your parish?

A strange thing happened to me last month: three of the people I used to visit on my First Friday calls all went to the same nursing home, within a few weeks. That meant that my call list in one of my church areas was instantly reduced to zero. The lazy side of me was delighted, but the other side pondered what this meant.

In the first case, the move to a nursing home made sense. This lady concerned had

been diagnosed with Alzheimers and her family, none of whom lived locally, were finding it hard to arrange carers to be with her, day and night. A move to a more secure facility made sense, and suited the lady in question also.

I am not sure that the same logic applies to the other two. I suspect that they were both suffering from some degree of loneliness and isolation. One of the other two, though in her 90s, was 'clear as a bell', able

to manage on her own, enjoying her independence, or so I thought. The other side of it was that her family, in their 40s and 50s, had moved on with their busy lives, so that she was mostly on her own. And I suppose she felt that isolation.

The third lady to whom I used to bring Communion was in a similar situation. Her family mainly lived far away and while they were very good for spending weekends with their mother, that still left five

long weekdays when she was alone. In the past, neighbours made up the slack, but in this full-employment economy, there are fewer people free to socialise than in the past. People who don't leave the house due to their circumstances feel this isolation. Nursing homes, though expensive, at least carry the promise of company, someone to talk to. It's a real challenge to Christian communities around the country, both in urban and rural areas like mine.

## Flowers in Lent – the economic argument

To be-flower or not to be-flower, that is the question! It's a Lenten question. The Missal makes clear that altars are to be bare in Lent, but Irish people feel that spring demands flowers. The flowers, banished for the bleak Ash Wednesday, creep back.

But of course, there are exceptions: Laetare (Mother's

Day) being one. St Patrick's Day is another. But, ask the Jesuitically-minded altar societies, why not St Joseph's Day, another solemnity. Or indeed the Annunciation. And where is the virtue in keeping the flowers purchased specially for these days slumming it in the sacristy. Pity the pastor who has to argue his way with such persuasive arguers!

## Could St Patrick's Day fall on a worse weekday?

St Patrick's Day really is a 'bummer', as the yanks say. This year it fell on the worst possible day for a priest in a parish, namely Monday. The feast requires a homily; it's not like the other holydays that have sunk without trace. Just like Christmas Day (the other holyday of obligation that's also a public holiday), it's a day that draws people to Mass, now more than ever. Part of our Irish Catholic identity, I suppose, something that means more than analysts seem to realise. Having become so well supported, more is

expected of its liturgy. But Lent leaves St Patrick out in the liturgical cold.

I found myself throwing together a few thoughts over breakfast that Monday morning, musing on Patrick's maritime links, reflecting on his early abduction and wondering if this meant he lived by the sea, as a number of parishioners in my parishes do. Musing is not quite homilising, I realise, but it had to do this year, next year I may do better: I'll have at least a day to prepare the Tuesday liturgy in 2026!

## A challenging baptism couple

I had one baptism in March. I had never seen the couple before, nor their child, and I expect I will not see them again for seven or eight years - unless some disaster befalls them, God forbid.

In that knowledge, I made the most of the ceremony and tried my best to impress on the couple that the raising of the child in the faith fell almost exclusively to them. Funny enough, the father seemed more

receptive than the mother; she was more caught up in the frivolities, but he seemed to take more careful notice of my suggestions. Let's hope and pray that good intentions turn to action in their years ahead.



## A Mother's Day puzzle for the Pastor

As ever, Mother's Day brought its annual conundrum: how to mark this occasion that means so much to people in the middle of Lent. Granted, the coincidence with Laetare Sunday allows Mother's Day flowers to adorn the altar, but there are limits to Lenten joy.

Add to that the beautiful but hard-to-adapt Gospel of the Prodigal Son, a story with no female character or anyone resembling a mother to be seen. My only inspiration was a critique I found of Rembrandt's

painting of the return of the prodigal, which informed me that the Loving Father in the painting evidently had two very different hands, one strong and firm, the other gentle and loving. The reflection I read suggested this loving parent was really a 'father-and-mother' to the erring son. This suggested to me that wherever one found love in the family, there is God – maybe a slightly obscure Mother's Day thought, but it seemed to work. That's 2025 – and 2028 etc – sorted!

## Do pastors go to the party?

I wonder if pastors attend post-Baptism receptions anymore? A few months ago, I celebrated a Baptism to which 70 or 80 guests were invited. All knew they were going for a meal in a local hostelry, but when everyone was loaded up in their cars, someone thought they

might also invite me.

Now I am always tempted by a free meal, but this Baptism had challenged me more than most. For some reason, the mother spent the whole ceremony singing out loud to the child, nervousness on her part I guessed, a previous bad experience with a

baptising priest maybe? Whatever the cause, I found myself trying to voice the prayers, while right next to me was a deranged singer of "Humpty dumpty" and other baptismal favourites. You've guessed it: even the free meal did not succeed in tempting me.

## Anonymous contributions welcome

As I've said before, I am extremely grateful to the editor for allowing me to submit these 'Notes in Haste' anonymously. Without anonymity, I

simply could not write them, or not as honestly as I do. I would risk offending those I work with and would risk rebellion, boycott and worse: the deprivation of dues! Perhaps there

are other pastors in Ireland who would like to share in this anonymous pulpit, in the safety accorded us by the Editor? If you would like to share your anonymous outpourings, write me

at [notesinhaste2025@gmail.com](mailto:notesinhaste2025@gmail.com) and I will share them here. Note well: I am a real pastor and I will know if they have the ring of truth – or not! Include a pseudonym.



# Out&About

## Smiles on a special day



**DUBLIN:** 5th and 6th class from St Joseph's Girls NS were recently Confirmed at Clonakilty Parish Church by Bishop Fintan Gavin.



**SLIGO:** Young adults from around the country recently went on retreat with the Franciscan brothers from Galway in Mullaghmore.



**CORK:** Cork Penny Dinners hosted a 'Holy Communion Fair' in Sacred Heart Church, Wilton Road on March 23, to guarantee families struggling will have all they need for their child's Confirmation.

### IN SHORT

#### Holy Communion fair helps children in need

Cork based charity Cork Penny Dinners hosted their 11th edition of the 'Holy Communion Fair' in Sacred Heart Church, Wilton Road on March 23, to guarantee families struggling will have all they need for their child's Confirmation.

They offered everything for free: dresses, suits, socks, underwear, accessories, prayer books, rosary beads and clothes for parents and siblings.

The parish hall was "transformed" to give the children and families the feeling they were in a regular shop, "with beautiful white backdrops and tables and tablecloths... We had some lovely flowers scattered around the place," said Caitríona Twomey, Penny Dinners

Trustees Volunteer Coordinator.

They not only had rails with dresses and suits for the children who are getting Confirmed, but also clothes, shoes and accessories for the parents and siblings. A volunteer hairdresser will do the children's and moms' hairs for the Communion.

"It was very emotional for [the families], and especially for the volunteers, when you see the mothers crying, the dads overcome with emotion and stuff like that. "I think it was the relief as well, that their child was able to get something that the child loved, that looked beautiful on the child... When they were struggling and couldn't afford it, when all of a sudden, they got it. It just made a huge difference to them," Ms Twomey said.

She said that after Mass, some Massgoers stopped by the hall for a cup of tea and chat

with the volunteers and parents and the children got a treat bag. "It's really geared towards keeping the Communion there special and alive in their memory for as long as they live."

Anyone who wishes to donate or volunteers for next year's fair can contact Ms Twomey over the phone on 085 1201742.

#### New principal appointed for Diocese of Clogher school

A new principle was appointed for the Diocese of Clogher's school St Michael's College in Enniskillen. Cathal O'Connor is a former pupil of the school and has been working in it for 22 years.

Mr O'Connor taught Religious Studies and was head of learning support before taking up the role of vice principal, a position he has held for eight years. He now takes on the role of principal following the departure of Mark Henry who worked in the school for over 30 years, including 10 years as principal.

"As a past pupil of St Michael's College, I am proud to lead a College with an inclusive Catholic ethos, focused on the needs and aspirations of our young people," the new principal said. "As principal it will be my privilege to head a dedicated and caring team of staff focused on high quality teaching, excellent pastoral care, opportunities for social and spiritual enrichment and extra-curricular pursuits that develop all the varied talents of our young people."



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If you have any stories, photos, or events you wish to be considered for publication, email a week in advance of publication



**DUBLIN:** Members of St Dominic's Catholic Society in DCU and DCU Chaplaincy went for a tour and meal at the Government buildings with Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin Donal Roche.



**KERRY:** Many parishioners of St John's Parish, Tralee gathered for a Parish Ministry Night on March 21. "A great bunch of people whose contribution to the work of the parish is really appreciated," the parish said.



**FERMANAGH:** Msgr. Peter O'Reilly with artist Barry McAdam unveiling a commemorative watercolour painting to celebrate St Michael's Parish Church's 150th anniversary.



**DERRY:** Dr Christine Ward of TOB Network UK and Fr David Marsden (pictured in front) recently led the workshop/retreat on Theology of the Body in Long Tower Church. Also pictured are (L/R) Fr Stephen Ward CC, Darinagh Boyle, Aras Cholmcille Tourist Engagement Coordinator, Charlene McDaid, Retreat Coordinator and Fr Gerard Mongan Adm.



**KILDARE:** Bro. Christopher Nkole OFM Cap recently graduated with a Master's Degree in International Development from Maynooth University.

## ANTRIM

Cullybackey Community Partnership is organising a 'Easter Festival' on April 12 from 1pm to 5pm in Cuningham Church hall car park. Come for egg hunt, music, craft fair and more. Free entry. All welcome.

## CAVAN

The Virginia Gospel Choir will perform a concert in Sacred Herat Church, Arva on April 12 at 8pm to fundraise for the conservation and restoration of the church. Special guests The Dreamers and Fr Jordan MacGabhann on the Uilleann Pipes and Flute. Doors open at 7.30. Tickets are €20.

## CORK

'Connect 6' faith gathering for young people aged 18-35 takes place on May 10 from 2pm to 7pm in the Cathedral of St Mary and St Anne. Guest speaker is Sr Mary Grance SV. Come for adoration, pizza, talk, confessions, Mass and more. Tickets are €10 and it includes food/refreshments.

## DERRY

Easter Craft Fair takes place in Greencastle Community Centre on April 12 from 12pm to 4pm. Tables are €20 and can be booked on 074 9381054.

## DONEGAL

Jubilee Mass for Healthcare Workers takes place in St Eunan's Cathedral, Letterkenny on April 4 at 8pm. This is a Mass of thanksgiving for doctors, nurses, care assistants, and all those who work in hospitals and nursing homes.

## DOWN

Magheralin Parish invites the youth of Dromore Diocese (13 to 20+ yrs) to celebrate the life of Carlo Acutis on April 13 from 2pm to 5pm at Dromantine Conference Centre. Join for workshop, testimony, pilgrimage, blessing with his Relic, and more. For more information contact Caitriona on 07979 725564.

## DUBLIN

The feast of divine mercy will be celebrated on Sunday, April 27 in St Vincent de

Paul Church in Marino with holy hour at 3pm during which time confessions will be heard, followed by holy mass at 4pm.

## GALWAY

'Come Holy Spirit Conference' is an evening of prayer, teaching and healing with international Catholic speaker and teacher Vickie Smith, a Third Order Benedictine of Divine Will. It takes place on April 10 from 7.30pm to 9.30pm in St John the Apostle Church, Knocknacarra.

## MAYO

Breakthrough Cancer Research invites you to climb Croagh Patrick on May 17 to help raise funds for people affected by cancer. A professional trained guide will provide support before and during the climb. To book a space in the climb email [edel@breakcancer.ie](mailto:edel@breakcancer.ie).

## SLIGO

'Afternoon with Priests & Religious' hosted by the Sisters of Life takes place on May 9 from 2pm to 4pm at the Clayton Hotel Sligo, Clarion Road. There will be two talks, Q&A and an opportunity to connect over tea/coffee. To register access [sistersoflife.org/event/visit-ireland/](https://sistersoflife.org/event/visit-ireland/)

## TIPPERARY

'Songs of Hope with James Kilbane' in St Cronan's Church, Roscrea, an event in support of church repairs takes place on April 4 at 8pm. Tickets are €20 and can be purchased by calling 087 382 5336. All welcome.

## WICKLOW

Fr Martin of St Brigid's Parish, Laragh will be holding the annual blessing of vehicles in the school carpark after 11am Mass on April 6.

Knockbride Jubilee Mission happens from April 5 to 8 in St Brigid's Parish, Laragh. This is a celebration of renewal of the Christian identity and faith led by Fr Lar Gallagher, Redemptorist. Sacraments, songs, history lectures, daily Mass and more.



# Why I want to remove the Oath to God in the constitution



If a person swears to God when he or she does not believe the Oath is devalued, for how can someone swear to God if they do not believe that God exists? Writes **Barry Ward**

**A**rticle 34.6.1° Bunreacht na hÉireann sets out the Oath that every judge, appointed under the Constitution, must take before assuming office. In English, the Oath reads as follows:

"In the presence of Almighty God, I do solemnly



and sincerely promise and declare that I will duly and faithfully and to the best of my knowledge and power execute the office [the person is undertaking] without fear or favour, affection or ill-will towards any man, and that I will uphold the Constitution and the laws. May God direct and sustain me."

This Oath is different in character to the Oath in the Irish language which refers to a judge acting, "gan eagla gan claonadh, gan bá gan drochaigne chun duine ar bith," thereby directly referring to the attitude of judge towards any person rather than any man.

## Amendment

I have introduced a Private Member's Bill in the Dáil to change this Judicial Oath of Office through amendment to the Constitution. The Bill will amend the Oath in two respects: the first being to change the English version to make it consistent with the Irish language version and therefore refer to a judge's attitude to any "person;" and the second to remove the reference to God in the Oath.

I have been much decried for my anti-Christianity, my anti-religiosity, my atheism, and my attempt to secularise Ireland through this move.

Many of the people have decried me, primarily online,

have done so because they didn't actually read what I said when introducing the Bill on Thursday March 20. I am a Christian and weekly church-goer. I do believe in God and the importance of religion and faith in modern Ireland. However, I also believe, therefore, that the Oath must honestly reflect the faith or otherwise of the person taking it.

If it is the case that a person is appointed to judicial office and then goes into the Supreme Court and takes the Oath in the presence of the Chief Justice and others, and swears to God when he or she does not believe in God, in my opinion the Oath is devalued, for how can someone swear to God if they do not believe that God exists?

In most other respects within our courts system, those who have to swear an Oath are given the opportunity to affirm in the alternative. Witnesses who appear in court to give evidence, jurors, before being impanelled as part of a jury, are offered the opportunity to choose an Oath that accords with their faith, be that Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish or

other, or to make an affirmation that does not reflect any faith. We recognise the importance of an Oath, but - it would be considered quite inappropriate for a person who does not believe in God to swear an Oath to God, as it would be a totally disingenuous gesture - but we do not afford the same facility or courtesy to those embarking on judicial office who do not believe in God.

## Secularise

My attempt to amend this Oath is not one to secularise Ireland but to establish the veracity and sincerity of any Oath a new Judge would take.

I am not saying that no judge believes in God, and I am not saying that every judge believes in God. I suspect, as with most of society, there are judges who believe and judges who do not believe. So, are we not therefore devaluing the importance and the honesty of a Judicial Oath of Office that requires them to essentially profess belief in God even if they do not have such faith?

Furthermore, are we suggesting that those who believe

that God does not exist, are incapable of holding judicial office or inappropriate people to sit as judges in our courts? I don't think anybody thinks that and therefore, is it not also reasonable to acknowledge the fact that not everybody is lucky enough to have faith in God and those who don't should not be required to say that they do?

The motive behind my Bill is, in fact, to acknowledge that we as a society are made up of lots of different creeds, and those of no creed, and, if we expect our judges to embark on their office in an honest forthright and sincere way, we should not be asking them to swear to a God they do not believe in.

The Bill only seeks to amend the Oath to remove the reference to God, but I would have no objection to a suggestion that an alternative affirmation be made available to those who do not wish to swear to God. I merely think that the Constitution should be as simple as possible and that is why I have put forward this proposal.

**i** Barry Ward is a Fine Gael TD for Dun Laoghaire constituency.

## Irish taxpayers are now funding abortions overseas as well as at home

**Eilís Mulroy**

**I**reland has a long history of giving generously to people in need overseas, reflecting the value our culture has placed on loving our neighbours both near and far. We can choose what good causes to support at individual, parish and church level. But for the funds donated overseas by the Irish Government, collected from us as taxpayers, how much do we know about where they go? How much say do we have, or should we have?

We are well aware that the Government's health policy has been expanded since the abortion referendum in 2018 to consider abortion as 'healthcare'. This turns on its head the life saving role of healthcare both in word and action, with massive amounts of resources invested in building up abortion services. Currently 18 of our 19 maternity hospitals are carrying out abortions alongside delivering babies.

Our tax pounds and euros have funded many life-saving and life-changing healthcare interventions in lower income countries down through the decades. But now, sadly, abortion

services are grouped together with valuable health initiatives under a wide-ranging umbrella called 'sexual and reproductive healthcare' or SRH.

## Aid

To say abortion is included within SRH is not speculation - it was confirmed recently by minister of state at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Neale Richmond, in answer to a parliamentary question by Deputy Carol Nolan. He gave a "comprehensive" list of areas recognised internationally as part of SRH. They include points that can be universally welcomed, such as antenatal, childbirth and postnatal care, and prevention of sexual violence. Along with these points are areas including contraception and infertility, and notably 'safe and effective abortion services'. Which of these areas are funded by Irish overseas aid?

The information available so far is limited, but our overseas aid most likely includes significant sums used to provide or promote abortion. In 2023, Micheál Martin as Tánaiste approved a new initiative on funding international development in the area of sexual and reproductive rights. The



new initiative, according to Ireland's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) annual report for 2023, covers a variety of goals ranging from combatting HIV and AIDS, to efforts to "reduce unmet need for family planning" and to "increase the number of countries that guarantee access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education." As we have seen, this area of healthcare is internationally considered to include abortion.

Mr Richmond, answering Deputy Nolan's recent question, told us no funding is earmarked for the promotion or provision of abortion. The minister's statement sounds less reassuring though when we see that 'earmarked' funding is one of several types of funding and has in previous

years been a minority of Irish Government funding for SRH.

**“IPPF has been a key player for decades in promoting expanded abortion policies”**

And who is this money funding? Since 2022, the Department of Foreign Affairs has provided €2.3 million to International Planned Parenthood Foundation (IPPF), revealed by Deputy Nolan's question. As a global abortion provider, IPPF has been a key player for decades in promoting expanded abortion policies around the world. The activities of

Planned Parenthood in the USA came under increased scrutiny and criticism since 2015, after undercover videos released by David Daleiden's Center for Medical Progress revealed abortion providers boasting about profiting from the sale of body parts from aborted babies. Meanwhile, the 2023 annual ODA report lists IPPF among Ireland's 'key partners' for overseas investment in sexual health and reproductive rights.

What overall scale of money is involved? The reply to a recent parliamentary question submitted by Ken O'Flynn TD confirmed that Ireland's overseas aid funding relating to "reproductive care" and family planning increased to approximately €7m per year in 2023-2024, up from €2 million to €4 million per year. For comparison, looking at government investment in the Irish health service, the National Maternity Strategy got €26 million from 2016-2022 (€3.7 million euro per year on average) for new development funding. The response to Mr O'Flynn claimed abortion is "not a central element" of the €7 million per year, which suggests that abortion is covered by some unspecified

amount of this very substantial funding.

## Healthcare

From what we have seen, it is clear that abortion is included, most likely, to the tune of millions of euro, in the initiatives funded by Irish overseas aid in recent years. The allocation alone of €2.3m to the IPPF from 2023 bears this out.

There is also the scandal of "ideological colonisation", raised by Obianuju Ekeocha, President of Culture of Life Africa, where Western governments have made their aid to African countries conditional on these countries agreeing to introduce abortion. It needs to be investigated whether our government has been associated with this additional outrage.

The Irish Government has shown beyond any doubt that they view abortion as healthcare while side-stepping any discussion on what that actually means. We should not hesitate to ask questions and shine a light on what they are likewise doing overseas, in our name and with our money.

**i** Eilís Mulroy is Chief Executive Officer of the Pro Life Campaign





# World Report

## IN BRIEF

### As Kansas Catholics pray, a Satanic group's 'black mass' turns violent, with arrests

● A Satanic group's attempted 'black mass' at the Kansas Statehouse on March 28 turned violent, leading to arrests. Across the street, Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City led hundreds in peaceful Eucharistic adoration at Assumption Church, located across the street from the Capitol. He urged Christians to pray for "mercy and grace" for themselves and for the Satanists engaged in mockery of God and their faith, encouraging them to be "close to Jesus."

During the event, Satanic Grotto founder Michael Stewart stomped on what he claimed was the Eucharist. A Catholic man heroically dove to recover and consume the fragments before Stewart violently kicked him. Video footage shows the brutal attack before officers intervened. Stewart and three others were arrested, including counterprotester Marcus Schroeder.

### Tragic earthquake hits war-torn Myanmar, with massive death toll and little aid

● A powerful 7.7 magnitude earthquake struck Myanmar's Mandalay-Sagaing region March 28, causing widespread destruction and a rising death toll. As of March 29, at least 1,000 people had died in Myanmar, with hundreds more missing. The death toll may surpass 10,000 according to US Geological Survey's estimates. In neighbouring Thailand, Bangkok city authorities said so far six people had been found dead, 26 injured and 47 were still missing, according to The Guardian.

The tremor, followed by a 6.4 magnitude aftershock, caused buildings to collapse, including a historic bridge in

the region. The earthquake's impact was felt across neighbouring countries, including Thailand and Bangladesh.

Pope Francis expressed his sorrow, offering prayers for the victims and emergency responders in Myanmar and Thailand. Meanwhile, relief efforts are hindered by Myanmar's ongoing civil war, with few resources reaching affected areas. Catholic churches in Mandalay and beyond were also damaged, with St Michael's Church among the hardest hit. In some regions, local communities are organising relief efforts as state response remains limited.

### Catholic Church in Germany falls below 20 million members

● For the first time, fewer than 20 million Catholics live in Germany, according to 2024 Church statistics from the German Bishops' Conference. Catholics now make up less than a quarter of the country's 83.6 million people, with only 6.6%—about 1.3 million—regularly attending Sunday Mass.

In 2024, over 321,000 people formally left the Church, compared to just 6,600 new members and readmissions. Baptisms fell to 116,000, while nearly 213,000 Catholics were buried.

Some dioceses, like Görlitz (14.4% attendance), maintain higher Mass participation, while Aachen and Trier report just 4.5%. The downward trend continues despite a slight slowdown, reflecting broader secularisation and demographic shifts in Germany.

### Pope Francis prays for victims of deadly wildfires in South Korea

● Pope Francis has expressed deep concern over the deadly wildfires in South Korea, which have claimed at least 28 lives and caused widespread damage. The fire, which began on March 22 in Uiseong, continues to spread uncontrollably across several regions, including Andong-si and Yeongdeok-gun. In response, the Diocese of Andong has called for prayers and financial support for victims, as entire villages and homes have been destroyed. On March 28, Pope Francis offered his condolences and prayers for the deceased, injured, and emergency workers. The wildfires, now considered the deadliest on record, have scorched over 35,000 hectares, displaced 37,000 people, and destroyed more than 300 buildings, including religious sites. The Diocese of Andong has launched an emergency committee to coordinate relief efforts and will observe a special prayer service on April 6 for those affected by the disaster.

# Pope Francis continues to lead despite illness

Despite his recent illness, Pope Francis remains an active leader of the Church, advocating for peace and reform much as he did during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even from his hospital bed, he has overseen key appointments, launched preparations for the 2028 Ecclesial Assembly, and issued repeated appeals for peace.

Five years ago, Pope Francis stood alone in an empty St. Peter's Square as the world entered lockdown. "We are all in the same boat," he declared. Today, recovering from a severe case of pneumonia that left him hospitalised for 38 days, he finds himself in another crisis—not a pandemic, but rising conflicts, rearmament, and growing poverty. Yet, his message remains the same: humanity must face these trials together with solidarity and compassion.

Despite his health struggles, Pope Francis continued guiding the Church. From his hospital bed, he condemned war's absurdity and consistently called for peace in Ukraine, Israel, Palestine, the Middle East, Myanmar, the DRC, and Sudan. He also spoke against the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, urging an immediate ceasefire and decisive international action.

In a message to Corriere



Pope Francis greets the faithful from the balcony of Rome's Gemelli hospital before returning to the Vatican on March 23, 2025, after 38 days of treatment in the hospital. Photo: CNS/Vatican Media.

della Sera, he warned of the power of words to divide or unite. "We must disarm words to disarm minds and disarm the Earth," he urged, criticising Europe's increasing militarisation and calling for renewed diplomacy. His advocacy for nonviolence echoes his long-standing commitment to global dialogue and reconciliation.

Although physically weakened, Pope Francis remained engaged in Church affairs, actively leading despite his illness. Over 38 days in the

hospital, he made 44 key appointments, including bishops, nuncios, and Vatican officials. He also signed significant documents, such as establishing a commission to support Vatican projects through donations.

Looking to the Church's future, he initiated a three-year preparation process for the 2028 Ecclesial Assembly, seeking to continue reform without requiring another Synod. His emphasis on long-term planning highlights his dedication to fos-

tering a Church that remains both spiritually vibrant and socially engaged.

The Pope has been a steady hand in turbulent times. Even amid personal illness and global instability, Pope Francis has remained a steadfast presence for the Church. His leadership has not wavered, proving that even in isolation, the Pope is never absent—his voice and mission persist, guiding the faithful through uncertain times with faith, hope, and unwavering moral clarity.

## Lebanon launches its own pilgrimage trails inspired by the Camino de Santiago

Lebanon will soon have its own 'camino,' according to the Association of Pilgrimages in Lebanon (APL). *Caminos Lebanon*, unveiled on March 28 in Bkerké, aims to revitalise Christian religious tourism through a network of pilgrimage routes connecting the country's historic and spiritual sites.

The initiative, endorsed by Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Bechara Boutros al-Rahi and Tourism Minister Laura Khazen

Lahoud, features four distinct trail types: Religious Mountain Trails following saints' paths, Cross Trails linking pilgrimage sites, Thematic Trails tracing biblical events, and Cultural Religious Trails showcasing Lebanon's diverse heritage.

The APL has been developing this project since 2009, with the blessing of the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East. A booklet detailing 24 shrines along the trails has been published in Arabic, with

hopes for an English translation.

Inspired by Spain's Camino de Santiago, the initiative introduces a 'pilgrim's passport' system and highlights Lebanon's religious diversity, with over 6,000 Christian and Muslim landmarks. "These paths are trails of faith and holiness," said Cardinal al-Rahi. *Caminos Lebanon* invites pilgrims and tourists to experience Lebanon's rich spiritual and cultural legacy firsthand.

## Survey data shows children bring 'high levels of happiness' to everyday activities

A recent analysis of U.S. survey data found that children bring 'high levels of happiness' to activities like mealtimes, socialising, and traveling.

Ken Burchfiel of the Institute for Family Studies analysed American Time Use Survey (ATUS) data, showing

that everyday activities are more enjoyable when children are present. He noted that a 2013 *Time* article glamorising the 'child-free life' is contradicted by data indicating peak happiness and meaningfulness occur with children.

Survey results showed 44%

of respondents were happiest when children were involved, compared to 37% with a spouse and 19% alone. Meaningfulness was also highest with children (56%).

While Burchfiel acknowledged factors like marriage and religion may influence well-being, he argued the

findings challenge the 'child-free' movement and may encourage those hesitant about parenthood.

The study comes amid record-low fertility rates worldwide, with declining marriage rates contributing to delayed childbirth and population decline.



# Letter from Syria

## The wonder of Easter in the Holy Land



Dr Declan Hayes

**W**hen the late Pope John Paul ascended to the Papacy, he said that Europe must breathe through its two lungs, the tradition of the Western Roman rite and that of the Eastern Orthodox rite as well. Although I could not agree with him more, I would add the 50 million members of the Orient Orthodox Church to that. When one sees all three of these sing in unison, as I have in Jerusalem and in Syria, it is a beautiful sight one never forgets.

The entry of the Latin (Roman Catholic) Patriarch into Bethlehem at Christmas is a sight to behold and he has hordes of marching bands, young girls in traditional costumes and enough mini Santa Clauses to fill the North Pole ten times over to greet him. Though Bethlehem and Jerusalem have their attractions, the smaller ceremonies in Ramallah and Taybeh, the last Christian village on the West Bank, more capture Christianity's perennial Levantine refrain and it is no wonder their people have such a deep-rooted affection for their homeland.

Although Christians are now much thinner on the ground than they formerly were, the various churches devote huge resources to keep alive Pope Francis' wish that the Christian candle of hope will continue to burn brightly in the lands that gave our faith its birth. This is not an easy thing to do as the little Christian children I spoke to in Ramallah and Taybeh see their future not in their homeland but in places like Chile, which has a significant Palestinian Christian diaspora.

### Congregations

Moving northwards to Syria, we see the various congregations, if not being systematically exterminated, at least being left in no doubt about the perilous position they now occupy. Back in 2014, I attended Palm Sunday High Mass in Damascus' packed-to-the-rafters Melkite Cathedral, where Patriarch Laham was surrounded by

**“When the great apostle St Paul had his Damascene moment, he said he could not describe Heaven's endless wonders, wonders I saw in a Palestinian baby's eyes as she glanced lovingly up at her mother in Yarmouk refugee camp as incoming fire rained in on us”**



Convent of Our Lady of Saidnaya, Saidnaya, Syria. Photo: Bernard Gagnon.

gaggles of little angels and where young, suited and booted couples celebrated their religion, just as their ancestors before them did since the time of St Paul.

Although Damascus is famous for St Paul's conversion and for being the reputed resting place of John the Baptist, its beating heart is these Melkites, Assyrians and other Christians carrying on their ancestors' traditions in the most devoutly beautiful of ways.

**“Just as others have said that they never felt closer to the divine than when they were in Maaloula”**

Much the same applies in Saidnaya, which lies 27 km north of Damascus and which is home to a gigantic Orthodox monastery, which was originally founded by Justinian in the early sixth century

and where I billeted during some pretty intense and indiscriminate shelling by Syria's new rulers.

What particularly struck me about that town was one little girl, who carried an icon of the Virgin Mary aloft on her little arms for the whole 4 km of the procession, and a tiny little boy, who played his toy drum alongside the bigger drummers, who made the town shake with their own percussion instruments. It was to protect their simple way of life and those simple traditions that scores of Saidnaya's finest lost their lives and, being in the Assyrian monastery as their relatives from all creeds were honoured would melt the hardest of hearts.

### Nuns

At the time, the nuns were also giving refuge to a large number of children from nearby Maaloula, which had fallen to the terrorists. Just as others have said that they never felt closer to the divine than when they were in Maaloula, so have I also to concur. I first entered that fabled city with Syria's Patriarchs and other Christian leaders in the afternoon of Easter Sunday 2014, just as the Syrian Arab Army had wrest back control of it and I was on that night's news bulletins saying that, just as Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday, so had the Syrian Army allowed its native Christians to again take root in

Maaloula, where Jesus' own Aramaic is the lingua franca, on that same Easter Sunday.

**“Maaloula, like the rest of Christian, civilised Syria, has fallen and most likely will never rise again in our time, that is no reason to abandon it or the majesty it stands for”**

Though I visited Maaloula many times since, to hear the locals sing the Our Father and other hymns and prayers in Aramaic is a blessing that can never be forgotten even if, as things stand, it may never now be repeated. Though Maaloula, like the rest of Christian, civilised Syria, has fallen and most likely will never rise again in our time, that is no reason to abandon it or the majesty it stands for.

When I first hit Damascus, my Assyrian friend accompanying me pointed out its various landmarks and his tone made it obvious just how much he was in love with that most ancient of cities and all it stands for. Muslim folklore has it that, when Muhammad reached Damascus, he refused to enter it because, so he said, he only wanted to enter Paradise once. When the

great apostle St Paul had his Damascene moment, he said he could not describe Heaven's endless wonders, wonders I saw in a Palestinian baby's eyes as she glanced lovingly up at her mother in Yarmouk refugee camp as incoming fire rained in on us.

Isaiah 17:1 tells us that Damascus will fall and that it will be a heap of ruins. Perhaps it will and its cathedrals will lose their majesty as well as their vibrant flocks. Perhaps Maaloula will never again resonate with those hymns in the language Jesus spoke and perhaps Damascene babies will no longer smile lovingly up at their mothers and Assyrian children will no longer make their First Communion where their ancestors have made them from time immemorial.

### Shame

Though any and all of that would be a great shame, it would be a much bigger shame if we sit by and let it happen. Although the Catholic Hierarchy will make their appropriate appeals this Easter, something much more fundamental is needed than that. We must, as Pope John Paul says, use both our lungs and those of the Orient Orthodox Churches as well to breathe in and savour everything, like the Christianity of the Levant, that is good in this world and work firstly for its preservation and then for its revival.



# Your Faith

The Irish Catholic, April 3, 2025

**Penance -  
What's the  
point?**

Jason Conroy

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## Second chances and new beginnings

Tapestry: The Resurrection by workshop of Pieter van Aelst

**“Y**ou only live twice. Once when you are born and once when you look death in the face,” said Ian Fleming.

Jesus raised Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-43), the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17), and Lazarus (John 11:38-43). These acts restored them to earthly life. In contrast, Christ's resurrection was not a return to mortal life but an expansion of human existence into a new dimension, opening the way to eternal life and communion with God. Pope Benedict XVI, in *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, contrasts the raising of Lazarus with Christ's resurrection. Lazarus returns to earthly life, but Jesus' resurrection is an “evolutionary leap” for humanity into a new existence.

The Gospel account of the raising of Lazarus, proclaimed during Paschiontide, foreshadows Christ's own resurrection. St Thomas Aquinas highlights three profound effects of Christ's resurrection: it brings about our bodily resurrection by divine power (*Summa Theologica* III q. 56 a.1), enables our spiritual resurrection from sin to grace (*ST* III q. 56 a.2), and inaugurates the new creation. Resurrection is not only about restored physical life but also about the ongoing transformation of the human soul.

### Reflecting

Another Gospel text reflecting this theme is the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The father's words, “This son of mine was dead and has come back to life,” reveal that conversion is a kind of resurrection. Similarly, John 8:1-11,



**The call to resurrection goes beyond physical revival; it's about embracing transformation, says Fr Barry White**

presents another moment of resurrection. This scene unfolds at dawn, as Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives (John 8:1), subtly anticipating Easter morning, when the empty tomb is discovered at first light. The woman caught in adultery faces a death sentence under Mosaic Law (Leviticus 20:10), but Jesus, in his mercy, does not condemn her. Instead, he offers her a new beginning: “Go, and do not sin anymore” (John 8:11). Her life and dignity are restored - resurrected.

John McKenna's *Once We Sang Like Other Men* reimagines the story of Lazarus in a striking way. Instead of showing him as a man grateful for a second chance, McKenna presents “Laz” as someone who struggles to change. His sister Martha voices her frustration: “All she could talk about was how Laz hadn't really appreciated the second chance, how he'd been drinking too much and had fallen and broken his hip, how he didn't seem to have any real gratitude for the chance he'd been given and how anyone else would have taken the opportunity to make something of themselves.” Unlike the Lazarus in the Gospel, who represents transformation, McKenna's ‘Laz’ falls

back into old habits, unable - or unwilling - to start fresh. His story raises a question: Do we truly want freedom, or do we cling to what's familiar, even if it holds us back?

### Resurrection

Sylvia Plath's poem *Lady Lazarus* offers another unsettling take on resurrection. Here, the speaker sees death as a performance, something she returns to again and again: “Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well.” Instead of a new beginning, resurrection becomes an endless loop, without real change or redemption. Like McKenna's “Laz”, she is trapped in self-destruction. Both works remind us that a second chance doesn't automatically lead to transformation. True renewal isn't just about getting another opportunity - it requires the courage to embrace change. But there is hope. Christ doesn't just bring us back to life; he calls us to live fully. The question is: will we answer his call?

In *Come Forth: The Raising of Lazarus and the Promise of Jesus's Greatest Miracle*, Fr James Martin, SJ, explores a fascinating idea: Could Lazarus - the man Jesus raised from

the dead - also be the mysterious “Beloved Disciple” in John's Gospel? Traditionally, the Beloved Disciple has been identified as John, one of the Twelve Apostles, but some scholars propose a different possibility.

The Beloved Disciple is mentioned only after the story of the Raising of Lazarus is recounted in John 11, as if that story was the Beloved Disciple's introduction to the narrative. John 11:3 describes Lazarus as “the one whom Jesus loves,” a phrase closely linked to the Beloved Disciple. After his resurrection, Lazarus shares a meal with Jesus (John 12:2), showing their deep connection. Later, at the Last Supper, the Beloved Disciple is described as reclining beside Jesus (John 13:23), a position of honour. Some scholars, like Mark Stibbe, suggest that if Lazarus had been hosting the meal, it would make sense for him to sit next to Jesus.

Another intriguing link appears in the resurrection accounts. When Jesus calls Lazarus from the tomb (John 11:44), he emerges wrapped in burial cloths, needing others to unbind him. In contrast, when the Beloved Disciple enters Jesus' empty tomb on Easter morning, he sees the burial cloths left behind, including a head covering (John 20:7). The head-covering (soudarion) in John 11:44, which still binds Lazarus in death, contrasts with the neatly folded head-covering (soudarion) in John 20:7, signifying that while Lazarus was brought back to mortal life, Jesus, in his resurrection, has fully and trium-

phantly conquered death. Fr James Martin suggests that the Beloved Disciple immediately believed in Jesus' resurrection (John 20:8) because he had experienced something similar—except, unlike Jesus, he had needed others to free him.

This theory remains debated. Scholars like Ben Witherington and Mark Stibbe support it, while others, such as Raymond Brown and John Meier, argue against it. Tradition still holds that the Beloved Disciple is the writer of John's Gospel. Regardless of his identity, the Beloved Disciple represents all those whom Jesus loves and calls to new life.

### Life

Human life is filled with moments of death—times of despair, anxiety, sin, and fear that entomb us. These are the tombs of the soul, places where darkness reigns. Yet God continually offers second chances—opportunities for renewal and freedom. But human nature, fragile and fearful, often drifts back to the tomb, clinging to what is known, even if it is a place of suffering. The challenge is not merely to rise but to step fully into the light of new life. Christ calls, as he called Lazarus. The call to resurrection goes beyond just physical revival; it's about embracing transformation in our daily lives. Christ invites us to step out of our tombs, leaving behind the shadows of sin and despair. By forgiving others, engaging in prayer, experiencing community, and serving others, we can find hope, healing, and renewal. The question is: Will we choose to step into the light?



# Hosanna - Or did He make a mistake?



The belief that we are created in the image of God does not mean that he has brown hair, blue eyes, or the body of a rugby player. It is the ability to reason, writes **Peter Kasko**

**W**e are creatures of habit, and as such, we sometimes operate on autopilot. What I mean is, we might be devout in saying our prayers or the rosary daily, yet we might still hate our neighbour, maybe for a reason we have long forgotten. Or we attend Mass every day but have a grudge so deep with our parents or siblings that reconciliation seems impossible. Finally, we all take part in welcoming Jesus with open hands, shouting: 'Hosanna, Son of David!' Yet, with the very same breath, less than a week later, we join with the 'mob', clamouring to cry out, 'Crucify Him'. The louder, the better. We must acknowledge that, at some point in our lives, we have been part of both the welcoming and jeering crowds. At other times, we are like the scared apostles who ran away, or the 'Peters' who denied Him, or the soldiers who nailed Jesus to the cross. These examples lead to one conclusion: we might be broken and sinful but that is not our identity.

## Weakness

The weakness that we have inherited through original sin is supernatural in nature and, as such, needs a supernatural means of healing. "For God so loved this world, that he gave His only Son," (John 3, 16). Looking at the time that has passed and the world around us, one might ask: did God make a mistake? The plan of salvation, (as theology understands it) does not have a simple one- or two-line explanation. It is a mystery for a reason. And yet, we all understand the answer to be rather simple: the answer is love. And the purest form of love is sacrificial. What does that mean? The apostle Paul sums it up precisely when he says to Galatians that "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith

in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." Clearly, a convert like Paul must have been hit hard to make a U-turn of such proportions in his life. What do I need to encounter to get a conversion like that? Even cradle Catholics can go through a conversion in the spiritual sense – whether through enlightenment, insight, or simply being deeply touched by an experience.

Rest assured; God makes no mistakes. The few examples in the Bible where we read of God either regretting or repenting do not mean that God is imperfect. Rather, we understand it as God's way of expressing his thoughts and responding to human actions, our actions, in a way that is understandable to us. The belief that we are created in the image of God does not mean that he has brown hair, blue eyes, or the body of a rugby player. It is the ability to reason, to think rationally. The likeness to God is in the ability to know, to be aware, perceive or reason and to pass judgment.

**“The true God is not one of many beings in the world He created. God is outside of this ‘box of time and space’ - He is the creator of that box”**

Here, we can easily fall into a common mistake. Bishop Barron succinctly explains that in the modern day we have a deep confusion as to who God is. He says that we may be thinking of God as “the highest being” among many others. As such, we see God as thinking and acting like we do and expecting Him to act or react in the way we easily comprehend. However, this could not be further from the truth. The true God is not one of many beings in the world He created. God is outside of this ‘box of time and space’ - He is the creator of that box. Once we accept that God operates outside of our human norms, we can easily understand that for God to communicate with us, God needs to lower Himself to our level. A human analogy would be an adult speaking to a child, carefully choosing their words; otherwise, the message may be lost.

So, what does God really mean when He claims to regret or repent? Simply put, God is responding to the choices of people, choices you and I are presented with, and expressing His sorrow over the consequences of our decisions, our ‘rebellion’.



Painting of Our Lady and Jesus, Stresa, Piedmont, Italy.  
Photo: Mikita Yo via Pexels.

In the book of Samuel, Saul had a choice to make, and he decided to rebel against God. Similarly, we find ourselves in everyday situations where we choose sin over the infinite love of God. Here, God's sorrow is over sin and that we have chosen to stray away from him, considering his ever present and constant love and justice (James 1, 17).

## Lent

As I write this, we are approaching the fourth Sunday of Lent. Sometimes known as *Laetare* Sunday, it is one of only two times in the liturgical year when the Church uses rose (pink) as a liturgical colour (the other being *Gaudete* Sunday during the Advent). The name is derived from the opening words of a hymn from Isaiah 66, 10: "*Laetare O Jerusalem, or Rejoice! Jerusalem!*" We, as the pilgrim Church on Earth,

are called to 'Rejoice!' even in the Lenten period leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. But what is there to 'be happy about'?

The final chapter of the book of Isaiah was delivered after the Babylonian exile, and after the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. The prophet is inviting everybody, native and sojourner alike, to celebrate the return of the nation, to celebrate the freedom gained from captivity.

For us, in the context of *Laetare* Sunday, we are invited to celebrate the paschal mystery in its entirety – the Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. What a beautiful image! This is the means of supernatural healing, the answer to both original sin and our personal sins, made possible through the saving work of the Son of God. God makes no mistakes.

The Christian message is a clear message of Hope. During this Lent we are all invited to search for the meaning of this word. The Gospel passage for *Laetare* Sunday, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is one such example, and it is overflowing with hope. God invites us all back to Him, no matter our circumstances or how deeply we have fallen into sin. He awaits us with open arms and an open heart, overflowing with love and compassion. To use the words of Luke in the Gospel: "Son, you are always with me." And THAT is our identity – beloved sons and daughters of our heavenly Father.

**i** Peter Kasko is a core team member of Living Water prayer group, which meets every Wednesday at 7:15pm in St Teresa's Church, Clarendon Street, Dublin, and has a passion for Theology and Patristics.



# Penance - What's the point?



Jason Conroy

**W**hat's the point of all these penances? Well, in fact, they're pointless - on their own, that is! With faith, however, all our Lent penances acquire a special power. Why do Christians fast? The name gives it away: we fast because Christ fasted. When you fast with faith, you are really, spiritually with Christ in the desert. John Henry Newman, in a sermon on Lent, speaks of how, alone, we are as powerless as water or bread, but that, just as these mundane things become supernatural in the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist,

so our penances become supernaturally powerful when we do them 'in Christ' - that is, with Jesus in view as our goal, asking Him to make our fasting His own, and His fasting our own.

**“Lent is sometimes called the springtime of souls, because it's a fresh start for both the plants and ourselves”**

Penances also withdraw us from the world to some extent. They had a real brain-wave during the Middle Ages: since the entire population was Catholic, they went ahead and banned, not only sports hunting and theatre plays, but also lawsuits during Lent, and even wars! The purpose was to give people time to reflect - Lent is, after all, supposed to be something like an extended retreat. Jesus' 40 days of fast-

ing were foreshadowed by the 40 days of prayer and fasting that Moses and Elijah did in the Old Testament - resulting in both cases in a decisive meeting with God on the holy mountain. Experience shows that even in modern times something similarly dramatic happens to us, if we take the much-needed break from busyness, step back, and turn to God. We can see how beneficial this is by looking at how many people seem to have had spiritual awakenings during the coronavirus lockdown, when they were forced to sit still. For some, like for Moses and Elijah, the resulting meeting with God changed the whole course of their life.

Again, all our penitential acts on their own are pointless without 'interior penance' - that is, we must do it for the right motive, out of love for God. If you love someone, you're willing to change for them - think how in a relationship you put the other's preferences before your own. Penance is the virtue of being willing to change. Newman said, "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often"; and John Paul II's message for us people of Ireland, still written on the plaque by the papal cross, was: "May you convert every day" - this means starting all over again, and turning to Christ on the inside as if it was for the first time, putting your past yet again behind you, and quitting all the little (or big!) sins that drag you down. Lent is sometimes called the springtime of souls, because it's a fresh start for both the plants and ourselves.

## Habits

So, you can look at Lent as a time to build habits which you'll keep even after Easter - not just for self-improvement, but habits which make you live more closely with the person you live with - ie. God! For example, getting up a bit earlier to spend some time with your loved one before work - that's prayer! Or quitting those little habits that annoy them- aka. your sins!

So, true penance is about love. If we love someone, we're pained when we realise we've done them an offence. Our own penances, Catherine of Siena says, have "infinite merit" when we do them with "infinite displeasure" for sins committed and sorrow towards God. We can do this, though, not just for our own sins but even for another person's too, so that our prayers 'constrain God', and He starts acting



The Israelites gathering Manna in the desert, Peter Paul Rubens

**“Again, all our penitential acts on their own are pointless without ‘interior penance’ - that is, we must do it for the right motive, out of love for God”**

**G**od be with the days of black tea with bread and dripping! Today, almost no religious group fasts less than Catholics. More and more research shows that fasting has big health benefits, from reducing the effects of aging to combatting cancer! But the spiritual benefits are even better - yet another example that what's good for your soul turns out to be good for your body too. In earlier times, Christians fasted quite impressively for Lent, so perhaps it's high time we rediscovered some of those big penances of yesteryear, the kind our great grandparents and their great grandparents did, and which Eastern Orthodox Christians still carry out to this day!

For starters, in the good old days, on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday you would do a 'black fast', which quite simply means eating nothing at all for the whole day, and drink-

ing nothing too. I can tell you, a pint of water never tasted so good as after one of these!

But this was only the beginning: during Lent, every day was a fast day! At first, there was no food eaten until 3pm, the time of Christ's death on the cross, but this was later shortened to 12pm for the sake of monks doing manual labour; after that, you had one small snack or 'collation' before bed to look forward to. No animal meats or fats, no eggs, no dairy products were allowed - even on Sundays! As for drinks, the menu consisted of water and watery beer, and later tea and coffee too - but no milk or sugar. It was a diet of bread and vegetables - and no vegetables during Holy Week. To round it all off, you'd finish your marathon with a good long fast from Holy Thursday evening until the Easter Vigil (which used to be as early as noon on Holy Saturday). God be with the days!

quite forthrightly in that person's life to undo their sins and heal their wounds. If someone you love is going in a bad direction, Lent is a good time to do penance for them in the trust that God will intervene in their life because of what you do now. In fact, offering up your penances for someone you care about makes the penance a lot easier to do too!

**“It's not too late to be daring and take up one of these, offering it to God for someone we love”**

So, with only two full weeks before Easter, what can we do? Like a race, the best time to put in our biggest effort is near the end.

**“If you love someone, you're willing to change for them - think how in a relationship you put the other's preferences before your own. Penance is the virtue of being willing to change. Newman said, ‘To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often’”**

St Josemaria says that penance is to be found in little everyday efforts - accepting inconveniences cheerfully, sticking to your timetable of work and prayer, being very kind to people you find annoying, and the like. For one year, my penance was to be cheerful, and that unsurprisingly turned out to be a very enjoyable Lent. Another possibility is the 'tech fast' - one thing I've learned this year is just how difficult everyone finds it to give up YouTube! Lots of people also turn their phone screen to

colourless 'greyscale' so that it becomes less addictive, and I've found this helpful too. But lest you think that the 'big penances' of the good old days are dead and gone, take a look at the 'Exodus 90' challenge, featuring the iconic 'cold showers for Lent' penance, the most feared penance of all.

So for the final sprint of Lent, especially for Holy Week, it's not too late to be daring and take up one of these, offering it to God for someone we love - God won't let it go to waste!



# Is Software the new hardware?

Photo: CNS/Lola Gomez.



Rohith Kinattukara

**M**y first ever article for *The Irish Catholic* was regarding the new Apple intelligence and the future of AI. I got one thing right and one thing wrong. Apple intelligence has been a total disaster, from different features being laughable because of glitches to the much awaited 'new and smarter Siri' being pushed back till 2027, what could go wrong did go wrong for the trillion-dollar big tech company. What I did get right however, was the push for AI and software developments advancing to a pace even they can't comprehend.

From Open AI's ChatGPT releasing new models every other month to compete with China's DeepSeek AI, consumers have a lot to choose from to get help from. All this clatter of AI news articles and YouTube videos scattered around my feed got me thinking, is this all exciting? Are new technological releases dare I say, boring?

## Conclusion

The conclusion I came up with is yes, they are. Companies have now started to hide their laziness behind the term 'AI' highlighted on their feature list. Samsung is a great example for this. Their latest phone launch which was the s25 series was a snooze fest to say the least, as the whole event was just mumbling about their AI features. Did the phone have any hardware update? No. They shamelessly launched last year's phone, slapped some software tweaks and called it a day. Apple does the same, with every iteration just being boring as the last, and its showing in its sale figures.

Consumers want to show off their latest purchase, they want to themselves feel like they have gotten something out of this world, but sadly it's not the case. I remember there was a time where everyone, including tech nerds like me would wait for the latest iPhone or Samsung phone. The battle for new design, cameras, faster chipsets (Apple still innovates here), and till this date I will never forget how Steve Jobs unveiled the MacBook Air by taking it out from an envelope. People loved and still love it; it's simple consumer psychology. Buying a new product should feel like a new product and not look like the previous 10 products. Yes, the software experience might be interesting, but that has also started to become dated.

**“The Catholic Church has started to use technology in many ways such as Virtual and Augmented Reality to showcase different artefacts, different chatbots and a famous experiment done in Switzerland, AI Jesus”**

Artificial Intelligence on smartphones is a great symphony, with different tools available for each problem you face daily. With voice assistance (not you Siri) being more human like as possible, it is literally like asking help from a friend. How sustainable is all this though? Not many people know the dangerous these big data centres have on the environment, with water wastage and e-wastage being the top contenders. The misuse of AI in many form factors is another dangerous trend that has been seeing around the world, and it is something that needs to be taken into consideration.

I have mentioned this before, if educational institutions keep denying the helpful tool AI is and train students from a young age, it is more likely going to be misused in a horrible way. Priests could start talking about different technologies and how they can be such an excellent tool for everyone to the younger generation, and it will be great for young people to listen and understand. The Catholic Church has started to use technology in many ways such as Virtual and Augmented Reality to showcase different artefacts, different chatbots and a famous experiment done in Switzerland, AI Jesus.

## New

Consumers want something new. Retro or nostalgia only usually works for fashion brands that have the audience for it. What smartphone companies are doing is not innovation, but recycling for the sake of it. With these devices being more expensive by the minute, one can ask, should companies start releasing one phone every other year? Well, I laugh while writing this, knowing that Apple alone has 5 different phones in their latest 16 line-up, priced ridiculously but also a clever strategy to make consumers eye for the most expensive one.

Small smartphone manufactures are the only hope, one being a UK based company called 'Nothing'. Yes, it is the real name, and they make excellent, phones with excellent prices, and beautiful and modern designs. Nokia was pompous when they had stiff competition, and they said no one can throw them down, look what happened to them. I hope that in the future, we see more real innovations that can help and benefit us as humans, because innovation never dies, and it should never. God Bless!

**i** Rohith Kinattukara is a Catholic student at Griffith College Dublin studying MSc in Procurement and Supply Chain Management who loves to write and breathes tech.

## Questions of Faith?

Jenna Marie Cooper

### Is spiritual communion the same as sacramental Communion?

**Q: Some people have said a spiritual communion is the same as a sacramental Communion when one has a sincere desire and cannot receive otherwise. If this is so, why do we say, “Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart.” Would it count in the case of making a plenary indulgence?**

**A:** While a spiritual communion might be a praiseworthy aid to one's spiritual life, it is not the same thing as a physical, sacramental Communion.

For those who may be unfamiliar with the practice, a 'spiritual communion' is a prayer expressing one's desire for deep closeness with Jesus, particularly in situations where it is not possible to receive Communion sacramentally. Making a spiritual communion can be devoutly helpful for many Catholics and can certainly be an occasion for receiving God's grace.

But this does not mean that the Church considers spiritual communion and sacramental Communion to be exactly the same or interchangeable. And as you note, this is evident in the very wording of many common prayers for spiritual communion. For example, if a spiritual communion was identical to a sacramental Communion, clearly, we would not be asking Jesus to come “at least spiritually” into our hearts.

One very rough analogy might be talking with our loved ones over the phone or a video call versus being with them in person. Phone calls can be a great way to maintain a relationship with friends or family we cannot see very often, but nothing is quite the same as meeting face-to-face.

Because a spiritual communion is different from a sacramental Communion, normally it would not fulfil the requirements for obtaining an indulgence.

For reference, Canon 992 of the Code of Canon Law describes indulgences as: “the remission in the sight of God of the temporal punishment due for sins, the guilt of which has already been forgiven. A member of Christ's faithful who is properly disposed and who fulfils certain specific conditions, may gain an indulgence by the help of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, authoritatively dispenses and applies the treasury of the merits of Christ and the Saints.”

Or in other words, the Church uses her authority to “bind and loose” (see Mt 18:18) to apply merits and virtues ‘stored up’ by those in Heaven towards our own sanctification or the sanctification of souls in purgatory.

Typically, an indulgence is attached to some pious act, such as making a pilgrimage or doing a work of charity. But to earn the indulgence, other conditions must be met. The document ‘The Gift of the Indulgence’ from the year 2000 lists these conditions as: making a sacramental confession and receiving holy Communion; not maintaining an attachment to any kind of sin; and praying for the pope's intentions.

Still, even if a Catholic does not have ready access to daily Mass, this does not mean that they are thereby unable to obtain an indulgence.

For one thing, ‘The Gift of the Indulgence’ indicates that while it is preferable to go to confession and receive holy Communion on the day the indulgence is earned, it is sufficient for these sacraments to be received “within several days (about 20) before or after the indulgenced act.” This document further explains that while it is ideal for the requisite holy Communion to occur in the context of the Mass, even a Communion received outside of Mass would count for the purpose of the indulgence.

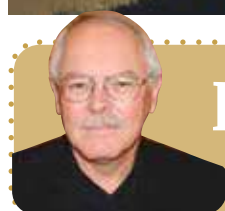
‘The Gift of the Indulgence’ goes on to tell us that “for the sake of those legitimately impeded, confessors can commute both the work prescribed and the conditions required (except, obviously, detachment from even venial sin).” That is, if a Catholic is truly unable to receive Communion through no fault of their own, a priest confessor can adapt the indulgence's requirement accordingly.

**i** Jenna Marie Cooper, who holds a licentiate in canon law, is a consecrated virgin and a canonist whose column appears weekly at OSV News.





# Melancholy and the soul



**Fr Rolheiser**

[www.ronrolheiser.com](http://www.ronrolheiser.com)

**N**ormally none of us likes feeling sad, heavy, or depressed. Generally, we prefer sunshine to darkness, light-heartedness to melancholy. That's why we tend to do everything we can to distract ourselves from melancholy, to keep heaviness and sadness at bay. Mostly, we run from feelings that sadden or frighten us.

For the most part, we think of melancholy and her children (sadness, gloom, nostalgia, loneliness, depression, restlessness, regret, feelings of loss, intimations of our own mortality, fear of the dark corners of our minds, and heaviness of soul) as negative. However, these feelings have a positive side and are meant to help put us in touch with our own soul.

Simply put, they help keep us in touch with those parts of our soul to which we are normally not attentive. Our souls are deep and complex, and trying

to hear what they are saying involves listening to them inside of every mood within our lives, including, and sometimes especially, when we feel sad and out of sorts. In sadness and melancholy, the soul tells us things to which we are normally deaf. Hence, it's important to examine the positive side of melancholy.

**“Why do we need to pass through certain kinds of melancholy to come to a deeper maturity?”**

Unfortunately, today it is common to see sadness and heaviness of soul as a loss of health, as an unhealthy condition; but that normally isn't the case. For instance, in many medieval and Renaissance medical books, mel-

ancholy was seen as a gift to the soul, something that one needed to pass through at key points in life to come to more depth and empathy. This, of course, doesn't refer to clinical depression, which is a true loss of health, but to multiple other depressions that draw us inward and downward.

Why do we need to pass through certain kinds of melancholy to come to a deeper maturity?

## Insight

Thomas Moore, who writes with deep insight on how we need to listen more carefully to the impulses and needs of our souls, offers this insight: “Depression gives us valuable qualities that we need to be fully human. It gives us weight when we are too light about our lives. It offers a degree of gravitas. It also ages us so that we grow appropriately and don't pretend to be younger than we are. It makes us grow up and gives us the range of human emotion and character that we need

to deal with the seriousness of life. In classic Renaissance images found in old medical texts and collections of remedies, depression is depicted as an old person wearing a broad brimmed hat, in the shadows, holding his head in his hands.”

**“How can Good Friday be good if melancholy, sadness, and heaviness of soul are signs that there is something wrong with us?”**

Milan Kundera, the Czech writer, in his classic novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, echoes what Moore says. His heroine, Teresa, struggles to be at peace with life when it's not heavy, when there's too much lightness, sunshine, and frivolity, when life is devoid of the type of anxiety that hints at darkness and mortality. Thus, she always feels the need for

gravitas, for some heaviness that signals that life is more than the simple flourishing of good cheer and comfort. For her, lightness equates with superficiality.

## Cultures

In many cultures, and indeed in all the great world religions, periods of melancholy and sadness are considered as necessary paths one must travel to deepen one's understanding and come to empathy. Indeed, isn't that part of the very essence of undergoing the Paschal Mystery within Christianity? Jesus, himself, when preparing to make the ultimate sacrifice for love, had to painfully accept that there was no path to the joy of Easter Sunday that didn't involve the heaviness of Good Friday. How can Good Friday be good if melancholy, sadness, and heaviness of soul are signs that there is something wrong with us?

So how might we look at periods of sadness and

heaviness in our lives? How might we deal with melancholy and her children?

First off, it's important to see melancholy (whatever its form) as something normal and potentially healthy in our lives. Heaviness of soul is not necessarily an indication that there is something wrong inside us. Rather, most often, it's the soul itself crying for our attention, asking to be heard, trying to ground us in some deeper way, and trying, as Moore puts it, to deepen us appropriately.

But for this to happen, we need to resist two opposite temptations, namely, to distract ourselves from the sadness or to indulge in it. We need to give melancholy its proper due, but only that. How do we do that? James Hillman gives us this advice: what to do with heaviness of soul? Put it into a suitcase and carry it with you. Keep it close, but contained; make sure it stays available, but don't let it take you over.

That's secular wording which can help us better understand Jesus' challenge: If you wish to be my disciple, take up your cross every day and follow me.

**“So how might we look at periods of sadness and heaviness in our lives? How might we deal with melancholy and her children?”**

## Catechism of the Catholic Church



By Renata Milán Morales

# Jesus died crucified: The trial

**A**mong the religious authorities of Jerusalem, not only were the Pharisee Nicodemus and the prominent Joseph of Arimathea both secret disciples of Jesus, but there was also long-standing dissension about him, so much so that St John says of these authorities on the very eve of Christ's Passion, “many believed in him”, though very imperfectly.

The historical complexity of Jesus' trial is apparent in the Gospel accounts, the personal sin of the participants (Judas, the Sanhedrin, Pilate) is known to God alone. Hence, we cannot lay responsibility for the trial on the Jews in Jerusalem as a whole.

In her Magisterial teaching of the faith and in the witness of her saints, the Church has never forgotten that “sinners were the authors and the ministers of all the sufferings that the

divine Redeemer endured.”

## Redemptive death

Jesus' violent death was not the result of chance in an unfortunate coincidence of circumstances but is part of the mystery of God's plan.

To God, all moments of time are present in their immediacy. When therefore he establishes his eternal plan of “predestination”, he includes in it each person's free response to his grace. For the sake of accomplishing his plan of salvation, God permitted the acts that flowed from their blindness.

The Scriptures had foretold this divine plan of salvation through the putting to death of “the righteous one, my Servant” as a mystery of universal redemption, that is, as the ransom that would free men from the slavery of sin. Indeed, Jesus himself explained

the meaning of his life and death in the light of God's suffering Servant.

Man's sins, following on original sin, are punishable by death. By sending in his own Son in the form of a slave, in the form of a fallen humanity, on account of sin, God “made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” By giving up his own Son for our sins, God manifests that his plan for us is one of benevolent love, prior to any merit on our part.

## The offering

The Son of God, who came down “from heaven, not to do (his) own will, but the will of him who sent (him)”, and by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” From the first moment of his Incarnation the Son embraces the Father's plan of

divine salvation in his redemptive mission. The sacrifice of Jesus “for the sins of the whole world.”

Christ's whole life expresses his mission: “to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In suffering and death his humanity became the free and perfect instrument of his divine love which desires the salvation of men. Indeed, out of love for his Father and for men, whom the Father wants to save, Jesus freely accepted his Passion and death.

Jesus gave the supreme expression of his free offering of himself at the meal shared with the twelve Apostles “on the night he was betrayed”. Jesus desires to associate with his redeeming sacrifice those who were to be its first beneficiaries. Apart from the cross there is no other ladder by which we may get to Heaven.

**i** From paragraphs 591-618



# Confession: God's love, which hopes for ours



Christ with the woman taken in adultery, by Guercino

Zep 3:14-18a  
Is 12:2-3, 4, 5-6  
Phil 4:4-7  
Lk 3:10-18

**Y**ou may still remember, Dear Reader, the formula you were taught while preparing yourself for the First Holy Confession. Although it's been a long time since that day, I still clearly remember mine: "My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you, whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy."

Especially when I started repeating in my head the words "I firmly intend to sin no more," I realised at a later stage of my teenage life that there was a big problem getting back to the confessional box. Why? Because I repeatedly promised to be better, to sin no more, and could not keep up that promise! I thought that I didn't deserve to go for that Sacrament.

This unfortunate (for me) sentence from the Act of Contrition became an actual stumbling block in practising Confession regularly and well. I started wondering: on the one hand, I should become perfect and sinless to present myself before God, but on the other hand, I knew that, above everything else, God is loving

## The Sunday Gospel

Fr Dominik Domagala



and merciful. Interestingly, these questions from my past were not unique to me! Many people, in fact, ask themselves the same thing every day!

**“We hear the Lord himself speaking not in a parable but with his own words”**

Many people consider achieving a perfect state the most important thing for them. Indeed, it is a valuable and victorious attitude, but they soon realise that perfect people, people without sin, do not exist! On the other hand, endlessly counting on God's mercy and forgiveness because "I can't do anything about my problems" can lead to a temptation to get deeper and broader into faults and sins. Today's Gospel reading answers that old dilemma of all of us.

**“Many people consider achieving a perfect state the most important thing for them. Indeed, it is a valuable and victorious attitude, but they soon realise that perfect people, people without sin, do not exist”**

The preceding Sunday, the Church gave us the famous passage on the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), or as I like to call that parable, 'the story of a merciful father'. Today, on the 5th Sunday of Lent, we hear the Lord himself speaking not in a parable but with his own words "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 'No one, sir' she replied. 'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus, 'go away, and do not sin anymore'" (John 8:11).

### Mercy

The liturgy of last Sunday and today brings us to this question: what is mercy actually about? The most straightforward answer would be that mercy is a forgiving love. What does it mean? It means that mercy forgives when love hopes. If you think about it, it makes a lot of sense. All people who genuinely love have some expectations towards their loved ones. Call it the time together, serving each other, helping or supporting - all true love hopes that it will be reciprocated. Of course, the other side is that we never fully respond with generosity, availability and selflessness. Sooner or later, the 'me' comes

into play, and it might take more and more space, which initially should be given to the one who truly loves us. That is where mercy comes in: it forgives, forgives, and again, it forgives. Forgiving mercy is shown because hoping love is at play.

**“All I can say is that I forget the past, and I strain ahead for what is still to come”**

How does it work with God? In a very similar way! The mercy of our God is his love, which hopes, which expects. And because it hopes, it also forgives. It is explained today in the words of St Paul in a very profound way. In the Second Reading, he teaches and speaks from experience: "I have not yet won, but I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me. I can assure you, my brothers and sisters, I am far from thinking that I have already won. All I can say is that I forget the past, and I strain ahead for what is still to come; I am racing for the finish, for the prize to which God

**“Endlessly counting on God's mercy and forgiveness because 'I can't do anything about my problems' can lead to a temptation to get deeper and broader into faults and sins”**

calls us upwards to receive in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12).

This is the forgiving mercy of our loving God, which invites Apostle Paul to put a big effort into doing what is right - to love despite a temptation to do otherwise.

### Reconciliation

In the time of Lent in many of our parishes, the services of Reconciliation and hours when confessions are heard are all the more available (or should be at least). Even those who do not practice it too often feel an urge to go to Confession in Lent. On this occasion, it is good to remind ourselves of the five requisites for a good confession. These are:

1. Examination of conscience.
2. Remorse for my sins.
3. Resolution not to sin again.
4. Confession.
5. Completion of penance.

When Jesus says in today's Gospel, "Go away and do not sin any more," he points out the very third requisite of a good confession - that one with which we all might have a problem at times. Indeed, Jesus did not expect the woman in today's story to be spotless. Sinless life, after all, is a true gift from above, and not many people who obtained

that level of perfection have lived before. Nonetheless, there are many faults in our lives that we can and should be fighting. This is, after all, our response to the forgiving love of our Father. In that way, we show that we love and care. Let's look that way at Confession and the tricky requirement of remorse for our weakness. We will soon discover again that confession is not at all an embarrassing moment or an experience that everyone "has to" occasionally get through. We will find again that Confession is not as much about sin as it is about our loving God.

This last week before Palm Sunday, I pray for this grace so that all of us can discover who and what we encounter at each Confession. It is not that much of a warning finger against a child who disobeyed. May it be for us all an experience of God's love, which hopes for ours.

**Fr Dominik Domagala** serves in Inchicore, Dublin. Studied Theology in Poznan (Poland) and currently is working on a Licentiate in Sacred Scripture. Author of the sermon-video-blog "The Social Oblate." Send your questions to [thesocialoblate@icloud.com](mailto:thesocialoblate@icloud.com)



# The Catholic Crisis in Ireland

## Looking beyond the census



Emily Nelson

In my previous article, we discussed how percentages of self-declared Catholics and other religions have changed globally over time and the rise of the 'nones' in the West. Census figures show that those identifying as having no religion is on the increase across the island of Ireland. What does this mean?

Religiosity still has a widespread impact on society, greater than often acknowledged. Many studies demonstrate the impact of religious belief and irreligiosity on society, illustrating the necessity for further such research into major cultural trends that will inevitably shape our society. This has ramifications on many human behaviours, is therefore of interest even beyond Church circles. It been shown to effect educational level, engagement in labour force, occupation, income, marriage, fertility, attitudes of trust and risk, approach to cooperation, work ethics and honesty, internet use amongst other traits. Current religion and religious history remain an important cultural factor in research and practice. Even beyond our desire to reach out to those who are lost, it is important for society to reflect on the impact of secularisation.

### Secularisation

Self-declared nones are on the rise, but how does this equate to secularisation? Prof. Stephen Bullivant writes in Matthew Nelson's *New Apologetics*: none does not mean nothing. As with those who do still identify as Catholic, there exists a great variety of beliefs and thoughts within these discrete categories. For many, there exists some kind of connection to a faith, and this is something we can share with them and grow.

In my 2022 Master's research, I surveyed those in Northern Ireland, who have "distanced themselves from the Church". Although the survey was not representative and had insufficient numbers to be highly reliable, there were some



**“It's odd really. Feel like I have much in common with the Catholic Church and still feel somewhat connected to it, but also struggle with the hypocrisy”**

very insightful discoveries. Within this group, 51% said they regard themselves as a Catholic (on forms or surveys) and 29.8% would not. Out of those, the majority (83.3%) said they would describe themselves as having 'no religion' consistent with data showing that those who leave Catholicism tend to become religious 'nones', rather than move to another religion or alternative denomination (as is more common within Protestantism). Out of those who no longer identify as such, 10.4% selected Christian (no denomination) and the remainder chose 'other' giving answers such as 'agnostic', 'spiritual', and 'confused, not sure what to believe'. Some examples of how they identify are included below:

**“I consider myself spiritual but not religious”**

“I consider myself an atheist. I'm confident in my belief that the Christian god as described by the Bible and modern Christians cannot exist.” Male, 28.

“I consider myself spiritual but not religious.” Female, 29.

“It's odd really. Feel like I have much in common with

the Catholic Church and still feel somewhat connected to it, but also struggle with the hypocrisy.” Male, 59.

### Religiosity

Such comments demonstrate using real examples the scale of religiosity and belief. The range of responses and comments provide insight into a complex situation for which a simple tick box question, for example as used in the census, is inadequate in capturing how people exercise their spiritual beliefs.

Most participants were non-practicing, only a minority felt they believed in Catholic teaching with most respondents somewhat believing and a slight majority felt positive about the faith. This both shows the variation within this cohort, and that for many there is hope and opportunity to reach out through their individual connections to their faith.

Such delineations have been recognised by other researchers. Hugh Turpin identified three types of baptised Irish Catholics; Catholics (Orthodox believers, obedient Church followers), liminal Catholics (who to varying extents reject the institution of the Church but maintain Catholic affiliation) and ex-Catho-

lics (disaffiliated and do not consider themselves to be Catholic in any way). When each asked what came to mind when they read “Irish Catholic Church”, Catholics most often choose clergy or Mass, liminal Catholics selected clergy or sacraments/rite of passage and for ex-Catholics abuse/paedophilia and clergy were most frequently selected. When comparing Turpin's work in Republic of Ireland and the Northern Irish study, more of the latter expressed positive or neutral feelings on the Church. This may be due to difference in wording, alternative perceptions in Northern Ireland verses the Republic of Ireland, or the over-representation of females in this sample who are on average more religiously increased and therefore may be more likely to view the Church in a positive manner.

**“There is nothing the Church (or any cults) could do to encourage me to join”**

Many people who have distanced themselves from the Church recognise things that attract them to it. When

asked if they would ever return to the Church, there were a range of responses. 43% said no or never, with some more offering further explanation: “Not at all. There is nothing the Church (or any cults) could do to encourage me to join” (Male, 37) or “No. When the next pope is a black Irish lesbian” (Female, 61).

Some said maybe or expressed potential for change. “Yes. As my children get older, it becomes less difficult to attend Mass” (Female, 43) and “Yes I think I will return when it feels right for me. I don't think anything will help me do this.” (Female, 23).

### Change

Others offered suggestions as to what they felt the Church should change. A lot of these extended to change in doctrine, reduction in scandals and an improved response to these when they occur. And others said that they never left or only partially indicative of the scale of disaffiliation. “I haven't fully left but current approach of the Church does impact my fuller involvement.” (Male, 46) and “I have not left the Church - better to stay and change from inside” (Female, 71).

These are voices which are heard throughout our society, and many express something we can connect with and begin conversations.

There is no typical none, just as there is no typical Catholic either. Researchers in the USA, have found nones tend to be a little bit

younger, more likely male, and more politically liberal than the general population. On the other hand, an “average weekly Mass-going Catholic” was found to be a 48-year old white woman with no college degree, living the eastern side of the Midwest, who “quite likes reggae, hates rap and has mixed feelings about opera”. Such caricatures accurately reflect statistical averages, but upon reading them we know instinctively of the ridiculousness of proposing that all Catholics should be considered as such.

**“When it comes to sharing our faith, we need to get to know the people around us to treat each individual as they are and tap into the hope that lies within them”**

Research provides us with important information on strategy, techniques and types of people on whom we can focus efforts, but it needs to scratch beyond the surface to really understand what people think and their motivations.

In the next article I will share some powerful insights in this area that can be used to compliment but not replace coming to know someone on an individual basis. Ultimately when it comes to sharing our faith, we need to get to know the people around us to treat each individual as they are and tap into the hope that lies within them. By challenging our own prejudices and reaching out we can understand others better and help them understand us, acknowledging their situation in our response and through this aid their faith journey towards Christ through the Church.

**① A qualified pharmacist, following volunteering roles Emily Nelson pursued her interest and completed a Master's in theology at St Mary's University, Twickenham, London. She set up Faith Versed through which she supports Christian organisations in the UK and Ireland in event organisation and research. Alongside this Emily is completing a PhD in Sociology at Queen's University Belfast, in Catholic Disaffiliation on the Island of Ireland.**



# TVRadio

Brendan O'Regan



## What future do we want for our children?

In today's diverse and scattered media landscape it's rare to find a programme that everybody is talking about.

**Adolescence** (Netflix) has bucked the trend, with its grim tale of a 13-year-old boy accused of murdering a female classmate. It's dark stuff for sure, but relevant considering news stories of children murdering children. We surely have a societal problem, but the nature of it and the possible solutions are complex, which is one of the lessons we can take from this programme. On an artistic level it is totally gripping entertainment and so well made. Each of the four episodes is done as one shot or take, with the camera following various characters around – for example bringing one person to a room and then leaving with another to follow their trajectory for a while. I felt the first two episodes were the most gripping. The first starts with a dramatic arrest scene, a rather heavy-handed break-the-door-down assault which hardly seemed credible, seeing as how they were arresting a young who was still in bed. By contrast the police were all courtesy and kindness when they got the boy to the police station.

The second episode was hugely unnerving as interrogations were carried on



Adolescence

in the boy's school, which seemed rife with bullying, and teachers varied from concerned but ineffective to downright lazy and careless. The following two episodes were gripping in their own way, with a focus more on the psychological aspects of the boy and the dynamics in his family. The acting is exceptionally good throughout, with Owen Cooper, as the boy Jamie, able to convincingly play everything from vulnerable to near psychotic. Stephen Graham

is intense and very human as the father, though I admit I had to turn on subtitles at times to understand what he was saying (Liverpool accent!). Amelie Pease is particularly good as Jamie's sister caught up in the mess and showing the better and more mature side of teenagers.

It's definitely an adult show, with plenty of sexual frankness, especially in the third episode conversation between the boy and a psychologist, and foul language

throughout, naturalistic I suppose but unnecessary. I have a particular problem with young child actors being made to use such language.

Most of the public discussion however has focused on the social issues raised and these are disturbingly timely. And so, the horrible effects of social media on young people are highlighted. There is the malign influence of misogynistic influencers, the internet's dark rabbit holes, reference to 'incels' (moody male loners – the 'involuntary celibates' with hostility towards women). It's something of a hotchpotch, but then so is the toxic environment that our young teens have to navigate. Family dynamics is an issue, but it's an average, intact, reasonably happy family – no violence (apart from the father pulling down a shed in a temper!), no absent father. The main issue there seems to be allowing the teen to have internet access in the bedroom and making the big mistake of assuming he was safe because he wasn't on the street. Yes, the show is a bit preachy, but pertinent and urgent issues are raised, and they have been discussed widely in the last week or two.

One of the most interesting of such discussions was on **The Story**, (Times Radio

### PICK OF THE WEEK

#### KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

RTÉ One Sunday April 6, 8pm

Hyacinth has asked the new vicar to tea, and, in her usual meticulous way, she has organised the event down to the last sugar lump. Events take a sudden turn.

#### BETTER OFF DEAD?

BBC 2 (HD, Eng) Tuesday May 8, 11.05pm

A documentary on assisted suicide, authored by actor and disability rights activist Liz Carr. In a society where disabled people are often told they are 'better off dead' than disabled, Liz asks: "Should we really be giving more power to end that group of people's lives?" Repeat.

#### THE LAST NUNS IN IRELAND

RTÉ 2 Tuesday (night) April 8, 1am

Broadcaster Dearbhail McDonald examines the role of nuns in Ireland to see how they have shaped Irish lives, including her own, for better or for worse. Repeat.

podcast), which included an interview with actor Stephen Graham (he also co-wrote and co-produced) who explained how he wanted to explore issues raised by recent murders of children by children, including one in his native Liverpool. He said we always tend to blame the parents – 'but what if it's not the parents?' One of the presenters suggested that, as with the Mr Bates drama about the Post Office scandal, it showed the power of a story to spark widespread public discussion of something that's been an issue for years.

It even surfaced on **The Hard Shoulder** (Newstalk, Thursday) when Sen. Rónán

Mullen debated the role of religion in schools with Bríd Smith TD. It was reasonably good natured but went along predictable lines. I was amused when Ms Smith used the Netflix show to make a point about religious schools being an obstacle to appropriate sex and relationships education. You could more easily argue that, if Christian principles were properly taught and followed, teens would not engage in violent behaviour, and boys would show the utmost respect for girls.

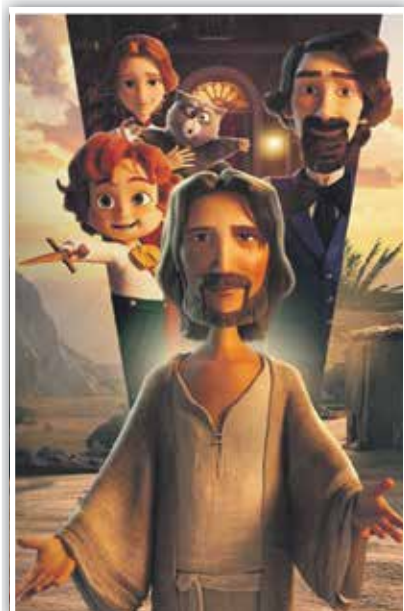
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# Film

Aubrey Malone



## Re-imagining of Biblical events in animated form



The King of Kings

The release of Seong-ho Jay Hang's *The King of Kings* (PG) makes perfect timing for Easter. Telling the story of Christ in animated form through the voices of household names like Oscar Isaac, Kenneth Branagh and Uma Thurman, it has Charles Dickens, of all people, as the narrator.

Many people won't be aware that Dickens wrote *The Life of Our Lord* between 1846 and 1849, adapting his rendition of the events from St Luke's Gospel. He wrote it exclusively for his children, refusing to allow its publication during his lifetime. It finally came out in 1934, at which time it became a best-seller for Simon & Schuster.

Mr Hang also wrote the script, playing fast and loose (and often anachronistically) with Dickens'

words.

After an early contretemps in a theatre with Dickens and his wide-eyed son Walter we travel backwards in time to the birth of Jesus, the Visitation of the Three Wise Men, the 'slaughter of the innocents' under King Herod's cruel rule and the flight into Egypt of Joseph and Mary with their baby.

We then have the Passover, Jesus beginning his evangelical mission, being baptised in the river Jordan, being tempted in the desert, walking on water, raising Lazarus from the dead, performing the miracle of the loaves and fishes, being betrayed by Judas and then being crucified before his resurrection three days later.

You may ask what's unusual about all this. The answer lies in Mr Hang's poetic treatment of the material. Using a plethora of com-

puter-generated special effects and some incredible lighting, many of the scenes, going from blue-grey seas to blood-red skies, resemble paintings. Throughout it all, Walter's curly red hair stands out like the iconic 'girl in the red coat' from Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*.

Dickens relates the events to Walter (voice of Roman Griffin Davis) initially as a bedtime story. The boy later becomes an integral part of them, joining Jesus with his Garfield-like cat Willa. It's a dangerous stylistic device but Hang pulls it off. One is reminded of Brandon De Wilde and his dog in George Stevens' *Shane*, another film laced with Biblical overtones.

Walter becomes a touchstone for all children hearing Jesus' story for the first time. His role as auditor and then participant is

inspirational. It serves to amplify its redemptive power as Dickens weans him away from his obsession with King Arthur-related violence towards Jesus' pacifism.

The long-necked Jesus is also striking, his nose almost like an extension of his forehead. Isaac uses an American accent for him while Branagh does Dickens, obviously, in a British one. There isn't a jarring effect any more than there is from the contemporary script (viz. Walter's excited post-Resurrection, "Wow, he really is alive!")

The young Jesus, and various members of the apostles, are voiced by James Arnold Taylor. Pierce Brosnan voices Pontius Pilate. Mark Hamill does Herod. Forest Whitaker voices Peter.

Overall it's a captivating ensemble piece that will enthrall adults as much as children.





# BookReviews

Peter Costello



## A Jesuit view of our dance to the music of Time



Author Fr José María R. Olaizola

**Dancing with Time,**  
by José María R. Olaizola  
SJ  
(€14.95 / 12.95)

Peter Costello

**W**hen this book first came into my hands, the title brought to mind at once Anthony Powell's twelve volume novel *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951-1975) concerning the continually shifting and ever interacting aspects of the life of a Welsh old Etonian Nicholas Jenkins. The theme was inspired initially by Nicolas Poussin's painting, well known to Londoners, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1634).

But the idea of life as an interacting dance is not fully pursued in Fr Olaizola's book, being only alluded to from time to time, but in a significant way. He wants his book to have a popular feel, and does not wish, I think, to

put readers off by being "too clever". That for him would be a failure of purpose.

### Audiences

The author tells us indeed that his book is intended for two audiences, the younger generation coming up and a mature adult readership. Doubtless the chapters intended for the younger generation will be found full of meaning and sound insight by their intended readers, but for me the chapters intended for the mature readers were far more interesting and rel-

evant. A matter of horses for courses, I suppose: we cannot help being the age we are.

**“Listening to the music and following your feet, you can learn to live better with others, deal with the future and talk to your past and future selves”**

The Powell parallel too is perhaps out of order because

the cultural references of the author belong either to Spanish culture, or to the sort of media culture of the United States that is now universal, as with the saddening comments on Matthew Perry, the ill-fated comedian from *Friends*.

### Pattern

Whereas Poussin and Powell saw life as having a sort of inevitable pattern dictated by the music, this book suggests that, as the author remarks, "Listening to the music and following your feet, you can

learn to live better with others, deal with the future and talk to your past and future selves." All in all this is a refreshing and moving exploration of universal emotions seen through a Christian prism.

**“Like packs of hounds they attack anyone who goes off-script. It would be sad, if it weren't also a little scary, to see where this state of affairs leads”**

The overall flavour of Fr Olaizola's writing can be found in passages like this:

"Rants, merciless criticism, disrespect, anathemas and condemnations, as if we were once again involved in the religious wars that bled Europe dry a few centuries ago. They use the same tactics as any other angry group. Like packs

of hounds they attack anyone who goes off-script. It would be sad, if it weren't also a little scary, to see where this state of affairs leads.

"Few things seem more immature to me than this all-out rigidity, don't know if there has ever been more talk of 'tolerance' from positions of such entrenched intolerance - so many insults used as labels for others. Labels are being used so crudely that they are either normalised or lose all meaning.

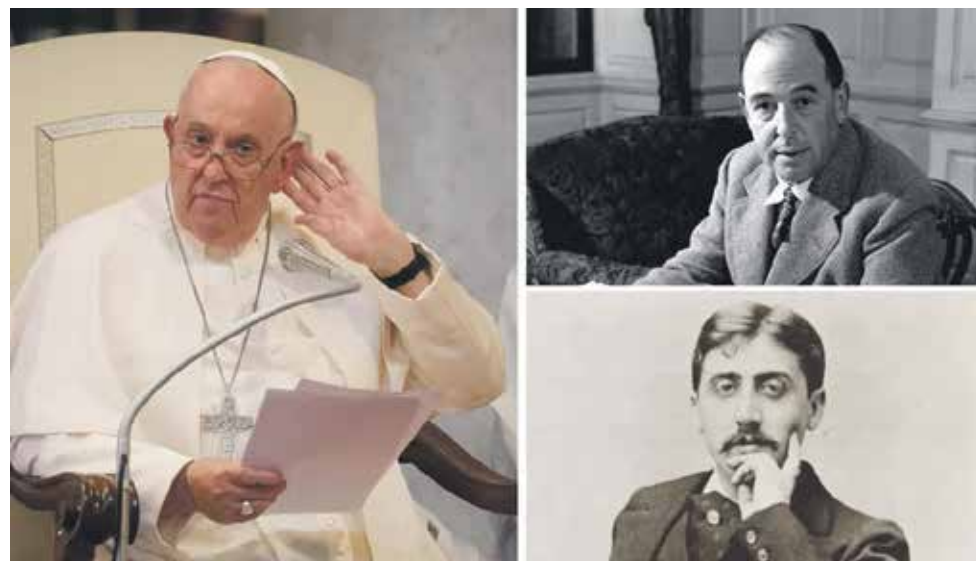
"Just think how quickly people call large parts of the population 'fascist'. How easily someone with different views on a nation, a language or conflict resolution is called a 'traitor'. Someone who argues that certain moral issues need re-thinking is called 'degenerate', and someone who asks for more careful thought on those issues instead of rushing to change the law is labelled 'retrograde' or 'traditionalist.'

**“Few things seem more immature to me than this all-out rigidity, don't know if there has ever been more talk of 'tolerance' from positions of such entrenched intolerance - so many insults used as labels for others”**



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.

## The Pope's very latest book celebrates his love of poetry



Pope Francis has an ear always alert to the voices of poetry and literature.

**Viva la Poesia!**, edited by Antonio Spadaro SJ (Edizioni Ares Rome, €18.50); an English language version for the international market is due soon.

**Peter Costello**

**W**hile the Pope was recovering during his recent stay in hospital yet another new book bearing his name appeared in the book shops of Rome.

Entitled *Long Live Poetry!* it focuses on Pope Francis's lifelong love of poetry and its importance in the lives of all of us.

The contents, all from the pen of Pope Francis over the last decade or so, but have been assembled by a Jesuit associate, focus on the Pope's engagement with poetry, poetry of all kinds and eras, and its deep influence on his thought and expression.

This aspect of his life derives from his childhood in Argentina, when, as he recalls, his Italian-born father would read the classics of his native land to the family in the evenings.

### Heritage

The Pope's experience of the mixed culture of Argentina and Italy have given him access to a rich literary heritage.

In introducing the book to the world on its publication, Cardinal Fernández, the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, observed that such expressions go beyond doctrinal explanation.

"There are certain truths that can only be communicated poetically, never without poetry."

The book, *Viva la Poesia!*, released in Italian on March 21, surveys his reflections on poetry, literature and the human imagination.

It has been edited by a Jesuit, Fr Antonio Spadaro, an undersecretary of the Dicastery for Culture and Education. The book includes excerpts from major papal texts, letters and speeches.

"We must recover the taste for literature not only in our lives, but also in formation of our minds and spirit, otherwise we are like a dried fruit," Pope Francis wrote in a document intended for the Curia in Rome, which is included in the book.

"Poetry helps all of us to be human beings, and we are in such great need of that today," he says. "I like poetry a lot... Poetry is full of metaphors. Understanding metaphors helps to make thought agile, intuitive, flexible, acute. Those who have imagination do not become inflexible, they have a sense of humour, they always enjoy the sweetness of mercy and inner freedom"

**“In his apostolic exhortations, encyclicals and speeches he has often used poetry”**

According to the editor the book provides the definitive keys to understanding the Pontiff's literary intelligence, outlining the vast panorama of authors that punctuated his formation, from Dante to Dostoevsky, from Virgil to Borges, passing through Hölderlin, Tolkien and many others.

The young Jorge Mario Bergoglio was a teacher of literature. The book concludes with an illuminating interview with one of

the literature students from the high school where taught when he was a scholastic. He must have been inspiring.

Many who have passed through a Jesuit education owe a great debt to those individual Jesuits teachers who introduced them warmly to the benefits of a true humanism.

The editor Fr Antonio Spadaro himself reflects on the Pope literary aptitudes. "He has always had this interest in poetry, even as a pontiff. In his apostolic exhortations, encyclicals and speeches he has often used poetry. I would say that he has expressed his theological contents through poetic language.

"When I interviewed Pope Francis in 2013, in the first interview, he said very clearly that the Church needs ingenuity. And so turning to poets today means asking, almost knocking on the door of poets and artists to help the Church be genial in these difficult times.

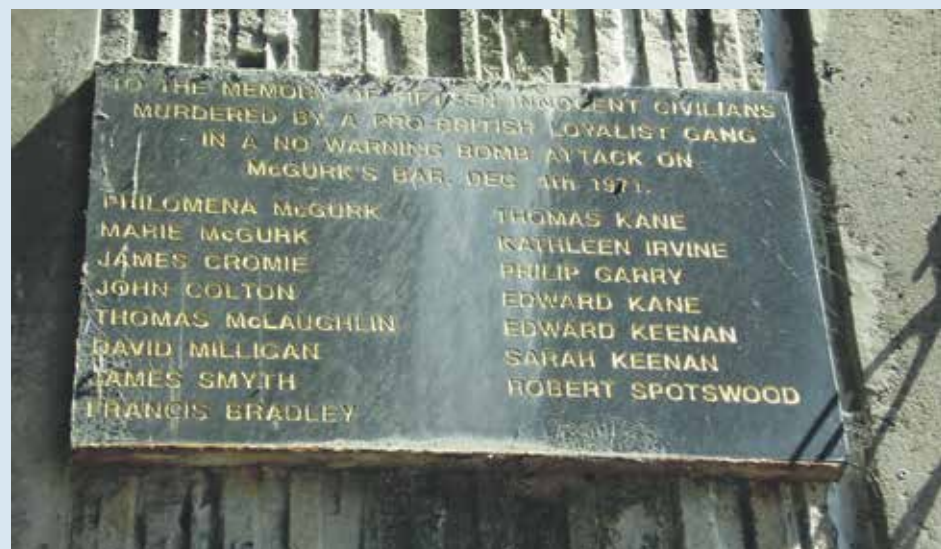
"I think that an important speech is that of Francis to the Popular Movements," his editor concluded. "Because in that speech he speaks of those who work for the common good as 'social poets'...

### Creative

"He uses the word 'poet' because the poet is creative. Therefore, the creativity of poetry is not limited to literature, but is part of the ordinary life of those who serve the community. Creativity is necessary."

At the end of the day, Pope Francis pointed out to his editor, poetry helps everyone to become more human. "In this age of artificial intelligence we cannot forget that poetry and love are necessary to save our humanity.

## The Troubles effect on women's lives



The memorial to those killed in the bombing of McGurk's Bar.

**The Sorrow and the Loss: The Tragic Shadow Cast by the Troubles on the Lives of Women**, by Martin Dillon (Merrion Press, €19.99 / £15.50).

**J. Anthony Gaughan**

**T**his book provides an account of the grief, sorrow, hurt and tragedy visited on women by the so-called 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland.

Reading it brought to mind those scenes in Sean O'Casey's play *The Plough and the Stars* about the 'Troubles' of the past which we have been commemoration. The women in his work all too often were left to bear the emotional and tragic burdens created by the men around them. All too often this seems to be the case in history, not just here in Ireland, but everywhere.

In pursuit of his theme Martin Dillon presents a series of personal testimonies. Carol Rice completed her nursing studies in 1988 and took a job in a London hospital. She married Simon Ware, who was a soldier in the Coldstream Guards Regiment in 1990. With his battalion he was deployed to serve in Northern Ireland in 1991. While on patrol he was killed by a roadside bomb. The death of Carol's husband cast a dark shadow over the rest of her life. She never ceased to be upset that no one has ever had to face justice for killing her husband.

Tracy Doak came from an RUC family. Her father, Beattie, was an RUC constable for decades and her brother, Allister, was also a member of the force. She realised the ambition she had from childhood when she joined the RUC in 1982. Just three years later, while escorting a Brinks-Mat van carrying foreign currency near the border between Northern and Southern Ireland, she and her colleagues were blown up by a 1,000 lb bomb hidden in a trailer parked at the side of the road. The spectre of Tracy's remains scattered across a field continues to haunt her parents. When asked about the loss and pain she continues to suffer, Jean, Tracy's mother, replied: 'It is the last thing at night and the first thing in the morning. I wear it like a coat'.

Serena was the daughter of David Graham. He worked in a cement factory and spent most of his free time gardening and growing roses. He was also an active member of his local Orange Lodge. He joined the UDR, which replaced the B-Specials, in 1972. It was his contribution to defending his country and it supplemented his weekly cement-factory wage packet. As he arrived at his work-place in March 1977 he was fatally wounded by two IRA 'gunmen'. Serena and her mother's loss and sorrow was accentuated when they later learned the identity of one of the killers who

was never to stand trial for his crime.

The IRA regarded those who sat on the bench in Northern Ireland as the enemy. They assassinated Judge William Doyle and Resident Magistrate William Staunton in 1973. A year later as Judge Tom Travers and his family exited St Brigid's Church in Belfast they were attacked. Tom's daughter, Mary, was shot dead and Tom was gravely wounded but survived. He identified his would-be killer: Joe (The Hawk) Haughey.

At his trial, despite the evidence to the contrary, Haughey was declared to be innocent of the crime. Martin Dillon notes that besides being a notorious IRA killer he was also at the time a British military agent ('asset'). This perversion of justice added to the grief of the Travers family.

Then there were the perpetrators of indiscriminate slaughter. Stevie 'Top Gun' McKeag was typical of loyalist sectarian killers. He was reputed to have murdered dozens of Catholics, each of whom lost their lives simply because they happened to be Catholics and were easy targets.

The bombing of McGurk's Bar on Belfast's North Queen Street in the New Lodge area was one of the earliest major atrocities in the 'Troubles'. The Bar was so-called as the McGurk family resided in a flat upstairs. A member of the UVF placed a no-warning bomb at the door-way of the building.

In the resultant explosion most of the Bar's patrons, including the McGurk family, were buried under the rubble. Fourteen were killed and many others suffered serious injuries. The statement issued by the British authorities and the RUC plumed the debts of cynicism. According to Mary Kane, whose father did not return home from McGurk's Bar after his after-work drink, the manner in which this tragic event was handled by officials in the North only increased the sense of loss and grief felt by the bereaved.

The McGurk's Bar atrocity was not the end of indiscriminate mass killings. The highest casualty list of the 'Troubles' occurred on May 17 1974 when loyalists planted four no-warning bombs in the Republic. The four bombs killed thirty-four people, most of them women, and injured 258 others.

Apart from providing the important perspective on how women were affected by the 'Troubles', this very informative book reveals the remarkable extent to which the paramilitaries on both sides of the conflict were riddled with informers: RUC Special Branch 'assets', M15 'assets' and M16 'assets'.

But that too, as other writers aside from Sean O'Casey have reminded us, is an old tale of Irish revolutionaries and their ways going back to Captain Le Caron in the days of the Fenians, a never changing aspect of history.



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Crossword

Gordius 709

- Across**
- 1 Scientific instrument (10)
  - 6 One's employer (4)
  - 10 Europe's largest river (5)
  - 11 Standard by which to judge something or someone (9)
  - 12 Tragic vessel built in Belfast (7)
  - 15 Imperial weight measure (5)
  - 17 In the distance (4)
  - 18 Large recess in a church (4)
  - 19 Melody (5)
  - 21 The dead body of an animal (7)
  - 23 Proverb (5)
  - 24 Presently, soon (4)
  - 25 Not imaginary (4)
  - 26 A safe (5)
  - 28 Cynical or doubtful person (7)
  - 33 Oblation (9)
  - 34 Brushed leather (5)
  - 35 Change direction (4)
  - 36 Item of geometric equipment (10)

1		2		3		4		5			6	7		8
										9				
10						11								
	12				13		14			15				
16						17								
18										19		20		
				21					22					
23											24			
				25										
26		27				28	29		30					
						31							32	
33										34				
35					36									

- Down**
- 1 Relocate (4)
  - 2 Marine area off the south coast of Ireland (6,3)
  - 3 City in Nebraska, or one of the Normandy landing beaches (5)
  - 4 Desert plants (5)
  - 5 Bucket (4)
  - 7 Constellation named for a giant hunter (5)
  - 8 Final part of a trial process (10)
  - 9 Changes for the better (7)
  - 13 American space agency (1.1.1.1.)
  - 14 Annuls, calls off (7)
  - 16 It happens when the pontiff comes to call (5,5)
  - 20 Nostalgic or romantic feeling (9)
  - 21 Sure (7)
  - 22 Variety of flatfish (4)
  - 27 A sore (5)
  - 29 Summit (5)
  - 30 Spaghetti, for example (5)
  - 31 Jetty (4)
  - 32 Low dam (4)

### SOLUTIONS, MARCH 27

**GORDIUS No. 708**

**Across**

1 Sandwiches 6 Owed 10 Octet 11 Machinery 12 Baghdad 15 Silly 17 Ouzo 18 Neil 19 Malta 21 Epistle 23 Relax 24 Knot 25 Cana 26 Towel 28 Refrain 33 Forbidden fruit 35 Lays 36. Antifreeze

**Down**

1 Stop 2 Nathaniel 3 Witch 4 Comma 5 Each 7 Wheel 8 D'Oyly Carte 9 Winsome 13 Deep 14 Dog Star 16. Ungrateful 20 Longitude 21 Exclaim 22 Leaf 27 Worry 29 Ennui 30 Refer 31 Odin 32 Styegordius - Irish

## Sudoku Corner

577

**Easy**

8		7		5				
	2		8					
		4	1			5	3	
		5	4			9		7
7								6
6		9			8	1		
	9	3			1	7		
					6		5	
				3		8		1

**Hard**

	5	8		6		7		
						4	6	
6			1	3				8
	1		6				4	
		4	2		1	5		
	3				8		7	
9			8		2			4
	2	5						
		6		4		2	3	

**Last week's Easy** 576

6	7	5	9	2	3	8	1	4
1	3	4	5	6	8	9	7	2
2	9	8	1	7	4	5	6	3
5	1	9	7	4	6	3	2	8
7	8	6	3	9	2	4	5	1
4	2	3	8	5	1	7	9	6
8	4	7	2	1	9	6	3	5
9	6	1	4	3	5	2	8	7
3	5	2	6	8	7	1	4	9

**Last week's Hard** 576

8	9	7	6	5	3	4	1	2
4	2	5	9	8	1	7	6	3
3	1	6	2	4	7	8	5	9
7	8	2	4	9	6	1	3	5
1	4	9	3	7	5	6	2	8
6	5	3	1	2	8	9	7	4
5	7	4	8	1	2	3	9	6
2	6	8	7	3	9	5	4	1
9	3	1	5	6	4	2	8	7



# Take me up to Monto

**Growing up we often sang** the song ‘Take me up to Monto’, never thinking it was a real place. But a very real place it was. For over a hundred years it was said to be the largest red-light district in Europe. It is said that there was anything up to 1,600 prostitutes working there at any one time. It was situated in the centre of Dublin. The Monto was roughly the area bounded by Talbot Street, Amiens Street, Gardiner Street and Seán McDermott Street. The name is derived from Montgomery Street. Neither the police forces of the British administration nor the Gardaí of the Irish Free State would go into it, such was the fear of violence. It was simply off limits, a no-go area for good respectful citizens.

**Legionaries**  
However, between 1923 and 1925, Frank Duff, the founder of the Legion of Mary, together with a small group of legionaries would visit various people every Friday night, and slowly they convinced the girls and the ladies who ran the houses to give up their trade and helped them to



Frank Duff

find other jobs which took them off the streets. Over time the legionaries invited the girls and the madams to attend retreats, make their confessions, return to the sacraments and give up their way of life. The faith and courage of these legionaries brought the light of Christ into the lives of these women, whom society had rejected and cast aside.

The legionaries received the co-operation of the newly formed Free State government. With only two houses still open for business the local Gardaí raided these premises on March 12, 1925. The following Friday evening Frank Duff met up again with a group of legionaries at the Pro-Cathedral and decided that they would go back into the Monto. After the Garda raid there was a lot of anger in the Monto area. But Frank and two other legionaries went on their usual Friday night legion work, knowing that their lives were at risk. But steadfast in their resolve they continued to visit the area bringing hope and mercy to all who lived in this once red-light district.

**Miracles**  
Frank Duff later wrote a book about the mission to Monto called *Miracles on Tap*. The Introduction to the book says “It’s the story of God’s infinite Power and Mercy challenged through weak human instruments”. This is the story of the Legion of Mary in Monto, 100 years ago. Everyone had given up

on these girls but not Frank Duff and his fellow legionaries. Where others dared not to go this little group of legionaries brought hope into despair.

In this year of the Jubilee of Hope I think there is no better book for those involved in evangelisation to read. It tells the story of how people of faith reached out in love and compassion to those whom many condemned. The legionaries made the love of God for these girls real and transformative. In his encyclical on the theological virtue of Hope Pope Benedict XVI teaches that the Christian message is not only informative but also performative. He says “the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known – it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing”. This was certainly true for the ladies of the Monto. Those legionaries 100 years ago were indeed Pilgrims of Hope. Thank God the legionaries of today continue to be Pilgrims of Hope in our cities and towns, faithfully each week doing their legion work without fanfare or recognition. But miracles of hope continue to happen.

## Be careful what you pray for

I heard a wonderful story lately of two men, who had been good drinking buddies for years and at the same time underwent major conversions back to the faith and the practice of the sacraments. Filled with enthusiasm they undertook a long pilgrimage to a Marian shrine. On the day they started out on the walk, one of them called out to the Lord: “Lord, send me the cross that I may carry it with Jesus!”. His friend immediately made his prayer, “Lord, remember I wasn’t the one who made that prayer”. Two days into the pilgrimage the one who prayed for the cross got very bad blisters and had to go home. The other one continued on the pilgrimage.



## Sister Hellen appeals for urgent Little Way help for the hungry and sick in East Pokot, Kenya

We have received an urgent request for help from Sr Hellen Chepkirui, Servants of the Sacred Heart in Tangelbei, Kenya, whom we have helped in the past to provide vital aid for school children and groups of people living in poverty and disease. Sister writes to The Little Way Association: “Without your kindness, we would never have been able to save lives and protect families. The East Pokot region is still facing a severe crisis. Terrible drought combined with extreme poverty make it harder for families to afford food and healthcare. Our dispensary is the only source of affordable healthcare services for the local people. Among the most affected groups we target are the children, HIV-positive mothers, TB, diabetes and cancer patients, and those with chronic illnesses. We also target the neglected vulnerable elderly and those who live with various forms of disabilities.

### THE SITUATION IS DIRE AND WE HAVE RUN OUT OF FUNDS

“I have been praying to God to take care of this situation because we have run out of funds. We urgently need medicines in order to help many suffering from water-borne illnesses and also TB and malaria.

### PLEASE WILL YOU HELP SR HELLEN?

“Our founder Father Yermo left us with the motto: God Will Provide. We believe that He will inspire you and your kind benefactors to enable us to help the increased numbers of children, women and men relying on us for relief food and healthcare.”

**If you can, please send a donation to The Little Way Association, in order that we can continue to help Sr Hellen and the many other Sisters in Kenya who turn to us for help.**



## MYANMAR EARTHQUAKE Emergency Appeal

The two earthquakes, whose epicentres were located near the cities of Mandalay and Sagaing, have caused great devastation. At present, the death toll is believed to be at least 1,700. Fr Henry is in charge of the Archdiocese of Mandalay’s emergency response team. He writes to the Little Way, “The situation is terrible. At present, the most important needs are humanitarian assistance such as food, medicine, temporary shelter, and hygiene kits. Many people will need help for a long time, before they can start to rebuild their homes and lives.”

**The Little Way Association will forward, without deduction, every euro you send to Priests and Sisters known to us in Myanmar to provide basic humanitarian aid and to help families rebuild their lives. PLEASE BE AS GENEROUS AS YOU CAN, AND PRAY FOR MYANMAR, GOING THROUGH A HARSH PERIOD OF WAR AND NATURAL DISASTER. THE NEEDS ARE IMMENSE.**

Crossed POs and cheques should be sent and made payable to:

THE LITTLEWAY ASSOCIATION  
Sacred Heart House, 119 Cedars Rd, Clapham Common, London SW4 0PR  
(Registered Charity No. 235703) Tel 0044 20 76 22 0466  
[www.littlewayassociation.com](http://www.littlewayassociation.com)

I enclose €..... to be allocated to:

€..... MYANMAR EMERGENCY APPEAL  
€..... HUNGRY AND SICK IN KENYA  
€..... WELLS / CLEAN WATER  
€..... MASS OFFERINGS (please state no. ....)  
We ask for a minimum of €7 or more for each Mass  
€..... LITTLEWAY ADMIN. EXPENSES

☐ Please tick if you would like an acknowledgement

Name (Rev. Mr. Mrs. Miss) (Block letters please)

Address

IC/03/04

To donate online go to  
[www.littlewaysassociation.com](http://www.littlewaysassociation.com)

DONATIONS FOR THE MISSIONS ARE SENT WITHOUT DEDUCTION FOR ANY EXPENSES.