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Thursday, February 8, 2024

€3.00 (Stg £2.70)

The-Irish-Catholic-Newspaper

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Govt snub for women religious on St Brigid's day 'very sad'

Ruadhán Jones and Chai Brady

The Government has been accused of "omitting" the "gigantic" contribution of women religious from its official programme for St Brigid's day, with just one event in Irish embassies across the world acknowledging their work.

Women religious and missionaries told *The Irish Catholic* that the State's "blindness" towards the work of pioneers like Nano Nagle and Catherine McAuley is "very sad".

The State cannot "deliberately omit" these women who were "gigantic figures in our history, whether we like it or whether we don't", said Ursuline Sr Marianne O'Connor. "The actual facts are there to prove it."

While acknowledging the dark legacy of abuse, Sr O'Connor said it is "sad that they can't see the good in these figures as well".

The Department of Foreign Affairs said on February 1 that "events across the world will highlight women working in a myriad of fields – fine art, science, literature, business, politics, poetry, theatre, music, sport, and more". However, just one

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Pope joins St Brigid celebrations...



AMRI Secretary General Ger Gallagher and Sr Louise O'Rourke PDDM meet Pope Francis during a gathering of religious and consecrated life in the Vatican on St Brigid's Day, February 1. Photo: Vatican Media

John Bruton a 'committed Christian'

Staff reporter

Former Taoiseach John Bruton, who died on Tuesday aged 76 after a long illness, has been remembered for his "profound Christian faith" and "compassionate" leadership.

A man of "deep conviction and profound Christian faith, John realised from an early age that the future of Ireland and the future of Europe were inseparable," Archbishop of Dublin Dermot Farrell told *The Irish Catholic*.

His work as government minister and Taoiseach "in a very different Ireland, and at a difficult time in our history, as well as his work in the European Union bore witness to what the recently deceased Jacques Delors frequently called Europe's soul – a shared sense of values and grounded in a spirituality," the archbishop added.

Every people and every country need contact with its heart, its soul, said Dr Farrell. "In John Bruton we had someone who was a sure guide on that journey."

Mr Bruton was "a committed Christian" and "a selfless public servant", bishop of Meath Tom Deenihan said in a statement. The former Taoiseach was first elected as Meath TD in 1969.

"John was a valued and active member of the Dunboyne parish community," said Bishop Deenihan.

Mr Bruton remained "very faithful" to his religious beliefs, according to Bishop

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Govt snub for women religious on St Brigid's day 'very sad'

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event – held in the Holy See – dwelt on the work of women religious.

The State has “very short memories”, according to Sr Sheila Kelleher PBVM. Only for the work of women religious, “there’d be no foundation for Catholic education, no foundation for the State at all”, she said, “but that’s not acknowledged”.

“I think part of the problem is people haven’t a sense of history,” Sr Kelleher continued. “I often think of Nano Nagle, I have to pinch myself sometimes to say did she really do that... they were pioneers.”

Missionary and interfaith advocate Sr Kathleen McGarvey OLA said it is sad that the State didn’t recognise the contribution of women religious, calling it a “blindness, whether its conscious or unconscious”.

“Nobody has done everything perfectly, and there are many ways in which we have not been perfect,” Sr McGarvey said.

However, she pointed to the good that women religious

continue to do around the world.

“Women religious have made great contributions in the sciences, many were pioneers in their own right... they continue to reach out to the peripheries across the world,” she told this paper.

Trained social worker and founder of the Children’s Grief Centre, Sr Helen Culhane of the Sisters of Mercy, said St Brigid’s day would be an “ideal” day to recognise and celebrate the work of women religious in Ireland and across the world.

“It’s very disappointing” they were overlooked by Government on the day, she said, asking: “By not doing it they obviously have an issue, so what is their issue?”

She also asked why many women religious won’t raise their voice and stand up for themselves, saying: “Where is the voice of women religious? They don’t want to be quoted. I’ve been interviewed by journalists for the last 17 years, I’ve never had a backlash from anything I’ve said. What witness are we giving as religious? It raises the bigger question, what are they afraid of?”

Staff deeply frustrated after Catholic college suspends historic dialogue

Ruadhán Jones

Staff at Mary Immaculate College (MIC) are “deeply frustrated” after President Eugene Wall announced the suspension of a historic dialogue meant to safeguard the college’s future.

Prof. Wall’s announcement

came after he and University of Limerick (UL) President Kerstin Mey failed to find “a meeting of minds” with Department of Higher Education officials on January 25.

“Despite a constructive and solution-focused engagement, we were unable to find any such meeting of minds,” the MIC president said in January

31 correspondence to staff.

“Accordingly, we are now suspending the discussion between the two institutions with regard to structural matters,” he continued, saying relations between MIC-UL will continue as they already exist.

Minister for Higher Education Simon Harris previously told the two institutions to go back to the drawing board after almost year-long negotiations failed to propose a suitable model.

Sources told *The Irish Catholic*, however, that staff fear the college has been left “strategically weaker” by the failed dialogue process, described as potentially “one of the most important strategic developments” in the college’s 125 year history by governing authority, including chairman Bishop Brendan Leahy. According to union officials, staff were told the purpose of the dialogue was to achieve university level status and solidify MIC’s posi-

tion in the higher education landscape.

Now, younger staff in particular feel the future is “very unsure and uncertain”, sources said. The dialogue made it “more unclear”, despite being intended enhance “structural alignment” between the two institutions.

Disappointment at the failure of the process and the lack of consultation with staff left them feeling “in the dark”, this paper understands.

There is a sense of “deep frustration” among staff, who still don’t know the specifics of the model presented to department officials or the exact contents of the department’s criticisms.

Although President Wall reassured staff in his email that MIC hopes to “build on the highly positive relationships” forged over the 12 month process, staff fear the “spectre of incorporation” is now on the horizon, sources said.

John Bruton a ‘committed Christian’

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emeritus of Meath Michael Smith.

The Faith was “very important to him”, Bishop Smith told *The Irish Catholic*, adding “He was a good man in all respects”.

“He was very balanced, he didn’t get fussed too much. It was very difficult at that time” politically, he said.

The Fine Gael politician’s career spanned six decades, serving as Taoiseach from 1994-97, leading the ‘Rainbow Coalition’ government.

He remained active politically after his retirement, campaigning against the repeal of

the 8th Amendment in 2018.

“John Bruton was a courageous, compassionate and noble statesman,” the Pro Life Campaign (PLC) said in a statement. “His passing is a great loss to the Irish nation.”

Speaking at a PLC dinner after the referendum, Mr Bruton said: “The pro-life arguments will need to be made, over and over again, to the young people of Ireland and to the generations that will succeed them.”

“These arguments, if repeated often and courageously, will remain in people’s minds.”

Survey finds a quarter of six year olds have a smartphone

Brandon Scott

A recent survey commissioned by CyberSafeKids to coincide with Safer Internet

Day, has shockingly revealed that a quarter of six year olds have a smartphone. The 23-page report published by CyberSafeKids on Tuesday,

which focusses on topics such as cyberbullying, combatting online grooming, sexting and pornography and gaming, endeavours to offer greater clarity into the habits and trends emerging in online youth culture and warn parents of their significant impacts on children.

The survey of 900 parents of children aged five to 17 with smartphone access finds more than a quarter of parents are “extremely concerned” about the risk of online grooming, cyberbullying and the risk of accessing pornography as well as social media addiction and content relating to self-harm.

Almost a quarter (24%) of six year olds have their own

smartphone and 45% of 10 year olds are allowed use their smartphones in their bedrooms. Just 28% of parents use parental controls and only 20% of parents felt the good the internet could bring their children outweighed the risks.

One-fifth (21%) of parents said their child had been purposely excluded from a group chat or online event and 18% said their child had been called offensive names. Supervision of internet access is lower during weekends and holiday times. Some 80% of parents of children aged 11 with smartphones said their child’s internet access is only sometimes or never supervised.

Knocking around



Liverpool legend John Aldridge took in the sights and sounds of Knock over the weekend, adding that he said a few prayers for “the quadruple and Jurgen to change his mind”.

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Annual Subscription Rates: Ireland €199. Airmail €320. Six months €105.

ISSN 1393 - 6832 - Published by The Irish Catholic,

Unit 3b, Bracken Business Park, Bracken Road, Sandyford,

Dublin 18, D18 K277.

Printed by Webprint, Cork.

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Call to defund Women's Council after 'deeply offensive' St Brigid post

Jason Osborne

A social media post from the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi) linking St Brigid to a push for liberalisation of Ireland's abortion laws has been criticised by a spokesperson for the Pro-Life Campaign as "deeply offensive to Christians".

Eilís Mulroy of the PLC also called for the defunding of the NWCi and said that they will be resurrecting a campaign to defund the group.

"I think the National Women's Council should be more sensitive to how people would feel about them linking a Christian saint

to a campaign for more abortion. I think that the National Women's Council don't really take on board the views of women generally," Ms Mulroy told *The Irish Catholic* newspaper.

"They're out of step with the clear majority of women because a clear majority of women do not support the

National Women's Council's stance which is in favour of late-term abortion."

The NWCi's post contained a picture of a Saint Brigid's cross accompanied by the words, "St Brigid and abortion in Ireland". They encouraged Government to consider ways in which it might provide expanded

access to abortion.

"The incredible thing is that they are funded so significantly by the Government, by the taxpayer," Ms Mulroy said.

"In 2021, in their annual report, they say themselves that they had 1.1 million euro in total income and of that, at least 962,000 was directly related to State funding. That's nearly 84.5% of their total income is from the State, so for a taxpayer funded group like them, to never seek the views or represent the concerns of women who oppose abortion is really indefensible."

"It's time really that the Government dispensed with the myth that the National Women's Council of Ireland represent anyone's views except for its own. They don't take on board the views of many, many women. I think that they should be defunded," she said.

Never underestimate role of Faith in addiction recovery says Pioneer priest

Brandon Scott

Speaking in the build up to Temperance Sunday on Sunday 11, Spiritual Director of the Pioneers Fr Robert McCabe, said that the role of Faith in a person's recovery from addiction is vital and offers consolation and guidance to those who are seeking long-term sobriety after treatment.

"Faith is one of the twelve steps," he said. "The person turns themselves over to a higher power. Some of them will discover the gift of prayer during their treatment. They know that when they finish their course of treatment that they will be able to go into their own parish church and sit in meditation and reflection with their rosary beads and prayerbook. Some of them discover the faith that their parents or grandparents might have been praying for them during their recovery."

Cambridge study: Religious people coped better during pandemic

Staff reporter

Two Cambridge-led studies have found that both the distress caused by the pandemic in the UK and the experience of infection with Covid-19 in the US were reduced among people of faith.

According to a new study released by Cambridge University, religious people seem to have experienced lower levels of stress and

unhappiness during the UK's Covid lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 when compared to their secular counterparts.

At the same time, another study looking at the US population during early 2021 suggests that worsening mental health after experiencing a Covid infection, either personally or in those close to you, was also lessened by religious belief.

As a result of these find-

ings, Cambridge economists have argued that religion "may act as a bulwark against increased distress and reduced wellbeing during times of crisis," such as the Covid-19 pandemic represented.

"The Covid-19 pandemic was an extraordinary event affecting everyone at around the same time, so we could gauge the impact of a negative shock to wellbeing right across society. This

provided a unique opportunity to measure whether religion was important for how some people deal with a crisis," said Professor Shaun Larcom of Cambridge's Department of Land Economy, and co-author of the latest study.

"The study suggests that it is not just being religious, but the intensity of religiosity that is important when coping with a crisis," Prof. Larcom said.

St Brigid's at St Patrick's...



Dana Rosemary Scallon joins Elaine Kelly, Martina Purdy and members of the Girl Guides to celebrate St Brigid's Day in St Patrick's Church, Downpatrick. Ms Scallon also saw the St Brigid's cloak made by Catholic Girl Guide leaders in Loughinisland at The Saint Patrick Centre.

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NI politicians must focus on welfare of students 'failed' by education system

Chai Brady

The restored NI Executive must focus on "human flourishing" in schools, the Bishop of Derry has said, warning that separating the teaching of mental and sexual health is not focused on children's welfare.

Bishop Donal McKeown said that so far the biggest problem for the education sector in the North has been "the lack of direction in terms both of policy and of finance".

Speaking of the new regulations regarding relationship and sexuality education (RSE) imposed on the North when Stormont was defunct, which mandates schools to teach about contraception and abortion, he pointed to the recent consultation on the issue which received more than 13,000 responses. The majority of responses, 73%, disagreed with the statement that "covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion

and these resources should not advocate, or oppose, a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations of abortion or contraception".

Regarding the consultation, Bishop McKeown said an "overwhelming number of parents were quite clear that they wanted to take responsibility for what happens. The Department of Education has a structure in place where people can be withdrawn from that (RSE) should they so wish.

"Now that it's legally binding, the Department of Education has to find some way of obeying the letter of the law, and yet recognising that the majority of parents aren't particularly interested in this approach to education."

The prelate said that it is "a very silly idea to separate sexual health from general mental health and treat it as though it were a separate subject that can be dealt with in isolation".

"The problem for our young

people actually is their general mental health. To separate sexual relationships from that seems to be an ideologically driven approach that is not something focused on the welfare of children and young people," Bishop McKeown said, adding: "I hope that we can focus on the welfare of those who are being most failed by our current education system, we are losing too many of our young people in terms of mental health, we are losing too

many who are in unemployment or under-achieving, who have a poverty of aspiration.

"I hope that we actually can have politicians who don't just decide how to divide up the money but actually have a vision for human flourishing, promote virtue rather than just independence, and how we can be a cohesive society that supports everyone, because we lose too many young people for want of a reason for living."

NEWS IN BRIEF

Department of the Taoiseach confirms no meeting with church leaders scheduled

In a response to a query submitted by *The Irish Catholic* in relation to possible future meetings held between the Department of the Taoiseach and church leaders in Ireland, the Department responded that although the "Taoiseach meets with church leaders from time to time as appropriate", there are no forthcoming meetings between the two groups scheduled in the immediate future.

The last meeting between church leaders and the Department of The Taoiseach took place in April 2021 during Covid.

Msgr Shea to address Cork youth event

Well-known US priest and university president Msgr John Shea will be the keynote speaker at the fourth Connect young adult gathering in UCC on Sunday, February 18.

The president of University of Mary, Bismarck, North Dakota, received a standing ovation at a recent gathering of 20,000 young people in St. Louis, Missouri. Cork and Ross said in a statement.

"He is a dynamic presenter, very tuned in to the challenge of faith in contemporary culture," a spokesperson for the diocese said.

"He is also very aware of the challenges we face as Church in Ireland today. We are therefore very excited to have him speak at Connect 4."

The fourth Connect event for young people aged between 18-35 years will take place in UCC on Sunday, February 18 from 9:45am to 4:00pm.

There is a nominal booking fee of €10 through Eventbrite.ie.

Faith communities have so much to offer NI politicians says priest

Brandon Scott

Fr Martin Magill, a priest based in Belfast and member of the 4 Corners Festival, a festival striving to bring all members of the North's communities together, has said that faith communities of all hues and creeds have so much to offer politics in Northern Ireland but the engagement hasn't been forthcoming and the opportunities to make an impact have

continued to fade as a result.

Speaking with *The Irish Catholic*, Fr Magill said that it's now time for politicians to catch up on the work that has gone neglected over two years during a defunct executive in Stormont – work that people on the ground have been actively tackling since the collapse of power-sharing.

"To some extent it's almost as if people are ahead of the politicians and it's politicians who have to catch

up rather than the other way around," he said.

Questioning why politicians in the North have seemingly engaged with other groups in society but not religious communities, Fr Magill said that the insights offered by faith communities are valuable to wider society and he would welcome greater outreach.

"I see civic society and various branches of civic society – there are times I see no reference whatsoever

to the Church and parish, he said. "Let parishes and the local people involved have a close connection with local people and there's a real value in listening and engaging with us. I'm not for one second suggesting speaking exclusively with us – not for one second. But to consider us as an important stakeholder. Not the only ones – but amongst others. Churches right across the denominations and other religions."

President praises social justice pioneers Fr Healy and Sr Reynolds

Ruadhán Jones

Ireland is "greatly indebted" to the work of Fr Sean Healy and Sr Brigid Reynolds, founders of Social Justice Ireland, President Michael D. Higgins has said.

Speaking on the retirement of the social justice pioneers, the President of Ireland said they leave behind "a rich legacy".

"There can be no doubt that the advocacy work undertaken

by Dr Healy and Sr Reynolds has assisted in the achieving of a more inclusive, sustainable society here in Ireland," President Higgins said at a SJI conference in Dublin, January 31.

"The work of Sean Healy and

Brigid Reynolds on poverty, and specifically on the metrics of poverty, on promoting a shared understanding and recognition of the importance of including measurements of poverty and poverty targets in social

partnership agreements – such work has been so very valuable in providing an evidence basis for social policy alternatives. Your leadership on this area is such an important legacy," he added.

Voices raised in joy...



Almost 750 primary pupils take part in the Laudate Festival in St Thérèse's Church, Mount Merrion. The Dublin Diocese's festival encourages young people to sing hymns and engage in parish life.

Michelle O'Neill – symbol of social change?

There's a theory that if women ruled the world, the world would be a nicer, kinder place – and politics less confrontational. It hasn't always been borne out by female leaders from history, who, from Catherine the Great to Margaret Thatcher have included warrior queens and steely autocrats.

But now, Stormont is carrying out a new experiment to test the theory, as Michelle O'Neill of Sinn Féin, and Emma Little-Pengelly, of the Democratic Unionist Party, take up Northern Ireland's leadership as First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

Will the ladies achieve a consensus where the gentlemen have failed – or at least faltered? The ladies certainly seem to have started out with good grace, speaking about extending understanding, and focusing on getting the job of government done. Well, let's give them a fair wind.

From the point of view of Irish social history, Michelle O'Neill is a particularly interesting study. Born and raised in the Doris family of highly



Mary Kenny

committed Republicans and supporters of the Provisional IRA, she has already been sufficiently conciliatory as to attend King Charles's Coronation – even expressing pleasure at doing so.

When I look back on the record of the previous Westminster Coronation, in 1953, when Irish Republicans managed even to get films of Elizabeth's crowning prohibited in the Republic (by threatening to bomb any cinema which allowed a public showing) – well, what a change! She was quick, too, to wish Charles a speedy recovery after his cancer diagnosis.

Ms O'Neill's personal life also reflects social shifts. She was pregnant, out of wedlock, as a schoolgirl, aged 15, and gave birth at 16. She has said that the teachers at her Catholic school, St Patrick's Academy in Dungannon, were “so supportive”, facilitated her in hav-

ing her baby, while helping her continue with her studies.

And so she did. She subsequently married Paddy O'Neill and they had two children together. She is now a grandmother.

Being pregnant at 15 has seldom been considered ideal, but Michelle's experience has shown, nonetheless, something positive to young women: an accidental pregnancy doesn't need to “ruin your life”. Quite the contrary, for the First Minister: she became a mother when young, and went on to develop a successful career in politics.

The feminist role model encourages girls to get an education, build a career, and then consider motherhood. But there's a lot to be said for young motherhood, when you have the energy and the optimism to cope. And afterwards building a career when you have psychologically matured in your 30s and 40s.

● Last week, I had the honour to be invited by our estimable Senator Mullen to address a score of Maynooth seminarians visiting the Oireachtas – given the hospitality of the place by An Ceann Comhairle, the likeable and always fair Seán Ó Fearghall.

The trainee priests were pleasant young men, polite and serious. Fintan O'Toole is forever railing against ‘Catholic patriarchy’, but I couldn't discern a single note of ‘patriarchy’ in their cordial attentiveness to the seminar speakers (who included Dr Philip McDonagh, former Ambassador to the Holy See, and Rónán himself.).

We were shown a new painting of St Brigid on display at the entrance to Leinster House, produced by the Dutch artist Lía Laimböck. It placed Brigid surrounded by nature and symbols of faith. I thought it an outstanding work, but, disappointingly, the National Gallery rejected it.

Surely the Gallery is supposed to be ‘National’, and a national saint deserves a position there – especially when portrayed with such accomplished artistry. Did they think the theme too religious?

Can Nazis be forgiven?



A scene from the disturbing *The Zone of Interest*

The *Zone of Interest* is one of the most chilling movies I have ever seen. It's about Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, and his family, who live in a beautiful manor house, with a stunning garden – beside the Nazi death camp.

You never see inside Auschwitz, but you hear the tormenting sounds of screaming and killing, while the family goes about its ordinary business, children happily playing, women chatting about clothes. Everyone knows what's going on, but they ignore it. Any evil which becomes ‘normalised’ is just a banal fact of life.

The film, directed by Jonathan Glazer, is as powerful for what it withholds, as for what it discloses. And yet,

a straightforward biopic of Rudolf Höss might also be instructive. He abandoned his Catholic faith when he joined the Nazi party in 1922, and became one of the most cruel and egregious enforcers of the Nazi drive to exterminate the Jewish people. He killed millions.

After the war, he was sentenced to hang by a Polish court, and before ascending the gallows Höss confessed to his evil deeds, repenting of his terrible sins. He requested a priest, and a Polish Salesian, Fr Tadeusz Zaremba gave him the Last Rites.

It is a tenet of faith that everyone can be forgiven. Does this stretch even to a committed mass-murderer? See the movie and judge for yourself.

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A referendum that ignores the trojan work of mothers



Wendy Grace

On March 8, one of the amendments to our Constitution that you are being asked to vote on seeks to remove the recognition and protection given to the extraordinary role that women and mothers play in society. In fact, a 'Yes' vote would remove the word mother from the Constitution entirely.

As well as being a waste of time and money, the Government's clarion call that this is somehow a step forward for women, couldn't be more misguided.

According to Ámáarach research, two out of three mothers would choose to stay at home with their children if they could afford it, and just 17% would opt for full-time work given the choice. The same piece of research found just 12% of mothers felt valued by society, and now the Government, and the self-proclaimed faux feminists, want to strip us of the few places where we are seen, where we are valued, where we are Constitutionally recognised. They are tone deaf to the choices women want to make.

Aspiration

Sadly, the aspiration in the Constitution for mothers to not have to leave the home out of economic necessity has not yet been achieved. Mothers across the country are having to do just that. Maybe that's where the Government should focus their efforts, giving women an authentic choice, and supporting whatever amount of time they want to spend at home.

While the wording might be a little outdated, erasing women and mothers and the often invisible, and rarely celebrated, work we do in raising our families is an insult.

The Constitution does not say, as the National Women's Council of Ireland and other



Bardhe Gjini works with students at a kindergarten in Vlore, Albania.

members of the Yes brigade would like you to believe, that 'a woman's place is in the home', what article 42.2.1 actually says is that: "In particular, the state recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved."

“It's saying society can't function well without us. Far be it from being 'sexist', that's pretty empowering stuff. Why would we want to remove that recognition?”

It goes on to say: "The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall

not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home."

You are being asked to remove this part of our Constitution with a muddled gender neutral definition: "The State recognises that the provision of care, by members of a family to one another, by reason of the bonds that exist among them, gives to society a support without which the common good cannot be achieved, and shall strive to support such a provision."

Recognition

By all means add in the aforementioned. Give protection and recognition to fathers and other caregivers. But why erase women and motherhood? Whether you're a mother who works inside or outside the home, the Constitution recognises the role that you play in the common good

of society. It's saying society can't function well without us. Far be it from being 'sexist', that's pretty empowering stuff. Why would we want to remove that recognition?

“To them, we are 'units of production' or as the OECD called stay at home mothers 'a waste of human capital'”

Former chief Justice Susan Denhim and former Attorney General Senator Michael McDowell have both made it clear that this line in the Constitution in no way assigns a woman's role to the home. Indeed, Article 45.2.1 gives all "men and women equally" the right to earn a living.

At the recent launch of the Electoral Commission, Supreme Court Judge, and the commission's chair, Marie Baker echoed this reality. She cited that the "case law of the supreme court is quite clear, that doesn't mean a woman's place is in the home, it says that the work women do,

provides an important protection, to society and the common good".

It's clear that the Government doesn't see it that way. To them, we are 'units of production' or as the OECD called stay at home mothers "a waste of human capital". It's no surprise then that the State is trying to remove their obligation to try to protect mothers from being forced to work outside the home due to economic necessity.

Influential

If I was to ask you who is the most influential person in your life, you would probably say your mother. And yet, by being asked to remove this article, we will erase any acknowledgement of the vitally important role women and mothers play in our society.

It's even more frustrating that campaigning groups like the aforementioned NWCI seem more intent on towing the Government line rather than representing women in all aspects of our lives. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised given they are practically bankrolled by the Government. It seems they will only fight for you if

you have an impressive title on your business card, they refuse to accept we are not being oppressed into this role, we are choosing it.

“Let's face it, much of the push for this is coming from the 'big boys' club in Leinster house”

A Yes vote in this referendum will further create an Ireland that makes it harder for a woman to stay at home, if that's where she wants to be. And let's face it, much of the push for this is coming from the 'big boys' club in Leinster house.

You will cast your vote on International Women's Day, a day that usually spends time celebrating women who have impressive jobs, and ignoring the trojan work and needs of mothers. Let's send a clear message that our work raising our families is just as important, and that for once we would like the Government, and groups who claim to represent all women, to actually fight for what the Constitution aspires to do: recognise, value and provide financial protection for women and mothers.

“For once we would like the Government, and groups who claim to represent all women, to actually fight for what the Constitution aspires to do: recognise, value and provide financial protection for women and mothers”

Misean Cara marks 20 years of missionary support

celebrating
20
years of
misean cara
Mission Support from Ireland



The work Irish missionaries continue to do overseas has lessons for the entire NGO sector, hears **Jason Osborne**

This year, Misean Cara is celebrating 20 years of supporting Irish missionaries around the world, aiding and empowering these silent heroes in their efforts to provide a better quality of life for “those left farthest behind”.

Their 79 members spread throughout over 50 countries work with the world's poorest and most marginalised, with a particular focus on education, health, sustainable livelihoods and human rights.

While much has been said and written about the contribution Irish missionaries have made across the globe, there is a real danger that as their numbers dwindle, Ireland will forget. This would be a tragedy of immense proportions because, as Misean Cara's CEO, John Moffett tells *The Irish Catholic*, in his 30 years working in international development, the work our religious have done abroad is “some of the highest quality development work” he's come across.

Legacy

“My main experience is in Africa, really, but the legacy in Africa of the building of education systems, health systems, in countries that back when Irish missionaries were going overseas were newly independent and didn't have that backbone of public service we're reliant on. They continue to flourish to this day.

“They're still some of the most exceptional educational and health establishments across the continent, run by or having been established by missionary organisations and that's an amazing legacy to have,” Mr Moffett says.

What sets the work that missionaries do apart from that done by other aid organisations, Mr Moffett says, is



From left to right, Sr Rose Farren, Sr Chiamaka and Sr Angela of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary with a young patient at St Michael's Hospital in Ghana. Photo: Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary

its patience.

“What's very different about the missionary approach to development as opposed to other ways of NGO operating is that it's very patient. Missionaries tend to be there for the long haul and I suppose where their strengths really lie and what I've observed myself from my own experience is that there's no one better placed to reach the poorest,” Mr Moffett says.

“They have an ability to establish themselves within communities, really get to understand what the issues are and really work with people on the ground to identify what their own ambitions are for their development and respond to that in a human way. So rather than maybe parachuting in with established approaches to how you're going to do development, they very much learn on the ground and work with people to identify their own development needs and their own ambitions. I think there's a way the missionaries are able to work with people that's both patient and kind and human that other NGOs possibly don't in the same way.

“You ask yourself, ‘What is it that drives them?’ Obviously, it's their faith. They get a certain grace to carry them through”

“It's a very human centred approach which I really appreciate,” he says.

Misean Cara Board Chair, Kevin Carroll echoes Mr Moffett's words with a specific example to illuminate the depth of commitment Irish missionaries have to the people they're helping.

“One of the first things they [missionaries] have to do is learn the local language, for example. That might seem a small thing, but when you learn the local language, it gains you an entry into a community. You're more trusted,” Mr Carroll says, adding that the other significant thing that has stood out to him is their willingness to work in “difficult areas” that other aid organisations might shy away from.



Br Tony Dolan of the Franciscan Brothers, in a 2005 photo from the Baraka Agricultural College near Nakura in Kenya. Br Tony was among the earliest recipients of Misean Cara funding, to support people's efforts to build self-sufficient futures for their families through sustainable farming practices. Photo: Noel Gavin



Br. Hugo Cacéres of the Christian Brothers, pictured here in 2014 teaching at the Fey y Alegria School, a missionary education project of Edmund Rice Development outside Lima, Peru. Photo: Edmund Rice Development

“You ask yourself, ‘What is it that drives them?’ Obviously, it's their faith. They get a certain grace to carry them through. Some of them have unfortunately paid with their lives for the work they did, lost their lives because they stood up for human rights, many were killed but it doesn't deter them. That's what differentiates for me the missionaries.”

Lasting fruit

The last 20 years of Misean Cara have borne lasting fruit, with the missionary work they've supported instilling a better quality of life for struggling communities across Latin America, Africa and Asia. What will the next 20 years look like, especially as Irish missionaries dwindle in number? “Different,” is Mr Carroll's answer.

“It's going to be different. Different in the sense that you won't have that many Irish missionaries serving overseas. There will still be some, there are some younger missionaries there, but there's not that many.

“But what you have in the last

10-20 years, even further back, is you have a lot of missionaries from countries where Irish missionaries have worked who have joined,” Mr Carroll says, explaining that the nations Irish missionaries flocked to decades ago are now bearing their own fruit in terms of vibrant vocations.

Author and expert on Irish missionary tradition and former board chair of Misean Cara, Matt Moran explains just how Misean Cara has been able to carry out its life-enhancing work over the last 20 years.

“In the 1970s, the Irish Government saw how effective missionaries were in delivering such a broad range of services and infrastructure. They saw how missionaries were integrated into the communities they served, and how solidarity, accompaniment and sustainability were central to their ethos and values. Importantly, they also saw how development aid got directly to those for whom it was intended and at low cost,” he tells *The Irish Catholic*.

“The missionaries are a good conduit for the effective delivery of aid.

They are a wise investment because as Dr Vincent O'Neill who was Head of Planning in Irish Aid said to me in 2011, the missionaries give a broader reach to Ireland's Overseas Aid Programme into remote areas that otherwise it could not reach.

Unique

“That makes Ireland's programme quite unique. Missionaries deliver exceptional value for money,” he says.

With the Government providing the bulk of the over €300 million Misean Cara has received and disbursed to its members across the globe through its Irish Aid programme, Mr Moffett says they have the taxpayer to thank for enabling them to support Ireland's missionary heritage and tradition, adding that every cent is “very much appreciated”.

For more information contact Clare at 01 405 5028 or email info@miseancara.ie.

Giant steps needed as new



Despite enormous challenges there are many green shoots, and the process of reform and renewal is already underway, writes **Michael Kelly**

It's unlikely that mandarins in the Vatican pay a great deal of attention to political news coming out of Belfast, but there was a certain symmetry that Down and Connor's new bishop was appointed just hours before the restored power-sharing government was installed across the city in Stormont.

The appointment of Bishop Alan McGuckian SJ, who turns 71 later this month, fills a vacancy in one of Ireland's most-important dioceses, but leaves yet another vacancy in the episcopal bench with the Diocese of Raphoe now on the Pope's radar in the search for a new bishop.

As a member of the Society of Jesus, it's not exactly a homecoming for Bishop McGuckian to the diocese of more than 400,000 Catholics, but he is a native of Co. Antrim and worked in Belfast for many years.

Appointment

In that sense, he is on familiar territory and, at one level, a predictable appointment. But his elevation also raises questions about Rome's chess-like approach to episcopal appointment in Ireland. In Belfast, he will replace Noel Treanor who, just over a year ago, departed to his dream job as the Papal ambassador to the European Union in



The Giant's Causeway at the sunset in North Antrim, Northern Ireland. Photo: Istock/Aitormmfoto

Brussels. But Dr Treanor's departure was known (and spoken about) in diplomatic circles from Spring 2022, given that his elevation as nuncio needed the approval – the *agrément* – of officials in all 27 EU member states.

“Papal aides admit that it is now increasingly common for episcopal nominees to decline the Pope's appointment”

It's a wonder, therefore, why it has taken nearly two years to find a replacement given the urgency of pastoral priorities in such an important diocese. And, in finding a replacement, the Pope again leaves Raphoe without a bishop.

Clerical sources in Down and Connor have wondered whether the delay was caused by other candidates declining the appointment. Once unheard of unless one was privately dealing with a serious illness or concerned about a past indiscretion, Papal aides admit that it is now increasingly common for episcopal nominees to decline the Pope's appointment. If being a bishop was once a coveted appointment, one cleric told me recently that he now believes that “anyone who wants to be a bishop, deserves it”.

Adage

The old clerical adage in Ireland used to be that once one was appointed to the episcopal bench, “you'd never again eat a bad meal, or hear the truth”. But, with declining vocations, demor-

alised priests, depleted coffers and vanishing congregations, today's bishops are all too painfully aware of the truth. And, as one told me recently, Confirmation suppers are not what they used to be.

“Although the Bishop of Derry has more than enough to do with 260,000 Catholics in his own diocese, he has been hugely engaged in Belfast in his role in his native diocese”

Bishop McGuckian is a former director of the renewal initiative in Down and Connor known as the ‘Living Church’ project. He facilitated a listening process all across the diocese more than a decade ago, so he is familiar with the issues. But it's also true that, as Heraclitus said 2,500 years ago, no man ever steps in the same river twice. Down and Connor is not the diocese that Bishop McGuckian left seven years ago, and the Living Church project that he established has received mixed reviews from clergy and laypeople

alike.

He is lucky to have had Bishop Donal McKeown as administrator of Down and Connor, pending the appointment of a new shepherd. Although the Bishop of Derry has more than enough to do with 260,000 Catholics in his own diocese, he has been hugely engaged in Belfast in his role in his native diocese often spending part of his week there. Having been an auxiliary there, he knows the place well.

While administrators usually just keep the show on the road in the absence of a diocesan bishop, the marathon-running Bishop McKeown has grasped the nettle in Down and Connor.

Ambitious

In an ambitious pastoral letter last May, Bishop McKeown invited clergy and parishioners across the diocese to participate in a process known as ‘Pathways for the Future’ initiative to examine, reflect upon and plan for the future mission, structures and priorities for the diocese over the years ahead.

“We must prayerfully discern together how, from our common baptism, all the people of God can play a greater and more active

role in the life and leadership of the diocese and parish communities,” Bishop McKeown wrote.

“In this time of transition, leading to rebirth and renewal, there are certainly challenges to be faced. It will be necessary to adapt how priests, who are already having to manage workloads and demands that are unreasonable and not sustainable, are supported and cared for,” he added.

“Greater collaboration between parishes will be necessary in a future where one priest will be responsible for a group or ‘family’ of parishes”

Bishop McKeown was frank about the urgency of the reform needed.

“We need to look at how parishes are structured, how liturgical services are celebrated, and how all the lay faithful can work together in the service of God and each other.

“Greater collaboration between parishes will be

“If being a bishop was once a coveted appointment, one cleric told me recently that he now believes that ‘anyone who wants to be a bishop, deserves it’”

D&C Bishop takes reins



Bishop Alan McGuckian SJ (centre) is pictured after being appointed the new Bishop of Down and Connor with (from left) Bishop of Derry Donal McKeown, Apostolic Administrator Down and Connor; pupils from Bunscoil Phobal Feirste; An tAthair Darach Mac Giolla Catháin and Aine Scullion, Vice Principal Bunscoil Phobal Feirste in St Peter's Cathedral Belfast on February 2. Photo: Liam McArdle

“We have to walk together to learn to listen to one another respectfully, even when we’re different”

necessary in a future where one priest will be responsible for a group or ‘family’ of parishes,” Bishop McKeown said.

Bishop McGuckian takes over a diocese with almost a million inhabitants, four out of ten of whom describe themselves as Catholic – up from just 30% at the turn of the Millennium.

But, while the number of Catholics has grown on paper, Mass attendance has declined and crucially, the number of active priests has fallen dramatically. Many of the priests are elderly, and while Down and Connor has done better in terms of attracting vocations than many Irish dioceses, it is rapidly running out of priests.

With 86 parishes and 146 churches the diocese now has only 84 priests in active ministry, down from around 200 in the year 2000. Only seven priests in the diocese are aged under 40, and so, in just over ten years the number of priests in active ministry will be almost half what it is today.

Projections

Projections suggest that 20 years from now, in 2044, there will only be around 24 priests available for those 86 parishes.

So, if Stormont’s new

ministers are facing a busy inbox, across the city at diocesan headquarters on the Somerton Road Dr McGuckian has no shortage of challenges of his own. He turns 71 in just three weeks, so will have four years to make a mark before the mandatory episcopal retirement age of 75.

While in Raphoe, Bishop McGuckian has been pioneering so-called ‘Conversations in the Spirit’ mirroring his experience of discernment as a participant in the Pope’s global synod process in Rome late last year which will reconvene this coming October.

Casting discussion on Church reform as discernment is a way to try and keep the conversation on track, and guard the process from becoming something akin to a diocesan parliament.

“If we really stay grounded in Scripture and our Catholic Tradition, we can listen to one another and talk to one another in respectful ways”

Already the synodal

process has caused confusion with some Catholics thinking that everything is up for debate, and essential doctrines and dogmas of the Church will be set aside based on a simple show of hands.

Bishop McGuckian, as a Jesuit steeped in Ignatian discernment, has taken a cautious approach. He told a congregation at the Knock Novena last year that the synodal process will only be successful if it remains grounded in Scripture and the Church’s Tradition.

“We have to walk together to learn to listen to one another respectfully, even when we’re different,” Bishop McGuckian said.

Anchor

“We in the Church of course have an anchor that you need when you’re in the sea, a stormy sea, our anchor is that we as Catholics are obliged to listen to one another in the light of the Scripture and of our Catholic Tradition.

“We’re anchored and grounded in those two things. And if we really stay grounded in Scripture and our Catholic Tradition, we can listen to one another and talk to one another in respectful ways,” he told the congregation.

He was also cautious in his welcome of the Pope’s recent controversial move on blessings for same-sex couples, describing *Fiducia Supplicans* as “consistent with Pope Francis’ desire that the Church find ways of reaching out with the mercy and love of Jesus to everyone”.

He went on: “Some people are suggesting that this document heralds a change

in Church teaching about marriage and sexuality. That is not the case”.

At the same time, Bishop McGuckian has been an enthusiastic promoter of the Pope’s vision of a reformed Church where

laypeople, priests and bishops share responsibility for the parish and make decisions collectively.

In Raphoe, he has prioritised youth ministry and recently led a delegation to a huge Catholic youth event in the United States. A former university chaplain, he has correctly discerned that without young people the Church has no credible future. He has also not taken the jaundiced view adopted by some older clergy of the fact that many young Catholics tend to be conservative and more traditional in their outlook.

Vocations

Bishop McGuckian has also prioritised vocations to the priesthood in Raphoe, this is something that will continue in Down and Connor. The diocese, like some other northern dioceses, had done relatively well in terms of attracting young men to consider priesthood in recent years and there have been a steady flow of ordinations.

And despite the challenges, there are plenty of green shoots in Down and Connor. Many parishes are

supported by very active and engaged lay communities. Many in the north have retained younger families and newcomers have energised some ailing parishes.

The challenges are great, but Bishop McGuckian brings considerable energy with him to the task. His background knowledge in Down and Connor is unmatched, and he knows the clergy but, being from a religious order, also a slight detachment.

He will want to move quickly, and the conversations are already at an advanced stage. Everyone knows what needs to be done, it is just a matter of the new bishop being able to lead people on a journey that will involve painful decisions like closing churches, lay-led funerals and the absence of a resident priest in many parishes.

Bishop McGuckian knows that only a diocese that is pruned and fit for mission can grow. Holding on to outdated structures and ways of thinking is always tempting, but not a recipe for authentic renewal and reform.



On 29 February 2024 *The Irish Catholic* newspaper will publish a special issue highlighting the ongoing Irish Homeless crisis.

The faces behind the figures

Our editorial team will be presenting readers with up-to-date homeless statistics and discussing the implications for individuals and families and of the crisis for those without homes this winter.

Looking forward

We anticipate publishing only one such supplement during 2024. This is undoubtedly the issue to showcase your organisation’s work across the sector and highlight where you will be focusing your efforts during the year.

We are inviting all members of the Dublin Homeless Network and all interested groups nationwide to participate in the supplement, to give voice to the many perspectives and challenges facing those who both work in and rely on the homeless services.

Please call us on the contact details below to participate in this special edition.

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The Irish Catholic

How the Church can help fend off the far-right



The Church is concerned by a rise in eurosceptics, writes David Quinn

For decades after World War II, the politics of Europe was characterised by great stability. Elections were almost always won by one of two political power blocs, either a centre-right Christian Democrat-style party, or a centre-left Social Democrat one. This has broken down. Support for the mainstream parties of the centre is much lower than it was, and many voters are moving either further left, or further right, and for the most part further right.

June elections

In June, elections to European Parliament will be held in all EU countries, including Ireland. The think tank, 'European Council on Foreign Relations' released the findings of an opinion poll last month which forecast major gains for parties of the 'far-right' or 'populist-right', whichever term you prefer.

According to the organisation, what it calls 'anti-European populists', "are likely to top the polls in nine member states (Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Slovakia) and come second or third in a further nine countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden)".

The European Parliament, like European politics itself, has always been dominated by either parties of Christian Democratic origin, or the Social Democrats. In the European Parliament, parties of a Christian Democratic origin fall under the umbrella term, the 'European People's Party' or EPP. The head of the European Commission, Ursula Von Der Leyen, comes from this grouping, for example.

Greater integration

What the EPP and their centre-left counterparts in the parliament have always held in common is their very strong support for the 'European project', that is, greater integration of the member-states into the EU. It is why they found Brexit so offensive. No country was supposed to

ever leave the EU.

The rise of eurosceptical parties is not only alarming the parties of the European mainstream, it is also alarming some major figures within the Catholic Church, not least Bishop Mariano Crociata, who is head of Comece, the office of the European bishops in Brussels.

Speaking to the Italian press after a meeting with Pope Francis, he said: "In fact, the possibility that the political orientations of voters will give rise to a majority capable of looking seriously to the future of the European Union is being tested".

This was a slightly convoluted way of saying he fears that the coming elections will result in eurosceptical parties gaining a lot more power.

“Church leaders often criticise globalisation but they seem unsympathetic when low-income voters in the West turn against, say, high immigration or believe too many people are seeking refugee status in Europe”

He acknowledged that mainstream politics was "ignoring the sensitivities, needs and problems of the peoples of which it should be an expression and guide".

He said: "This fuels intolerance, rejection, and therefore also anti-Europeanism and absenteeism."

By 'absenteeism' he meant voters staying at home rather than exercising their right to vote.

Bishop Crociata did not explain the ways in which the mainstream parties appear to be ignoring the "sensitivities, needs and problems" of many voters, so let's do a little dive into what is happening.

Disenchantment

Common across Europe is a disenchantment on the part of many low-income voters with mainstream politics. These are precisely the sort of voters the Church should be most concerned about.

Low-income voters believe that they have been the losers in the worldwide move towards globalisation. Globalisation has been made it easier for people to travel overseas in search of work, for jobs to be transferred abroad, especially those in the manufacturing sector, and it has meant that countries which make certain goods more cheaply can cost some workers in the West their jobs.

Overall, globalisation has made the world more prosperous. For example, it has seen hundreds of millions of Chinese people moved out of extreme poverty. But for



Picture of an European Union Entrance sign, on a road obstructed by the Hungarian border fence. It was built during the refugees crisis to stop the refugees from taking the Balkans Route. Photo: istock/balkanscat

many in the West, it has increased economic insecurity.

If you are a working-class voter who once worked in a factory, but that factory has been moved to China, you are hardly going to be happy about it.

If large numbers of immigrants have moved into your area, competing for both jobs and housing, you are unlikely to be very pleased about globalisation either.

“The Catholic Church in Europe for the most part identifies strongly with the mainstream parties, despite the fact that some of those parties have sometimes been extremely hostile to the Christian roots of Europe”

Therefore, it is unsurprising if low-income voters are annoyed at the mainstream parties who they believe have been ignoring them for years. This helps to explain why the Social Democratic parties have seen their support plunge in working class areas and many of those voters have turned to the populist or far-right who they believe,

rightly or wrongly, are listening to their concerns.

Church thinking

What should the Church think about this? Church leaders often criticise globalisation but they seem unsympathetic when low-income voters in the West turn against, say, high immigration or believe too many people are seeking refugee status in Europe.

An interview appeared on Monday in the German Catholic media with the head of the European Parliament, Manfred Weber, who is a member of the German Christian Social Union party which is in the EPP.

Weber is a Catholic and was asked whether the EPP's more restrictionist approach to asylum-seekers is compatible with Catholic teaching.

He responded: "We [the EU] want to offer shelter to people who are persecuted politically or because of their religion or race, as well as to people from war or civil war zones. These humanitarian principles do not waver for us. I see many points of agreement with what the Catholic Church says."

The news agency pursued him asking: "But you want to let fewer refugees into the EU?"

He replied: "We know that 60% of people who arrive in Germany are not entitled to asylum."

In other words, many asylum-seekers are really would-be economic migrants in disguise. They should apply to get into the EU on that basis and not try to cheat the system.

The Catholic Church in Europe for the most part identifies strongly with the mainstream parties, despite the fact that some of those parties have sometimes been extremely hostile to the Christian roots of Europe.

But new voting patterns are placing the Church in a quandary. On the one hand, the Church wants to identify with the poor and dispossessed of the developing world who wish to come into Europe. On the other hand, this makes low-income voters in the West feel more economically insecure and the Church is supposed to side with them also. It is not a simple black or white issue.

The EPP seems to be moving in the right direction by trying to strike a balance between the needs of people from the developing world seeking to enter Europe, and the needs of socially disadvantaged people already here.

The Church also needs to develop a position on the issue that is both realistic and morally defensible. Indeed, in his interview, Manfred Weber basically pleaded with the Church to do precisely this. By doing so, the Church can play its small part in fending off the rise of a genuine far-right in Europe. Avoiding the hard questions and assuming we can go back to business-as-usual politics is no longer an option for the Church. It needs to offer guidance on how we can balance the needs of the poor from developing countries with the needs of our own poor.

How the liberal media in Ireland works its bias: 10 of the worst tactics



Brendan O'Regan

1. Emotion v Reason

In this scenario a person with a touching personal story, but pushing an agenda, is pitted against a person on the other side who has just rational arguments. The latter person is on a hiding to nothing, coming across as heartless, insensitive and is put in a position where they are unable to challenge the other, because that would make them seem lacking in compassion. This is regardless of the strength or validity of his/her argument. Yet, in law making and public policy matters, aiming at the common good, is it better to be guided by emotion or reason? If emotion runs high the person making a passionate speech is often highlighted and promoted in subsequent debates, merely because of their passion, regardless of the validity, rationality or logic of their position. The more this happens the less likely it is for anyone to challenge this person.

2. The Unbalanced Panel

The bias is obvious here – there's a media debate about a controversial issue, with an imbalance of numbers – often 2, 3 or 4 to one. This puts the 'one' on the defensive, when they won't be as effective, and allows the others to gang up on the 'one'. A variation on this is when the presenter weighs in on the side of the majority, making it 3, 4 or 5 to 1.

3. The Biased Presenter

An interviewer or presenter that you expect to be impartial, and is required to be so by broadcasting standards, just isn't. You can tell by the language used (they sometimes adopt the loaded language of one side of an issue) and the contrast between the way they question spokespersons for one side and the way they question those on the other side.

RTÉ regularly defends its programming as fair and impartial



4. The 'Neutral' Expert

In this case there's a supposedly neutral expert, e.g. on law, or medicine, who is not really neutral at all, as can be judged by the language they use, the points they choose to make, and the points they choose to omit. They may have expertise in one area, giving them an air of authority, but then speak on a different area and still seem authoritative.

5. Sauce for the Goose

A spokesperson on one side of an issue gets a soft easy interview and in the relaxed atmosphere expresses themselves very well. Then, a person on the other side gets an intensive grilling and under pressure doesn't express themselves as well as they'd wish.

6. No Debate

In this instance those on one side of an argument make out that the debate is closed, that there is no more conflict on the issue, that all the nice people are on one side so why give the nasty people any air time? They can throw tantrums and even barge out of studios if they don't get their way.

7. The Creepy Imagery

The media demonise a

cause or institution by associating it with creepy imagery and music, giving it a sinister ambiance that will turn people off.

8. Groupthink

This is partly an example of media bias, though mostly one of the causes of it. This becomes evident in some chat shows where everybody is of one mind on a controversial issue, and it all tends to sound like a 'love-in'. Participants pretend there's no other viewpoint, or assume there's no other view point, or really think there's no other viewpoint because of the limited circles they move in.

9. The Dodgy Poll

A media outlet or campaigning group conducts an opinion poll with loaded questions and then uses the result to browbeat the opposing viewpoint. Can be used to further the 'No Debate' approach.

10. The Softening

Dominant elements in the media, influenced by 'No Debate', conduct soft interviews with one side of an argument, sideline representatives of the other side, and this could go on for years. Then a 'Dodgy Poll' is conducted and surprise, surprise, there's a majority for the point of view promoted for so long.

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Quarter of a million Holocaust survivors still alive today



Chai Brady

In a world that continues to grapple with the echoes of history, a recent report from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) sheds light on the remarkable resilience of a quarter of a million Holocaust survivors still living today. This report, based on data collected by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference), provides a comprehensive overview of the demographic composition, current needs, and ongoing challenges faced by these survivors as they age.

Beacon

Since its establishment in 1951, the Claims Conference has been a beacon of justice

Pope Francis touches the death wall at the Auschwitz Nazi death camp in Oswiecim, Poland, in this July 29, 2016, file photo. During his weekly general audience, January 24, Pope Francis highlighted International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust on January 27 and the importance of remembering and condemning the extermination of millions of Jews and people of other faiths. Photo: CNS/Paul Haring



for Jewish victims of Nazi persecution. Through negotiations with Germany and other initiatives, the Claims Conference has secured recognition, compensation, and restitution totalling over \$90 billion (€83 billion) for survivors. Beyond financial compensation, the organisation plays a crucial role in providing social welfare services, including home care, medicine, meals, and support networks, enabling

survivors to age in their homes with dignity. The January 2024 report highlights the evolution of survivor eligibility criteria, a testament to the Claims Conference's ongoing negotiations with the German government. Originally limited to specific groups, the definition now includes a broader spectrum of Jewish individuals affected by Nazi persecution, encompassing those in concentration

Table 6. Current Population of Holocaust Survivors by Region, 2023

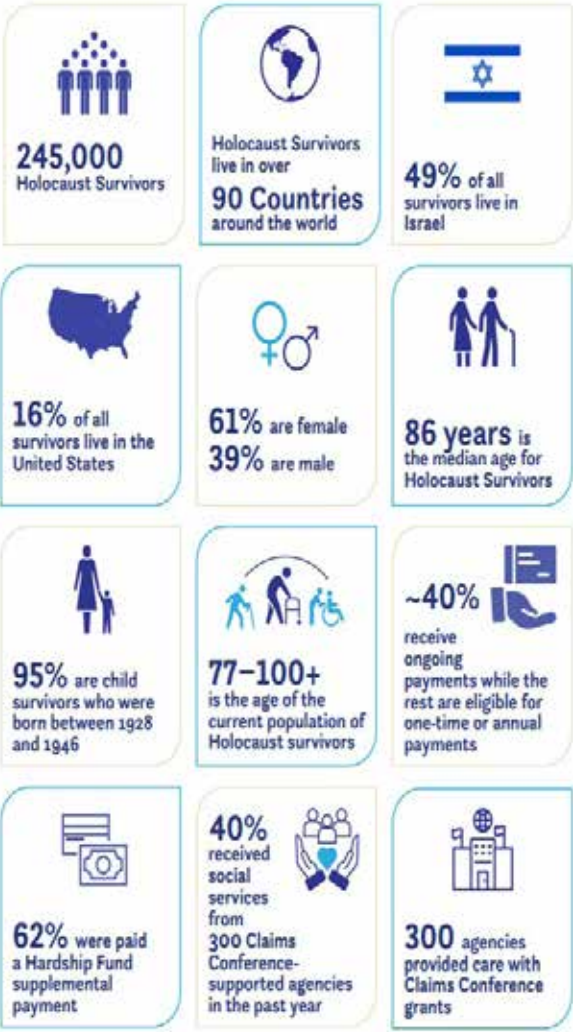
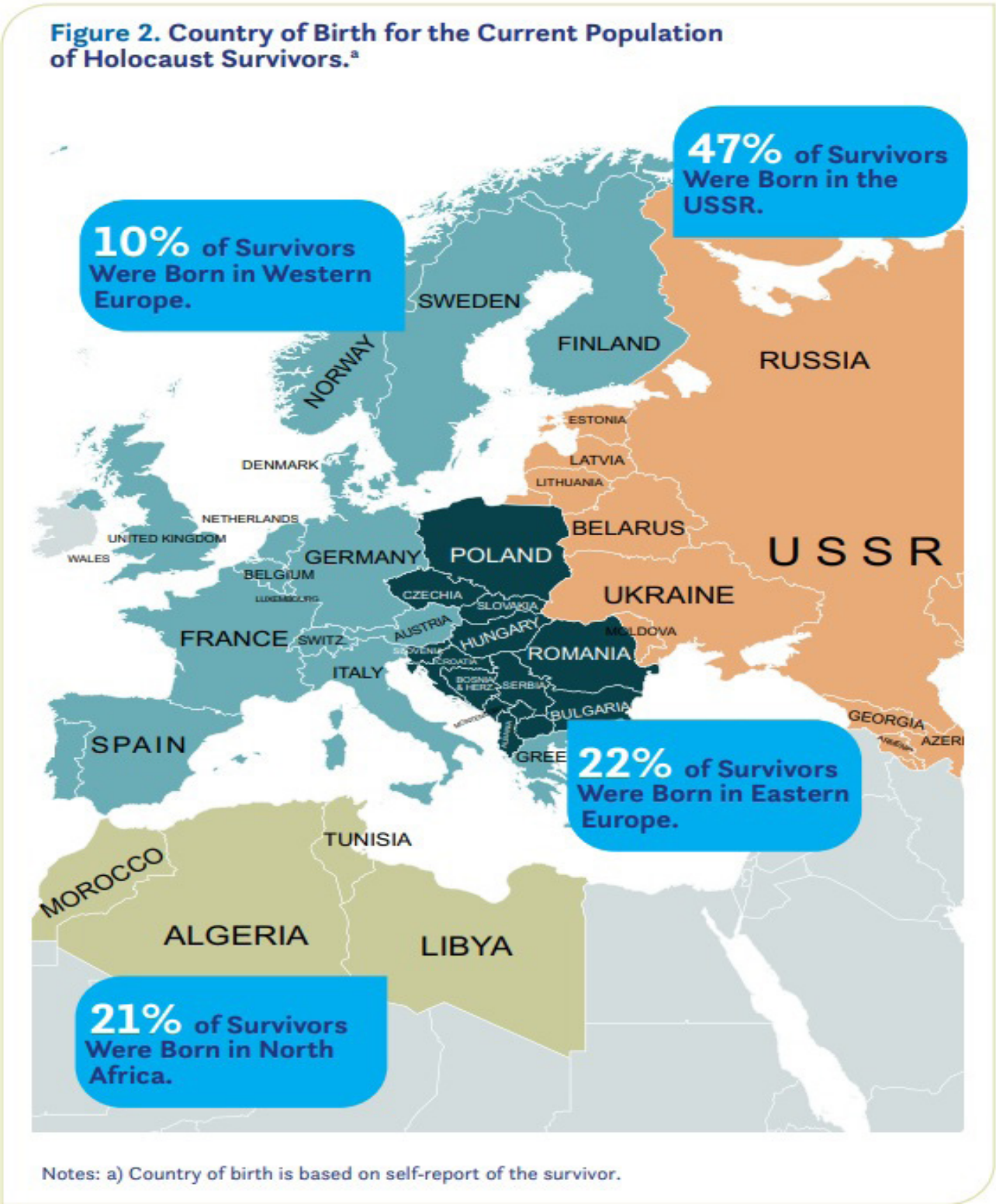
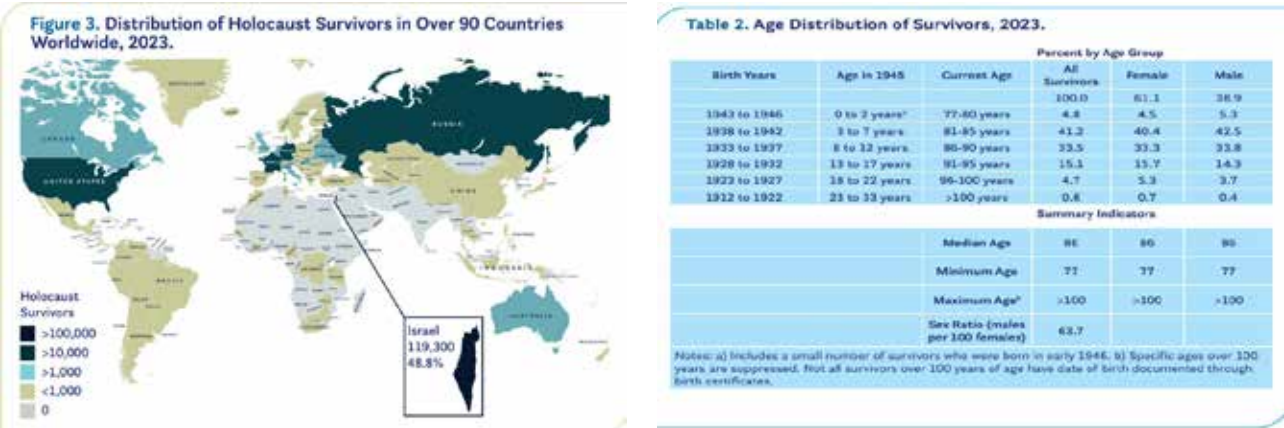
Region	Survivors ^a	Percent
Israel	119,300	48.7
North America	44,200	18.1
Western Europe	42,800	17.5
Former Soviet Union	28,900	11.8
Eastern Europe	6,100	2.5
Other ^b	3,600	1.5
Total	245,000	100.0

Notes: a) Population estimates are rounded to the nearest hundred for display in tables. b) Includes survivors in Australia, New Zealand and other areas in Oceania; Argentina, Brazil and other South American and Caribbean countries; and countries in Africa and Asia.

camps, forced labour camps, ghettos, and those who were forced to flee or live in hiding. Notably, it recognises Jews who were in utero during the persecution of their mothers. **Survivors** As of August 2023, the global population of Holocaust survivors stands at 245,000, with ages ranging from 77 to over 100 years. A significant majority, 95%,

were children at the time of Nazi persecution, enduring unimaginable hardships such as concentration camps, ghettos, and living in hiding. Nearly half of all survivors, 49%, currently reside in Israel. Western Europe and North America each house 18% of survivors, with France being home to 9% of survivors worldwide. The former Soviet Union (FSU) accounts for 12% of

survivors, underscoring the global reach of the Holocaust's impact. With a median age of 86 years and 20% of survivors aged over 90, increasing care needs present a significant challenge. The report indicates that 40% of survivors currently receive services from agencies funded by the Claims Conference, with new requests for home care and related services steadily rising. The increase



 **Father Peyton Centre | Ireland**
HOLY CROSS
FAMILY MINISTRIES

Manager

Based in Attymass, Co Mayo, the Father Peyton Centre is a visitor centre dedicated to the spiritual and cultural heritage of Venerable Patrick Peyton C.S.C. and are seeking applications for the position of Centre Manager.

This is an exciting opportunity for the successful candidate to develop the Visitor Centre further and support the existing valuable work of the services provided.

Reporting to the Executive Director, Holy Cross Family Ministries Ireland, the Manager will have the following responsibilities:

- Co-ordinate community services including Meals on Wheels and weekly gatherings;
- Maintain and develop the facility to offer an excellent visitor experience;
- Manage the staff and resources of the centre effectively;
- Co-ordinate events, retreats and visitors in conjunction with the Executive Director;

Applicants must possess the following:

1. Minimum 3 years experience managing in a similar Visitor Experience role;
2. In depth Knowledge of community services and funding available;

The successful candidate will be highly motivated to work on their own initiative, have a specific interest in the role and excellent people management skills.

To request detailed Job Description and application form, email: frpeytoncentreboard@gmail.com,

Completed Applications should be submitted by email to: frpeytoncentreboard@gmail.com, before **17:00, Friday February 23rd 2024.**

www.frpeytoncentre.ie

The Fr Peyton Centre is an Equal Opportunities Employer



in needs is attributed to aging survivors requiring more assistance and existing recipients experiencing escalating disability.

Allocations

To address the growing needs of survivors, the Claims Conference has consistently increased its allocations to agencies globally over the past seven years. This commitment reflects an awareness of the changing landscape

and the necessity to adapt assistance programmes to evolving circumstances.

Holocaust survivor, Reha Bennicasa, daughter of Rose Girona, the oldest living Holocaust survivor known to the Claims Conference said: "As a survivor and daughter of a survivor, I cannot stress enough how important it is to share our testimonies. Personally, I am pleased that my mother has reached 112 years of age, and to learn that she is the

oldest Holocaust survivor.

Oppression

"My mother and I survived German and then Japanese oppression. Her strength throughout this horror and in all other facets of her life are amazing. She is a wonderful example to me and, hopefully, to the world. Given the declining survivor population and the rise in antisemitism, we need to encourage the world to learn about our collective history so that the Holocaust

will never happen again."

The quarter of a million Holocaust survivors still living today stand as living testaments to resilience, courage, and the indomitable human spirit. As the Claims Conference continues its work on behalf of these survivors, it is imperative for the global community to recognise their contributions, honour their experiences, and ensure that they receive the care and support they need to age with dignity.

Out&About

The knights come knocking...



MAYO: Dames and Knights of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem – Lieutenancy of Ireland are pictured with Archbishop of Tuam, Francis Duffy KC*HS at the Apparition Chapel, Knock Marian Shrine on Saturday, January 27, during the order's annual pilgrimage.



MAYO: Chevaliers Thomas Kilduff (Cavan) and John Cunningham (Kilmeaden, Waterford) members of The Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem – Lieutenancy of Ireland at Knock Shrine.



ROME: Bishop of Ossory Niall Coll and Church of Ireland Bishop of Cashel and Ossory Adrian Wilkinson, two Irish participants at the recent meeting of IARCCUM (the Anglican Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission) are pictured in St Peter's with Bishop Brian Farrell and Fr Martin Browne OSB.

IN SHORT

Prayerful pro-life protest outside Cavan hospital

A prayerful protest took place at the entrance to Cavan General Hospital at 3pm on Sunday, January 28 organised by the Choose Life Cavan and South Cavan branches ahead of the introduction of abortion services planned for 2024.

The protest had support from African, Arab, Indian, Filipino and Polish health workers in Cavan General Hospital, according to a spokesperson for the protest.

The rosary prayers were led by Deacon Andy Brady and prayers were also said by Fr PJ Hughes PP from Mullahoran.

"The protest highlighted to Minister for

Health Stephen Donnelly and local politicians and HSE management that we vehemently object to these abortion plans," the protest's spokesperson said.

Cavan and South Tipperary General Hospital in Clonmel are the only two maternity hospitals in the country where abortion services are not available.

Previously, consultants at Cavan General Hospital wrote to the then-Minister for Health stating their objection to any involvement in providing this deadly life termination service, according to the protestors statement.

Anna Donoghue, secretary of Choose Life south Cavan branch, said the group has hired a barrister – Ben O'Flynn BL – to establish the rights of HSE employees and hospital workers who refuse to carry out abortions or work where

support services are provided.

This, she added, will focus on the premise of 'conscientious objection' – the refusal to perform a legal role or responsibility because of personal beliefs.

Waterford diocese hosts ecumenical prayer service

Christians should not attack or speak negatively of each other within "our Christian diversity", Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan told an ecumenical gathering in Waterford.

Speaking at a prayer service for Christian unity in Tramore, Co. Waterford, Bishop Cullinan said such attacks would be against "the body of Christ, akin to when Our Lord Jesus Christ said

to Saul; 'Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me'?"

Around 20 people attended the prayer service, including Bishop Cullinan, Church of Ireland Dean of Waterford Bruce John Hayes, Church of Ireland Rev. Christine O'Dowd-Smyth, Ukrainian chaplain Fr Andriy Sowiak, a priest of the Sambii-Drohobych Eparchy of the UCCC, and Pentecostal Pastor Steve Hamer from Dungarvan.

Also in attendance were laity and religious of the Catholic and Protestant Churches.

Fr Sowiak, who ministers to the Ukrainian Catholic community in Erin, led the closing prayer for Christian unity. Both Ukrainian Orthodox Christians, and Ukrainian Catholics frequent St Frances Ukrainian Catholic Church in the heart of the ancient quarter of Waterford city.

Edited by Ruadhán Jones
Ruadhan@irishcatholic.ie



Events deadline is a week in advance of publication



WESTMEATH: Bishop Tom Deenihan leads vespers with the priests and religious of the diocese of Meath to mark the feast of the Presentation of the Lord.



WATERFORD: Approximately 20 people, including Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan, Church of Ireland Dean Bruce John Hayes, Rev. Christine O'Dowd-Smyth, Fr Andriy Soviak, a priest of the Sambii-Drohobych Eparchy of the UCCC, and Pentecostal Pastor Steve Hamer from Dungarvan, attend an ecumenical gathering in Tramore, January 24.



ROSCOMMON: Mother and daughter Mary and Maggie Keenan of Kilmore are pictured after being commissioned as Eucharist Ministers during Mass in Dangan Church by Fr Stephen Ezenwegbu PP of Aughrim/Kilmore Parish.



TYRONE: Students and staff from Dean Maguire College Carrickmore show off their display for Catholic Schools week.



CAVAN: A prayer protest takes place at the entrance to Cavan General Hospital at 3pm on Sunday, January 28, organised by members of the Choose Life Cavan and South Cavan branches, ahead of the provision of abortion services planned for there during 2024.

ANTRIM

Novena to Our Lady of Lourdes in Moneyglass concludes on February 11 at 7pm.

ARMAGH

Adoration Chapel on Edward Street holds Adoration from 9am-7pm every day.

CARLOW

Training for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion will take place from 10am to 4pm on Saturday, February 10, in the Cathedral Parish Centre.

CAVAN

Nine Day Novena to the Holy Face of Jesus starts concludes Monday February 12 with Mass at 10am in Cavan Town parish.

CLARE

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament takes place Monday to Friday at Ennis Cathedral from 5pm until 7pm.

CORK

Spring Gathering for our Family of Parishes Thursday February 8th at 7.30 pm in Church of the Immaculate Conception, Farran.

DERRY

Dungiven Lectio Divina Group meet on Wednesdays, from 7.30-9pm, in Dungiven Parish House, while St Canice's Prayer Group meets each Thursday in Dungiven Conference Room at 7pm and invites anyone who wishes to deepen their faith through shared Scripture, prayer and praise.

DONEGAL

The Legion of Mary meet every Thursday in Raphoe parish at 8pm. All welcome.

DOWN

Lectio Divina Group 7.30pm-8.30pm meet in St Dymphna's Room in Bangor Parish every Monday.

FERMANAGH

St Michael's Parish Enniskillen hosts a Divine Mercy Holy Hour every Sunday at 7pm.

GALWAY

Roundtower association to host conference on 'Our Lady, the Liturgy, the family and the crisis of modernity' with guest speakers Dr Joseph Shaw and Fr Philomeno James Mary in Galmont Hotel, on February 10 at 9am To register contact info@roundtower.org.

KILDARE

A one night per week programme for Lent starts on Ash Wednesday, February 14, in Our Lady's Parish Centre, Leixlip, from 7.45-9pm followed by tea. The programme's theme is 'Living words – Keeping Scripture Alive Today', with will have a different theme each evening presented by a different speaker.

KILKENNY

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is available after Saturday evening Mass or any other time on request in Thomastown Parish.

LAOIS

An ecumenical service of prayer and worship in the Methodist Church, Mountmellick, takes place Sunday, February 11, at 7pm, gathering to celebrate Christian unity in Christ, in prayer and in fellowship.

LEITRIM

Daily rosary at 6pm in St Joseph's Church, Leitrim Village.

LOUTH

St Peter's Youth Group for teenagers 13-17 years old in Drogheda, meets on the first and third Friday of each month in the Family Room of Our Lady of Lourdes Church. Come along to encounter God, make new friends and have fun.

MEATH

Legion of Mary Navan meetings Monday and Tuesday at 7pm in Community Centre (via red door beside Meals-on-Wheels). Contact 046 902 3474. New members welcome. Junior Legion meets 7pm on Thursday, contact 086 367 1171.

MONAGHAN

Monaghan Charismatic Prayer Group's spring conference takes place on Friday 9, Saturday 10 and Sunday 11 of February in Four Seasons Hotel. For details contact Josephine on 087 931 8514 or Anne Marie 086 725 1770.

TYRONE

Eucharistic Adoration takes place in St Luárán's, Dunganon on Monday and Wednesday 10.30am-5pm.

WEXFORD

A triduum in honour of Our Lady of Lourdes takes place February 9-11 at St Michael's Parish Gorey.

Catholic poetry from a monk's cat to Dante



A new collection showcases diversity of the Catholic poetry, hears **Ruadhán Jones**

Catholicism and art, like faith and science, are not supposed to mix. Art is about 'freethinking', so it is assumed that subscribing to dogma can only limit your talent.

A new book on Catholic poets blows this myth out of the water. Collated by award winning poet and Catholic convert Sally Read and published by Word on Fire, *100 Great Catholic Poems* reveals the artistic drive rooted in God that has produced varied, beautiful works since the beginnings of Christianity.

This collection ranges from Mary's Magnificat through to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and an Irish monk's reflections on his cat. Regardless of subject matter or style, faith is the inspiration to the men and women who wrote these poems.

To quote from one of Ms Read's favourite works in

the collection, by Renaissance poet Vittoria Colonna: "now the holy nails/ Will be my pens, my ink will be his precious/ Blood, his lifeless sacred skin my page/ On which I'll write all he sustained."

"You couldn't get more Catholic than that," Ms Read tells *The Irish Catholic* with a laugh, adding later that poetry is "a really God-given art form".

“God uses poetry to make us understand our relationship with him through the psalms and through so many books in the Bible”

Poetry and faith are perhaps more closely intertwined than any other art form. Through the Mass, the Divine Office and the scriptures, poetry is ingrained into the lives of Catholics. As a result, we "have no choice but to converse with it and understand it", the English poet says.

"Poetry is God's chosen language to address us," Ms Read explains. "So right from the beginning in Scripture, God uses poetry to make us understand our relationship with him through the psalms and through so many books in the Bible like Isaiah and Song of Solomon."

"He uses poetry because God is ineffable and poetry is all about trying to describe something that's indescribable. That's the



primary function of poetry – if you're trying to describe something that's impossible to describe, you have to find a metaphor to say that it's like this and it's a bit like that. That's the way that poetry functions."

Prayers and poems

Given that poetry is God's chosen language, it's not a surprise that the distinction between prayers and poems can be hard to pin down. "The moment you say

my God is my rock and my stronghold, you're already using poetry," explains Ms Read, who recently released her first book of poetry since converting to the Faith more than a decade ago.

The first poem from the collection is the Magnificat, Mary's hymn of praise to God. It was a deliberate decision on Ms Read's part, marking her intention to choose poetry from the coming of Christ on and also acknowledging Mary's own poetic instincts.

"There are some beautiful hymns and there are some very, very beautiful prayers," she says. "So I was quite strict [in deciding between the two], but at the same time there's overlap because a long, long time ago hymns meant actually a song of praise to God."

"So the hymns of St Gergory Nazianzen and St Ephraem are in there because they're not hymns in the way we would understand hymns, as songs to sing in church in that very Anglo-Saxon way."

When Word on Fire first came to Ms Read, she was excited by the prospect of the project. She didn't hesitate to come on board as it "sounded a really, really

exciting thing to do", as well as being necessary. "People seemed to be very eager for it," she says.

“I deliberately chose things I perhaps wasn't personally crazy about. But actually when I worked with the poem, I became passionate about it through working with it”

But she did want to know more, particularly regarding how strict on the 'Catholic' side of things they were going to be.

"They were quite explicit about what they wanted in terms of, it had to be very Catholic – my first question to them was how strict are you going to be? Can I have TS Eliot, who didn't actually convert to Catholicism? And they said, well no you can't, it's got to be absolutely Catholic," she explains.

"Initially I was thinking, this is going to be really difficult. But as I say in the introduction, that strictness led to a really interest-

ing anthology. Whereas if you're more woolly in your guidelines, then you end up with something that's less distinctive."

Variety

Arguably, defining 'greatness' was going to be more challenging than choosing Catholics. Labelling anything great opens you up to questions and accusations, why this and not that. Ms Read stresses that she tried to be as objective as possible in choosing a wide range of subjects, styles and authors.

"I had to work with my taste but also against my taste. I deliberately chose things I perhaps wasn't personally crazy about. But actually when I worked with the poem, I became passionate about it through working with it."

There were some she knew she wanted from the beginning, such as Dante and English poet Fr Robert Southwell SJ. GK Chesterton, who Ms Read admits she isn't the hugest fan of in literary terms, "he had to be in there because he's so popular and I'm really glad he is. I think he brings something really important to the anthology."

"There's a poem by Joyce



Poet Patrick Kavanagh



A large three-dimensional representation of Italian poet Dante Alighieri is seen during a parade marking the feast of the Epiphany in Rome near the Vatican on January 6, 2023. Photo: CNS/Justin McLellan

Kilmer called 'Trees', which is a very well-known and popular poem. I surprised myself by putting it in there, but I like the way it sits in there. It's a nice change of pace, it's a nice poem, and it's nice that there will be poems in there that people will recognise."

“The images were outlandish to me, the context alien. And yet it spoke to my heart. I was soothed, but electrified”

A good number of Irish poets get a look in, from ancient saints to members of the 1916 rising. Another favourite of Ms Read's is an anonymous Irish poem, 'Donal Og', translated by Lady Augusta Gregory.

Describing reading the poem's opening line – “It is late last night the dog was speaking of you” – for the first time, Ms Read says she was “struck at once by the strangeness”.

“There was much more I did not understand as I read on,” she writes in the book's introduction. “The images were outlandish to

me, the context alien. And yet it spoke to my heart. I was soothed, but electrified. The poem would travel with me for a long time.”

Irish names dominate the early sections of the book, including St Columba and St Patrick, while Joseph Plunkett's 'I see his blood upon the rose' is included later, along with two poems by Patrick Kavanagh. In amongst these Catholic classics, however, is a curious poem about an Irish monk and his cat written in the 9th Century.

Whimsical distraction

Appearing among notes about St Paul, angels and “other far loftier matters”, the piece appears a “simple, whimsical distraction from study”, Ms Read writes in the introduction.

“I love that poem, it was a no brainer for me to get that in there,” she tells this paper. “It's got great rhymes and has a very Catholic outlook.”

“And that's the thing, you might think well what's so Catholic about the monk with his cat, what's that about? But actually if you think about the relation of the cat to the monk and the monk to nature and God and

the angels, it's very Catholic in its vision.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a poem often lauded as the greatest of all time takes up a great deal of space in this anthology. Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* “kind of has to be the best Catholic poem ever written”, says Ms Read.

“Popes have been celebratory and proprietorial about the *Divine Comedy*. It is astonishing. It's about this spiritual crisis, this middle-aged man travelling through hell and purgatory and heaven. There are just so many theological truths in there and it's so, so dramatic and amazing. There had to be a lot of that.”

“If there are images you like, underline them. Read them for the pleasure of hearing the sounds and letting things come to mind”

If you fear that so far the book seems stuck in the past, you don't need to be. One of the effects of limiting the book's remit strictly to Catholics is it has thrown up a varied and high-quality

“Some of the poems are very similar to prayers or written in the style of prayers even. So it's quite a devout book, in that sense”

collection of modern writers. These include Polish poet Czesław Miłosz, American poet Claude McKay, and the fascinating English poet Elizabeth Jennings.

Modern poetry

Ms Read thinks it will come as a surprise to many to see the variety and quality of modern Catholic poetry.

“Contemporary poetry is very under-read anyway,” she says. “And we've got some extraordinary contemporary Catholic poets... some [of those selected] are very recent, for instance George MacKay Brown and Denise Levertov. They died in the early part of this century or the late part of the 20th century.”

Speaking as a poet, Ms Read hopes that people will

approach the poems in her new book “like you would listen to music”.

“You should read it aloud and not worry about understanding it,” she says. “Then if there are images you like, underline them. Read them for the pleasure of hearing the sounds and letting things come to mind.”

“The good thing about this anthology is that there is a commentary for every poem, so you should have some good idea of what the poet was like, the time they were living in and why they wrote the poem and what it was about. You won't be left high and dry, there shouldn't be any poem in there that you have no idea what's going on.”

Another aspect of the book Ms Read is keen to highlight is its devotional character, a

product of the strict criteria applied.

“I think that if you're feeling spiritually dry or you have a retreat going on, it's the type of book you could take very safely. Because some of the poems are very similar to prayers or written in the style of prayers even. So it's quite a devout book, in that sense,” she finishes.

Whatever way you approach the book, whether as a means of prayer or to appreciate beautiful poetry, it is a valuable introduction to the canon of Catholic poetry.

i Sally Read's 100 Great Catholic Poems published by Word On Fire is available for purchase in hardback online.

Doon grannies and grandads celebrated at school Mass

Staff reporter



Ann Fitzgerald and Hilary Hughes with her grandchildren and parents, Michael Fitzgerald, Jen Fitzgerald and John Clifford at Mass for Catholic Schools week in Doon Parish Church, Co. Limerick.



Peig McLoughlin with her grandchildren from Doon Convent Primary School.



John and Margaret Kitching join their grandchildren from Doon Convent Primary School at a grandparents' Mass.



Gerry Connors with his daughter Katie and grandchildren Rua and Senan Murphy from Doon CBS Primary School enjoy grandparents day.



Pakie and Ann O'Brien are pictured with their grandchildren from Doon CBS Primary School.



Margaret Crowe pictured with her grandson Cormac Crowe at Mass.



Kathleen Ryan and her grandchildren Billy and Tommy Murphy from Doon CBS Primary School are pictured at the grandparents' Mass.

THE SYNODAL TIMES



“Synodality is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium” – Pope Francis

CARDINAL ROMERO ON NORTH AFRICA

PAGES 20–21

LETTER FROM THE NILE

JUSTIN ROBINSON

PAGE 22

Religious men and the call to renewal

Luca Attanasio

The executive councils of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) and the Union of Superiors General (USG), in the wake of their joint contribution to the first phase of the synodal process in 2022, organised “Synodality: A Renewed Call to the Prophecy of Hope”, a meeting which took place in **November 22 to 24** at the “Fraterna Domus” Spirituality House in Sacrofano (Rome). The event, marked the first joint meeting of the two unions and saw the participation of over 250 Superiors General, evenly distributed between male and female religious leaders. The two unions have intensified their collaboration since their online reflection on Pope Francis’s encyclical “Fratelli Tutti” and have expressed a clear desire to continue walking together. After talking to **Sr Mary t Barron, OIA, president of UISG**, *The Synodal Times* turned to **Fratel Emili Turu, general secretary of the USG**, former superior general of the Marist Brothers from 2009 to 2017

What is the meaning of this Synod on Synodality with all its profound novelties for religious life?

Pope Francis has said several times that synodality is what the Lord expects of the Church in this millennium we are living. During the joint meeting of the two Unions of Superiors General, I could see that consecrated life is convinced of this call of the Spirit at this moment in history and is committed to carrying it forward. There will certainly be exceptions among the members of consecrated life, but among the members of leadership I saw hope and commitment.

Someone commented that this Synod has in a way the same breath and spirit as the Second Vatican Council, is this so in your opinion? Why?

Vatican II meant, among other things, the rediscovery of the Church as the People of



Emili Turu, general secretary of the Union of Superior Generals

God. The exercise of synodality is a practical application of this ecclesiology. Church history reminds us that the implementation of a Council takes a period of time of about one hundred years... That is where we are now, in the implementation of Vatican II!

“The two Unions have already been ‘walking together’ for years, in a synodal way, collaborating in many initiatives and projects”

How many men and women religious are involved in the synodal assemblies, what do you think is the specific contribution they are making and what is the Synod offering to Religious Life?

I do not have a concrete number, but it is probably high. There are 10 religious men

and women chosen by the USG (5) and the UISG (5). But then there are many other religious men and women: some chosen directly by the Pope, and many others who collaborate in facilitation tasks or as consultants, or in other types of support. There are also many bishops who are religious... starting with the Pope! In consecrated life there is a long history of synodal experiences, albeit in different forms, often influenced by the historical

Continued over

NEXT WEEK: EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH THE ‘REFUGEE’ BISHOP OF MYANMAR.

Continued from page 19

context in which each congregation was founded. Different spiritual traditions are offering their richness to the synodal process, but at the same time feel challenged to shed what is not essential in their own tradition and to embrace with openness the newness of the Spirit.

Commenting on the meaning of the meeting, Father Arturo Marcelino Sosa, Superior General of the Society of Jesus and President of the USG, urged the participants not to miss the opportunity to “think together about how best to combine energies and resources to serve the mission of Christ”. What strategies were discussed to keep the synodal spirit alive between the two Unions?

The two Unions participated very actively in the consultation process that preceded the first session of the Synod and will continue to do so whenever they are invited to do so. In the meeting we had with the Pope, it was very clear that the two Unions of Superiors General are at his side in this effort of renewal of the universal Church. Moreover, the two Unions have already been ‘walking together’ for years, in a synodal way, collaborating in many initiatives and projects.

“I think we can already see the fruits of this Synod in the path we have travelled: we are learning together to listen to each other, to discern, to listen to the Spirit”

What do you imagine and above all hope for this long and participative synodal process between now and its conclusion in a year's time?

I try not to have too high expectations, because a renewal process of the universal Church takes many years... and a lot of patience! I think we can already see the fruits of this Synod in the path we have travelled: we are learning together to listen to each other, to discern, to listen to the Spirit. This is the most important thing, I believe. A new style of relationship in the Church and with all our brothers and sisters, believers and non-believers. I hope that in a few years, when we look back, we will be able to recognise that the journey we have made together has made us better people, better Christians.



Cardinal Cristóbal López Romero of Rabat, Morocco, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 17, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

Cardinal Romero on North Africa, migration and living amidst Islam

EXCLUSIVE



Luca Attanasio

Cardinal Cristóbal López Romero, S.D.B., Archbishop of Rabat, Morocco, was born on 19 May 1952 in Vélez-Rubio, in the diocese of Almería, Spain. In 1964 he entered the religious family of the Salesians and was ordained a priest in 1979.

After a long time in South America, he returned to his homeland as superior of the Salesian province of *María Auxiliadora* in 2017, and was appointed by Pope Francis as archbishop of Rabat. He received episcopal ordination on 10 March 2018, and - maybe in one of the fastest process - created and proclaimed Cardinal by Pope Francis in the consistory of 5 October 2019, with title Cardinal-Priest of San Leone.

Besides being a bishop and a cardinal, he is also a member of the fourth estate: in 1982 he obtained a diploma in information science, in the journalism school, at the autonomous University of Barcelona.

Interviewed by *The Synodal Times*, the cardinal, a priest immersed in the North African context and a man of dialogue, a pastor attentive to the demands of the most marginalised in society, spoke about the Synod and Africa, the challenges of the Church in Islamic lands, migration, and the Maghreb bishops' reaction to the *Fiducia Supplicans*

You were present at the Synod sessions and like you, many delegates from Africa (over 60). What significance does this event have for the African Church?

The Synod on Synodality is being (because it is still ongoing) for every Christian a magnificent experience of “Catholicity”, universality, communion and participation in a common mission. For Africa it has been an opportunity to become aware of existing as an African Church and to make its voice heard as such: the first time that a continental Assembly

has been held with the participation of lay people, religious men and women, priests and bishops. But at the same time it is an opportunity to discover the universal Church and not to fall into the temptation of closing in on itself. Africa has the possibility and the duty to share its Christian experience with the rest of the Church, but also the obligation to allow itself to be enriched, questioned and enlightened by the experiences of other places.

The Churches in North Africa live in an almost totally Islamic context, what is the main meaning of their presence? What are the main challenges and goals?

The meaning of our presence in North Africa is the same as in the rest of the world. We exist to be signs and bearers of God's love for the world, to be a manifestation of God's tenderness for humanity, to be a sacrament of the encounter or covenant that God wants to establish with

humanity, to be, with Christ, builders of the Kingdom that He has come to announce, propose and inaugurate. The Church, neither here nor anywhere else, is not self-referential, it does not live for itself, it does not aim at self-aggrandisement and “fattening”. Christ has been defined as “man-for-others”. The Church, the Body of Christ, must also be and exist “for others”, not for itself.

“But what a pastor cannot exempt or escape from is to welcome these people, to listen to them, to proclaim the Gospel to them, to pray with them”

In North Africa, in a context of Islamic majority, we see this very clearly, it is evident to us; in countries with a Christian tradition and majority, it ends up being lost sight of and the Church can dangerously

become closed in on itself, becoming an objective of itself, forgetting that it is a means to a greater end: the Kingdom of God. The Churches of North Africa humbly wish to render this service to the universal Church: that the goal is the Kingdom of God.

The objective, then, is unique, universal and of all times: to make peace, justice and freedom, life, truth and love reign in the world; that is to say, that God reigns in everything and in everyone. And the challenge is to build this Kingdom by already being part of it, by being a visible sign of what we want the whole of humanity to be: a family, the family of God, in which He is the Father and we are all brothers and sisters; in short, universal brotherhood.

You became bishop and cardinal in a very short time, do you see this as a sign of the Holy Father's special interest in the Maghreb Churches?

Yes, the fact that I have been named cardinal, with only a year and a half of episcopate, indicates that it is not something personal, but rather institutional. I believe that with this gesture the Pope wanted to give a boost to the Churches of North Africa, to the Churches that live in a predominantly Muslim environment and to all those who are committed to living and promoting the Islamo-Christian dialogue.

“The objective, then, is unique, universal and of all times: to make peace, justice and freedom, life, truth and love reign in the world; that is to say, that God reigns in everything and in everyone”



Pope Francis celebrates Mass at Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat, Morocco, March 31, 2019.

The question of migrants: Libya, Tunisia, Morocco itself are places of passage and often of great pain for hundreds of thousands of individuals, how does the Church position itself?

The Pope has indicated to all Christians four verbs that express the attitudes with which we must face, as Christians and as citizens, the phenomenon of migration: welcome, protect, promote and integrate. From Caritas, but not only, our Churches do their best to put into practice what these four words indicate, especially the first two; in promotion and integration we have fewer possibilities because they require time, and people who are in a situation of mobility do not stay with us for long, they are really just passing through.

Unlike the Churches of sub-Saharan Africa, the Churches of North Africa had a different attitude towards Fidei Supplicans. In the final communiqué of the Cerna meeting in Rabat from 11 to 15 January, there is an invitation to the ecclesial communities to assess their concrete attitudes on reception and accompaniment in the light of the Document on the pastoral meaning of blessings. Can you tell us more about your position?

We start from three principles. First, the Christian doctrine on marriage and sexuality, which does not change but is reaffirmed. Second, the existence of people - not few - who live at a distance from the Christian ideal in this area, for various reasons, but who are Christians and want to come closer to that ideal. And thirdly, the understanding that a blessing does not necessarily mean approval of the conduct of the person or persons blessed, but a request for help from God

so that, with his grace and strength, they may be converted and improve in their life of faith.

If these three principles are accepted, it is logical that we use blessings as a spiritual and pastoral resource (third point) to bring people who are in an irregular and incorrect situation (second point) towards the ideal (first point).

These blessings, which do not condone the conduct of the recipient, are not obligatory; the priest can discern whether they are suitable or not and whether the necessary conditions are met (above all that there is no confusion or intention to assimilate them to the sacrament of marriage); therefore, in conscience, he decides whether to give them or not.

But what a pastor cannot exempt or escape from is to welcome these people, to listen to them, to proclaim the Gospel to them, to pray with them and to accompany them in a discernment that will help them to come closer to God and to live their Christian life correctly. Frankly, if we do all this, it matters little to me whether they are blessed or not: the welcome, the prayer, the affection with which they are treated, the reflections to which they are invited and the accompaniment they are offered will be the best blessing, beyond raising one's hand and making the sign of the cross over them, however good that may be.

Are blessings the problem at hand... or is it the homophobia and moral rigidity that still nestle in the hearts of some Christians, whether pastors or lay people, and which translate into attitudes of rejection, contempt, discrimination and insult?

Luca Attanasio is a journalist, writer and teacher.

Let this marking of Myanmar's coup anniversary be the last

By Benedict Rogers

Two days ago, as I was walking around the exhibition area of the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit in Washington, D.C., a piece of paper taped to the end of a table caught my eye. On it was a photograph of my friend Reverend Dr Hkalam Samson, former president of the Kachin Baptist Convention in Myanmar.

Reverend Samson has been in jail for the past year and is serving a six-year prison sentence. I temporarily removed the piece of paper, took a photograph with it, and shared it on social media. We need to increase our efforts in the campaign to #FreeReverendSamson — and renew our efforts to #FreeMyanmar.

And today is a good day to renew our fight.

The coup

Three years ago today, the military in Myanmar seized power, completely illegally, overthrowing a democratically-elected civilian government. Under the coup leader, commander-in-chief General Min Aung Hlaing, the military plunged the country into a new nightmare of brutality, inhumanity, torture, repression and war.

Myanmar has already endured repeated coups, successive military dictatorships, and civil war for much of the past 75 years or more.

Indeed, apart from a brief period of fragile democracy at the start of independence and in between Ne Win's two regimes, Myanmar has been ruled directly or indirectly by the military ever since independence. Even in the decade of liberalisation and quasi-democracy which ended with the 2021 coup, the military pulled the strings.

"An estimated 158 people have been sentenced to death by military courts and at least four have been executed"

Yet for the past three years, Feb. 1 has been etched on my heart and seared in my mind as one of Myanmar's darkest days. The consequences of that coup have been unbelievably and heartbreakingly dire and tragic for the people of Myanmar.

People I have known personally have been jailed, displaced and driven into hiding and exile.

An estimated 158 people have been sentenced to death by military courts and at least four have been executed, such as the wonderful Ko Jimmy and Phyo Zeya Thaw, whom I met several times.

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reports that there are almost 20,000 political prisoners in Myanmar's jails today. At least 4,474 people have been killed since the coup.

Two million displaced

The United Nations claims that over two million people have been displaced within Myanmar since the

coup — and the actual figure is higher. Thousands have fled to neighboring countries.

Late last year, a UN report detailed 22 documented incidents of mass killings, the burning of entire villages, and over 687 airstrikes against civilians between April 2022 and July 2023 alone. Over 75,000 houses and other buildings have been burnt since the coup, across 106 townships in 12 states and regions. Many churches have been destroyed, damaged or desecrated.

The humanitarian crisis is also urgent. Half the population lives in poverty. As many as 18.6 million people are in urgent need of assistance.

Under Min Aung Hlaing's regime, the military has resorted to airstrikes against unarmed civilians with unprecedented scale and severity. They are also committing atrocity crimes with extraordinary barbarity.

"The military has found itself on the back-foot as the armed opposition movement has gained ground"

The junta's crimes against civilians, according to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk, include "burning them alive, dismembering, raping, beheading, bludgeoning" and "using abducted villagers" as human minesweepers.

The junta is, as Turk described it, "inhumanity in its vilest form".

Aung San Suu Kyi

Myanmar's democratically elected leader — who won an overwhelming re-election mandate in November 2020 — should be heading towards the tail-end of her second term in government.

Instead, 78-year-old Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is in prison, denied access to her family, friends or the international community. Concerns about her health have been met with refusal by the junta to allow her medical treatment outside prison.

“To me the answer is straightforward. It involves cutting the lifelines to the junta and providing lifelines to the people”

And yet, despite all this, there is cause for hope.

In a David and Goliath battle, and despite being armed by China and Russia, the military has found itself on the back-foot as the armed opposition movement has gained ground.

The armed opposition movement is like David in terms of its lack of ammunition, stockpiles, military hardware — and like David in terms of sheer guts, courage, determination and strategic precision.

Since October last year, the opposition has captured dozens of towns, many in strategically important



Aung San Suu Kyi

locations including key trading posts along Myanmar's borders.

"The answer is straightforward. It involves cutting the lifelines to the junta and providing lifelines to the people"

Min Aung Hlaing's military is struggling to recruit troops — and faces increasing dissent, dissatisfaction and despair within the ranks. Tens of thousands of soldiers have deserted, defected or simply refused to fight.

What next

There is now serious talk that the regime might collapse. We must prepare, both to encourage that to happen and to know what we do next.

To me the answer is straightforward. It involves cutting the lifelines to the junta and providing lifelines to the people.

That means cutting off the flow of funds, arms, and fuel to the military, to prevent or at least impede their ability to bomb, shoot and kill.

It means further targeted, better-coordinated sanctions.

It needs the provision of cross-border aid, to reach those most in need who cannot be reached from inside Myanmar.

It requires accountability for the military's crimes, and an end to impunity — if we can convince our political leaders to pursue these options.

Myanmar's regime has its back to the wall. Soon it will be on its knees.

The opposition forces in Myanmar have barely more than a slingshot, but with a clear aim and the support of the world, they can knock the regime out the way David knocked out Goliath.

But they need — and without any doubt — deserve our support.

They need the United States, UK, EU, Australia, and Canada to act to cut the lifelines to the regime and provide lifelines to the people.

They need the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to be more robust.

They need Pope Francis and all of us to pray.

**The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official editorial position of UCA News.*

<https://www.ucanews.com/news/let-this-marking-of-myanmars-coup-anniversary-be-the-last/104017>

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DON'T MISS NEXT WEEK'S EXCLUSIVE SYNODAL TIMES INTERVIEW WITH THE 'REFUGEE' BISHOP OF MYANMAR LIVING IN THE FOREST WITH HIS BAMBOO CATHEDRAL. ONLY IN THE IRISH CATHOLIC/THE SYNODAL TIMES



Letter from the Nile



Justin Robinson

I've just spent the day at the Cairo International Book Fair, one of the Arab world's biggest and oldest book fairs. I'm a frequent visitor to Egypt, with the number of stamps in my passport starting to raise eyebrows of uneasy immigration officials in various countries...

Ma'alesh. Never mind. I'm visiting our Benedictine community here, doing some research for my dissertation at the Dominican's Institute for Oriental Studies, and wanted to fill my suitcase with multiple purchases from the book fair.

Cheerful chaotic city

As ever, Cairo remains an assault on the senses: hot and dusty, crowded and loud, colourful and charming. In this cheerfully chaotic city, the last of the Christmas celebrations have come to an end and Ramadan is just around the corner, with the chatter on the street concerning Egypt's recent presidential election and the war in neighbouring Gaza. There is much solidarity with the Palestinians, with the flag of Palestine hanging all around and Egyptians sticking to a boycott of various western companies whom they consider to be complicit in supporting the war.

The election – which many

said was a foregone conclusion – saw the former army general Abdel Fattah el-Sissi re-elected to another presidential term. Sissi has worked hard to get Egypt on the move, with spectacular results: vast infrastructure projects such as building a new channel for the Suez Canal and twelve-lane motorways connecting major cities; new houses for those living in soon-to-be-cleared slums; glittering malls in the new capital city built in the desert east of Cairo.

Vanity projects

The president's critics argue that these are vanity projects and costly extravagances, pointing to the

country's deep economic crisis as a sign of his failure in office. Many Egyptians live in poverty, with little work and low pay. The country is beholden to foreign creditors, and inflation is staggeringly high.

During my stay a young taxi driver named Mohammad talked to me in perfect French about his education at a Jesuit school in Cairo, and shared his admiration for the priests who taught him there. He is a lawyer, but drives a taxi at night to make ends meet. I knew better than to ask him what he thought about this situation. After recounting his hardships, he simply smiled and said *alhamduillah ala kulli*

haal – “thank God in every circumstance.”

Pursuing progress

Whatever his supporters or critics might say, Preident el-Sissi is undoubtedly aware of the challenges to be tackled during his next term in office and is determined to pursue progress and prosperity in a “new republic.” Egypt is certainly on the up, but much remains to be done so that all can share in the benefits.

As I return to Jerusalem, I'm happy to have once again been welcomed into the arms of the *umm al-dinya*, “the mother of the world.” I'll be back again soon, I'm sure, for as the Egyptian saying goes: “whoever drinks from the Nile will return again.”

“During my stay a young taxi driver named Mohammad talked to me in perfect French about his education at a Jesuit school in Cairo, and shared his admiration for the priests who taught him there”

i Justin Robinson OSB is a monk of Glenstal Abbey in County Limerick currently residing in Jerusalem.

Letter from Rome

On the 'Cobra Effect' and Congo's Ambongo as an emerging papal candidate



John L. Allen Jr

Though it's likely apocryphal, the story goes that during British rule of India, colonial officials became concerned about poisonous cobras in the city of Delhi and decided to offer a bounty for every dead snake. Enterprising locals, naturally, began to breed cobras in order to collect the reward. When the British discovered the ruse and withdrew the offer, breeders set their now-worthless cobras free, thereby making the problem significantly worse.

The so-called 'Cobra Effect' is a classic illustration of what's come to be known as the 'Law of Unintended Consequences'. Quite often, actions designed to accomplish one outcome actually generate a cascade of other effects, most of which the actor never envisioned or desired.

Fiducia Supplicans

Right now, Pope Francis may feel trapped in his own version of the 'Cobra Effect' vis-à-vis the Vatican document *Fiducia Supplicans* on the blessing of persons in same-sex unions.

One principal consequence of the controversy surrounding the document, ironically enough, would appear to be to have given conservative critics of the Pope a chance to kick the tires on possible candidates in a future conclave, meaning contenders who might steer the Church in a different direction.

“Cardinal Ambongo found a way for the Africans to have their cassava and eat it too – opposing the Pope, at least indirectly, but without seeming disloyal”

Right now, perhaps no one's stock as a *papabile*, or candidate to become pope, has risen as much during the furore over *Fiducia* as Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu of Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who also serves as the elected leader of the African bishops as president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM).

A recent headline in the Italian



Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo of Kinshasa, Congo, president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, gives his blessing at the end of a Mass in St Peter's Basilica for participants in the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican October 13, 2023. Photo: CNS/Lola Gomez

newspaper *Il Messaggero*, atop a piece by veteran Vatican correspondent Franca Giansoldati, says it all: “The profile of Cardinal Ambongo advances among the future *papabili*: He led the African blockade of the blessing of gay couples.”

The reference is to the fact that the 64-year-old Ambongo was the prime mover in a January 11 statement from SECAM which declared *Fiducia Supplicans* a dead letter on the continent. African prelates, it said, “do not consider it appropriate for Africa to bless homosexual unions or same-sex couples because, in our context, this would cause confusion and would be in direct contradiction to the cultural ethos of African communities”.

Of course, the SECAM statement is hardly the only negative reaction that *Fiducia* has generated, but it's especially notable for two reasons.

Cardinal Ambongo

To begin with, it marks the first time the bishops of an entire continent have said that a Vatican edict will not be applied on their territory. Given how difficult it generally is to get an unwieldy body of bishops to agree on anything, the compact and rapid fashion in which SECAM responded is, *inter alia*, a testament to Cardinal Ambongo's leadership.

Moreover, the SECAM statement is also striking for the manner in which it was worked out in concert with the Pope and his top advisors.

Cardinal Ambongo has told the

story in a conversation with a French Catholic blog. After soliciting the responses of the African bishops' conferences to *Fiducia*, he flew to Rome to share them with the Pope. Francis asked him to work with Argentine Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which Cardinal Ambongo did, consulting the Pontiff along the way, so that when the SECAM statement appeared, it carried a de facto seal of papal approval.

“He's also capable of breaking with the hallelujah chorus that always surrounds any pope when he believes a matter of principle is at stake”

In other words, Cardinal Ambongo found a way for the Africans to have their cassava and eat it too – opposing the Pope, at least indirectly, but without seeming disloyal. That's one of the most difficult needles to thread in Catholic life, and the artful fashion in which Cardinal Ambongo pulled it off has turned heads.

Here's how Soldati summed things up in her piece for *Messaggero*:

“At this very delicate juncture, Ambongo has carved out a primary role, demonstrating to the College of Cardinals an indubitable capacity for mediation as well as great courage,

to the point that there are those now looking at him as a possible candidate in the next conclave, in a hypothetical future, whenever it may be: A cardinal-elect from a growing continent, anchored in tradition, faithful to the principle of synodality, who knows curial mechanisms well, and with a perspective capable of facing a complicated future.”

“In sum,” wrote Soldati, “all the qualities for a future black pope”.

A member of the Capuchin Franciscans, Cardinal Ambongo earned a degree in moral theology from the prestigious Redemptorist-run Alphonsian Academy in the late 1980s. In the years following, he worked in a parish, taught in seminaries and held various leadership positions within the Capuchins until he was made a bishop in 2004 at the young age of 44.

Environmental Advocacy

In 2016, Cardinal Ambongo became the Archbishop of Mbandaka-Bikoro and, like his mentor, the late Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, soon found himself thrust into the maelstrom of Congolese politics. When then-President Joseph Kabila delayed elections in 2016 to remain in power, Cardinal Ambongo became a tribune of the pro-democracy opposition and helped to negotiate the St Sylvester Framework Agreement that paved the way for new elections in 2018.

Cardinal Ambongo certainly doesn't lack for boldness. His out-

spoken environmental advocacy, including criticism both of giant global oil and mining companies as well as local politicians who do their bidding, has generated death threats over the years; at one point, he called himself “a person in danger in Congo”.

He obviously enjoys the favour of Pope Francis, having been named a member of the Pontiff's Council of Cardinals in 2020, taking the place of Monsengwo, and then being confirmed in that position in 2023. He also hosted a successful papal trip to Congo last February. Yet as the ferment over *Fiducia* has illustrated, he's also capable of breaking with the hallelujah chorus that always surrounds any pope when he believes a matter of principle is at stake.

Thus, Cardinal Ambongo could appeal to conservative cardinals seeking a change, but he's also earned the respect of Francis loyalists for the dialogical way he's handled himself. His résumé certainly bespeaks gravitas – a trouble-shooter and statesman in national politics, the continental leader of a body of bishops, and a papal advisor with insider's knowledge of Vatican reform efforts.

Whether that's recipe for a future pope is anyone's guess. What seems a safer bet, however, is that it's the profile of prelate who matters, now and for some time to come.

i John L. Allen Jr is Editor of *CruXNow.com*



World Report

IN BRIEF

Polish pro-lifers mobilise against abortion

● Catholic pro-life campaigners have vowed to resist liberalisation of Poland's abortion law, in a package of radical measures proposed by the new coalition government.

"We face a struggle – what they're planning is deeply worrying," said Ewa Kowalewska, vice president of the Polish Federation of Pro-Life Movements.

"Despite efforts to persuade young women it's something positive and good, easy-access abortion has long been opposed here. But the government holds all control mechanisms now, and society is unaware of what awaits it."

The veteran campaigner, a member of US-based Human Life International, spoke as Prime Minister Donald Tusk's government pressed ahead with legislation to allow abortion on demand up to 12 weeks, and to make the morning-after pill available without a prescription to girls age 15 and up in the traditionally Catholic country.

300 parish priests to participate in Vatican synod meeting

● Three hundred parish priests from all over the world will head to Rome and make their contribution to the ongoing Synod of Bishops on synodality by sharing their experiences of parish life, the Vatican said.

The priests, selected by bishops' conferences and Eastern Catholic churches, also will have the chance to dialogue with Pope Francis during the April 28-May 2 meeting.

A statement released February 3 by the General Secretariat of the Synod said the initiative responds to the outcomes from the first assembly of the Synod of Bishops on synodality held at the Vatican last October, which highlighted in its synthesis report the need to "develop ways for a more active involvement of deacons, priests and bishops in the synodal process during the coming year".

Dicastery warns changing words in sacraments can make them invalid

● The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith said it continues to receive reports of Catholics, including priests, finding out all the sacraments they have received are invalid because they were baptised years earlier with a formula that was not approved.

When a priest or other minister changes the words, gestures or material prescribed for the celebration of the sacraments, he can "rob" the Faithful of what they deserve and make the Sacrament invalid, the dicastery said in a note published February 3.

The note, *Gestis Verbisque* (Gestures and Words), passed unanimously by members of the dicastery during their plenary assembly January 25 and was approved by Pope Francis January 31, said the document signed by Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, dicastery prefect, and Msgr Armando Matteo, secretary of the dicastery's doctrinal section.

Canada postpones assisted suicide for mentally ill

● The Canadian government will postpone until 2027 plans to expand its assisted suicide program to include those suffering from mental illness after a parliamentary report said the country's health system is "not ready".

Canada first legalised assisted suicide in June 2016 for adults suffering from irreversibly deadly illnesses. In 2021, the government said it would wait an additional two years to extend those services to citizens suffering from mental illness to "study how MAID [medical assistance in dying] on the basis of a mental illness can safely be provided".

The government last year extended that delay by another year. Canadians suffering from mental illnesses were expected to be able to apply for assisted suicide by mid-March 2024.

The government announced that the extension would be delayed until 2027, stating that the government-run health system "is not yet ready for this expansion".

Church in Sri Lanka to begin canonisation process for 2019 Easter attack martyrs

The Archdiocese of Colombo, Sri Lanka, is set to begin the canonisation process for the hundreds of faithful killed in the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attack in the country, an archdiocesan official confirmed with CNA.

Fr Joy Indika Perera, a representative for Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith of Colombo, told CNA in an email last week that the archdiocese plans to submit a petition to the Vatican to declare those killed in the Easter Sunday attacks "martyrs of faith".

Fr Perera said the archdiocese will be submitting the petition on April 21, exactly five years after the attacks took place. That is the minimum amount of time required by the Church to open a person's canonisation cause.

The petition will be submitted to the Vatican's Dicastery for the Causes of Saints.

Eight suicide bombers targeted two Catholic churches, one evangelical church, three luxury hotels, and other locations on April 19, 2019, killing an estimated 269 people and injuring more than 500.

Fr Perera said that 216 Catholics from two different churches, St Sebastian and St Anthony, "were massacred in cold blood" in the attack.

Shortly after the attacks, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the bombings. The Sri Lankan government determined the attack to have been carried out by a local radical Islamist group known as



A person mourns near the grave of a suicide bombing victim at Sellakana Catholic cemetery in Negombo, Sri Lanka, in this file photo from April 23, 2019. Photo: CNS/Athit Perawongmetha, Reuters

National Thowheeth Jama'ath, with the assistance of foreign groups.

Out of fear of additional attacks, in-person Masses were suspended and Catholic schools were closed in the archdiocese for several weeks.

Speaking on behalf of the cardinal, Fr Perera criticised the government's response to the massacre, accusing it of still doing its best to "hide" information about the attacks and those responsible.

"Cardinal Ranjith has been always insisting on the discovery of [the] truth behind these attacks as there are clear indi-

cations that it was a deliberate act of political manipulation by some interested parties who made use of the Islamic extremists for their diabolical plot," Fr Perera said.

"Up to now no serious investigation has taken place in order to find out the real cause of this massacre," he added.

Maithripala Sirisena, who was president of Sri Lanka at the time, created a five-person commission to investigate the attacks. In October 2020, five suspects arrested in connection with the attacks were released by the government, citing a lack of evidence.

The trial of 25 of the men accused of preparing the attacks began in November 2021 but was adjourned in January 2022.

In January 2023 a seven-judge panel from Sri Lanka's Supreme Court found Sirisena and four other high-ranking government officials liable for the massacre because they possessed but failed to disclose credible information warning of the attacks. The court ordered Sirisena to pay victims' families a total of \$273,000 from his personal funds while other officials were similarly disciplined.

Panamanian cardinal found safe after disappearing for 48 hours

Cardinal José Luis Lacunza Maestrojuán of David, Panama, was found safe after disappearing for approximately 48 hours, an absence that provoked a police search for the prelate and concern for his well-being.

The cardinal, who turns 80 February 24, reappeared on the afternoon of February 1 in the city of Boquete, near the border with Costa Rica, according to Panamanian media. Church sources told the news organisation *Mi Diario* that he was in good condition. He had been last seen January 30 in the diocesan seat of David, 30 miles to the south.

Panama's National Police posted a brief video on X, showing its director, John Dornheim, chatting with Cardinal Lacunza through the window of the cardinal's vehicle and offering him water. The prosecutor's office in the province of Chiriquí said on X that it had opened an investigation into the cardinal's disappearance on January 30.

The Panamanian bishops' conference announced Cardinal Lacunza's appearance in a brief statement February 1. It had called for "permanent prayer" in a statement released just prior to Cardinal

Lacunza's reappearance.

The circumstances of Cardinal Lacunza's disappearance and reappearance remain uncertain.

The Spanish-born prelate, a member of the Augustinian Recollects, moved to Panama as a missionary and was appointed bishop of David in 1999 by St John Paul II. Pope Francis elevated him to cardinal in 2015.

Cardinal Lacunza has worked to mediate conflicts in western Panama, where indigenous groups have protested to protect their lands amid the incursion of actions such as mining.

Pope condemns antisemitism as sin in letter to Israeli jews

In a letter addressed to "my Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel," Pope Francis expressed his heartbreak at the violence unleashed by the Hamas attack on Israel in October and he repeated the Catholic Church's condemnation of all forms of

antisemitism and anti-Judaism.

"The path that the Church has walked with you, the ancient people of the covenant, rejects every form of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, unequivocally condemning manifesta-

tions of hatred toward Jews and Judaism as a sin against God," said the letter dated February 2 and released by the Vatican the next day.

Pope Francis had met privately February 2 with Raphael Schutz, Israel's ambassador to the Holy

See. His letter did not mention the meeting but spoke of "the numerous communications that have been sent to me by various friends and Jewish organisations from all over the world" and "your own letter, which I greatly appreciate".



Edited by Jason Osborne
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Light in the darkness



Pope Francis celebrates Mass in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican for the feast of the Presentation of the Lord – also known as Candlemas – marking the Catholic Church's celebration of World Day for Consecrated Life February 2. Photo: CNS/Vatican Media

Children from Gaza arrive in Rome for medical treatment

Ten children from Gaza in need of medical attention arrived in Rome on a military plane late January 29, the first group of young patients who will receive treatment in Italy thanks to the lobbying of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land and negotiations involving the governments of Italy, Israel, Palestine and Egypt.

The 10 children and a young man, described as being just over 18 years old, were taken from Rome's Ciampino military airport to the Vatican-run Bambino Gesù paediatric hospital for an initial assessment, *Vatican News* reported.

The patients include children seriously injured in the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas as well as chronically ill children who can no longer receive the necessary treatment in Gaza because of the war.

Four of the patients will stay at Bambino Gesù while the young man will be treated at St Camillus Hospital in Rome and the other children will be cared for at hospitals in Genoa, Bologna and Florence.

The flight was met at Ciampino airport by Fr Ibrahim Faltas, vicar of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, along with

Italy's foreign minister and the army general who coordinated the airlift.

Awaiting the arrival of the plane, *Vatican News* said, "Fr Faltas did not hold back his emotion at what he described to the Vatican Media as 'a first sign of peace. Peace that needs listening and humility'".

Gen. Francesco Figliuolo, head of the interforce coordinating team, told reporters at the airport that the Italian government and armed forces studied the possibility of setting up a field hospital in Gaza, but the security situation made that impossible.

The first group of patients, and the parents or guardians accompanying them, crossed from Gaza into Egypt at the Rafah crossing and were taken to a hospital in Cairo in preparation for the flight.

Initial plans are for 100 Palestinian children, who are in dire need of medical care that cannot be provided in Gaza, to be brought to Italy. The Italian military hospital ship, Vulcano, set sail January 31 with another 50 to 60 children and their guardians. Another airlift is expected in February.

UN: Evidence in Jimmy Lai trial may have been obtained through torture

The United Nations is warning that evidence in the trial of prominent Hong Kong Catholic, philanthropist and media mogul Jimmy Lai may have been obtained by torturing a witness in China.

The UN Special Rapporteur on torture, Alice Jill Edwards, called on China's government to clarify the allegation of torture and launch an investigation.

"The absolute prohibition on relying on evidence obtained through torture or other ill-treatment in a trial is a funda-

mental safeguard," she said on January 31.

"I am deeply concerned that evidence that is expected to be presented against Jimmy Lai imminently, may have been obtained as a result of torture or other unlawful treatment," said Ms Edwards.

"An investigation into these allegations must be conducted immediately, before any evidence is admitted into these present proceedings."

The use of torture and other coercive techniques to force confessions is well documented in China, the Australian

lawyer said. She reminded China that it had ratified the UN Convention against Torture.

The international legal team of the imprisoned democracy activist, Mr Lai had lodged an urgent appeal with Ms Edwards at the beginning of January against one of the prosecution's most important witnesses.

UN Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council.

Vatican roundup

Pope treated to ceremony at Vatican to usher in the Chinese New Year

● Pope Francis "dotted the eyes" of performers dressed as a dragon and lion in a traditional ceremony to symbolically awaken them and welcome in the Chinese New Year.

He complimented the performers for "this fine art" and thanked them for their thoughtfulness during an audience at the Vatican February 2 with a delegation from the National Federation Italy-China and the Chinese Martial Arts Academy of Vercelli in northern Italy.

"I extend to all of you a warm welcome and I thank you for your visit" to mark the 10th anniversary of the founding of the federation and to prepare for the Chinese New Year, which begins February 10 and ushers in a year of the dragon.

He expressed his appreciation for the group's efforts in fostering dialogue "and seeking to respond to the challenges posed by cultural integration, education and the promotion of shared social values".

Vatican clarifies handling of cases of abuse of 'vulnerable adults'

● In cases of a cleric sexually abusing a "vulnerable adult," the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith investigates and judges only cases involving "persons who habitually have an imperfect use of reason," the dicastery said in a note published January 30.

Other cases involving vulnerable adults, including those in situations where their ability "to understand or will or otherwise resist the offense" is temporarily limited, should be referred to other offices of the Roman Curia, the clarification said.

While Church documents issued in the past 15 years have included "vulnerable adults" as a special category in need

of protection from clerical sexual abuse, questions have been raised about whether those persons should always be treated in Church procedures in a way equivalent to children under the age of 18.

For example, many asked, is a religious sister vulnerable to a priest who is her spiritual adviser in the same way that a person with a developmental disability would be.

The doctrinal dicastery's late January clarification said while the Church recognizes the special attention needed toward vulnerable adults, the definition of vulnerable adult in recent Church documents is broader than the cases over which the doctrinal dicastery has jurisdiction.

Vatican opens registration for May celebration of World Children's Day

● Although the Vatican knows most of the children who will come to Rome May 25-26 for the first World Children's Day will be Italians, Pope Francis hopes local celebrations also will take place so that the whole Catholic Church can experience their joy and will show them the beauty of gathering with other believers, a cardinal said.

Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, said that when Pope Francis met in November with some 7,000 children ages 6-12, "it seemed like we were watching a fountain whose lively jet refreshed the earth and the Church".

Referring to the November event as the "zero edition" of World Children's Day, he said that with only six months to prepare for the May event, it probably will be "more like a final release than the concert itself," but it is still important for the children and for the Church as a whole.

The cardinal spoke February 2 at a news conference presenting initial plans for the May celebration and announcing the opening of pre-registration through the world day's website: <https://www.worldchildrenday.org>

Wave of arrests for Belarus Catholics as they face new restrictions



Jonathan Luxmoore

Priests and lay Catholics from Belarus said they still hope their Church's situation will improve, despite the continued arrests of clergy and new religious restrictions that are imminent.

"Priests are being targeted on various pretexts, and many Catholics feel pressured and harassed," explained Fr Dzmitry Prystupa, from Baranavichy in Belarus' southern Diocese of Pinsk.

"It's painful that there's no free speech in our Church – and that the good news, so strongly linked with truth and justice, has to be announced selectively, subject to official surveillance and verification. But I still think we should trust our Church's leaders to do their best," he said.

The priest spoke amid the country's plans to enforce a new Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations law, signed December 30 by President Alexander Lukashenko and published January 5, which will restrict educational and missionary activity by churches and require all parishes to reapply for legal status.

“In a January 10 statement, the pontifical foundation Aid to the Church in Need said Belarus now ranked second in the world after Nicaragua for the number of arrested Catholic priests”

In an *OSV News* interview, Fr Prystupa said fellow clergy were still coming to terms with the law's implications, adding that he regretted that President Lukashenko's regime only thought “in a narrative of political opposition”.

Guidance

Meanwhile, a prominent lay Catholic said the Belarus bishops' conference had analysed the law when it was being drafted last June, but had not yet offered advice on how Church communities should prepare for it.

“In coming months, meetings



Clergymen carry candles during the annual feast of the Icon of the Mother of God procession July 5, 2019, in the village of Budslav, Belarus. Photo: OSV News/Vasily Fedosenko, Reuters

should be held to guide parish rectors through the new procedures,” Artiom Tkaczuk, a social worker now living in neighbouring Poland, told *OSV News*.

“But the whole legal system in Belarus is unpredictable – so while Church leaders will be studying the new law's detailed provisions, they'll also be trying to anticipate what the regime hopes to achieve with it,” Mr Tkaczuk said.

Besides obliging communities to re-register their founding charters or face liquidation, the law will prohibit religious activities deemed to harm “health and morals,” infringe Belarus' “sovereignty, constitutional system and civil harmony,” or “humiliate national honour and dignity”.

Parental applications will be required for children seeking catechism classes at churches, while parish office-holders must have their addresses and personal data registered.

In a June 12 statement, the bishops warned the law would “complicate the dynamics of state-confessional relations,” adding that the Catholic Church would “face difficulties” observing its tightened controls over religious education, as well as its accompanying ban on minority languages and curbs on monastic communities, pilgrimages and religious literature.

The law

The law also was criticised by United Nations rapporteurs, who cautioned in August it could “fail to meet Belarus' obligations under

international human rights law”.

The Catholic Church, making up a 10th of Belarus' population of 9.4 million, has not reacted publicly to mistreatment of citizens since its leader, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, was made to retire in January 2021 after being temporarily barred from the country.

However, dozens of clergy from various denominations have also faced arrest, while in a January 10 statement, the pontifical foundation Aid to the Church in Need said Belarus now ranked second in the world after Nicaragua for the number of arrested Catholic priests, with 10 detained on extremism and treason charges in 2023, along with many lay Catholics.

“Up to half a million Belarus citizens have since left the country, while 1,413 political prisoners are currently incarcerated”

On January 24, a well-known Catholic journalist, Oksana Yuczkavich, working recently for the Church's *Catholic.By* news service, was detained on unspecified charges. Another prominent lay Catholic, Piotr Rudkovsky, was accused of

conspiracy in late January over his cooperation with Belarus' opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

Three priests arrested

Meanwhile, three priests arrested in November included Polish native Fr Henryk Okolotovich, rector of St Joseph's Parish at Volozhin, northwest of Minsk, who also remains in detention on unknown charges.

Mr Tkaczuk said clergy from Fr Okolotovich's Minsk-Mohilev Archdiocese had prayed for him at a December meeting, while Curia officials also had sought information about the 63-year-old's fate.

In the face of new arrests, Mr Tkaczuk told *OSV News* that with the new law, “it's clear we must now prepare for a fresh wave of systemic pressure across our four dioceses”.

Russia has gained military and logistical support for its invasion of Ukraine from President Lukashenko, whose disputed August 2022 re-election after 26 years in power was followed by harsh repression and international sanctions.

Up to half a million Belarus citizens have since left the country, while 1,413 political prisoners are currently incarcerated, including Ales Bialiatski, winner of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize, according to a January 16 report by the Minsk-based Viasna Human Rights Centre. The report said 1,603 people had been convicted in

2023 “in politically motivated criminal cases”.

Mr Tkaczuk added that Catholics living abroad had demanded “more open testimony” against repression from Belarus' Catholic bishops, but said “important developments” were occurring “outside the public sphere,” with an extensive self-help network in local parish communities.

Frustrations

Meanwhile, Fr Prystupa said he also understood frustration at the Church's current silence, but added that Catholics in the country understood the risks of speaking out.

“With all media under strict regime control and priests routinely intimidated by security agents, it simply isn't possible to say anything about arrests and detentions,” Fr Prystupa told *OSV News*.

“But we know the fate of martyrs has always provided a seed, so we should trust in God's will. For now, instead of fighting in vain, we should focus on proclaiming the Gospel and following Christ, the Church's first duty.”

The bishops' conference spokesman, Fr Yuri Sanko, declined *OSV News* requests to comment on the new religious restrictions, which have not been mentioned on the Church's *Catholic.By* website.

Jonathan Luxmoore writes for OSV News from Oxford, England.

Letters

Letter of the week

A world desperately in need of the light of the Lord

Dear Editor, I write as others have already done to express my gratitude to Michael Kelly for his many years of dedicated service as editor of this paper. I wrote several letters during the unquestionable lockdown period and found any dealings I had with Michael Kelly very helpful and supportive.

I am glad he continues to write in this paper

I now write to draw attention to Brendan O'Regan's contribution [*The Irish Catholic* – January 25, 2024].

Regarding public policy, I believe his comments are what so many know to be true and are grateful to see them in print here. I hope many of your readers have read and have shared his words and appreciated the truth in what he so aptly and succinctly expresses.

Yes, Brendan, you have hit the nail on the head and have helped readers voice the confusion and conflict that abounds in our society today. I quote another very wise and insightful statement that adds more clarity to this widespread

confusion "there is no conflict between old and new; the conflict lies between the false and the true".

How we need the help of Jesus Christ who is God's light and our truth as we live through this time of darkness and much confusion. He is the way, the truth and the light and has promised to be with us until the end of time.

Yours etc.,
Sr Susan Evangelist
Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal

Timeless words always resonate

Dear Editor, Archbishop Eamon Martin's condemnation of the terrible effects of modern warfare [*The Irish Catholic* – January 4, 2024], echoes the words of Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Summi Maeroris*. Appealing to all people of good will and especially to those in charge of nations, to work for peace, the Pope wrote: "Let the whole world recall what war brings. We know this only too well from experience: ruins, death, and all sorts of miseries. Modern technology has created and prepared such murderous and inhumane arms, not that only

can armies and fleets be annihilated, not only cities, towns, and villages, not only the inestimable treasures of religion, art, and culture, but innocent children with their mothers, the sick, and the helpless elderly. Everything which human genius has produced that is beautiful, good, or healthy – everything, or almost everything can be destroyed."

Isn't this message as relevant today as it was in 1950?

Yours etc.,
Alasdair MacKenzie,
Tralee, Co. Kerry



Hierarchy must listen to radical changes needed

Dear Editor, I'm extremely disappointed firstly with the shortage of priests all over our country. The hierarchy are to blame for this.

People blame the current situation on the Pope. This is certainly not true – the Lord didn't say priests shouldn't be allowed get married. The Apostles were married and even popes were married in the early years. Many young men would be more interested in becoming a priest if this were allowed happen – otherwise we will be left with a lot of our parishes

closed sadly.

Some dioceses in the country have closed churches. This is totally wrong, our churches, and I stress, are the temples of the Lord. Every church here in Ireland and elsewhere should have a Mass celebrated at the weekend.

The hierarchy should've never agreed to close churches for Mass during the lockdown. All we had to do was sanitise and wear a facemask. Instead of doing this, people were advised to stay at home, listen to Mass on our laptop, television, phone

or radio. This is not the same as going to Mass because Holy Communion wasn't received and it's the most important part of the Mass.

Why were women being discriminated? Why are they not allowed become deacons, if they want to? Why are nuns not allowed say Mass? We have some lovely nuns in my parish in rural Laois. We have some foreign priests in our diocese. They are really nice and they're all doing an excellent job. I wish we could get more of

these men.

In these challenging times we need more Masses than ever. Time is running out for us all. I think the God of money has taken over the real true God in our world today and it makes my heart bleed. I ask the bishops to encourage everybody to come back to their churches – remember we need more masses and prayers than ever.

Yours etc.,
Mary Delaney,
Abbeyleix, Co. Laois

Church must protect integrity and resist 'anything goes' approach

Dear Editor, I sense that a mixture of deliberately controlled secular sensationalism and Church apathy are being rapidly and subtly blended together, here in Ireland, in order to promote a fast-developing problem that should not ever occur to threaten our country's Catholic sense of strength and belonging.

I am less than happy at the apparent lack of clarity in positive Church leadership thinking on whether or not we should tolerate any form of acceptance in regard to matters such as the right of Church members to engage in abortion, same-sex relationships, divorce or assisted suicide.

In an article by Cindy Wooden [*The Irish Catholic* – January 4, 2024], much of her writing seemed to be about a strong wish

by the present Pope (He and I are the same age, and I very much admire his papacy). He appears to say that the Church might cater, and include on our ranks, those who are engaging in the above practices (who are unlikely to conform to existing Church norms, now or in the future).

If I understand correctly, the hope is that relatively minor concessions would be offered to those requesting them and a confrontation/crisis thereby avoided. What may not be appreciated is that what would actually be happening is concession of an ultimate major transformation from a nationwide warm and strong sense of familial Catholicism to secular 'anything goes' abnormalism.

In reflecting these views I am doing so,

not only from a religious belief, but from my past experience as an industrial relations negotiator. This type of agreement, when concluded, was generally referred to in trade jargon as 'change of stealth' or 'creeping change'.

What about setting up a top 20-member National Church PR committee comprising 50% twenty-somethings and 50% 30-plus religious and laity. I would suggest their role primarily as (i) to protect Catholic integrity, (ii) Wake up Church members, (iii) Torpedo the hostile news media and politicians, and restore the Catholic Church to its proper place.

Yours etc.,
Seán O Briain
Bray, Co. Wicklow

As new era dawns, education is key battlefield in NI

The Irish Catholic

Michelle O'Neill's election as First Minister in the restored power-sharing administration in Stormont is rightly hailed as an historic moment. We don't need to rehearse the history of partition or the creation of Northern Ireland to know that those who crafted that state, never wanted or expected it to turn out this way.

Ms O'Neill is the first person from a Catholic and nationalist background to hold the highest office of government in Northern Ireland.

Of course, lots of her party's policies leave a lot to be desired from the point of view of Catholic social teaching.

On other fronts, Church leaders and people of faith in general can breathe a sigh of relief that the Department of Health has gone to Robert Swann from the Ulster Unionist Party and the Department for Education has gone to Paul Givan from the Democratic Unionist Party.

Neither man is a crusader or beholden to a radical agenda.

As Health Minister in the last administration, Mr Swann refused to commission what the Westminster government crudely described as 'abortion services'. Unfortunately, the prolonged suspension of the Assembly overtook Mr Swann, and politicians in London voted to bypass devolution and impose abortion on the region. It is to be hoped that Mr Swann will pursue policies that will aim to reduce the number of abortions while enhancing supports available to women struggling with crisis pregnancies.

But if the abortion battle is lost, at least for now, the battleground has shifted to the educational sphere.

In this regard, Church leaders can be quietly confident

that, if not entirely on their side, they have a sympathetic ear in Mr Givan. In his first interviews as Education Minister, Mr Givan has spoken about his support for pluralism in education in the north and respect for parents' wishes.

This will have Catholic school leaders breathe a sign of relief. They have seen their diverse and high-performing schools constantly under attack in recent years. Integrated education, it has been argued, is the only way forward for Northern Ireland – despite the reality that many faith-based schools are, in fact, much more diverse and integrated than the actual integrated schools that attract much better state funding.

Catholic schools also outperform other sectors when it comes to academic achievement. Last year, nine out of ten of the top-performing schools in the North were Catholic. This is despite the fact that Catholic children are significantly more likely to qualify for free school meals, a key indicator of social disadvantage.

Catholic schools seek no special treatment. In fact, they seek nothing more than simply the right to be what they are and serve the needs and wishes of parents and the wider Catholic community.

Their Catholic identity came under considerable threat with the Secretary of State Chris Heaton-Harris recently pushing a policy shift that would see the schools forced to teach children about how and where to access an abortion.

Church leaders should seek an early meeting with Minister Givan to press him to withdraw this unjust threat to the liberty of Catholic schools. Indications are that they would be pushing an open door.

Letters to the Editor

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

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

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

Scottish conversion therapies ban threatens Church freedoms



Scottish politicians are indulging in paternalistic overreach, writes **Ian Dunn**

John Knox has been in the grave for four centuries, but his spirit still lingers in Scotland. As in Ireland, Scotland's politicians like the idea of a progressive secular state that has left behind its religious roots – but the readiness with which Scotland's politicians seek to ban things suggests their inner Calvinist is never far from the surface.

The Scottish Government, emerging from the Scottish Parliament, has control over many domestic areas of governance but is still ultimately at the mercy of the British Parliament.

The current Scottish Nationalist Party, which seeks independence, is often keen on high-profile policies that they feel will distinguish them from the Conservative Government at Westminster.

“This could create ‘a chilling effect and may criminalise advice or opinion given in good faith’”

But, in truth, most Scottish politicians, no matter their party colours, are partial to a bit of paternalistic overreach.

The latest manifestation of this tendency is a proposed ban on ‘conversion practices’. There are, as we know, things that happen to gay and transgender people under the guise of ‘curing them’ that are profoundly wrong.

Yet defining exactly what these conversion practices are has proved tricky and risks criminalising a whole range of other behaviours. That's certainly the view of Scotland's Catholic Church,



Snow begins to melt on a statue of a bagpiper in Bruar, Scotland. Photo: CNS/Reuters

which says this could create “a chilling effect and may criminalise advice or opinion given in good faith”.

The Scottish government has just launched a consultation on banning what it refers to as “conversion practices”.

The 86-page proposal document was released alongside the online consultation, which closes on April 2.

Abuse

A Church spokesperson said that “while the Church supports legislation that protects people from physical and verbal abuse, a fundamental pillar of any free society is that the state recognises and respects the right of religious bodies and organisations to be free to teach the fullness of their beliefs and to support, through prayer, counsel, and other pastoral means, their members who wish to live in accordance with those beliefs”.

They fear that a broad ban would criminalise mainstream religious pasto-

ral care or parental guidance “unless it was approved by the State as acceptable”.

The bishops also feared it could criminalise the Church's teaching about God's creation of the human person as male and female and the meaning of sex within marriage, and that “anyone who proposes this teaching to someone with same-sex attraction or gender identity issues would face sanctions”, and that this would apply even if the person with these issues wanted help to follow Church teaching since this law would say they cannot consent to this teaching.

“As the first educators of their children, parents alone have the right to advise and guide their children in such matters”

“Priests could be banned from working in Scotland, the Church could lose its charitable status, and class-

room and pastoral teachers could lose their jobs,” the bishops' statement said.

“There would be uncertainty about the future of Catholic schools, and children could be taken away from their parents. As the first educators of their children, parents alone have the right to advise and guide their children in such matters.”

Destructive practices

Scotland's Equalities Minister, Emma Roddick, was in no mood to back down this week, saying that conversion practices which aim to change or suppress a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, “are damaging and destructive acts that violate people's human rights”.

“Sadly, these practices still happen today, and they have absolutely no place in Scotland. In taking forward our commitment to ban conversion practices, we are leading the way in the UK and joining the growing list of countries acting to address this harm,” she said.

However, as the Scottish

government found with its Gender Reform Bill, which was blocked by the UK government and the UK courts, navigating between two parliaments and two legal systems can be tricky.

One of the country's leading lawyers, Roddy Dunlop KC, Dean of the Faculty of Advocates, said the definition of conversion practices set out in the Scottish Government's document was not ‘legally coherent’.

“The ‘new’ statutory aggravation will address conversion practices that fall within existing criminal offences”

In addition, many of the abusive and coercive practices described in the plans are already unlawful in Scotland, as they are throughout the UK, as the Scottish government's document notes: “The [new] statutory aggravation will address conversion practices that fall within

existing criminal offences.”

Already the Scottish government has started to strike a more conciliatory tone, amid briefings that the proposals could be watered down.

Concern

In a briefing for journalists, a Scottish Government spokeswoman was asked if she recognised there is a risk the parent-child relationship could be disrupted and parents prosecuted.

She said: “I recognise the concern that's being expressed, and we're reflecting. Our current analysis is that the provisions don't bring in a serious risk of that, but I'm listening to the concerns that are being expressed by people who are bringing those concerns.”

She said the intention was not to deal with “normal, regular, parent-child dynamics, but to get into conduct that is abusive and harmful”.

No doubt John Knox's ghost will be watching with interest.

Your Faith

The Irish Catholic, February 8, 2024

Question of Faith

Are demonic possessions just mental illness?

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Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor is seen in an undated photo. Photo: OSV News

Flannery O'Connor: Sharing faith through fiction

Flannery O'Connor was not an evangelist. She was an artist, one of the most gifted American fiction writers of the 20th Century. But a profoundly Catholic theological vision informs her art, giving her stories resonance and depth that sound deep – and sometimes deeply disturbing – spiritual chords.

Explaining why she often wrote about grotesque characters in bizarre situations, O'Connor remarked that in an age of disbelief like this one, "You have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."

Another time she said, "All my stories are about the action of



This American author ought to be on the Faithful's radar, writes Russell Shaw

grace on a character who is not very willing to support it". Then, with her characteristic mixture of ruefulness and realism, she added, "But most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal, etc".

Today, 60 years after her death, that sort of reaction to O'Connor's fiction is more and more giving way to the realisation that these are richly imagined analogies of faith flung in the face of scepti-

cal secularism by a master storyteller.

Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, author Joyce Carol Oates cited O'Connor's "unshakable absolutist faith" as the foundation of her creative work. Faith, said Ms Oates, provided O'Connor with "a rationale with which to mock both her secular and bigoted Christian contemporaries in a succession of brilliantly orchestrated short stories that read like parables of

human folly confronted by mortality".

The only child of a real estate agent named Edward F. O'Connor and Regina Cline O'Connor, Mary Flannery O'Connor was born March 25, 1925, in Savannah, Georgia. Her great-grandparents were Irish immigrants, and the family had remained staunchly Catholic, members of a religious minority in the Protestant Bible Belt. As a child, Mary Flannery attended parochial schools until her father's failing health forced a move to the Cline family home in Milledgeville, Georgia. There she attended Peabody High School, drawing cartoons and writing for the school paper.

In 1942, she entered Georgia State College for Women, located near her home. It was then she

began to use the name Flannery O'Connor on school assignments. She graduated with a degree in social science.

In 1946, she was accepted by the prestigious Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa and went there to study journalism. While there, she met important writers like Robert Penn Warren and John Crowe Ransom, began writing fiction and started attending daily Mass. After Iowa, she spent time at an artists' colony near Saratoga, New York, writing and socialising with other writers and attending Mass with the domestic staff.

Taken ill in 1950 while travelling home for Christmas, she was diagnosed with lupus, the inflammatory connective tissue disease that had also killed her father. She moved home for good and

Flannery O'Connor is seen in this 1962 photo. Photo: CNS



lived with her mother, settling into a routine of writing, tending her collection of peacocks and other exotic birds, exchanging letters with a growing number of correspondents, going to church with her mother, now and then lecturing on college campuses, and battling lupus.

Her illness she viewed with cool courage touched by humour. "I had a blood transfusion Tuesday," she wrote a friend not long before her death, "so I am feeling sommut [sic] better and for the last two days I have worked one hour each day and my my I do like to work. I et [sic] up that one hour like it was filet mignon."

Her first novel, *Wise Blood*, appeared in 1952 and received respectful but sometimes puzzled reviews. The story, she later told one of her correspondents, is about a "Protestant saint," Hazel Motes by name, "written from the point of view of a Catholic". Her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, about a reluctant teenage prophet named Tarwater, came out in 1960.

In between, she produced a slow but steady stream of short fiction. The stories were collected in two volumes, *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* (1952) and the posthumously published *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965).

The unravelling of hypocrisy is a favourite theme with O'Connor, and a story called *Revelation* is a particularly striking example of that. Mrs Turpin, a middle-aged farm woman possessing sublime self-satisfaction and a keen eye for the faults of those she considers her inferiors, gets the shock of her life when a crazed girl in a doctor's office throws a book at

her, tries to choke her and tells her, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog".

It's the start of Mrs Turpin's conversion. That evening, as she stands beside her hog pen, the conversion comes to completion in the vision of a "vast horde of souls" mounting to heaven.

“One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God,” she wrote, “and once you have discredited his goodness, you are done with him”

Leading the way are many of those she's always looked down on. Bringing up the rear are some like herself. "They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behaviour. ... Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away." Mrs Turpin walks slowly back to the house. The crickets are loud in the woods, "but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah".

Beyond mere hypocrisy, O'Connor sometimes confronts monstrous

evil that might best be described as demonic. In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, an escaped killer called the Misfit slaughters a family whose grandmother confronts him at the end.

"No pleasure but meanness," he snarls at her.

"She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children'. She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest."

"She would of [sic] been a good woman," he tells his companions, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life".

O'Connor rejected the stereotyped explanation that she wrote as she did because that was how writers of the so-called Southern Gothic school wrote.

"My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable. ... The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get this vision across to this hostile audience."

In 1960, the Dominican Servants of Relief for Incurable Cancer, a religious order founded by Nathaniel Hawthorne's daughter, Rose, that operated a cancer home in Atlanta,

Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor is seen in a 1959 photo, sitting on the steps of her home. Photo: CNS



approached O'Connor with a request to write a book about a girl with a disfiguring facial tumour whom the sisters had sheltered until her death at the age of 12. The sisters were deeply impressed by her courage and good spirits and wanted the world to know about her.

O'Connor told them they should write the book themselves, but she negotiated its publication and wrote the introduction.

The volume appeared in 1961 as *A Memoir of Mary Anne*. Reflecting its author's own experience, her introduction is an extraordinary testimony of faith.

"One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God," she wrote, "and once you have discredited his goodness, you are done

with him". In earlier times, people viewed unmerited suffering with "the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith." But now "we govern by tenderness" – tenderness divorced from its source in Christ – which "ends in forced labour camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber". Today, perhaps, she would add abortion to that list.

O'Connor died of kidney failure brought on by lupus shortly after midnight August 3, 1964. Her volume *The Complete Stories* received the National Book Award for Fiction in 1972.

i Russell Shaw, a veteran journalist and writer, is the author of more than 20 books, including three novels.

Valentine's Day, life as a couple and Ash Wednesday



Silvio Cuellar

This February, we celebrate Valentine's Day, the day of love and friendship. February 14 is also Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. At first glance, many will think that we will not be able to celebrate with our partners, but there are interesting parallels between true love as a couple and Lent. During Lent, we focus mainly on three important things: prayer, fasting and charity. Likewise, to have a successful and holy marriage, it is also required to have a prayer life with Christ at the centre, make many sacrifices and be generous in giving ourselves to our family as Christ offered up himself for the Church.

Prayer

Prayer is essential for a Catholic home and a couple's relationship to last and bear much fruit. When we look at the lives of the saints, many were the fruit of their parents' lives of prayer.

We have the example of St Therese of Lisieux, whose parents were known for a deep life of prayer and devotion.

“In married life, we can focus on giving more of our time this Lent, seeking to strengthen the relationship between spouses and with our children by being more present in their lives and activities”

Also well-known is the testimony of St Monica, mother of St Augustine, who persevered in prayer for many years for the conversion of her son, who, despite having had a non-exemplary life, decided at one point to embrace the Faith, becoming a doctor of



the Church.

My in-laws, Paul and Barbara, are examples of prayer, sacrifices and charity. I have always admired their great faith and commitment to serving others. They were always involved in pro-life ministry. They adopted a child from the foster care system and, over the years, helped many single mothers financially. From them, I learned what it means to live the Faith, not just in the parish, but Monday through Sunday. I remember that, at every family gathering, they would begin with a family prayer. They always led by

example and never missed going to church. When we went on vacation together and were away for the weekend, finding a church where we could attend Mass on Sunday was very important.

One suggestion during this Lent would be to take on (or pick back up) the practice of praying the rosary as a family, giving the children the opportunity to lead a decade. In our home, we offer intentions for someone who needs our prayers at the beginning of each decade. Let us remember that “The family that prays together, stays together”.

Sacrifices

For Catholics, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are obligatory days of fasting and abstinence. Likewise, the Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence; on those days, we abstain from eating meat. That may not be a sacrifice for you so there are many other ways in which we can practice sacrifice and fasting. For example, we can fast by limiting or eliminating social media and technology use during the 40 days of Lent.

Sacrifice is also very important for a couple. Spouses should love and make sacrifices for each other as Christ sacrificed

himself for the Church. This concept goes against the modern culture of instant gratification, where the “I” comes first.

At the beginning of a marriage, we go through the honeymoon or infatuation stage, where everything is rose-coloured. Then comes the maturity stage, where every day we make the decision to love the person God has placed in our lives. That implies making sacrifices for the sake of our partner and family, putting them ahead of our needs.

I remember recently, the night after a very exhausting weekend, I was very tired

on my way to bed when I received a call from my son at 10:30 pm. He was at the gym and had no way to get home. Even though my body was telling me to go to bed, without a moment's hesitation, I answered, “I will be there in 15 minutes”. As parents, we may have countless examples of how we have sacrificed for our children, including our time and income.

Another important way to make sacrifices and an excellent investment is, for example, to enrol our children in a Catholic school, where they can receive an excellent education and formation in the Faith. I sometimes joke that I could be driving a luxury car with what I pay for my daughter in high school. But the truth is that as parents we know that any material sacrifice is not enough to give the best to our children.

Charity

Finally, Lent is a time to practice charity more intensely.

Many of our parishes participate in Catholic Relief Services' Rice Bowl campaign to support the efforts of the US bishops' international relief agency, which helps the world's most disadvantaged with development programs and emergency assistance. Diocesan Catholic Charities' campaigns also help fund diocesan ministries and local relief. Let us be generous with these opportunities and offer our generosity in our parish community.

In married life, we can focus on giving more of our time this Lent, seeking to strengthen the relationship between spouses and with our children by being more present in their lives and activities.

We can also make time to reconnect with family members with whom we have not spoken for a long time, call them to reconcile, ask forgiveness if we have offended them, give them a word of support and offer to pray for them.

This Lent, let us seek to focus on habits of prayer, fasting and charity, using our resources, time, treasure and talents to volunteer in ministries that serve and help others.

i Silvio Cuellar is a writer, liturgical music composer and journalist.



Of worrying and wild things



Effie Caldarola

Walking through the park on a brisk winter morning, I glance at the car park near the playground and notice a colourful van.

I see big letters on its side panel: "Worry First".

Wait a minute. I look again. Actually, it says "Worry Free," the slogan of a utility company's appliance service. I chuckle. I've proven something I know about myself all too well. I am a worrier, and I just let my eyes deceive me. Is that my slogan, I wonder, "worry first"?

We all worry. We worry about the future, about all the things that could go wrong. On the one hand, it's good to be prepared, but worrying is a spiritual problem. A very human one, but a problem nonetheless.

In Wendell Berry's poem, *The Peace of Wild Things*, he writes of waking in the night "in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be". How many of us can identify with that?

Nighttime

Nighttime is the perfect incubator of worry.

Berry tells us that he goes into nature when these fears arise, and I believe he's speaking metaphorically when he writes, "I

go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the heron feeds".

His next line is one I have memorised: "I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief."

“Turning away from worry means that in the moment, in each precious and passing moment, we accept the presence of God with us through it all”

How much time do we waste taxing our lives with "forethought of grief"? Of all the species in this world, we humans are the only ones who worry about all the "what ifs". The birds of the air make nests, and they carefully find a spot to protect their eggs from predators. But they are called to this, and they do it naturally and without worry. They live in each present moment.

Once a spiritual director was encouraging me to trust God more. She mentioned Jesus' admonition (Mt 10:29-31), "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care".

I immediately mentioned the birds that would occasionally crash into my plate glass front window. Was God caring for them? My director smiled. They died without worry, she said. No forethought of grief burdened them.

Turning away from worry does not mean our lives will be without

struggle, illness, frustration and certain death. Turning away from worry means that in the moment, in each precious and passing moment, we accept the presence of God with us through it all.

Lazarus

In Jesuit Fr James Martin's book, *Come Forth*, about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, he talks about what some psychologists call catastrophising, always focusing on the negative. He gives examples: "a bumpy airplane ride meant that we were crashing ... a mildly critical remark from a friend meant that he hated me".

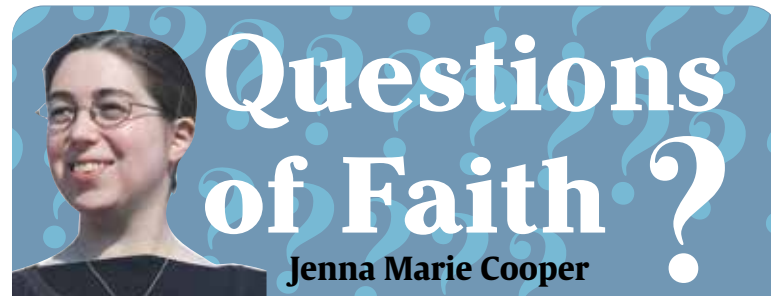
This thinking the worst, expecting the worst or worrying about every possibility can dominate our lives.

"There's a reason," writes Fr Martin, "that they call Satan 'the Prince of Lies'. If Satan can get you to focus on only the negatives, you are living a lie."

Anxiety, another spiritual director told me, means a lack of trust. I was taken aback by this comment, because I know that some people are plagued by genuine anxiety for which they may need medical help.

But for the anxiety that taxes my life, the worry that exhorts payment in wasted time, wasted opportunities and lost sleep, I know that God is the answer. Making the choice in each present moment to not "worry first" is a step on the spiritual journey.

i Effie Caldarola writes for OSV News from the US.



Questions of Faith?

Jenna Marie Cooper

Are demonic possessions just mental illness?

Q: In watching *The Chosen* I noted a couple of demoniac episodes were included, as are in fact depicted in Scripture. No CGI effects were done to show the demons either going in or coming out of the victims, making the healed person seem to simply be someone with personality disorders. What does the Church say today about demons? Are they real or were they ancient superstitions and misidentifications of what would today be called "mental issues"?

A: The Church teaches that demonic possession, while rare, is certainly something that can happen.

In 1999, the rite of exorcism was the last liturgical ritual to be revised after Vatican II, but it's worth noting that this ritual is for what we call "major exorcisms," or exorcisms intended to release the afflicted from actual demonic possession (i.e., more or less along the lines of the exorcisms we see portrayed in the movies). But in the Catholic Church we also have "minor exorcisms," such as the prayers prayed over soon-to-be baptised infants and adult catechumens preparing to enter the Church. Minor exorcisms are meant to strengthen the one seeking Baptism against the very real powers of evil, with no presumption that the one receiving the minor exorcism is actually possessed.

Because of the reality of the demonic, today every diocese is supposed to have a specially trained priest, appointed by the diocesan bishop, who serves as the diocesan exorcist.

That being said, it requires careful discernment on the part of the exorcist-priest to determine whether or not a true demonic possession is actually the source of a particular individual's suffering. As the US Bishops' Conference website's page on exorcism notes: "The exorcist is instructed to employ the utmost circumspection and prudence before proceeding to the rite. Throughout his ministry, an exorcist must establish a balance within his own mind between not believing too easily that the devil is responsible for what is manifesting, and attributing all possible manifestations solely to a natural, organic source." To that end, most dioceses in the United

States have protocols which require an individual to have medical and psychiatric evaluations, to rule out potential natural causes, before they can receive a major exorcism.

Finding a medical or mental health condition that could mimic demonic possession is one way to gain clarity that a person's suffering is not caused by the direct malevolence of a supernatural entity.

On the other hand, introduction to the rite of exorcism lists some medically-unexplainable, positive "signs and symptoms" of demonic possession, such as: the afflicted person speaking and understanding foreign languages they never studied; revealing hidden knowledge or information they would have had no way of knowing; and demonstrating physical strength beyond what would be normal for their size and general condition. True victims of possession will typically also have a history of dabbling in the occult, such as through fortune-telling, visiting psychic mediums, playing with Ouija boards, or participating in 'New Age' activities.

If we turn to the gospels themselves, there are some instances where Jesus cast out demons in a way that might perhaps be interpreted as the curing of a mental illness, such as when he frees a mute man to speak. (See Matt 9:32)

But there are also many narratives of Jesus performing exorcisms in unambiguous cases of actual demonic possession. For example, we read of demons tormenting two possessed men; they recognise Jesus and cry out to him: "What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the appointed time?" (Matt 8:29)

But the bottom line we should always remember is this: whether the biblical exorcisms cured cases of true demonic possession or mental illness, the message to us is the same: God has supreme authority over all that he has created, and he wishes salvation and healing for all his children.

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.



The 'dark night'

as impasse



What happens to us when we experience a dark night of the soul? What's happening and what's to be our response?

There are libraries of literature on this, each book or article making its own point, but here I want to share a rather unique and highly insightful take on this by Constance FitzGerald, a Carmelite nun and someone well versed in the various classical spiritual writers who speak about the dark night of the soul.

Impasse

She uses the word "impasse" to render what is commonly called a dark night of the soul. For her, in effect, what happens in a dark night of the soul is that you come to an "impasse" in your life in terms of your emotions, your intellect, and your imagination. All the former ways you understood, imagined and felt about things, especially as this relates to God, faith, and prayer, no longer work for you. You are, so to speak, paralysed, unable to go back to the way things were and unable to move forwards. And part of the paralysis is that you cannot think, imagine or feel your way out of this. You are at an impasse – no way back and no way forward. So, what do you do? How do you move beyond the impasse?

There's no simple or quick path out of this. You cannot imagine, think, or feel your way out of this because the vision, symbols, answers, and feelings you need,



Fr Rolheiser

www.ronrolheiser.com

in effect, don't exist yet, at least they don't exist for you. That's the exact reason why you are at an impasse and so emotionally and intellectually paralysed. The new vision and feelings that can reset your vision, thoughts, and feelings first have to be gestated and given birth to through your own pain and confusion.

No answer

At this stage, there is no answer, at least not for you. You may have read accounts of others who have undergone the same impasse and who now offer counsel as to how to undergo the dark night. That can be useful, but it's still your heart, your imagination, and your intellect that are in the crucible of fire. Knowing

that others have gone through the same fire can help give you vision and consolation in your paralysis, but the fire must still be gone through in your own life to reset your own imagination, thoughts and feelings.

For FitzGerald, being in this state is the ultimate liminal space within which we can find ourselves. This is a crucible within which we are being purified. And, for her, the way out is the way through. The way out of a dark night of this kind is through "contemplation", namely, staying with the impasse, waiting patiently inside it, and waiting for God to break the impasse by transforming our imagination, intellect and heart.

To become mystics

So ultimately, this impasse is a challenge for us to become mystics, not that we begin to search for extraordinary religious experience, but that we let our disillusion, broken symbols, and failed meanings become the space wherein God can reset our faith, feelings, imagination and intellect inside of a new horizon wherein everything is radically reinterpreted.

How do we do this concretely? How do we contemplate? We do it by sitting in the tension, helpless, patient, open, waiting and staying there however long it takes for us to receive in the depth of our souls a new way of imagining, thinking, and feeling about God, faith and prayer – beyond the impasse.

Moreover, the broken symbols, the disillusion and our helplessness to think or feel our way out of the impasse is precisely what assures us that the new vision which is given to us comes from God and is

not the product of own imagination or projection or self-interest.

Nietzsche

One of the most penetrating criticisms of religious experience ever given was made by Friedrich Nietzsche who claimed that all religious experience, all of it, is ultimately human projection. He argued that we create God in our self-image and likeness for our own self-interest, and that is why a lot of sincere faith and religion can be hypocritical and false. Reacting to this, Michael Buckley, the renowned Jesuit philosopher and theologian, made this counterclaim: Nietzsche is 95% correct. Ninety-five percent of what claims to be religious experience is in fact human projection. But, Buckley adds, Nietzsche is 5% wrong and that 5% makes all the difference – because in that 5% God's revelation flows untainted in our lives.

Now, and this is the essential point here, that 5% happens precisely when we are in a dark night of the soul, when our symbols are broken, our intellect is impotent, our imagination is empty and our hearts are at loss. It is precisely then, when we are helpless to help ourselves that we are also helpless to fudge and taint the way God is entering us.

God can flow into our lives pure and untainted when we are at an impasse and unable to substitute our vision for God's vision.

“All the former ways you understood, imagined and felt about things, especially as this relates to God, faith, and prayer, no longer work for you. You are, so to speak, paralysed”

Returning to the Lord this Lenten season



Christ in the Wilderness, by Ivan Kramskoy. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Lv 13:1-2, 44-46
Ps 32:1-2, 5, 11
1 Cor 10:31-11:1
Mk 1:40-45

Most of us struggle to keep up with new year resolutions already! Thanks be to God that the Lenten season approaches. For in the coming weeks, the Church invites us to return to the Lord with our whole heart, mind and soul. We are given yet another chance to encounter God's mercy and to renew our resolve to become disciples of Jesus.

Leper

In the Gospel, Jesus heals a leper who approaches him

The Sunday Gospel

Jem Sullivan



with a confident request. In Jesus' day, lepers were sharply ostracised from the community. They were forced to live outside cities and towns and were generally excluded from normal activities of life. The first reading from Leviticus describes how lepers were declared unclean by the priest, were required to dress in a way that clearly identified them as outcasts and were commanded to stay outside the camp.

Within that social context, a leper was truly helpless. Their

helplessness came not only from the fact that there were no cures or medicines for their condition. Lepers were helpless because society had no place for them, saw them as having no worth and treated them with little value or dignity as a person.

Pity

St Mark tells us that Jesus was moved with pity at the leper's condition. As we ponder God's word we contemplate what it meant for Jesus to be

moved with pity for the sick. And we reflect on how we too stand in need of Jesus' healing love today.

Jesus knew well that the leper's physical disease had resulted in a much deeper sickness – the wound of rejection, loneliness and despair. The mission and purpose of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is to free humanity from this deepest of wounds – our separation from God. Jesus was sent by his heavenly Father to reconcile

humanity to friendship with God so we would not suffer helplessness, alienation and despair wrought by sin.

Weaknesses

In the face of sickness, disappointment and rejection – and even our own weaknesses and failures – we face the same vulnerability of the leper in the Gospel. So, as we return to the Lord this Lenten season with renewed faith and trust in God's healing mercy we make the words of the

psalmist our own as he prays, "I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation".

May this Lent be a graced time to grow in trust that, like the leper who encountered Jesus, we too will encounter the fullness of God's mercy and healing love. For Jesus desires to heal each of us who approach him in faith as we pray, "speak to me, Lord".

Question: What healing do I seek from Jesus today?

“May this Lent be a graced time to grow in trust that, like the leper who encountered Jesus, we too will encounter the fullness of God's mercy and healing love”

i Jem Sullivan holds a doctorate in religious education and is an associate professor of Catechetics in the School of Theology and Religious Studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.

TVRadio

Brendan O'Regan



We all know real aggression and it's unpleasant

I don't know anyone who approves of rudeness, though obviously there are people who are guilty of it. Maybe they don't realise their behaviour is rude. Anyway, I'm not sure how many words we need to describe it.

On **Drivetime** (RTÉ Radio 1 Thursday) there was a largely tongue-in-cheek discussion of 'microaggressions' – including eye-rolling and interruption. In a way I was glad that presenters Cormac Ó hEadhra and Sarah McInerney didn't take it too seriously.

Included in the discussion was the rather more serious issue of 'unconscious bias'. They were discussing the matter with career psychologist Prof. Sinead Brady who had all the appropriate lingo – 'micro-aggressions', related to 'unconscious bias', were 'intersectional', were examples of 'epiphenomenon' or 'empty signifiers' – cue 'wow!' from Cormac Ó hEadhra.

Strangely, though you can be rude to anyone, micro-aggressions were "small subtle behaviours ... intentional or unintentional used to communicate bias towards marginalised groups". As the jargon flowed, Sinead was hesitant – "I want to be very careful about my language here". True, if you're into mine-



fields, you have to be careful how you walk through them. You might get more than micro-aggro for your trouble.

Curiously, if interruptions fitted the descriptions, then even to say 'sorry, go ahead and speak' could be a micro-aggression. Cue loud sigh from Sarah McInerney – "It's a minefield," she said.

Sometimes I feel people have too much time on their hands. Yet, in this age of fragility, it is more important than ever to be kind and respectful. How about this advice: 'Don't be rude to anyone!' – uncomplicated.

Another point occurred to me – we all know what

real aggression is, and it's not pleasant to be on the receiving end of it. Extending the meaning to behaviours like eye-rolling robs the word of its meaning, and it's not the only word to be re-defined out of useful existence.

The political situation in Northern Ireland has been marked by real aggression. The peace process was brought about by courageous leaders and peacemakers but since then some leaders on all sides have taken dangerous risks with its stability. Last weekend hope was renewed with an agreement that should see the political institutions re-

established.

Last Monday was not a public holiday in the North so the work continued. On **Late Breakfast** (Newstalk) UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was reported as describing a "fantastic cause for optimism".

Journalist Fionnán Sheahan spoke of "a significant historic day". There are now two women in charge, with a First Minister from a Catholic and Nationalist background. I'm not sure how much religion figures anymore, unless as a primarily cultural-political thing.

Last Monday on **BBC News** some second level students spoke about the political and religious issues. One had a message for the leaders: "you're there to solve problems, not create them".

The situation for religious persecution is infinitely worse in places like North Korea and Nigeria, but this doesn't figure large in Western media. **Vaticano** (EWTN, Sunday) referenced a report from the Open Doors organisation which said that over half the world's population lived in countries with severe religious persecution. Christians especially faced "existential threats" from Government bodies and other entities.

Journalists were among those persecuted, an issue raised at a recent gathering of Catholic journalists

PICK OF THE WEEK

SONGS OF PRAISE

BBC One Sunday, February 11, 1.15pm

For World Day of the Sick, stories of faith and hope from Christians who are unwell and their carers. Includes the story of the Christian founder of the modern hospice movement, Dame Cicely Saunders.

CALLED AND CHOSEN - FR VINCENT R. CAPODANNO

EWTN Sunday, February 11, 9pm

Docu-drama about the life and ministry of Fr Vincent R Capodanno, a US Navy Chaplain who was killed on September 4, 1967 who gave his life trying to minister to a fallen soldier during the Vietnam War.

WITNESS

RTÉ Radio 1 Friday, February 16, 10.05pm

Topical religious affairs show from the West of Ireland, with Siobhán Garrigan.

in Lourdes. Their mission to speak the truth often landed them in trouble, especially if reporting on crime or terrorism. Pope Francis encouraged them to continue to report, especially from war torn regions, as direct personal contact helps to reveal the "absurdity" of war.

Finally, I wrote extensively last week about the upcoming referenda, but it's worth drawing attention to the **Brendan O'Connor Show** (RTÉ Radio 1 Saturday). It involved two interviews rather than a debate.

The presenter spoke with author Katriona O'Sullivan who favoured a YesYes. She wanted recognition and other rights in the Constitution for families not based

on marriage. She referenced her own blended family, so much of her contributions were very personal – effective in swaying voters but not necessarily geared towards the best public policy.

Up next we had writer and commentator Maria Steen, arguing for a NoNo. She did not favour erasing the words 'woman', 'mother' and 'home' from the relevant articles. Even under the current articles some women felt they were being forced out to work from 'economic necessity' – not a problem with the law itself but with successive governments that have "failed to follow through".

Worth listening back!

Film

Aubrey Malone



The perils of joining a medical research programme

Whenever anyone signs up for a research experiment in a film – especially if they're locked in the kind of laboratory you associate with David Cronenberg – you get the sneaky feeling that things are going to go horribly wrong. Soon.

Such suspicions are copper fastened when the person conducting it says things like, "You have nothing to fear", or, "We have your best interests at heart".

Or: "There will be a cash bonus for those of you who last the pace."

The experiment involves a stark choice: Stay awake or die. Ominous-looking capsules are ingested, causing personality changes,

hallucinations, contortions that are reminiscent of Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, and on one occasion even levitation.

I don't generally associate Ireland with horror movies. Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula*, of course, and Neil Jordan made a big impact with *Interview with the Vampire* in 1994, but it's only in the past five years or so that the genre has really taken off in this country.

Debut director Ian Hunt-Duffy stumps up nicely with *Double Blind* (16), adopting a 'Ship of Fools' format with his band of gullible victims who believe the clinical trial will solve their money problems.

He uses most of the



A scene from *Double Blind*.

expectable tropes – the complacent know-all who thinks everything will go hunky dory, the dark horse who's a possible traitor, the spunky heroine (think Genevieve Bujold from *Coma*) who's cynical enough to make you think she'll get to the bottom of

what's going on behind those mysterious walls.

Before that happens, of course, we know we're going to see lots of people with tomato ketchup on their bodies as they meet their maker. Because this motley crew of misfortunates aren't really all that

different from the mice trapped in cages in the self-same lab.

Gird your loins as our British Sigourney Weaver (great performance from Millie Brady) puts her thinking cap on and realises that herself and her colleagues aren't much more than "data points on a spread sheet" – to put it mildly.

She's intent on finding out who's pulling the strings in the futuristic research facility as the clock winds down to a personal Armageddon and the door to freedom seems ever farther and farther away.

I saw this film at a morning showing. I'm always brave at morning shows.

The problems tend to arise when you're out at the coal shed that night and a cat squawks beside you, causing you to jump roughly five feet in the air.

If you're watching it at night, as I expect you will be, there are various ways you can deal with the scary bits. You could crawl under the seat, for instance. Or jump into the lap of the person sitting beside you. Or put your hands over your eyes and view them from a tiny crevice between your fingers.

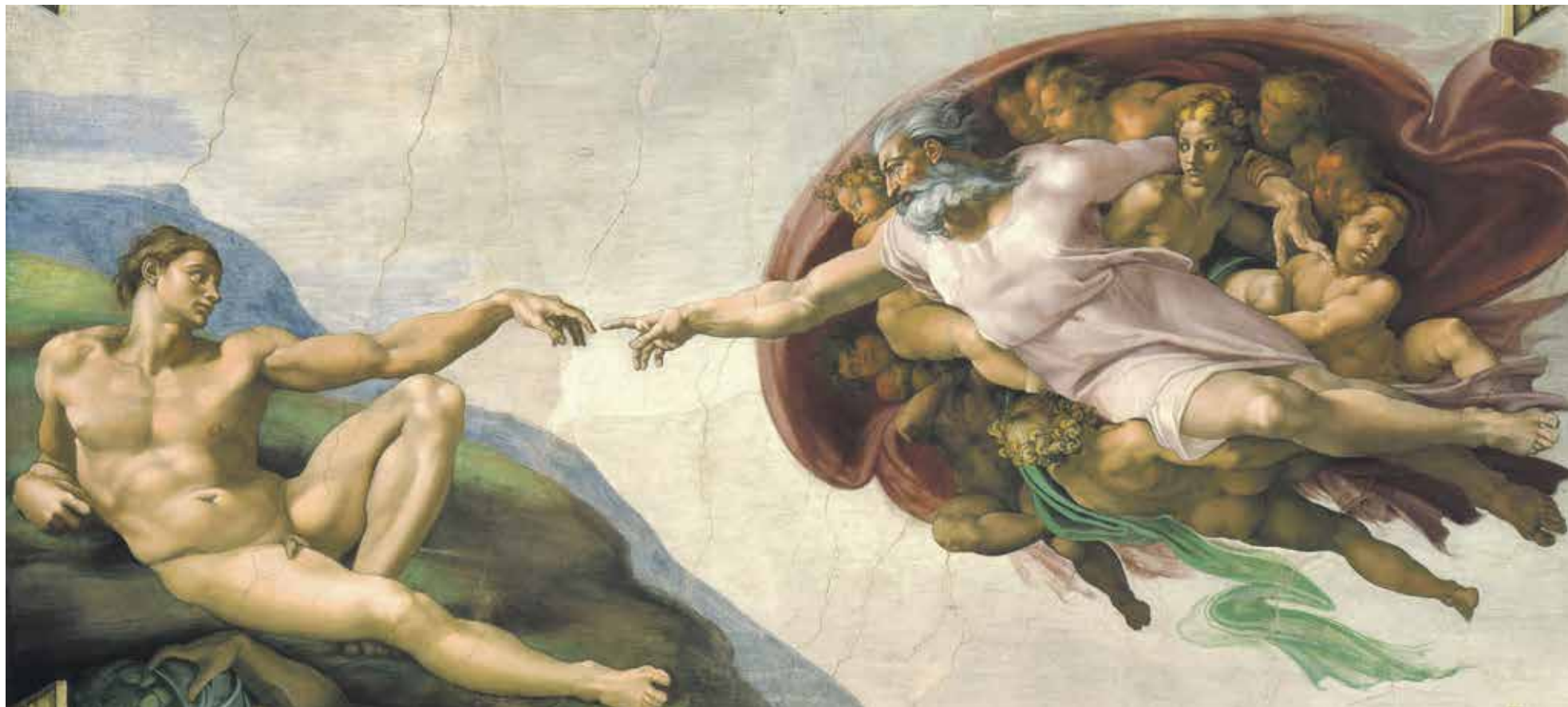
The third option is the most user friendly and the one least likely to result in you doing any physical damage to yourself.

BookReviews

Peter Costello



A culture that excludes God



The Creation of Adam by Michelangelo - Many millions never feel touched by the hand of God, as was Adam at creation.

Bulwarks of Unbelief: Atheism and Divine Absence in a Secular Age, by Joseph Minich, foreword by Carl R. Trueman (Lexham Press, €25/ \$29 / £21)

Frank Litton

How did we, in the West, move from a world in which belief in God was the default position to one in which it is an option among others?

Charles Taylor's *The Secular Age* (2007) is the most discussed study of the trajectory of thought that brings us to this point. Other philosophers have contributed, notably, Remi Brague, with his *The Kingdom of Man: Genesis and the Failure of the Modern Project* (2018 – original French version appeared in 2015).

Now, Joseph Minich, a teaching fellow at the Reformed Protestant, Davent Institute enters the conversation with this valuable contribution.

Thoroughness

The secular age came to Ireland in a rush, spectacular in its thoroughness. Whatever about belief (69% report themselves as 'Catholic'), the practice of religion has diverged from 91% in 1975 to 30% in 2021. The voices of the Church

have all but disappeared from the public sphere.

How has this come about? We can speak of push and pull factors. The latter is the vision of the human condition found in the Church with the promise of salvation, the former those aspects of the Church that repel.

“Is it not possible that the decline of the pull of the vision towards commitment and practice preceded the scandals and the outrage?”

These appear to be the most significant in Ireland. How often do we hear people explain their detachment from the Church in terms of their revulsion at clerical sex abuse and its cover up, or the harsh, cruel treatment of women who transgressed its sexual norms?

That the truth, or plausibility of the vision is seldom, if ever, in the frame is not surprising. We Irish do not 'do ideas', anti-intellectualism being a distinctive feature of our culture.

Nonetheless, is it not possible that the decline of the pull of the vision towards commitment and practice preceded

the scandals and the outrage? As the vision recedes, the institution loses respect and its sins are brought into daylight?

Minich is particularly helpful here. While more than able to engage with the philosophical dimension, he pays more attention to the socio-cultural dimension than either Taylor or Brague.

Interactions

Indeed, his ability to trace the interactions between the world we find ourselves in and our efforts to orientate ourselves within it, is one of the book's greatest strengths.

And we find ourselves in a world very different from that of our parents or grandparents. What could be clearly seen in their horizon, is obscured in ours.

Not so long ago, cows grazed and crops grew around the small village of Leixlip, where the multinational company Intel now manufactures chips for computers. Some 4,500 work in the vast complex that covers 360 acres and

represents an investment of €28 billion.

“While its fruits were visible in what we can do and produce, its impact on how we envisage ourselves, our relationships with others, our place in the cosmos is just as significant”

How could one measure the distance of this world from that of the community of farmers that tended the cattle and tilled the land?

We did not choose this new world with all its ramifications and transformations, though it is of course the consequence of choices that we did make. The crucial choice was to find our way into the modern globalised economy, seeking its material benefits.

This world was a long time in the making. Technology

was a dominant force. While its fruits were visible in what we can do and produce, its impact on how we envisage ourselves, our relationships with others, our place in the cosmos is just as significant.

Impact

Many philosophers and theologians have examined this impact, Minich pays special attention to two thinkers who have shaped the discussions. He gives us a lucid account of the work of Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) French philosopher, sociologist and lay theologian and the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) providing an analysis of the limitations of the 'technoculture' we now inhabit.

This world operates with an impoverished concept of reason. This 'instrumental' reason can give us more and more efficient and effective means for getting from A to Z, while leaving us bereft of reasons why Z could be a worthwhile destination. We assert values in the absence of any idea of the good.

The world presents us with a sharp distinction between

the 'subjective' and the 'objective' that disengages us from nature. Working as instruments of production, we cannot identify ourselves in what we make, so we express ourselves in what we consume. God is absent from this world.

“We must be grateful to the philosophers/theologians who use their God-given reason to guide us”

Minich concludes this fine book asking what its implications are for the believers who find themselves in this world.

He reminds us of St Augustine's distinction between the 'City of Man' and the 'City of God'. Christianity is an historical religion; the story of revelation, a long process of education, for the inhabitants of the 'City of Man' in what is the Kingdom whose coming they pray for.

We are in a chapter of that lesson. As the deficiencies of our technoculture become increasingly apparent in our politics, our economies, our efforts to save the planet, our relationships, it seems that we are starting a new chapter.

We must be grateful to the philosophers/theologians who use their God-given reason to guide us. Minich is eminent among them.

“This world operates with an impoverished concept of reason. This 'instrumental' reason can give us more and more efficient and effective means for getting from A to Z, while leaving us bereft of reasons why Z could be a worthwhile destination”

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.

Are we facing an 'information crisis'?

Elon Musk
contemplates
our future



Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now, by Jaron Lanier, with a new afterword (Vintage, £9.99 / €12.60)

Peter Costello

As I sit down to write this review, my *Financial Times* has just reported that "Elon Musk's firm xAI is in talks to raise up to \$6bn, as the Tesla and X chief looks to global investors, including Hong Kong, to finance his challenge to Microsoft-backed Open AI".

The author of this book would, I think, regard this ambition as the start of a race to the bottom.

Jaron Lanier is a Jeremiah of the internet who has emerged directly from Silicon Valley. And as one of the original proponents of 'digital reality' who is steeped in the tech culture that has been transforming our lives over the last quarter of a century, he knows what he is talking about.

The difference that sets him apart is that Lanier is an artist, a musician of an advanced kind of modern classical forms, whose work has been much admired.

Reliance

Reportedly he is worried too that reliance on social media platforms is reducing people's capacity for spirituality; or as *The New York Times* put it awhile ago, the pressing need to 'click delete to save your soul'.

This book, while not perhaps new, is bang up to date. So what are his arguments for deleting your social media? You are losing your free will; leaving is a striking way to resist the insanity of our times; social media is undermining truth; social media is making what you say meaningless; it is destroying your capacity for empathy; it is making you unhappy; it does not want you to have economic dignity; it is making politics impossible. And tenthly and finally, 'Social media hates your soul'.

“The evidence already suggests that social media is making us sadder, angrier, less empathetic, more fearful, more isolated and more tribal. It is driving 12-year-olds to suicide”

This is a short book, it can be read in an hour or two not devoted to idly searching the web. These might be the best-spent two hours this year if you do so.

The social media that people, especially young people, are overmuch engaged on serves only to make them essential 'automated extension of the platform'.

There is a serious problem facing parishes, Church communities and religious organisations of all kinds: should you stay with X 'formerly known as Twitter'.

It may be the fifth most visited site in the world, but should your parish or community be there? Would your intentions and your community not be better served by establishing a well-maintained website of your own? A site free from all the madness you might hope all could avoid.

In summary the evidence already suggests that social media is making us sadder, angrier, less empathetic, more fearful, more isolated and more tribal. It is driving 12-year-olds to suicide.

But I began with Elon Musk. As I finish these thoughts, my morning news survey tells me that Musk's company Neuralink has implanted a wireless brain chip inside a person's brain through intrusive surgery. It will make it easier for the person to communicate with computers and AI.

Entities

Or rather for those entities to communicate with them and so control them. A professor at King's College London refers to "the brain implant community": just who are they one wonders.

This advance must mark a sinister landmark on the way to our complete dehumanisation. Where will 'free will' be in a fully developed 'information world' controlled by the likes of Elon Musk?

Seeking the paths of past in the Pyrenees



A shepherd's summer hut in the high Pyrenees. Photo: Peter Reid

An exhibition by Anthony Kelly, Seán McCrum, Peter Reid, and Paddy Sammon in the Irish Architectural Archives, 45 Merrion Square; run to 29 March 2024; free.

Peter Costello

The Ariège is a French *department* that lies in the Pyrenees between Carcassonne and the mountain state of Andorra. It is one of the least populated regions of France, and as a result preserves many traditions of the past, and is crisscrossed by the tracks of ancient peoples and faiths, a place of hermits, shepherds and smugglers.

The multimedia *Chemins de migration* (which might be translated as 'the paths of people movement') combines colour and black and white photographs with sound and video, with a background from Troubadour and Sephardic songs, is an immersive event.

It centres on sites in southern France where those involved experienced a curiously localised sense of migration and place.

The places recorded include stone shepherds' huts, the site of an ancient grain mill,

a castle celebrated for Troubadour music and culture, as well as one abandoned in the historical shifting of borders and allegiances between what are now France and Spain over the centuries. They focus especially on one such, Roquefixade Castle.

The artists involved explain: "It looks at the ways we experience a sense of place – hard to define yet unmistakable when we feel it".

How did simple stone shepherds' huts in the Pyrenees act as a portal, leading visual and sound artists' imaginations to connect with the relationship of landscapes to buildings? Why is this combination of sound and visual so important?

A small but intriguing exhibition, well worth a visit. And those inspired to actually tour the region should make sure that they visit not only the magnificent 19th Century restoration of the Cité de Carcassonne by architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, but also the cathedral in the high mountain town of St Bertrand-de-Comminges (easily reached from Lourdes), two of the most important survivals of medieval culture in South-West France.



Author Joyce Meyer

The Power of Thank You: Discover the God of Gratitude, by Joyce Meyer (Hodder and Stoughton, £9.99 / €11.99)

Peter Costello

“Each moment that you're given,” Joyce Meyer writes, “is a precious gift

from God.”

How often were we told when small to 'say thank' on so many occasions? But how little it affects the adult world. Many are hasty to blame, slow to say a kind word.

But that generalised gratitude to God that Meyer writes of, becomes more focused when it is a small child saying 'Thank you Granny', or a friend saying 'Well done girl, that was a great goal'.

These may seem small things, but if we could fill our days with such small moments of kindness how much happier the world would be, how much more like that ideal way of living that so many claim to bring us to, but somehow never

do.

As an evangelical Joyce Meyer calls on her readers to thank God for the salvation of their souls. And yet, when we look around at the world, we can see that it is easy to be grateful to God, while being ungracious to others.

The essence of Gospel teaching, of what Jesus really wants his followers to hold to, is that we “do unto others what we would have them do unto us”.

The gratitude we feel should encompass others too. We need to thank others for their existence. But as a mere glance at the morning paper, or the news flashes on your phone, will tell you, that is not easy in the modern world that surrounds us, but which has not quite overwhelmed us.

Let Your
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For more information, please contact James at jsullivan@materfoundation.ie or phone 01 830 3482.

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 Irish Hospice Foundation

www.hospicefoundation.ie



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Leisure time

Crossword

Gordius 649

Across

1 Church bench (3)
3 Popular dessert (6,5)
8 Yearly (6)
9 Hindrance (8)
10 Vegetables symbolic of Wales (5)
11 Cupboard (5)
13 Ancient Spartan slave (5)
15 How pasta should be served (2,5)
16 Bishopric, see (7)
20 Met romantically (5)
21 Sea creature cooked in calamari (5)
23 Fictional detective, played by the late John Thaw (5)
24 Classic western starring Grace Kelly and Gary Cooper (4,4)
25 A constituent of blood (6)
26 Abstainer, pioneer (11)
27 Producer of acorns (3)

Down

1 Description of the entrance to Heaven (6,5)
2 Roved (8)
3 Alloy of copper and zinc (5)
4 One of the twelve special followers of Jesus (7)
5 Establish (3,2)
6 Item of jewellery in which you might keep a snippet of hair (6)
7 Digit on the foot (3)
12 One who works maintaining spires, etc (11)
13 Detested (5)
14 Attempted (5)
17 Strong coffee (8)
18 Everlasting (7)
19 Rain forest (6)
22 Wild Australian dog (5)
23 Grinding tooth (5)
24 Strike (3)

1		2		3			4			5		6		7
8							9							
10										11				12
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15									16				17	
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		19				20								
21					22					23				
24										25				
26													27	

SOLUTIONS, FEBRUARY 1

GORDIUS No. 648

Across - 1 Rack of lamb 6 Show 10 Paris 11 Nocturnal 12 Decline 15 Stays 17 Suds 18 Oath 19 Elver 21 Floated 23 Terse 24 Once 25 Aunt 26 Rivet 28 Odyssey 33 Dandelion 34 Tenor 35 Ever 36 Adam and Eve

Down - 1 Ripe 2 Carpenter 3 Ousel 4 Linen 5 Mock 7 Henna 8 Wall Street 9 Guessed 13 Idol 14 Esparto 16 Footbridge 20 Vengeance 21 Feather 22 Easy 27 Venue 29 Denim 30 Satan 31 Wind 32 Free

Sudoku Corner

519

Easy

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

Hard

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

Last week's Easy 518

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

Last week's Hard 518

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



What do we think about the ‘last priests in Ireland’?

A few weeks ago, priests were the subject of a highly-publicised TV programme, entitled: *The Last Priests in Ireland*. It wasn't exactly the way I thought we might see ourselves presented or our ministry described. Last is a dangerous place to be! It puts on additional pressure and is tinged with sadness and despair. We are here because others went before us – many of them encouraging us through the lives they lived, that, in those lives there was something worth imitating and a call deserving of a positive response – vocation.

Possibility

Anyway, I'm wondering how you feel about the possibility of the final days of priesthood in Ireland? Was there any sense of regret or did it all seem inevitable? Did you find yourself agreeing with the thesis that priests were, in the past, seen as leaders and ones who were approached for advice and guidance and that really anyone can do that – there is no need for a priest to fulfil that role in modern Ireland? Though we all need someone to turn to, it does not have to be a priest and society will find other roads to travel in search of guidance. There is truth there and we have no shortage of experts to whom



we can turn. But is that all a priest is? Are there things he does, that cannot be done by another?

“I had the joy of baptising a little girl and reminding her parents that the gift she is, seeks also the gift of faith”

This week, as one of the “last priests”, if the programme is accurate, I stood at the bedsides of two elderly ladies as death called out to them. I whispered words of absolution, anointed with the Oil of the Sick and sought to reassure them and their saddened loved ones. I celebrated the funeral Mass of a man who died unexpectedly and left a lot of heartbreak behind. I travelled the roads and by-roads of a country parish to visit people on the ‘First Friday’ and be with them

for a little while in prayer and faith. I had the joy of baptising a little girl and reminding her parents that the gift she is, seeks also the gift of faith, and that nobody is better placed (or challenged) to share this gift with her as deeply and meaningfully as they. I crossed the country to share a ‘Day of Recollection’ with a group of co-workers and met a young couple who will say ‘I do’ to one another in the coming weeks. Attending an Ecumenical Service in the local Church of Ireland, I had the opportunity to share a few words around the Good Samaritan. I attended a meeting of priests and laity in our diocese where current challenges and expectations were discussed, alongside prayers for guidance.

Supply

I spent a bit of time in schools and attended a few meetings, kept an eye on the churches and tried to supply or arrange the supply of what they needed. I blessed St Brigid's crosses, candles on Candlemas Day and throats on the feast of St Blaise. I enjoyed what I was doing. There wasn't a pedestal in sight, nor any desire to control anyone's life but gratitude for being part of it. Deeply aware of my own limitations, I was

happy just to be amongst people. Others could have done some of what I did but not all of it. Neither can I do all of what others did for me. I couldn't begin to be a carpenter, a butcher, an electrician, a farmer or any of the countless and essential professions that surround me and that is fine and understandable. But if I thought I was looking at the last edition of any of them, my heart would be broken and the sense of loss immeasurable.

“Together means together – laity, religious, men, women, young, old, lost, found – together”

Perhaps that is what I want you to think about these days. The Church is with us and for us. It has been there on our darkest and brightest days; at times of joy and sorrow, certainty and uncertainty and it is unlikely that there will be any change in that truth. The Synodal Pathway, so present to us now, calls for us to work with and for each other in a deeply meaningful and prayerful way. Together means together – laity, religious, men, women, young, old, lost, found – together. Priests

are not the be all and end all but a definite part and a necessary part. So maybe all of us could encourage those who are here, give thanks for those who were and pray that there will be more to come.

Barber's chair

A shortened version of a story shared! A barber told a man in his shop that he did not believe in God. He went on to say there could not be a God, given the terrible condition of the world and the way people treat each other. The customer said that he did not believe in barbers! He wondered how can there be barbers in the world when people go around with long, unwashed hair and shapeless beards. “Ah”, said the barber, “they would not be like that if they came to me”. “Maybe”, said the customer, “that’s how God feels too”!



A bishop in southern India looks to The Little Way Association for vital aid for many suffering from flooding

Bishop Antonysamy of Palayamkottai in south-east India has written to The Little Way Association in the aftermath of severe floods which have ravaged parts of Tamil Nadu including his diocese. He says “Many groups of people, including expectant mothers, children, the disabled, aged and sick have been left in a state of acute distress. Many have lost their employment and daily wages, significantly affecting their food security and health. Households have been particularly badly-hit, losing essential items such as cooking vessels, clothing, livestock, and more.

We need your help to provide food supplies, protective clothing, blankets, and nutritional supplements

“These people are struggling to meet their basic needs. I reach out to you, on behalf of all our people, to request your compassionate response to my appeal for funds to be used for food supplies, protective clothing, blankets, and nutritional supplements. Our Social Service Society will implement the relief work and are well-equipped to bring relief to those most in need.

Please do help us to aid the recovery of the affected families and individuals, helping them to rebuild their lives.

“Your generosity, dear Little Way donors, will undoubtedly contribute to the alleviating of suffering and the restoration of hope in the affected communities. May God bless you.”

Every euro you send will be forwarded without deduction and gratefully received.

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Sadly, the mother of these three children has lost her husband. Her home has been severely damaged in the flood, leaving her in a dire situation.



“I rejoice to be little, because only children and those who are like them will be admitted to the heavenly banquet.”
- St Therese

You can help repair a Mission Chapel

The Little Way Association has a long history of providing humble places of worship for far-flung parishes in mission countries. Nature can take its toll on these simple buildings, and we receive requests from priests for help with repairs.

We humbly ask that you allocate some of your kind giving to our chapels fund. By ensuring that these small but dignified churches are in good repair, you help to make possible the offering of Holy Mass in needy Catholic communities.

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