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Doctors rally against removal of 'killing prohibition' from ethics code

EXCLUSIVE

Jason Osborne

At least 250 doctors have signed a letter addressed to the leadership of the Irish Medical Council stating that they are "gravely concerned" with recent changes to the code of ethics that governs doctors in Ireland.

The recently updated 9th edition of the Medical Council's 'Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics for Registered Medical Practitioners' saw the removal of a prohibition against the deliberate killing of a patient.

It also saw changes in wording that will result in weakened protection of conscientious protection for doctors.

"We are concerned about the risk that the removal of section 46.9 (8th edition) may pose to patients and persons in society who may be vulnerable resulting from this change," the letter reads.

"Additionally we are concerned about doctors who have Freedom of Conscience positions in light of the change in section 42:9th edition functioning essentially to a mandatory requirement to act in a way that may contravene their conscience and potentially cause moral injury."

Many have interpreted the removal of the paragraph 46.9, that said, "You must not take part in the deliberate killing of a patient," as paving the way for the

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Angelic powers...



Tomas Padayogdog takes part in the opening of a novena to Santo Nino, January 14, which will be celebrated for the 25th time by the Filipino community in Berkeley Road Parish, Dublin. Photo: Joel Vallejo

JASON OSBORNE

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Doctors rally against removal of 'killing prohibition' from ethics code

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introduction of euthanasia and assisted suicide to Ireland.

The doctors in their letter urge a review of the updated guidelines and "the reinstatement of the safeguard 'You must not take part in the deliberate killing of a patient'".

They also request that the Council revert to the wording regarding conscientious objection of the 8th edition.

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic* newspaper, Consultant Obstetrician Dr Trevor Hayes described the changes as "just the thin edge of the wedge" being driven into medical prac-

tice in Ireland.

There's a desire to "change the vocational attitude of why you should be a doctor," Dr Hayes said.

"What they want is they want a generation change and when the old guys move on, they'll have screened out the pro-life doctors at the medical student level and then they'll have their agenda," Dr Hayes said, adding, "two generations is all it takes for this to happen".

"They want doctors to just press the 'kill button'. They're not interested in doctors asking, 'Should I be doing this?' They don't want them asking that anymore."

Maternity hospital coverage 'distressing and painful' says head of Sisters of Charity

Ruadhán Jones

Negative coverage of the handover of land for the national maternity hospital, including the burning of nuns in effigy, was "distressing and painful", the leader of the Religious Sisters of Charity (RSC) has said.

Sr Patricia Lenihan, leader of the RSC's since 2019 – a period of turmoil in which the sisters controversially gifted St Vincent's hospital to the State for the building of a new National Maternity Hospital – has opened up about the "very intense" coverage.

"It was very distressing and painful," she said on RTE's documentary, *The Last Nuns* in Ireland.

"But what was very distressing was to watch the sisters who gave their life

serving in St Vincent's Hospital" she continued, asking "was this to be their legacy, is this to be what the congregation is to be remembered for".

She recalled pictures of "people burning effigies of nuns, you know, outside the Dáil" as public opinion turned acrimonious.

Sources close to the RSC previously told *The Irish Catholic* that the sisters were "treated like monsters", adding that they are fearful of the media. "You would think we were evil," a source close to the sisters said.

The Religious Sisters of Charity began caring for cholera victims in Ireland in 1832 and in 1834 set up St Vincent's Hospital and since then have been "dedicated to providing the best possible

healthcare in hospitals, hospices, nursing homes and in the homes of the sick".

"It is distressing that people would think so badly of us. I'm more concerned for the people who are saying these things than for us," continued the source.

Despite exiting healthcare and handing over the site, the sisters have been the subject of near constant criticism by some opposition politicians and media commentators.

It is claimed by some that the sisters were involved in some sort of sinister deal to assert Vatican control over the site, despite Rome giving approval for the handover – even though the new hospital will provide abortion and other procedures incompatible with Catholic teaching.

Taoiseach's letter on immigration 'misinformation'

Brandon Scott

Aontú Leader and Meath West TD Peadar Tóibín has said that the letter submitted by An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar to the *Sunday Independent* on the Government's policy on immigration is 'misinformation' and rebutted it on a number of points:

Voluntary deportations

The Taoiseach: "They have the right to stay here until their application is accepted or refused, in which case a deportation order is issued. If they do not leave voluntarily, this is done forcibly".

Peadar Tóibín: "This is simply not true. Minister for Justice Helen McEntee herself admitted that the deportation system in Ireland is in practical terms a voluntary one. Only 15% of deportation orders are enforced. Only

15% of people who received a deportation order are actually deported by the state. Since 2018 5,091 people have received a deportation order and yet the government can only be certain that 783 people actually left the country."

Government does not know how people are coming to Ireland

The Taoiseach: "Ireland does not have open borders. That's a myth".

Peadar Tóibín: "Again this is not the case. Helen McEntee stated that 76% of people who migrated to Ireland last year did not register their asylum application at a port or an airport. When I asked the Minister what route had the IPO Office applicants taken, she stated, "Information on how a person enters the country when not through a designated port, including by travelling over the

land border, is not recorded".

Criminal records

Minister for Justice Helen McEntee: "Data is not collated in a manner which provides the number of international protection applicants who have been removed as a result of having a criminal record gained abroad or in Ireland. Each applicant has their fingerprints checked against the Eurodac system which allows officials to establish if the applicant has previously applied for international protection in another Member State".

Peadar Tóibín: "This only deals with criminal convictions inside the EU. The Minister also admitted that there has been a 60% fall in the number of EU citizens who have been returned home due to criminal records since 2014".

Speed of decisions

The Taoiseach: "Last year, the speed at which decisions are made was increased considerably".

Peadar Tóibín: "It may be true that there has been some improvement but the Minister has indicated to me that some applications are taking up to 6 years to receive their first decision and that does not include the time taken to exhaust the appeals process which can leave applicants waiting 10

years for their final decision."

Robust borders

The Taoiseach: "All our ports and airports have robust border controls".

Peadar Tóibín: "According to the US State Department analysis Ireland is a 'Tier 2 country' in terms of human trafficking. The State Department states "the Government of Ireland does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking". Just three people have been convicted in the district courts for human trafficking in the past 10 years, despite more than 1,000 cases coming before them."

Community consultation and funding

The Taoiseach: "It is essential... that information is provided. We also need to ensure that local services get extra resources to cope with an increase in population".

Peadar Tóibín: "The Minister for Justice has indicated to me, that only €3 million of a €52 million Community Recognition Fund announced in 2022 has been spent on communities. This is scandalous particularly given the fact that it is often small rural communities such as counties like Donegal or Mayo or in working class areas in north Dublin that International Protection applicants and Ukrainians are located."

Benedict XVI's 'anthropology' instructive for Irish education scene

Jason Osborne

Pope Benedict's theological legacy is instructive for helping Catholic schools provide "holistic education" in Ireland, an Irish attendee at a conference in Australia on Pope Benedict's theological legacy has said.

CEO of the Catholic Education Partnership, Alan Hynes told *The Irish Catholic* newspaper from Perth, Australia, that "our schools should be Christ-centred, pupil-focused and informed by a full vision of the human person," and that the thought of Pope Benedict XVI can help to achieve this.

"What you have in Benedict, which is very similar to what you had in Pope St John Paul, you have both popes identified that there isn't just a crisis in faith as such, but there is a crisis with reason, in terms of the value placed on reason," Mr Hynes said.

"You can see, I think, Pope Francis similarly talks about two ecological crises which are of course related – one is the environment and our common home and then the other is in human ecology, in the sense, again, which both Pope Benedict and Pope St John Paul II would have identified it, that there's an incomplete anthropology that's informing a lot of modern discourse around what it is to be human."

When it comes to education, where Catholic educators and schools aspire to deliver a "holistic education," Mr Hynes said that "one of the things we need to do is work hard to make sure we have a very authentic Christian anthropology, so that full vision of what it is to be human, that that informs not just RE or just the ethos of the school, but that that ethos and that anthropology should permeate all subjects."

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Homeless deaths on streets a ‘sad indictment’ - Fr Peter McVerry

Chai Brady

Homeless people are refusing to access emergency hostel accommodation because they “feel unsafe” due to rampant drug abuse, Fr Peter McVerry has warned.

Following the death of a rough sleeper in Dublin City Centre last week – identified as a man in his 40s – the founder of homelessness charity The Peter McVerry Trust said people are opting to brave the cold rather than stay in a hostel.

As temperature plunged this week Fr McVerry told *The Irish Catholic* that “every death on the streets

is a sad indictment, but it has been happening for years”.

“Much of the emergency hostel accommodation available is unfit for purpose,” he said. “Many people refuse to go in, they don’t feel safe. They may be sharing a room with very active drug users, they may have drugs pushed on them. Some of the emergency hostel accommodation is very, very good but much of it is hopelessly inadequate and many people will not go into hostels, they just don’t feel safe – that is the issue.”

This comes as a report from the Health Research Board, published on Tuesday, revealed that 121 people who were homeless died in 2020, equivalent to 10 deaths per month – an increase on the 2019 figure of 92. A total of 23 people who died in 2020 were known to have been sleeping rough.

Fr McVerry said: “We need smaller hostels instead of the big 60-80-100 bed hostels, and we need a range of different types of hostels. While there are some drug-free hostels there are very few of them.”

“There’s a lot of feuding going on between homeless groups of people, so I think we need much

smaller units,” he said, adding that in order to access emergency accommodation all that should be needed is a name and date of birth “your personal circumstances are irrelevant”.

“You may have addiction problems, you may be drug free, you may have mental health or even physical health problems and you’re asked to go onto a top bunk. We need a whole revamp of the whole emergency hostel accommodation if we want to get people off the streets,” Fr McVerry said.

The most recent data from the Department of Housing revealed that the number of homeless people in Ireland increased yet again to a record high of 13,514, which includes more than 4,000 children.

Human rights on Taoiseach’s agenda with China

Jason Osborne

“Human rights concerns” were on the agenda during An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar’s meeting with Chinese Premier, Li Qiang, this week according to the Department of the Taoiseach.

Mr Li, China’s second most powerful man, made a two-day state visit to Ireland this week, during which time he met separately with Mr Varadkar at Farmleigh House and President Michael D Higgins at Áras an Uachtaráin.

It is the first time such a high-ranking Chinese official has visited Ireland since Mr Li’s predecessor, Li Keqiang, visited Ireland in 2015.

China stands accused by the United States and United Kingdom, among others, of extensive religious freedom abuses. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom describes religious freedom conditions in China as continuing to “deteriorate,” with the Chinese government making use

of “facial recognition and artificial intelligence” to create a “high-tech surveillance state”.

In response to a query from *The Irish Catholic* newspaper as to whether An Taoiseach will raise religious freedom concerns with Mr Li, the Department responded that, “It is the Government’s long-standing practice to raise human rights concerns in bilateral engagement with Chinese interlocutors”.

“The protection and promotion of human rights, including religious freedoms, is at the heart of Ireland’s external engagement with all partners. It is the Government’s long-standing practice to raise human rights concerns in bilateral engagement with Chinese interlocutors, as well as at multilateral fora, including the United Nations Human Rights Council.

“In this context, the Taoiseach will raise human rights during his engagement with Premier Li this week,” the statement concluded.

Jack Reacher star reaching out to others on God’s behalf

Jason Osborne

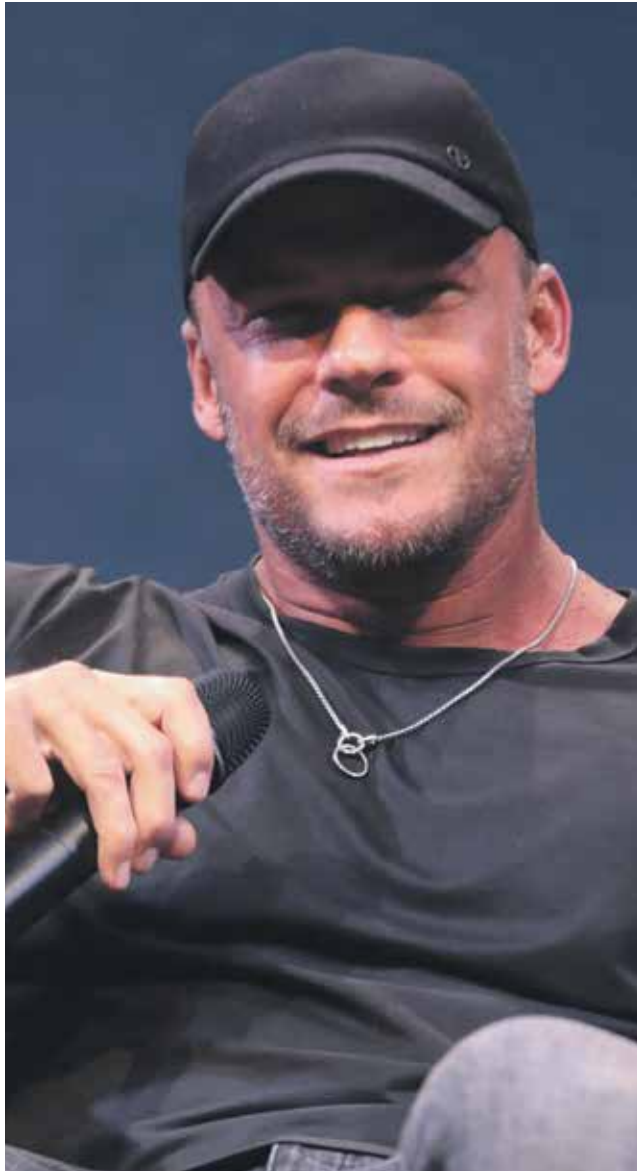
Star of the Amazon Prime hit series *Reacher*, Alan Ritchson, has thanked God for the platform the show’s success has given him to reach out to those who don’t yet know God.

In a YouTube video response to those who criticise his portrayal of the violent Jack Reacher while being a professed Christian, Mr Ritchson said that he “loves telling his story” and that he takes his lead from Scripture.


“I mean, what sort of stories are we supposed to tell? If you look at Scripture, what do you find? You see a thousand years of an infinitely holy God holding tension with human beings as he tells the story of who he is, reveals who he is through an imperfect people.”

God has given him a platform through the show’s success, Mr Ritchson said, that he can use to reach “people who maybe don’t think about these things all the time and maybe, maybe for those who are struggling or feel lost or want to try something new”.

“If they can find something that brings them hope, like my faith has mine,” he said.



Alan Ritchson, star of the hit show, *Reacher*. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.



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The Diocese of Meath is a Catholic community of sixty-nine parishes divided into eight regional deaneries living and working together in service of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Its geographical area comprises counties Meath and Westmeath, the greater part of County Offaly, one parish in County Louth and two parishes in County Cavan.

The Diocese is seeking to recruit for the role of Director of Faith Development in the Diocese of Meath. It is an exciting and challenging opportunity in the life and mission of the Diocese. The post holder will be required to lead and work under their own initiative as well as work as part of a team to develop and implement new approaches, resources and programmes to adult faith formation, sacramental preparation, and evangelisation in parishes across the diocese.

The terms are based on a 5-year Fixed Term Contract, working 35 hours per week, work pattern to be agreed.

Salary: Will be considered within the range of €40,000-€42,500 gross per annum – commensurate upon experience and qualifications.

Full details relating to the vacancy can be found on the Diocesan Website at: www.dioceseofmeath.ie clicking on the tab [job vacancy](#) where terms and conditions and application form relating to the role can also be accessed.

Applications are welcome from anyone who feels they meet the criteria as presented and are interested in playing an active role in faith development in the Diocese of Meath.

Closing date for applications will be 5pm on Friday 2nd February 2024

The Diocese of Meath is a registered charity CHY 7230

Paramilitary style violence 'torturing' North's communities

Ruadhán Jones

Paramilitary violence is "torturing" communities in the North due to "complacency" about peace, a senior Belfast youth worker has warned.

It is only a "fluke" that 2023 saw no deaths through paramilitary activities, Mr Stephen Hughes added, responding to figures from the PSNI.

Up until 2022, paramilitary violence "was a declining issue", he told *The Irish Catholic*. "Until the DUP walked away, this wasn't a big

issue... now all of a sudden it's back on the agenda again. It's back torturing communities".

While PSNI figures for 2023 show while there were no "security-related" deaths for the first time since 1969, Mr Hughes said the report reads "atrocious".

"It's only by fluke that we haven't lost anyone," the Belfast youth worker said.

"Paramilitary violence is not just entrenched, it's on the increase – bombings are up, shootings are up, all the data is up. There's nothing positive to take out of this report."

There were 31 casualties of

paramilitary style assaults and 19 casualties of paramilitary style shootings in 2023, compared to 25 paramilitary style assaults and 19 paramilitary style shootings in 2022, the PSNI report showed.

While crediting the lack of a working assembly with leaving communities "in the grip of paramilitary violence", Mr Hughes said societal "indifference" is a key issue.

"It doesn't seem to be a big issue for people – maybe it's not a big issue for 95% of society... because it doesn't affect middle class people," he said. "There's a societal shrug around this."

Paramilitary style violence is most prevalent in inner city communities, said Mr Hughes, and communities dealing with sectarian divisions.

However, its normalization is permitted by "indifferences... and complacency – it's not my problem, not my area, not my life. We pay for it morally, spiritually and financially, everyone," he said.

"It's about more than politicians – all of us have to step up, Church leaders, politicians, the community has to stand up. Civically responsible people must stand up."

The PSNI report showed that

in 2023 there were 104 security-related arrests under Section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000, compared to 110 during the previous 12 months.

The act allows police to arrest someone that they suspect of terrorist activity without a warrant.

There was also a large rise in the amount of explosives found by police in 2023.

Last year police recovered 3.22kg of explosives, compared to just 0.65kg found in 2022.

The number of firearms and rounds of ammunition found were both down on the previous year.

Govt deviating from programme with upcoming referenda says Senator

Brandon Scott

Independent Senator Ronan Mullen launched a stinging criticism of the Government's proposals to remove the terms 'women' and 'mother' from the constitution, suggesting that Government is deviating from its official programme and being guided by specific ideologies instead.

"The Government now wants to remove mention of 'woman', 'mother' and 'home' from the Constitution," he said. "What impact will this complete removal of woman or mother have on our future understanding of these terms?"

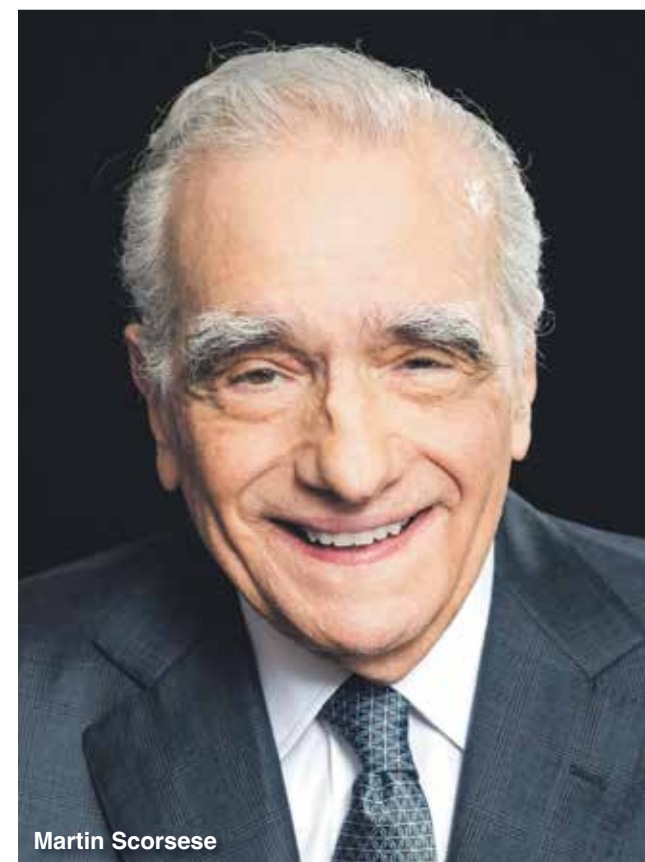
Senator Mullen referred to a recent statement made by a UN official which recognised the benefits single parents receive in Ireland relative

to most other countries. "In 2017, the Government's special rapporteur on child protection said, concerning marriage breakdown, that 'a dependent spouse fares better in Ireland than in virtually any other jurisdiction in the world and that is due to this lifelong obligation (of financial support for a dependent spouse)'".

Senator Mullen queried whether the proposed

changes to the constitution were being influenced by certain ideologies espoused by those in Government as opposed to the benefit of all. "Is this about placating ideologies in the Green Party to make sure the Government goes-the-distance? Maybe so, but the actual changes being proposed were not specified in the Programme for Government," he said.

Martin Scorsese finishes script for 'A Life of Jesus' movie



Martin Scorsese

Staff Reporter

Oscar winning director Martin Scorsese has announced the completion of the script for a new movie, *A Life of Jesus*.

Mr Scorsese co-wrote the screenplay with critic and filmmaker Kent Jones, based on Shusaku Endo's book of the same name, and plans to shoot it later this year.

The American director said he envisions the film being about 80 minutes long, which would be one of his shortest films ever made, and will focus on

"Jesus' core teachings in a way that explores the principles but doesn't proselytise".

"I'm trying to find a new way to make it more accessible and take away the negative onus of what has been associated with organised religion," Mr Scorsese said.

"Right now, 'religion' – you say that word and everyone is up in arms because it's failed in so many ways," he added in his interview with *The Los Angeles Times*. "But that doesn't mean necessarily that the initial impulse was wrong. Let's get back. Let's just think about it."

Labour of love



Archbishop Eamon Martin joins members of Armagh Men's Shed to examine the model of Armagh's St Patrick's Cathedral they constructed in honour of the cathedral's 150th anniversary.

Can 'love thy enemy' ever compete with 'Jihad'?

We are currently within the octave of Prayer for the Unity of Christians, and seldom in recent history has the spirit of Christian unity appeared more needed.

Yet as I sat listening to a gentle homily about how Jesus Christ means peace – peace in our hearts, peace with our neighbours, and in the world – I wondered how that message could stand up to the realities of the times, and the alternative values on offer elsewhere.

There have always been the temptations of 'the world, the flesh and the devil', but perhaps they have rarely been as proximate to everyday reach. Pornography, for example, has always existed; but it is now on children's phones.

I had also just heard a Middle East expert from the British Foreign Office speak about the Houthis, who have been menacing trade passing through the Red Sea since last November (and have been the subject of strikes by US and UK missiles and air attacks.)

Don't be deluded by images of this militia as some raggle-taggle band, said the



Mary Kenny

official. They are determined, battle-hardened, well-funded, well-trained and very religious.

Very religious? Yes, the message on their flag proclaims: "God is Great. Death to America. Death to Israel. Curse on the Jews. Victory to Islam."

Emerging as a minor sect of Zaidi Muslims in the 1990s, the Houthi militia have become increasingly successful, and are now in partnership with Hezbollah in the Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

They believe they are on the winning side of history, according to Mohammed Al-Basha, a senior Middle East analyst, driven by "euphoric hubris" and viewing their advances as "divine intervention".

If this is a 'war of civilisations', can the core message of Christianity – that 'God is peace, God is love' – stand against the sheer numbers whose message of God's great-

ness is death and hatred? Can 'turn the other cheek' and 'love thy enemy' compete with 'jihad'?

Heaven knows the Middle East is a cauldron, and the huge numbers of our young people who sympathise with the Palestinians are usually moved by compassion for suffering, and pity for victims.

Aerial bombing of any kind always results in innocent victims. (And some military experts believe the strikes against the Houthis will lead to an escalation of the conflict.)

In the light of what is occurring in this region, Christians certainly should unite. There won't be agreement about all matters of faith and doctrine, but surely there can be absolute commitment to the core message of the Gospel?

The unity of Christians should be viewed within the alarming context of what is happening on the global stage.

An unassuming Anglican

The last days of Queen Elizabeth II have been chronicled in a new book by the experienced royal reporter Robert Hardman. She had a peaceful passing, and in her final hours, her chaplain – the local minister at Craithie church, near Balmoral – Rev. Kenneth MacKenzie read to her from the Bible.

Elizabeth was a sincerely Protestant monarch, and the Bible, rather than any more

ritualistic form of service, would be her obvious source of spiritual comfort.

We are not told what scriptural passages were chosen, but I would imagine that the Psalms would have been a major part of the readings.

It is a constitutional quirk that when the British Monarch moves from England to Scotland, she, or he, changes from being an Anglican into being a Presbyterian.

North of the Border, the

monarch is no longer governor of the Established Church, but an ordinary member of that plainer, more egalitarian Christian denomination.

This low-Church tendency suited Elizabeth's personal inclination anyway. Charles is known to have "higher" Church reflexes, and has a special affection for his father's original denomination, the Greek Orthodox, so rich in ritual.

● President Macron has appointed a new Education Minister, Amélie Oudéa Castera, who has immediately come under fire for sending her three young sons to a Catholic school, rather than to a state *lycée*.

This has re-kindled political and social debates that have existed in France since the 19th Century – state education, republican and secular, versus faith schools, usually Catholic and seen as conservative.

French state schools have a past record of excellence, but in recent times there are complaints of falling standards – notably in literacy and maths – discipline problems, even violence.



France's new Education Minister, Amélie Oudéa Castera

There is a plan to re-introduce uniforms to try and halt this decline. The faith schools have meanwhile enjoyed a reputation for academic excellence and classroom discipline.

Mme Oudéa Castera, whose sons attend the École Stanislas, a well-known Catholic school, said that

she and her husband felt their children's education hadn't thrived in the public sector and so they made the choice to switch.

A storm broke over her head, and she may face a tougher time justifying her situation – her job title is 'Minister for National Education and Young People'.



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Mixed news as Nicaraguan bishops and priests unshackled and exiled

Chai Brady

"Exile is not freedom", an Irish missionary has warned following the release of prominent critic of the totalitarian regime in Nicaragua Bishop Rolando Álvarez, along with 18 other clergy from prison.

The news of their release was formally announced by the Vatican on Sunday. Bishop Álvarez, of the Diocese of Matagalpa, was openly critical of President Daniel Ortega who continues to brutally crack down on dissent.

Fr Kevin O'Higgins SJ, who spent decades in Latin America under a military dictatorship, said that it is "impossible not to feel happy" for Bishop Álvarez, Bishop Isidoro Mora and the 15 priests and two seminarians who were released.

However, Fr O'Higgins said those released would be the first to say they have not truly been "liberated". "If they were liberated they would be back in their dioceses, their parishes. What has happened is clearly what the regime wanted, it wants to get rid of its critics and it certainly didn't want another martyr like St Romero.

"It clearly suits them because there is now three bishops and dozens of priests – the more critical, prophetic voices – that are now outside the country. That is not liberty, that is not freedom," he said.

Bishop Álvarez's case was followed closely by international media, after he was force-

fully removed from his diocese, put before the courts, charged and convicted of treason and sentenced to a 26-year prison term. Negotiations between the Vatican and Nicaraguan authorities eventually secured the release of the clergy and seminarians.

Fr O'Higgins said: "I think what the Church wants to avoid is a confrontation that could turn violent, and it easily could. I would imagine feelings are running very high among the people in Nicaragua and among the people exiled.

"Apart from the Church people, there are still hundreds of political prisoners in Nicaragua. So even apart from the religious liberty aspect, there are still massive human rights issues, so the pressure has to continue."

President Ortega's regime has revoked the Jesuit's legal status in the country, confiscated Catholic universities and monasteries, suppressed Catholic media, expelled several religious orders, banned processions and other traditions during Easter last year and continues to jail all those who are publicly critical.

The dictatorship is accused of 90 attacks this year alone in its crackdown on the Church – more than in any previous year since 2018 – according to a 232-page report released in Spanish compiled by a lawyer which contains first-hand accounts of violence against the Church named *Nicaragua: A Persecuted Church?*.

See page 24

76% of asylum seekers not registering on arrival

Ruadhán Jones

Three quarters of asylum seekers arriving in Ireland are not registering at the point of arrival into the country, figures released by the Government show.

Of the almost 9,000 migrants seeking international protection who arrived in Ireland in 2023, just 2,056 registered at airports and ports, figures released to Aontú leader Peadar Kirby revealed. The majority register at the International Protection Office (IPO).

Mr Kirby criticised the Government's "extremely lax" international protection system in a statement.

"When I asked the Minister what route had the IPO Office applicants taken, she stated, 'Information on how a person enters the country when not through a designated port, including by travelling over the land border, is not recorded'," said Mr Kirby.

It is "incredible" that the minister "does not know how the vast majority of migrants are now coming to Ireland because the Minis-

ter's policy is, not to ask the vast majority of people how they are coming to Ireland," said the Aontú leader.

An applicant is not legally obliged to make an application for international protection at a designated port of entry, the Department of Justice said in response to his questions.

Mr Kirby also raised concerns about Ireland's human trafficking record, saying that "From the border to the child protection services this Government's management of the situation is a mess".

Pope says slapping kids ok (again)

Staff reporter

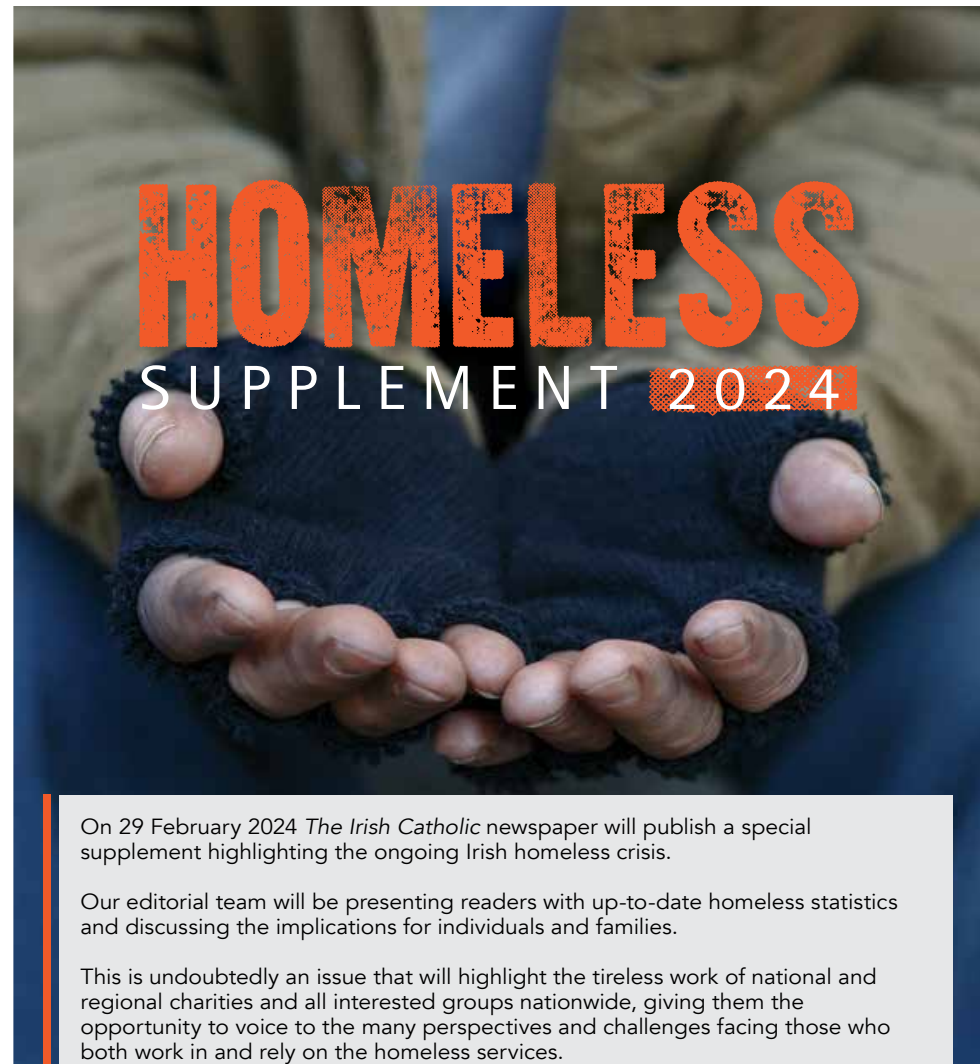
The German Child Protection Association has criticised Pope Francis for his comments on the beating of children. "There is no justification for beating children, not even a papal one," said Daniel Grein, Federal Director of the Child Protection Association, in Berlin. "Anyone who physically abuses a child is doing the wrong thing. This also includes slapping on the bottom or slapping in the face."

In Ireland, all forms of corporal punishment of children have been definitively

outlawed since the passing of the Children First Act 2015. On Sunday evening, Pope Francis approved of a slap on the bottom. Parents would be "giving the child something", but would often have more pain in their hands than the child's bottom. He used this example to explain how God punishes people. Francis made his comments in an interview on the Italian talk show *"Che Tempo Che Fa"* (roughly: "As the times are").

A statement by the Pope had already caused criticism in 2015. At the time, he defended parents who beat their children. If they did it

with dignity, he said, it was fair. In 2021 the Pope repeated his line not to hit children in the face. He said it was "humiliating" for a parent to slap a child. "I always say it: Never slap a child in his or her face. Why? Because your face is your dignity." However the Pope defends non-facial slapping. In its statement, the Child Protection Association in Germany emphasises the right to a non-violent upbringing for children that applies in Germany. Overburdened parents who do not know how to help themselves other than with violence are entitled to help.



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

Our editorial team will be presenting readers with up-to-date homeless statistics and discussing the implications for individuals and families.

This is undoubtedly an issue that will highlight the tireless work of national and regional charities and all interested groups nationwide, giving them the opportunity to voice to the many perspectives and challenges facing those who both work in and rely on the homeless services.

Please contact us via e-mail or phone to order extra copies of this special edition.

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The Irish Catholic

The universal Church...



Bishop of Achonry Paul Dempsey blesses the community of the Mission of Turbi, Kenya, saying it was very special to see the work of Catholic missionaries.

Nuala O'Loan

The View



UK Legacy Act will inflict further damage on victims

Many people will have seen the recent TV programme about the Post Office scandal involving the wrongful prosecution of and conviction of sub-postmasters and the wrongful demands by the Post Office for tens of thousands of pounds allegedly missing from post office accounts, all the result of a faulty computer programme, Horizon, and, seemingly, the determination of the Post Office that the computer was right and that there were no errors. A public inquiry is under way, but the thing which has really caused a public outcry about the plight of people wrongfully convicted and wrongfully required to hand over, in some cases, all their money, was the television programme.

It demonstrated the abuse of power by those who had the ultimate power, the capacity of prosecute and to sue using public money, to resource the many lawyers who acted for them in each case, leaving some postmasters fighting without any legal help at all for their livelihood. Some were so devastated by what was being done to them that they died by suicide, unable to see a way forward.

Abuse

This is but the most recent example of the abuse of power. We have seen many others: most recently I chaired an inquiry into alleged corruption in the Metropolitan Police in the case of Daniel Morgan – an inquiry which examined policing over 34 years. Over the decades we have seen many other issues eventually make their way to public inquiry – the contaminated blood scandal, the undercover policing inquiry, and more recently the Omagh Inquiry.

One of the things that has happened in all these cases is that the human cost and ongoing suffering of those impacted by whatever abuse of power has occurred is recognised in the days and weeks on which it occupies space on our televisions and in the media, but that after that people are left to try and put their lives together, coping as best they can with the devastation consequential upon what has

happened to them.

I was thinking about this last week as I drove to Belfast to the funeral of Tucker McConville, one of Jean McConville's ten children, who died aged 59. Jean McConville was abducted and murdered by the IRA in 1972. Her youngest children were 6-year-old twins and Tucker (Thomas) was just 8. Most of the children were there the day that the IRA came to their West Belfast flat and abducted their mother. I investigated what happened after her death and found that there was no police investigation for some 20 years. Even though police had been told that Jean McConville had been taken, nothing was done. For 30 years, as her children grew up they lived with the memory of that terrible day, but they never gave up trying to find their mother. Eventually, quite by chance following a terrible storm, her body was found in 2003 on Shellinghill Beach in Co. Louth and they were finally able to bring her to St Paul's Church in Belfast for her Requiem Mass and to lay her to rest.

“She was just the Protestant widow of a soldier and mother of ten children living a lonely and difficult life in IRA dominated West Belfast”

Now, 40 years after her abduction and murder, only five of Jean McConville's children are alive – the others have all died, too young. They have all borne the terrible pain of searching endlessly for her, and the grief and loneliness of growing up in children's homes separated from their siblings. That grief and pain was etched on their faces in St John's Church in Belfast as they buried their brother. Fr Martin Magill spoke warmly and compassionately of Tucker's life and of his brothers and sisters, and of how they were let down by the state which failed them utterly and by the Church which also failed them in those terrible days after their mother was abducted, as they tried to survive together in

the little flat which must have been so empty despite all the children, because their mother had gone.

Jean McConville was an East Belfast Protestant who had married a Catholic British soldier and who had been forced to move to West Belfast in 1971 because of their 'mixed marriage'. Within months her husband was dead from cancer and she was left on her own with her ten children. I have no doubt that she became suspect because of who she was, and that that was why she was abducted and murdered. She was not, as had been suggested, an informant for the British. She was just the Protestant widow of a soldier and mother of ten children living a lonely and difficult life in IRA dominated West Belfast.

There are so many in our country who have not only suffered as a consequence of the activities of organisations like the IRA, the UVF, the UDA etc., but also as a consequence of the activities of the state in covering up or failing to investigate wrongdoing whether by individuals such as those who murdered Jean McConville and hid her body for 30 years, or by agents of the state as is the case with the Post Office and the wronged sub-postmasters. On each occasion the people most affected are left with a legacy of pain, grief and even the destruction of their lives as a consequence of what happened.

Deprives victims

The British government's recent Legacy Act which deprives victims of their rights under the Rule of Law to compensation for the damage done to them, to inquests to determine what happened when people were murdered during those dreadful days of the Troubles, to the prosecution of those responsible where the evidence can be secured, and which offers amnesty to the perpetrators of these terrible crimes, has inflicted further immeasurable damage on victims. The British government try to portray this as being in the interest of victims. The victims know that it is not in their interests, but rather it is to stop the British Government from having to pay compensation to those wronged by its



A family member carries a photograph of Jean McConville at the funeral of Tucker (Thomas) McConville, the son of Jean McConville who was one of the disappeared and killed by the IRA in 1972. Photo: Mal McCann

agents, to prevent inquests and prosecutions which result in the disclosure of information which is damaging to the State, and to prevent the prosecution of former soldiers and police officers suspected of the most serious crimes.

Victims are currently challenging the legality of the Legacy Act in the High Court in Belfast, cases will probably go all the way to the Supreme Court. More recently the Irish Government, true to its promises, launched proceedings in the European Court of Human Rights against the United Kingdom, challenging the Legacy Act. I am sure this was not done easily – Brexit led to difficulties between the two countries and work is ongoing to clarify the new rules which will enable the best possible trading relationships between them; the current refusal of the DUP to return to government in Stormont as a consequence of the outcome of that work has exacerbated those difficulties. It is good to see the Irish Government act with integrity at this time. As I write this, the British Government is currently withholding £30m in levelling up money which could be used now to improve things in the North, but which will be made available, it says, when Stormont returns.

As the victims of all state injustices and failings seek truth and reparations, we should surely remember them in our prayers and support them as best we can.

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Sometimes State 'care' can be the most dangerous place for vulnerable children



It's right to expose historic instances of abuse, but we can't obsess about it at the expense of vulnerable children in need today writes
Michael Kelly

It hasn't been a great week for Minister Roderick O'Gorman's Department for Integration. Although, in fairness, one could probably write that any given week over his turbulent tenure as a minister, being appointed in his first term as a TD.

We all breathed a sigh of relief last week when an immense tragedy was averted when 14 migrants aboard a shipping container en route to Rosslare were found safe and well... it could've ended so differently.

Officials from Mr O'Gorman's department were swiftly on hand to bring the migrants – including girls aged six and four years – to a State facility to be looked after.

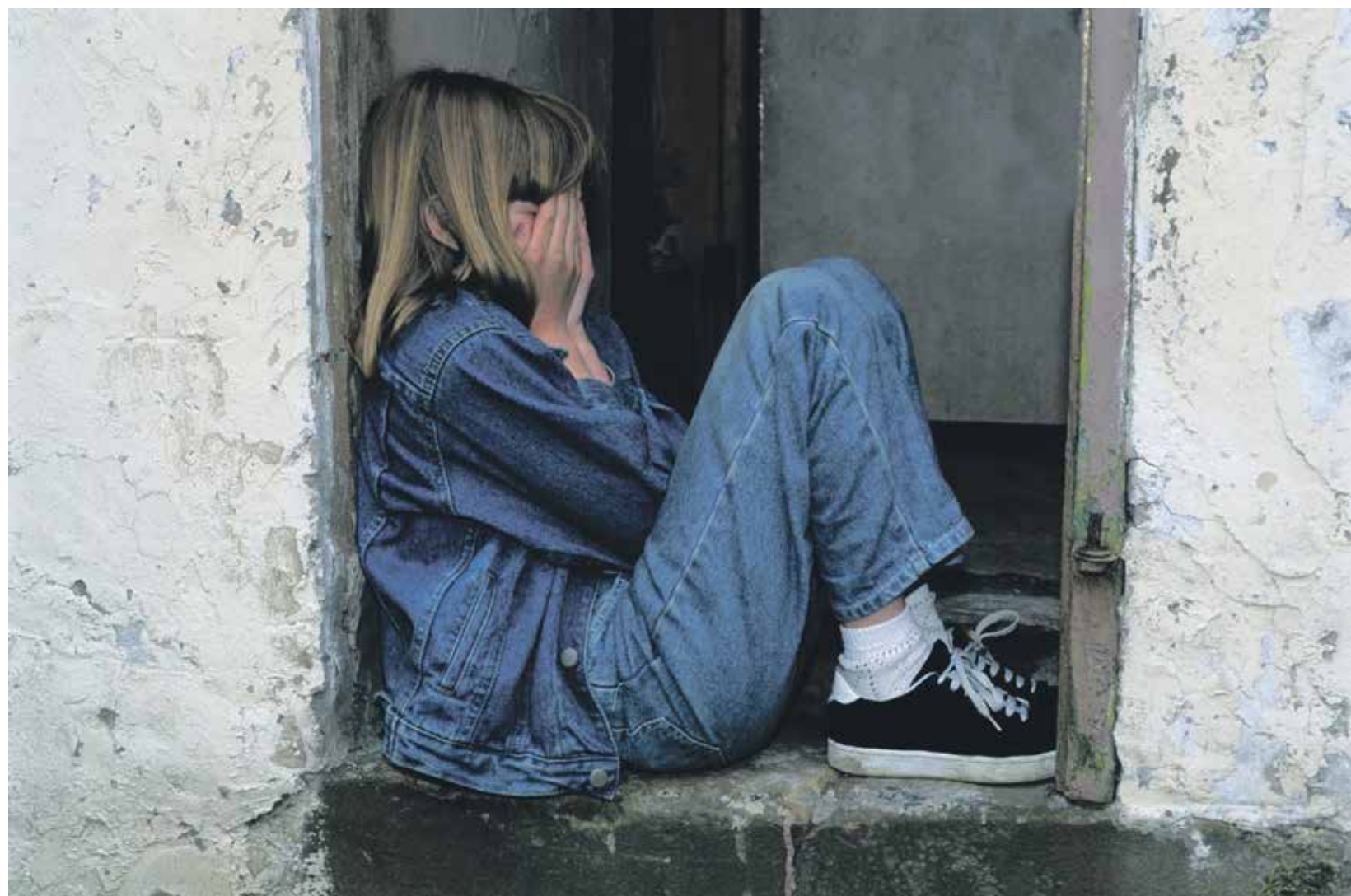
So far, so good. But within hours, eight of the 14 undocumented migrants had been reported “missing” from the Dublin-based asylum centre where they were brought.

The migrants were not being detained, so were perfectly free to leave State care. And, sure, who could blame them? We haven't got the best record of looking after vulnerable people, let's face it.

Failing

And I'm not talking about the 1950s, no – right here, right now Ireland is desperately failing vulnerable citizens. And the most depressing thing is that when these failings are exposed, it's barely a one-day wonder in the media before we go back to excavating the coals from 70 years ago rather than righting the wrongs we actually can today.

A report released on Monday by the Child Law Project revealed that a teen-



ager with a disability was held in a room of a hospital emergency department for two months in 2021, because the HSE said it had nowhere else for her to go. The teenager did not go outside for two months and had no education or physical activity. Eventually, the girl's mother went to court and the judge ordered that the child be placed in care after her 60-day ordeal. Less than three years ago, not the bleak Ireland portrayed in books like *Angela's Ashes*.

“There is a strange blind spot in Ireland when it comes to the safety (or lack of safety) of children placed in the care of the State”

In another case, two young children were left in the care of a known sex offender.

Yet another example is that of a 15-year-old boy in State care who hadn't had a single day of secondary education. There was only movement when the judge threatened to summon offi-

cials from the Department of Education to appear before the court.

I couldn't find a single reference to any of these cases on the homepages of the two largest-selling daily newspapers in the country. Meanwhile, on RTÉ the main headline was about a utility company cutting the price of gas.

There is a strange blind spot in Ireland when it comes to the safety (or lack of safety) of children placed in the care of the State.

Report

Last summer, University College Dublin (UCD) published a new report on the way underage girls in the care of the State are being sexually exploited, abused and raped by ‘gangs of men’.

The study, *Protecting Against Predators: A Scoping Study on the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Young People in Ireland*, revealed that teenage girls (and occasionally boys) were leaving Túsla care homes overnight with adults often referred to as their ‘boyfriends’ and returning the following day either drunk or high on drugs and usually showing signs that they had been sexually exploited.

The report authors make the obvious comparison with similar scandals in Britain in towns like Rochdale and Rotherham where it emerged that a massive child-grooming scandal had been downplayed by police and social workers. Teenager girls were being sexually abused by gangs of men who would give drink or drugs to make it easier to exploit them. Many of these vulnerable girls had been so expertly groomed that they viewed these men as their ‘boyfriends’, even though the men were forcing them to have sex with several other men.

“They were banging on the doors, banging on the windows and absolutely everything to try to get into the place”

These children are in State care precisely because they are vulnerable, and their own families have been unable to look after them. Thankfully the vast majority of children in the care of the State stay with foster families, but when

it comes to teenagers with complex needs often foster placements don't work out and a care facility becomes the only option. But, this research reveals that far from being the safety net that these children need, it leaves them vulnerable and shrewd people are obviously only too willing to exploit this.

The UCD report, compiled after interviews with staff in the care facilities, paints a depressing pattern of child sexual exploitation where minors can effectively just be picked up from State-run facilities at night and taken to hotels where they are plied with alcohol, and sexually abused. And dropped back in the morning with relative impunity.

Protection

One of the care workers interviews said that that they tried to lock up one of the girls at night for her own protection. But men would come to the residence for her and “they were banging on the doors, banging on the windows and absolutely everything to try to get into the place”.

“So it became a real danger and a flashpoint for everybody,” the worker

told researchers. “It ended up like there was a stream of cars outside there practically every night of the week, and worse at weekends.”

“How different would it have been if it was nuns or Christian Brothers who were failing these girls rather than social workers?”

It was a bombshell report that should've been a moment of national panic and emergency about how these vulnerable girls are being failed. But, it didn't even unseat Ryan Tubridy and the RTÉ payments scandal from the front pages for a single day.

How different would it have been if it was nuns or Christian Brothers who were failing these girls rather than social workers? I think we all know the answer.

It's important to focus on past child protection failings, but we shouldn't miss the opportunities to actually save children that can be helped today.

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Out&About

Smiling servants of the Lord



ARMAGH: Archbishop Eamon Martin celebrates Mass with students for the priesthood and diaconate for the dioceses Armagh and Dromore.



GALWAY: Archbishop Francis Duffy presents four members of the Tuam Cathedral Choir with the Benemerenti medal. Pictured are Ursula Kelly, Rose McGrath, Archbishop Duffy, Eamonn Kitt and Anne Joyce. Photo: Jacinta Fahy.



GALWAY: The four medal recipients with the members of the Tuam Cathedral Choir following the presentation. Photo: Jacinta Fahy.

IN SHORT

Kerry diocese keeps 'hope alive' with mission

The diocese of Kerry has launched its online mission, 'Hope Alive!', from January 21 to 24.

Well-known humanitarian Adi Roche headlines the mission and will reflect on what it means to welcome the stranger on Sunday, January 21, at 8pm.

Guest speakers include Fr Michael Conway, Dr Keith Gaynor and Jane Mellet, reflecting on topics from mental health to parish responses to the environmental crisis. All keynote talks take place at 8pm.

The mission is an opportunity to "nourish, share and live our faith", according to Bishop of Kerry Ray Browne.

"We live in a fear filled time: parents concerning young children; adults regarding housing and poverty; all of us regarding both climate change and the awful wars in Sudan, Ukraine and Israel-Palestine," the bishops said in a statement.

"Hope in the presence of Jesus Christ is our response to all fear and worry."

Putting a spin on the traditional parish mission, the online gatherings are open for all to participate in.

Mission Masses streamed daily at 10 am from: Our Lady and St Brendan's Tralee, on Sunday, January 21; Caherdaniel, Monday, January 22; Ballyduff, Tuesday, January 23; and Dingle, Wednesday, January 24.

You can register for the mission on www.dioceseofkerry.ie.

Tuam choir members honoured by Pope

Four members of the Tuam Cathedral Choir were conferred with Papal honours by Archbishop of Tuam Francis Duffy.

Ursula Kelly, Anne Joyce, Rose McGrath and Eamonn Kitt were presented with the Papal Medal Benemerenti by Archbishop Francis Duffy at the Carol Service, which took place in the Cathedral of the Assumption recently.

"The word Benemerenti comes from Latin and means 'well-deserving'," a spokesperson for the choir said in a statement.

"Each of the four choir members is well

deserving, having been part of the choir for over 40 years."

In presenting the Benemerenti Medals, Archbishop Francis Duffy thanked the four recipients for their commitment and dedication to the Cathedral Choir for over four decades.

Under the direction of Dr Mark Keane, the choir sings at the 10.30am Mass each Sunday. The choir members sing each year at the Annual Novena in Knock, the Christmas Carol Service, and all significant ceremonies in Tuam Cathedral.

The choir has also performed at many international venues, most recently in the Karmelitenkirche in Straubing, Germany. In previous years, the choir has sung in Liverpool and New York.

Edited by Ruadhán Jones
Ruadhan@irishcatholic.ie

Events deadline is a week in
advance of publication



TYRONE: Baby Ria Conlon and parents John and Rebecca take part at a Mass in St Colmcille's Church on the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord for newly baptised children of the parish.



WICKLOW: Fr Aquinas Duffy PP Wicklow attends the Annual Remembrance Service for the Wicklow RNLI on January 1 at Wicklow Harbour, along with Church of Ireland Rev. Jack Kinhead and RNLI Member Stephen Kelly.



USA: Anna Sheehan, Ireland Johnson, PJ Cronin, Eva Conroy, and Alex O'Doherty, all students at University College Cork pose during the SEEK24 conference at America's Center Convention Complex in St Louis on January 4. Photo: OSV News.



ROSCOMMON: Bishop Paul Dempsey marks retirement of Martin Conlon after his 18 years working with Accord.

ARMAGH

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

CAVAN

Fr Brendan Coffey OSB Abbot of Glenstal Abbey, Limerick, will be the guest preacher at the annual Ecumenical Service at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Kingscourt at 7.30pm on January 24.

CLARE

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

CORK

Alpha training days for parishes and families takes place in Blackrock Parish Centre on Saturday, January 27 at 10am and Clonakilty Parish Centre on Saturday, February 3. To register visit corkandross.org.

Connect 4, a faith gathering of 18- to 35-year-olds to take place in Devere Hall on February 18. Tickets are €10. To book tickets, visit Eventbrite.ie.

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

DONEGAL

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

DOWN

Church Unity Service in St Patrick's Church, Downpatrick on Sunday, January 21 at 7.30pm with participation of the Christian Churches in Downpatrick. Guest preacher: Fr Andrew Black (lecturer St Mary's College Belfast).

DUBLIN

The Catholic Intersociety Ball will take place in the Gresham Hotel on April 6. Purchase tickets at Eventbrite.ie

FERMANAGH

St Michael's Parish Enniskillen hosts a Divine Mercy Holy Hour every Sunday at 7.00pm.

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.

KILKENNY

The St John's Parish Scripture Group in Kilkenny city to continue their meetings in the New Year. The group will meet again on Thursday, January 18 at 7.30pm.

LAOIS

The rosary will be prayed at the grotto of the Church of the Assumption at 8pm on the first Friday of every month. The Divine Mercy Chaplet is prayed at 3pm every Sunday in Portlaoise parish church.

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.

MEATH

Prayer day on January 21 with Greg Dunne will take place at 2.30pm in St Patrick's Hall, Trim. All are welcome.

MONAGHAN

A presentation of Pioneer pins and diplomas will be made after 6pm Mass on Saturday, January 20. Pins for 10, 25 and 50 years. Diplomas for 40 years. Clasp and diplomas for 60 and 70 years, all those who are looking for any of the above, contact Jim on 087 6734553.

OFFALY

Rosary takes place at Alfie Lambe House, Arden Rd Tullamore on Saturday 13, 8.15pm.

TYRONE

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

WEXFORD

Gorey Parish archive photo exhibition to take place on January 26 at 7pm in the pastoral centre.

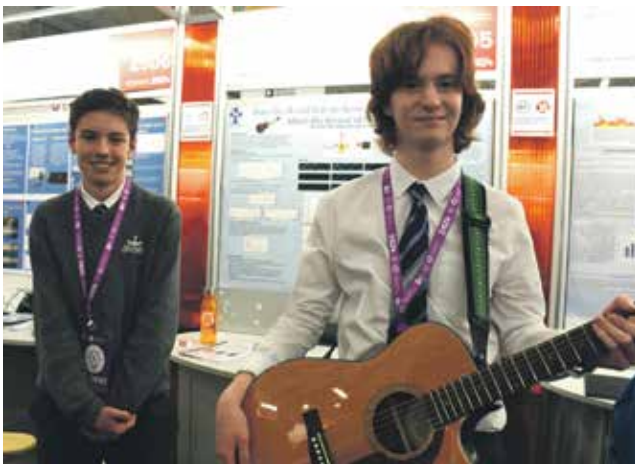
Brainiacs from Catholic schools descend on Dublin for BT Young Scientist



Thousands of schoolchildren descended on the RDS in Dublin for the 60th BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition, which ran from January 10-13, 500 projects from 219 schools were displayed. Photos: Chai Brady



Ronan Scullion (13) and Laochra Hill (14) from St Colman's College, Co. Down with their project "Egg"citing Way To Treat Phosphate Run Off'.



Calum Burke (15) and John McCallig (15) of Blackrock College in Dublin investigated whether the wood an acoustic guitar is made from affects the sound of the guitar.



From St Vincent's Secondary School in Louth Julia Van Coller (16) and Dearbhla Rooney (15) discovered how Irish people truly feel about immigration with a lie detector test.



Sixteen-year-olds Siobhán O'Brien and Ciara McDermott from Loreto Secondary School Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, who investigated 'Coastal Crumbling'.



Noah Callum Hill (16), Donagh Carey (16) and Sarah Higgins (16) from St Finian's College, Co. Westmeath presented 'A Quantitative Analysis of Students' Daily Inhaled Dose of PM2.5 Particles'.



Amy Hennessy (16) and Juliette Purcell (17) from Coláiste Mhuire, Co. Clare, investigated anterior cruciate ligament injuries in women's sport.



Abbie Mazzelle (16) and Emma Heaphy (16) of Presentation Secondary School Listowel, Co. Kerry, present their project 'Would people move to an island if given the necessities?'.



Travelling to Dublin from St Vincent Secondary School, Co. Louth, Erin Finegan (16) Dearbhla McKenna (16) and Erin Roe (16) presented their study: 'An attempt to create an improved artificial version of the "helicopter seed" produced by the acer pseudoplatanus'.



Pippa Hennessy (16) of St Mary's High School in Cork focused on the topic 'Does Our Generation Have a Shorter Attention Span Than Previous Generations?'. Ms Hennessy said social media plays a big role in decreasing attention spans.



Delilah Afriyie, Doireann Dempsey, and Layla O'Connor all aged 13, from St Mary's Secondary School in Mallow, Co. Cork presented technology that could save a person from drowning.



Naomi Picovici (14), St Leo's College in Carlow, poses with her honey and herbs. Ms Picovici focused on the potential of herbs to combat varroa mite infestation on Irish bees.



Matthew Daly (14) and Rory Maguire (14) of Presentation College Headford, Galway, investigated the topic: 'How "green" are the local GAA clubs? Comparing the carbon footprints of our rural GAA clubs.'



Stephen Tighe, Joshua Kenya and Michael Lavin, all aged 16, from Scoil Mhuire in Roscommon demonstrated how their Triple S (Slurry Safety System) could save lives by detecting dangerous levels of harmful gas.



Sophie Bradley (16), Sadhbh Barr (15) and Lauren Duggan (15) from St Mary's Secondary School Glasnevin in Dublin investigated the "physiological and mental well-being of top tier athletes at active and retirement levels in sport".



Aoife Brennan (16) and Molly O'Leary (15), from Mount Sackville Secondary School in Dublin looked into the effects of IV vitamin drips/shots on skin and overall health.



Promoting the health benefits of sea swimming are Ciara Kennedy (15) and twins Emily and Laura Dolan (16) from Holy Child Secondary School Killiney in Dublin.



Evanne Coyle (15), Aimee Kierans (16) and Amy Murphy from St Louis Secondary School, Monaghan, presented their project 'Sunscreen – Safe or Sorry?'

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Bevy of baby blessings in Graiguecullen

Ruadhán Jones

Graiguecullen's parish church was packed for the feast of Jesus' Baptism, as children baptised in 2023 received a blessing from Fr John Dunphy PP.

The blessing was given to the babies and their parents as they continue their faith journey together.

The parish's baptismal ministers gifted each family with a prayer card, a little bottle of holy water and a sheet of prayers for parents to pray with their children as they grow up.



Fr John Dunphy offers a blessing to children baptised in 2023 and their parents in Graiguecullen parish on the feast of Jesus' Baptism.



'Fr Dougal' documentary on priests disappointingly conventional



RTÉ documentary fails to ask the big questions about the priesthood, writes **David Quinn**

You could tell Ardal O'Hanlon was pulling his punches in his documentary about the huge decline in vocations that was aired by RTÉ on Monday night, but you could also tell he won't regret it when there are very few clergy left in the country.

O'Hanlon, who made his name playing the part of 'Fr Dougal' in *Fr Ted*, was presenting *The Last Priests in Ireland*.

In fairness to him, O'Hanlon makes no real attempt to hide where he is coming from. Near the beginning of the documentary, he describes himself as "an agnostic hostile to a disgraced Church" but adds that he is "appreciative" of Ireland's Christian heritage, although he never really explains why.

Indeed, several times he interviews a self-styled Celtic priest, and we are almost invited to regret that this earlier and supposedly more liberating Celtic spirituality was better than the Christianity that replaced it, especially as the influence of popes grew.

Celtic

What was good about early Irish Christianity was essentially its Celtic character. The more Roman the Church became, the worse it became. Or so we are led to think.

We were never told that the Celts engaged in human sacrifice, but never mind.

The take that the Church in Ireland became worse as it became more Roman was confirmed when O'Hanlon got around to the Synod of Thurles in 1850, which was presented as the final takeover of the Church in Ireland by Rome through its agent, Cardinal Paul Cullen.

After that, the programme implied, the Church in Ireland really went downhill as the clergy became ever more powerful and authoritarian.

This, of course, is an utterly conventional take on the recent history of the Church in Ireland

which was challenged by no-one in the documentary.

Some of the priests O'Hanlon speaks to in the show are people he knew when he was growing up.

They explain why they became priests and remain priests, and did so very well, but they did not give an alternative interpretation of the history of the Church.

You can't talk about something like the Synod of Thurles without mentioning the Famine, which had devastated the country only a very short time before. You also can't mention the Synod without referring to the final lifting of the Penal Laws only a couple of decades earlier.

In the mid-19th century, the Church needed organising. Society needed organising. We didn't want the British doing it for us. They were largely responsible for the Famine, and fully responsible for the Penal Laws.

“The post-Famine Church in Ireland had developed as an antidote to the poverty and degradation of the mass of the population in the mid-19th Century”

So, who else were we going to turn to apart from the Church? It would have been much harder for us to get back on our feet without it, but O'Hanlon presents what happened post-Thurles mostly as an eager power grab by Rome and its Irish allies.

Someone who offers a very different take from this depressingly conventional one is Brian Fallon, for many years the literary editor of *The Irish Times* and therefore not someone who would be regarded as a Church 'apologist'.

In his book *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960*, he writes: "Irish Catholicism is often described as repressive, and so it was in many or even most senses, but how effective would it have been as a grassroots moral force if it had been anything else?"

Crucially, he adds: "The question has to be faced realistically and today's ready-made answer, that of the liberal, middle-class agenda, does not seem adequate in the context of two generations ago."

"Like Scottish and Welsh Calvinism, the post-Famine Church in Ireland had developed as an antidote to the poverty and degradation of the

mass of the population in the mid-19th Century, when evangelical religion proved to be virtually the only force which could lift demoralised human beings to some level of self-discipline and self-respect. To have undermined this foundation... would have been socially irresponsible".

Fallon says, "the Catholic Church in Ireland was essentially a people's Church" because it very much reflected the society from which it had arisen.

He also quotes William Butler Yeats (famously a Protestant) who, after the Civil War, said the Church now badly needed to restore a semblance of order to a society that was falling apart.

Priests and nuns played a big part in this, for which they are now regularly damned. And yes, they often were authoritarian (something I hardly encountered at all growing up), but to ignore the historical context for the kind of Church which arose after the Famine does a massive disservice to anyone who watched this programme.

The Last Priests in Ireland mentions the scandals, as it must, but these are presented almost as the defining characteristic of the Church in Ireland, along with authoritarianism.

This is like reducing British history to the crimes of the British Empire. It's not the whole story, is it? Rarely does O'Hanlon address some of the good Irish priests might have done for people.

At the end of the programme, O'Hanlon wonders if we really need priests at all. He acknowledges we need models of selflessness, but not even the Church says that priests alone can provide this.

We certainly don't need priests and religious to carry out the social work of the Church. The Welfare State has replaced a lot of those functions, and in fact is the direct inheritor of the Church's charitable tradition, although we have largely lost sight of this now.

Secularisation

The decline of the priesthood in Ireland (not just the Catholic priesthood, by the way) is really a symptom of the secularisation of Irish life, and also of much smaller families and far more job choices.

But if the priesthood, or some kind of ministerial office at least, was ultimately founded by Jesus Christ, and that more or less vanishes from Irish life, then who leads the Church and what happens to a society as it progressively becomes less religious and maintains only a weak connection with the sacred and transcendent?

It is still very early days in



Ardal O'Hanlon meets chaplain Fr Jerry Carroll in *The Last Priests in Ireland*.

that process, and we can't know for sure what will happen.

We do know that the 20th Century has seen some horrific replacement 'religions' like fascism and communism.

The fate of Christianity is intimately bound up with certain ministerial offices, includ-

ing for Catholics and versions of Protestantism, the priesthood.

If few are coming forward for those, then the Church(es) inevitably decline. I think a society without Christianity will be in worse shape ultimately and that we would be in far worse shape if Christi-

anity had never existed.

Explaining this was beyond the scope of *The Last Priests in Ireland*. That said, it's a pity it didn't stray from its wholly conventional script about Irish Catholicism since 1850. A missed opportunity, but all too typical.

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A new forest is born at Glenstal Abbey



Bro. Luke McNamara OSB

On the eve of the Epiphany in brilliant sunshine that seemed to promise better days are coming, a large group of volunteers, in a quarter of an acre plot in a field just South East of the Front Gate, planted 2,500 native Irish trees.

The density of planting follows the *Akire Miawaki* approach: three or four trees to the square meter instead of the more normal commercial density of one tree to every two square metre.

This makes for a sheltered woodland environment even in the first year, so the trees become self-maintaining from the beginning. As the Irish sean-fhocail puts it: 'ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann siad'.

A wide diversity of native trees were planted: apple, cherry, oak, sloe, pine,

rowan, spindle and holly. These species are found in abundance within the remnants of the natural Glenstal woodland and speak of their ecological functionality – they feed the birds that spread them.

The initiative was part of the 100 million trees project founded by siblings Richard and David Mulcahy, who hope to plant this number of trees in 10,000 acres over the next 10 years, using the dense planting approach of Miawaki.

Conscious that we are stewards of the land and seek to protect and enhance it for future generations, the monks are glad to be part of this project, which joins with the aim of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si*, on the care of our common home and also responds to the goal of planting more trees put forward at the spring general meeting of the Irish Catholic bishops' conference.

It is hoped that other communities, farmers, land and homeowners will identify small plots for planting and so promote biodiversity, improve our natural habitat and limit the effects of climate change.



All hands on deck at Glenstal Abbey.



Bro. Anthony Keane and Abbot Brendan Coffey plant tree saplings in Glenstal. Photos: Denis Hooper.

Instrumentalising education doesn't help bring peace



Learning for lasting peace is a pipe-dream for many who don't get to school, writes **Dualta Roughneen**

The sixth International Day of Education will be celebrated on January 24, under the theme "learning for lasting peace", with the assumption that education contributes to more peaceful societies.

The idea is that the more educated a society is, the less likely it is to enter into wars of aggression and conflict.

It certainly isn't true that educated leaders are less likely to engage in wars or bring society together. Lenin graduated from high school ranking first in his class. He distinguished himself in Latin and Greek and (eventually) qualified with a first-class Law Degree.

Pol Pot was reportedly a mediocre student who benefited from a scholarship that enabled him to study in Marseille, however he did not finish his undergraduate degree. Hitler was similarly a poor student.

Robert Mugabe studied economics at the University of London, albeit remotely, while Idi Amin had little formal education.

Conflicts

Research from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) indicates that higher government spending on education is correlated with fewer and shorter conflicts. It doesn't however establish a causal effect that one flows from the other.

Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker's famous book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, notes the importance of education in reducing conflict. Mr Pinker highlights "the escalator of reason" – with education as a central component – as one of the most important "pacifying forces"



Police officers stand guard outside a school in the Jaranwala town of Faisalabad, Pakistan, August 21, 2023, set up as a temporary shelter for the members of Pakistan's Christian community who were displaced after sectarian violence. Photo: OSV News/Charlotte Greenfield, Reuters

of humanity's violent history.

However, a study by Otsby et al in 2019 found that while the existing evidence converges toward a consensus that education has an overall pacifying effect on conflict, these general conclusions are challenged by evidence showing above-average levels of education among terrorists and genocide perpetrators.

“The evidence base that teaching children about peace and the values of harmonious living lead to more peaceful societies is sketchy at best”

For sure, involvement in conflict causes a reduction in investment in education – it isn't conclusively true that the causation moves in the opposite direction.

The GPE argues that investing more in education can foster economic growth and social equality, which, in turn, are associated with a decrease in conflicts.

All of this is noble and good of course. The aim of reducing conflicts, saving

lives, building peaceful societies is a good thing.

Instrumentalising

However, this comes with a risk of instrumentalising education which is a good in itself, not just something that contributes to other goods.

This is particularly true when we are talking about education in under-resourced settings, and when investment in 'peace education' and similar initiatives are prioritised over investment in the basic building blocks of education.

While many claim that peace education is more necessary than ever, in a world mired in conflict, the evidence base that teaching children about peace and the values of harmonious living lead to more peaceful societies is sketchy at best.

Sustainable Development Goal 4, to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for

all by 2030, remains well off-track and with significant setbacks due to war and conflict particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

“Peace education feels like a luxury investment in vast swathes of the world”

UNESCO Director General, Audrey Azoulay said that education is in a state of emergency as recently as September 2023. Over 250 million children are out of school across the world.

Since 2015, the number of children completing primary education has increased by less than three percentage points to 87%. The number completing secondary education, meanwhile, has increased by less than five to just 58%. Six years from 2030, we are way off track.

For a huge number of chil-

dren across the world, basic numeracy and literacy, let alone general proficiency in reading and mathematics remains a pipe-dream.

Globally, South Sudan has the lowest expected years of schooling at 5.5 years, followed by Niger (6.9 years) and Mali (7.4 years). Compare that to Ireland with 18 years.

Until the building blocks are put in place that will allow children to attend and complete a quality education, peace education feels like a luxury investment in vast swathes of the world.

While countries in the 'developed world' are spending between 4 and 6% of GDP on education, investment in education in Africa is stuck at 2-3%, and that drawing from a much, much lower GDP per capita. Funds are scarce in the poorest parts of the world.

Disability

For people with a disability, the situation is even more stark. As expected, less

children with a functional difficulty will access less education and for a shorter period of time.

For instance, in Mali, the 'ever attended' school rates stand at 19%, 30% and 40% for persons with at least a lot of difficulty, some difficulty and no difficulty respectively.

“Inequality across disability status in terms of literacy may be widening and feed into a disability and development gap”

The Disability Data Initiative, in the absence of clear commitments of governments when they signed up to the Sustainable Development Goals to collect data on progress for people with disability, has been gathering evidence on the disparate impact of education progress on people with disabilities.

The data points, drily, to the sad reality that "with universalisation efforts for primary and secondary education, a priority in SDG Goal 4, attendance among children with disabilities needs to improve fast.

"Otherwise, inequality across disability status in terms of literacy may be widening and feed into a disability and development gap, a situation where disability related inequalities may expand as countries develop."

While education for lasting peace may be a noble goal, it should be put in context of the reality of the world for millions of children, and children with disability in particular.

The evidence points towards the potential that education in itself can contribute to peace, and to a much greater extent than scripted initiatives such as peace education and other curriculum additions.

This is not to say that we should scrap 'peace education' but with so many children missing out on education entirely, with so many failing to achieve any form of proficiency, with children with disability doubly marginalised by poverty and lack of accessible schools and teaching, investment needs to be focused on the building blocks rather than the architectural flourishes particularly when resources are already far below what is needed to ensure a solid foundation.

“The evidence points towards the potential that education in itself can contribute to peace, and to a much greater extent than scripted initiatives such as peace education and other curriculum addition”

John McGahern's holy sense



The famous Irish author had a different type of religion, writes Aubrey Malone

John McGahern had well documented problems with the Church, and with his faith, but he always struck me as having a holy sense about him, even a monastic one. It was in his simple bearing, his self-effacing nature, in the frugality of his lifestyle.

He retained this right through his life. Though a non-believer at the time of his death in 2006, he wanted a Catholic funeral. Indeed, his funeral Mass was a celebrated one.

Last year I had the arrogance to write a biography of him. I didn't feel qualified for the task. I wasn't a close friend of his, merely an acquaintance, and neither am I a McGahern scholar, like those who've written academic books on him. But I still undertook it.

I had interviewed him in 1990 apropos his Booker-Prize nominated book

Amongst Women and we kept in contact by phone and in letters afterwards.

He never played the role of 'the writer' to me. "How are you?" he would always say anytime I rang him, as if I was the important one.

We both shared roots in Co. Roscommon. My mother was from there, and he knew some of my relatives. He was always more interested in personal talk than what he called 'rubbish' about books.

And yet he was a visiting professor of literature to many American universities. I have often found in life that those of the greatest intelligence are the ones who play it down most.

Eminences

Likewise with religion. Those who have the deepest thoughts in this regard are not the ones who go about the place "like eminences", as he once put it to me, but those who downplay their spirituality.

"The Bible was my first book," he said, "and it was my most important one." Even when he lost his teaching job in the 60s due to events in his private life, he never held any bitterness towards the Church, which 'hired and fired' at the time.

He spent some years as a supply teacher in England afterwards. When he came back to Leitrim to live in the early 1970s he formed many friendships with priests.

These he kept up all his life, meeting them at social



events and treating them exactly as he always did even when the country was beset with anti-Catholic feeling.

It was the *Irish Catholic's* Mary Kenny who broke the news of John's return to Ireland in her capacity as an *Irish Independent* columnist. She writes about meeting John in her recently-published book *The Way We Were: Catholic Ireland Since 1922* published by Columba Press.

"I sometimes feel that when people lose the belief in heaven as a physical place, they lose their religion as well"

John wasn't initially pleased at this news coming out as he wanted to keep his head down but I think he was glad afterwards. As I say in my book, "The prodigal son didn't come home to eat the fatted calf but to raise it." His new life was as a small freehold farmer.

"When I was young," he said once, "Heaven was as

real a place to me as Canada or Australia. I felt if I climbed up beyond the top branch of the highest tree I would eventually reach it. Religion was the weather of my childhood."

I sometimes feel that when people lose the belief in heaven as a physical place, they lose their religion as well. In other words they throw the baby out with the bathwater.

When John stopped believing in 'apple pie in the sky when you die,' or the man with the white beard on his Olympian throne as the 'penny Catechism' instruction of John's youth may have intimated, they go through a similar transition.

Likewise, when members of the clergy fail through human error, this has also led to people leaving their religion. John was against this.

Opinion

In his later years he felt the tide had swung too far against priests in popular opinion after the abuse scandals broke.

This despite the fact that he believed John Charles MacQuaid, the archbishop of Dublin at the time of his

sacking, was firmly behind it. I asked him once if he didn't know he was walking into a lion's den by marrying in a registry office and publishing *The Dark*, a book which dealt with many sexual issues which were taboo at the time.

"One can't go from 'God betrayed me' to 'God doesn't exist.' This seemed to be at least a part of what was going on with him"

"I didn't think about these things," he replied, "All I was concerned with was getting the words right." In some ways, literature became his religion in his adulthood.

His mother had wanted him to be a priest. He promised her he would honour that wish when she was dying of cancer.

John was just ten at the time, and fervently praying that she would survive. When she didn't, he felt God betrayed him.

Again, there's a faultline in this kind of thinking. One can't go from 'God betrayed me' to 'God doesn't exist.' This seemed to be at least a part of what was going on with him.

Instead of taking religious vows, he entered what he came to call the 'second priesthood,' ie. the teaching profession. When I met him in 1990 I told him

my mother had also wanted me to be a priest.

Two members of my family had already entered seminaries as I was growing up. Like John, I 'settled' for the 'second priesthood' of teaching.

Routines

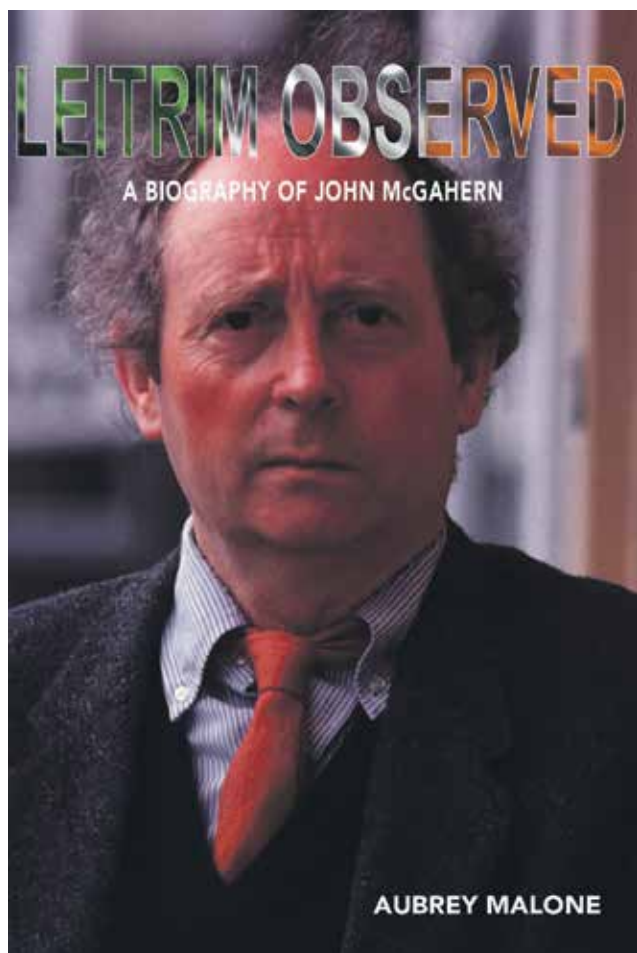
I entered St Patrick's Training college in Drumcondra approximately 20 years after he did but many of the same routines were in place. The system had relaxed somewhat but I still felt a church-like aura in the building, perhaps because of the stained glass on the windows.

I interviewed John a second time on the occasion of his 70th birthday in 2004. He was ill with cancer by now but he didn't tell me. Two years later he was gone from us.

His legacy lives on. In nearly all of his books there's a huge sense of the sacramental, of the excitement of ritual he experienced upon stepping into a church as a boy. I don't think this ever abated, even when it became transmuted into his literary ambitions.

The writer-cum-film director Neil Jordan, who was a pupil of his in Clontarf, once said, "I just thought of him as a teacher when I was in his class. Today he's almost like an archbishop."

i Aubrey Malone's biography of John McGahern, *Leitrim Observed*, is currently on sale, published by Aureus Press at €20.



THE SYNODAL TIMES



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

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Church in Ireland needs ‘mindset shift’ over lay ministry

Ruadhán Jones

The Church in Ireland needs a whole “mindset shift” over lay ministry, as dioceses and parishes seek to embed a synodal approach to local leadership, a leading theologian has said.

Irish dioceses have a “brilliant opportunity” to initiate a more “inclusive” model of leadership, according to the Dean of Theology at St Patrick’s Pontifical University, Maynooth, Dr Jessie Rogers.

But for this to take place, “there’s so much change of mindset that has to happen”, Dr Rogers told *The Synodal Times*.

“On one level, people are saying how do we go forward with a shortage of priests,” said Dr Rogers.

“On another level, which I hope is the deeper, truer level, is recognising that we’re in a different world... and that God gives to the Church everything that we need to be able to fulfil the ministry that he has given to us.”

“There is a whole load of possibilities”, she said, including lay-led liturgies, catechetics and corporal works of mercy, adding that it is “a brilliant opportunity and invitation for all of the Baptised to more fully live out our faith”.

However, this needs training, formation and proper preparations by dioceses and parishes to make space for lay leadership.

“People’s experience over the years is that they feel they have something to give, but there’s no opportunity in the parish,” warned Dr Rogers.

Maynooth is entering into partnership with a number of Irish dioceses to provide part-time courses on lay ministry, with 30 aspiring lay ministers from Ferns already gathering in January for a period of discernment.

The college is “in partnership with the dioceses,” said Dr Rogers, “who are looking to change their model, to make it more inclusive, to include more people... the training and formation is only a piece”.

A lot of the work the dioceses have been doing in the synod has already brought about possibilities and people on board who may not have been as involved before, the theologian and Old Testament scholar said.

She encouraged the Faithful “not to fear”, saying we are “gaining so much more than we are losing”.

However, she warned against a mindset that asks, “how do we compensate for the lack of a priest, how do we do the next best thing”.

That mindset leads to the danger of that we “miss other possibilities”.

“It’s not just, how do we fix things, how do we make the best of a bad situation – it’s a case of what surprising thing is God doing in this time and this place,” said Dr Rogers.

Pope hopes hell is empty



“This isn’t dogma, just my thought: I like to think of hell as being empty. I hope it is.”
Reported by CNS – the Pope was speaking on Italian TV.

NEXT WEEK: EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH UISG PRESIDENT, IRISH WOMAN SR MARY T BARRON, OLA.

Africa in Revolt



Luca Attanasio

While in Europe and other areas of the world there has been a mixed reaction to the publication of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's statement *'Fiducia Supplicans'*, with German bishops in clear majority in favour or French who speak of blessings as a 'way to get closer to God', the Catholic Church in Africa is in revolt. The publication, on 18 December last, of the doctrinal declaration, specifically the chapter referring to the possibility of blessing 'irregular' or same-sex couples, is triggering unrestrained reactions in many bishops' conferences and causing worrying splits. Not a day goes by without pronouncements by bishops, official statements by entire conferences or interviews with individual exponents expressing absolute opposition, even to the point of threatening total disobedience.

Already at the beginning of November, the responses of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, headed by Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, to the doubts expressed by Monsignor José Negri, bishop of Santo Amaro, Brazil, had raised much controversy. The very



Pope Francis greets Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican.

important Vatican body, the same one that issued the *"Fiducia Supplicans"* on the Pope's input, had on that occasion expressed (actually reiterated) that transsexuals can also ask for and receive baptism, and that transsexuals as well as homosexuals living with another person - provided that they lead "a life in conformity with the

faith" can be godparents and witnesses at weddings in church. But African reactions to *'Fiducia Supplicans'* go much further. Home to 236 million of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics - as *Fides News Agency* reports - Africa accounted for more than half of the 16.2 million people who joined the Church worldwide in 2021, one of

the places where Catholicism is more on the rise. Concerns - as the *New York Times* writes - have been raised about whether this declaration, as well as other Rome's positions, could lead to a rift between Pope Francis and a region that is a demographic bright spot for Catholicism. "Homosexuality falsifies and corrupts human anthropology and trivialises sexuality, marriage and the family, the foundations of society."

African culture

In African culture, this practice is not part of family and social values,' thunders the Malawian bishops' conference. 'Consequently,' it concludes, 'we, the bishops, prohibit forever all blessings of homosexual couples in the Church of Cameroon. This is a clear act of insubordination to an official document of the dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith approved by the Pope. In a statement issued on 5 January 2024, the Bishops' Conference of the Democratic Republic of Congo affirms "Regardless of the recognised right of the faithful to receive help from the sacred pastors through the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the Word of God, the sacraments and the sacramentals, we say NO to any form of blessing

of same-sex couples". Very similarly, Nigeria's bishops say that 'it is not possible for the Church to bless same-sex unions and activities' and add that allowing such blessings 'would go against the law of God, the teachings of the Church, the laws of our nation and the cultural sensitivity of our people'. The positions of individual bishops such as the Kenyan Martin Mtumbuka of Karonga Diocese "[It] looks to us like a heresy; it reads like a heresy; and its effects a heresy," or the Malawian Martin Mtumbuka, diocese of Karonga, who called on God's people to 'forget and ignore this controversial and blasphemous statement', even though he was aware that, 'in doing so, I invite you to publicly reject a document signed by the Holy Father', leave no doubt. Like an ax comes, then, the position of the umbrella body of the Regional Bishops' Conference of West Africa (Recowa): 'With regard to the blessing of homosexual couples, Recowa remains categorical: it will not take place in our area'.

Apparently more nuanced but equally harsh in content is the statement of the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops. The document states that the Church works to 'recover the lost and redirect all sin-

ners to the source of salvation and eternal life, but does not approve of sinful behaviour, such as homosexual activity. In blessing people, we do not bless the immoral actions they may engage in, but we hope that the blessing and prayers offered over them will cause them to convert and return to the ways of the Lord'. The Zambian bishops maintain that *'Fiducia Supplicans'* "is not and should not be understood as an endorsement of same-sex unions," and they state that the scriptures "present homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity".

The list is much longer and the uprising almost general. So much so that Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, Archbishop of Kinshasa, in his capacity as president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (Secam, the body that groups together all the conferences of the Catholic bishops of Africa, ed.), on Christmas Eve launched a continental consultation "to provide unequivocal clarity" on the *"Fiducia Supplicans"* for the African population, and offer "definitive guidance" to God's people. In the meantime, on Thursday 11 January, the Cardinal himself, in his capacity as president of Secam, issued a letter intended to be "a syn-



Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga of Bangui, Central African Republic, walks with Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, president of the Islamic Central African community, as they encourage tolerance and reconciliation.



New Cardinals Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg, Fridolin Ambongo Besungu of Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Juan Garcia Rodriguez of Havana walk in procession with Pope Francis during a consistory in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican October 5, 2019.

thesis” of the positions of the various national and inter-territorial Episcopal Conferences on the continent, in which he writes that the blessings to homosexual couples proposed by *Fiducia supplicans* cannot be implemented in Africa “without exposing themselves to scandal”. The text, however, is careful to reiterate that each bishop will be free to choose how to act in his own diocese and, above all, that in all their different messages, “the Episcopal Conferences of the Church Family of God in Africa begin by reaffirming their unwavering attachment to the Successor of Peter, their communion with Him and their fidelity to the Gospel”,

Some days before, the same dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith is also running for cover. Urged on by harsh stances by episcopates from halfway around the world, not only from Africa, it published a clarification text on 4 January, stressing that the blessings envisaged by the “*Fiducia Supplicans*” differ from

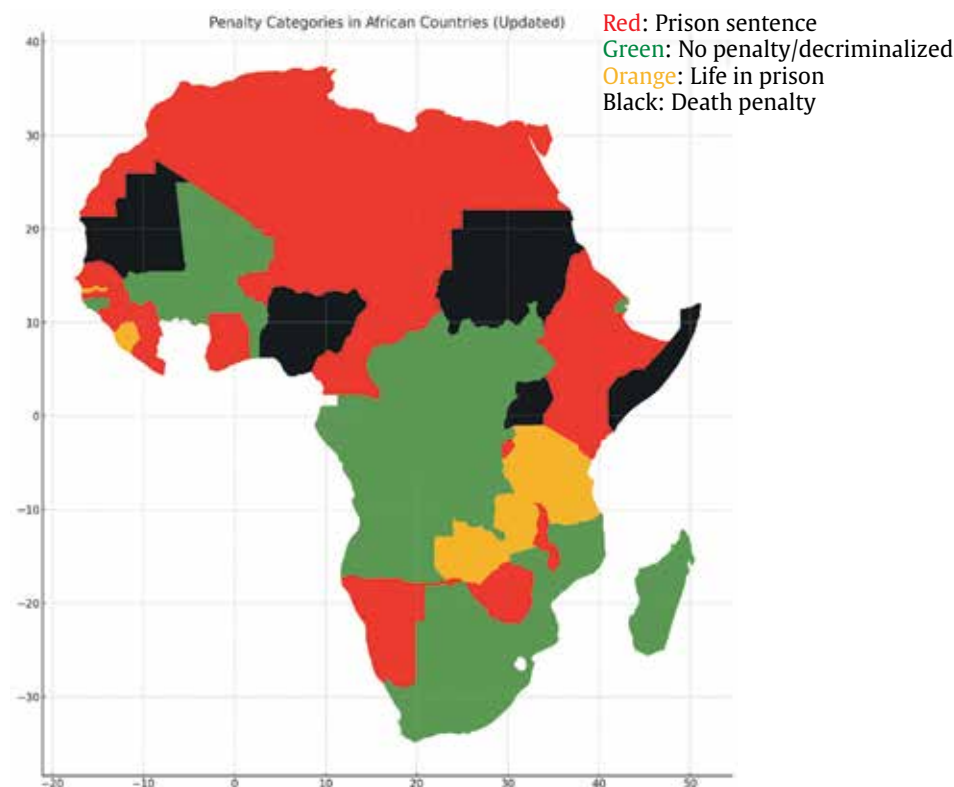
liturgical blessings in that they are “blessings of a few seconds, without Ritual and without a Blessing”.

African laws

It is certainly difficult to imagine an imminent change in the African Church with regard to people who are homosexual or have orientations other than heterosexuality. The African continent, in fact, is by far the most homophobic continent on the planet. In most of Africa – 33 out of 55 countries – homosexuality is a crime punishable by imprisonment. Last year alone, six states (Kenya, Ghana, Namibia, Niger, Tanzania and Uganda) have taken steps to even tighten their anti-homosexuality laws, and others could follow suit. The range goes from legality without recognition of status (a block of Central Africa including Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Gabon etc.,

or western including Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, etc.), to a prison sentence but without enforcement (South Sudan, Namibia), to actual imprisonment (all of North Africa, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Nigeria and various others) to the death penalty not enforced (Mauritania and various states of Nigeria), even going as far as the actual death penalty in the Nigerian state of Bauchi or in the areas under the control of al Shabab in Somalia. Sealing a very bad trend, comes the news in late 2023 of Burundi President Evariste Ndayishimiye's shock proposal to introduce stoning against gays.

People are certainly less homophobic than their rulers who maintain or propose medieval measures. Paradoxically, the Church, with its roots in the continent, among thousands of controversies and disagreements, is opening a debate that, maybe, can trigger change.



States in Africa and legislation about homosexuality and sexual attitude other than hetero

As *The Institute for Security Studies*, also known as ISS Africa explains, here are many international policies that recognise the impact of discrimination against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and others (LGBTQIA+) community. One is the UN Human Rights Council Resolution 41/18 on the protection against violence and discrimination on sexual orientation and gender identity. Another, which is legally binding, is the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Article 2 provides for the right to equality of all, and protects against discrimination based on sex or other status. However, the African Union (AU) has no official position on whether this includes sexual

orientation, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights hasn't been consistent on the issue. The commission affirmed that Article 2 included all people and gave observer status to the Coalition of African Lesbians. But it later rejected applications based on the organisations' sexual and gender identity. Other AU organs have interpreted Article 2 to exclude LGBTQIA+ people, and several member states seem to agree.

The primary human rights watchdog in Africa recently made a decision that departed from its existing practice. The African Commission of Human and Peoples' Rights, an independent expert body within the African Union (AU) framework, used sexual or

gender identity as the reason it rejected applications for observer status from three non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The commission said that “sexual orientation” was not an “expressly recognised right” in the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights. It also said that protecting and promoting sexual and gender minority rights was “contrary to the virtues of African values”. The difficulties of Africa’s most important body to deal with this issue, reflect the situation of a continent where homosexuality or other types of sexuality are punishable by law. The following is a list of the 55 states and their legislation on the issue of different sexual orientations.

Types of penalties:

Death penalty

Life in prison

Prison sentence (length varies from 1 year to 15 years in Ethiopia)

No penalty/decriminalized

Countries with penalties:

Algeria	Prison sentence	Mauritania	Death penalty
Burundi	Prison sentence	Morocco	Prison sentence
Cameroon	Prison sentence	Namibia	Prison sentence
Chad	Prison sentence	Niger	Prison sentence
Comoros	Prison sentence	Nigeria	Death penalty
Egypt	Prison sentence	Senegal	Prison sentence
Eritrea	Prison sentence	Sierra Leone	Life in prison
Eswatini	Prison sentence	Somalia	Death penalty
Ethiopia	Prison sentence	South Sudan	Prison sentence
Gambia	Life in prison	Sudan	Death penalty
Ghana	Prison sentence	Tanzania	Life in prison
Guinea	Prison sentence	50 Togo	Prison sentence
Kenya	Prison sentence	Tunisia	Prison sentence
Liberia	Prison sentence	Uganda	Death penalty
Libya	Prison sentence	Zambia	Life in prison
Malawi	Prison sentence	Zimbabwe	Prison sentence

Countries with no penalties:

Angola	No penalty/decriminalised (in 2021)
Benin	No penalty/decriminalised
Botswana	No penalty/decriminalised
Burkina Faso	No penalty/decriminalised
Cabo Verde	No penalty/decriminalised
Central African Republic	No penalty/decriminalised
Congo, Democratic Republic of the	No penalty/decriminalised
Congo, Republic of the	No penalty/decriminalised
Cote d'Ivoire	No penalty/decriminalised
Djibouti	No penalty/decriminalised
Equatorial Guinea	No penalty/decriminalised
Gabon	No penalty/decriminalised (in 2020)
Guinea-Bissau	No penalty/decriminalised
Lesotho	No penalty/decriminalised
Madagascar	No penalty/decriminalised
Mali	No penalty/decriminalised
Mauritius	No penalty/decriminalised
Mozambique	No penalty/decriminalised
Rwanda	No penalty/decriminalised
Sao Tome and Principe	No penalty/decriminalised
Seychelles	No penalty/decriminalised
South Africa	No penalty/decriminalised
Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara) (recognised by the African Union and some United Nations members)	No penalty/decriminalised

John XXIII, a letter and concern for Pope Francis

Penelope Middelboe

I fear for Pope Francis's health. I wrote him a personal letter posted on 7 December, but it hasn't left the UK yet according to the tracking number. I fear for his health because the last time I wrote personally to a pope was in May 1963 when I was six years old. The pope died before receiving my letter.

Pope John XXIII – affectionately known these days as *'il papa buono'* – was dying. My class teacher at Brentwood Ursuline Convent School, who was a nun, had asked everyone in the class to write to him.

I remember the excitement and responsibility of writing to a pope. We had to do it there and then. I expect every class in the convent was being asked the same thing. The nuns were very upset he was dying. Perhaps they had been inspired by Vatican II. Anyway there was a great sense of urgency. A miracle was expected. Letters were to go to the Post Office that afternoon.

Introduction

I didn't make my First Communion for another year after that, but my mother must have already given me some sort of introduction to Christianity and Jesus because I understood what a pope was.

My maternal grandmother was a Catholic convert. She'd gone to Oxford as a blue-stocking telling her Anglican parents she would either become a Communist or a Catholic. Her father had said that if she became either he would disown her. She never spoke about her conversion and he astutely never asked.

I had been born in

Kenya, and our family had only recently arrived in England. Had I ever even written a letter before, I wonder? However I clearly knew that in a letter you were meant to write more than just one line. You were meant to give a little of yourself. And in this case, the life of the most important person we knew of was at stake.

“I had written telling him that I was praying for him to die very soon to be with Jesus. I was very happy for him”

Our letters were collected. There was a hushed silence as our letters were read by the nun and placed in a large envelope. Half-way through she stopped, looked at me and called me over. I wish I could remember her exact words but basically she told me to do it all over again. And quickly. The bell was about to go and I was now holding up the important posting. This time, she emphasised, I was to leave the theology out of it. Of course she didn't use that word.

I was confused. And upset. I don't remember being particularly embarrassed, perhaps because I was new to the school and new to the country and used to feeling an outsider. I believed I had written a good letter. Pope John XXIII was old – 81 was very old then although I doubt I knew his age – and so in my best handwriting, in pencil, I had written telling him that I was praying for him to die very soon to be with Jesus. I was very happy for him. I remember adding that because he didn't have children he didn't have to

worry about leaving them without a Daddy. I said something about hoping he wasn't in pain.

But if this was unacceptable to my class teacher, what, I asked her, could I possibly write? I was deeply sincere but perhaps she was too busy to see that, because her reply was very off-hand. 'It's very simple, Penelope. You should do what everyone else in the class has done...' I listened, curious to know what they'd all done, and I had so clearly not... 'and write to say that you are praying that he will get better.'

I was appalled. I didn't want him to get better. I wanted him with Jesus. He was old and ill. But my letter was now in the bin and I realised I would have to do what she said. I remember verbatim my reply. 'What else can I write? I can't just write I pray for you to get better.' And her impatient response, 'tell him you're a good girl and...' she floundered around for an and, '... and you help your Mummy with the washing up'. Then she sent me back to my desk.

Well I didn't. I didn't help my Mummy with the washing-up. I never had done. We'd lived in Kenya where the dishes were washed up by the cook in the stand-to kitchen to the side of our modest house. And now we were in England and my father had only just found a job after 9 months, we were living four of us (my parents, brother and I – and a Siamese cat with a litter tray) in very sad little hotel where they served either tinned spaghetti on toast or beans on toast for most of our meals. So no, I'd never helped my Mummy with the washing-up.

Imposter

My hand wrote the letter my teacher wanted, and my imposter body put the letter on the teacher's desk. She read it and just as the bell rang slipped it into the envelope. I remember feeling very sad. I felt I'd failed the Pope. I had wanted to comfort him and now I'd written praying that his torment would continue. To make matters worse I had garnished it with a lie about being good and helping Mummy.

Everything in me rebelled at the hypocrisy I had been forced into. I didn't want the Pope to read my cruel letter. I came home and exploded at my Mother. Why didn't my teacher understand about Heaven? I remember realising then that I would have to keep on doing my own thinking about these important things.

“My real prayers had been listened to. Pope John XXIII was with Jesus. He might even know the truth about my letter and forgive my white lie”

A few weeks later in assembly the headmistress, also a nun, read out a letter from the Pope's office thanking us for our very kind letters. She paused for us to comprehend the significance of hearing from the Vatican. It was in fact a very dull and stuffy letter written by some secretary. Then she continued. Sadly Pope John XXIII had died before our kind letters reached him. Gasps of disappointment ran around the hall.

That afternoon I jumped off the school bus into my Mother's arms to deliver the good news. My real prayers had been listened to. Pope John XXIII was with Jesus. He might even know the truth about my letter and forgive my white lie.

My prayers today for Pope Francis couldn't be more different. I pray that he has the strength to continue his revolution here on earth a while longer. And only now do I understand the nun who couldn't bear the thought of losing the revolutionary John XXIII.

i Penelope is the author of two history books, *We Shall Never Surrender* (Macmillan 2011) and *Edith Olivier* from her journals: 1924-48 (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1989). She was *Script and Series Editor* on animated films aimed at making cultural heritage accessible for HBO, BBC and S4C/Channel 4. She co-produces a podcast *HistoryCafe.org* with 100+ episodes to date.



“I remember feeling very sad. I felt I'd failed the Pope. I had wanted to comfort him and now I'd written praying that his torment would continue”

Pope in new interview talks health, resignation, future travel plans



Elise Ann Allen

In a new interview, Pope Francis said he is in good health and denied any plans to resign, saying he has several foreign trips planned for this year, including a summer stop in Polynesia and a potential return trip to Argentina.

Speaking of his health, Francis in the interview joked that "I'm still alive" despite several health challenges last year, including two hospital stays and a recent bout of bronchitis that forced him to cancel a planned trip to Dubai in early December for the COP28 United Nations climate summit.

Asked whether he was considering resignation, the Pope said, "it's neither a thought nor a concern nor even a desire".

"It's a possibility open to all popes, but for the moment, it's not at the centre of my thoughts, worries and feelings," he said, adding, "as long as I have the ability to serve, I go forward; when I can't take it anymore, it will be time to think about it".

Pope Francis spoke to Italian journalist Fabio Fazio on the popular television program, *Che Tempo Che Fa*, which was broadcast Sunday night. It was his second appearance on the program since his election in 2013.

Variety

In the roughly 50-minute interview, Francis touched on a variety of issues in addition to his health, including war, migration, future travel plans, and the recent controversy over his decision to allow non-liturgical blessings for same-sex couples.

He also spoke of international travel plans for 2024, announcing that he intends to travel to Polynesia in August and that a potential return trip to Argentina is being discussed for later in the fall. Francis in a previous interview said he will also visit Belgium this year.

On Argentina, a trip that would mark his first return visit since his election, he said, "I want to go, it's been ten years. I would like to go".

"We must take the issue of migration in hand, take out all of these mafias that exploit migrants and go forward in resolving problems both of the people in the country and of migration"



Pope Francis listens to a question from Fabio Fazio in this screen grab of an interview on *Che Tempo Che Fa*, a television program on Italy's Nove channel. Photo: CNS/Courtesy of *Che Tempo Che Fa*

The Pope also touched on the recent controversy caused by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's Declaration 'Fiducia Supplicans: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings', published December 18 and which authorises pastors to give spontaneous, non-liturgical blessings to couples in irregular situations, including divorced and remarried couples and those in same-sex unions.

"People must see what path the Lord proposes to them, but we must take them by the hand and help them go down that path, not condemn them from the beginning"

After the declaration's publication, there was an explosion of backlash from critics, who accused the Pope of heresy, while supporters hailed the move as a significant step forward in the pastoral outreach to the LGBTQ+ community.

Some bishops conferences

welcomed the move, while others, notably the entirety of Africa, have refused to give blessings to same-sex couples, as a pair or as individuals, citing cultural sensitivities and the possibility of creating confusion.

In his interview, Pope Francis said that at times, "decisions are not accepted," and that people don't really understand what they are criticising.

Danger

"The danger, the thing I don't like, is to arrive at ugly conclusions," he said, referring to accusations of heresy, instead of "talking, expressing doubts, and carrying forward a fraternal discussion".

He said this is what happened with *Fiducia Supplicans*, and insisted as he often has that "the Lord blesses everyone, everyone, everyone, those who come. Every person".

"Then people must see what path the Lord proposes to them, but we must take them by the hand and help them go down that path, not condemn them from the beginning. This is the pastoral action of the Church," he said.

Francis insisted on the need to be generous in forgiving, telling confessors in particular to "forgive everything," and that "in 54 years as a priest, only once have I denied forgiveness, due to the hypocrisy of the person".

If God punishes, he said, it is "to correct, out of love".

He also spoke of his ongoing reform efforts, saying the most urgent reform of all is "the reform of hearts, for all Christians".

Structures and institutions are changed, adapted and updated

every few years at a mechanical level so they can meet modern needs, "but hearts must be reformed every day. This is a daily task," he said, saying, "We must renew our hearts all the time, every day".

"There are many children 'who don't smile,' saying that 'for a child to forget their smile is criminal, this makes war'"

Pope Francis also touched on the issue of war, specifically citing the ongoing wars in Gaza and in Ukraine, saying he is afraid of further escalation of all global conflicts.

"How will it end? Like Noah's Ark? This scares me, the capacity for self-destruction that humanity has today," he said, and again condemned the global arms trade.

In reference to Ukraine, he lamented that there are many children "who don't smile," saying that "for a child to forget their smile is criminal, this makes war". He also pointed to the conflict between Israel and Palestine, saying the two people, "called to be brothers, destroy one another".

On the issue of migration, he condemned the "cruelty" with which they are treated and noted that there is a "mafia that takes them and exploits them" along their journey.

He recalled a recent case in which traffickers had tortured a migrant and asked for a large sum of money in exchange for the person's freedom, saying, "Thanks be to God we found a benefactor and he was freed".

"Everyone has the right to remain home and to migrate," he said, noting that the countries of Cyprus, Greece, Malta, Italy and Spain bear the brunt of the migrant crisis, and pleaded with these nations to, "Please, don't close borders".

Pope Francis noted that some of these countries "don't have children, they need a workforce. Some of these countries have empty villages," and advocated for a balanced European migration policy that is fair to all sides.

"We must take the issue of migration in hand, take out all of these mafias that exploit migrants and go forward in resolving problems both of the people in the country and of migration," he said, saying, "To migrate is a right, and to stay in one's homeland is also a right. Both must be respected".

Prayer

Francis also explained his frequent appeals for prayer, saying he makes the request because "I am a sinner and I need God's help to stay faithful to the vocation he gave me".

"Each person has their own vocation that they must carry forward," he said, saying that he as a bishop has "a very big responsibility toward the Church. I know my weaknesses and because of this I must ask for prayer, that everyone prays for me, so that I remain faithful in the work of the Lord and that I don't end up in the attitude of a mediocre pastor."

A pastor must be with his people and know their needs, he said, and asked viewers again to pray for him, "that I always go forward, that I do not fail in my duty," and jokingly added, "please, pray in favour, not against!"



World Report

IN BRIEF

Norway monks consecrate new church among ancient ruins

● Norway's only male contemplative community of the Cistercian Trappist order consecrated its new church in December, inaugurating a brand-new monastery in the Trondheim Fjord, an inlet of the Norwegian Sea.

The four monks currently living there are dedicated to silent prayer and welcoming pilgrims in the heart of this northern desert.

The Cistercians of the Strict Observance, who came from the Abbey of Cîteaux in France — where St Bernard of Clairvaux lived — settled in Munkeby, near the Norwegian coast, in 2009. The monks chose this relatively desolate central Norwegian region because it is home to 12th Century Cistercian ruins that bear witness to a Christian history with deep, ancient roots.

Thousands gather at River Jordan to mark Jesus' Baptism

● For 2,000 years, since Jesus descended into the waters of the Jordan River to be baptised by John the Baptist, the river has been a pilgrimage site for Christians from around the world. And on the banks of that river, for the past 24 years, on the second Friday of January, the Catholic community in the region has undertaken

a pilgrimage, gathering around its patriarch, to celebrate the Baptism of Jesus.

This past Friday, January 12, thousands of the Faithful gathered once more for the feast day.

The pilgrimage has become one of the main events for the Jordanian Church, with St John the Baptist as its patron.

Pope Francis calls for greater 'cooperation' between Christians and Marxists

● Pope Francis this week called for cooperation between Christians and Marxists as a way to achieve greater "dialogue" and help in the search for the "common good".

"I thank you for your commitment to dialogue," the Pope said in a private meeting on January 10 with 15 representatives of DIALOG (Transversal Dialogue Project), an association of European leftist politicians and academics that seeks to bridge Catholic social teaching and Marxist theory.

"There is always a great need for dialogue, so do not be afraid," the Pope said during the event at the Paul VI Audience Hall.

Highlighting the nexus between social, economic, and ecological issues, the Pope said that "politics that is truly at the service of humanity cannot let itself be dictated to by finance and market mechanisms".

Cardinal Parolin: *Fiducia Supplicans* has 'touched a very sensitive point'

● Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state, has commented on the divided reaction to the *Fiducia Supplicans* document amid a great backlash from episcopal conferences.

"This document has aroused very strong reactions; this means that a very delicate, very sensitive point has been touched; it will take further investigation," Cardinal Parolin said January 12, during a conference held at the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome.

The cardinal went on to say that "if these ferments serve to walk according to the Gospel to give answers to today, these ferments are also welcome," while reiterating that "the Church is open and attentive to the signs of the times but must be faithful to the Gospel".

When asked in a follow-up question by an Italian journalist if the document was a mistake, the Vatican's top diplomat responded curtly: "I do not enter into these considerations; the reactions tell us that it has touched a very sensitive point."

Bishop Álvarez released and exiled after over 500 day detention

Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa has been released from prison and sent into exile along with 18 imprisoned churchmen as the Nicaraguan government expelled its most prominent critic, whose presence behind bars bore witness to the Sandinista regime's descent into totalitarianism, along with its unrelenting persecution of the Catholic Church.

Vatican News confirmed on January 14 at 10:41pm Rome time that with the exception of one priest who remained in Venezuela, all released priests, including Bishop Álvarez and Bishop Isidoro Mora of Siuna, have arrived in Rome "in the last few hours" and are "guests of the Holy See".

Nicaraguan independent media 100% Noticias posted a photograph on X, formerly Twitter, of the two freed bishops concelebrating Mass in Rome.

Independent Nicaraguan media reported January 14 that the churchmen had departed Nicaragua on a flight for Rome after the government reached an agreement with the Vatican for their release and exile. Auxiliary Bishop Silvio José Báez of Managua — who left the country in 2019 — also confirmed the news at his weekly Mass in Miami, and was visibly moved.

"This is the power of the people of God's prayers," he said. "The criminal Sandinista dictatorship of (President) Daniel Ortega has not been able to defeat the power of God."



Nicaraguan Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa walks outside a Catholic church in Managua in this 2022 file photo. After more than 500 days' detention, the Ortega regime released the prelate, who has been the Nicaraguan government's most prominent critic, from prison January 14, 2023, and sent into exile along with 18 other imprisoned churchmen. Photo: OSV News/Maynor Valenzuela, Reuters

The Nicaraguan government acknowledged the churchmen's release in a January 14 statement, which "deeply thanked" Pope Francis and Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, "for the very respectful and discreet coordination carried out to make possible the Vatican trip of two bishops, fifteen priests and two seminarians".

The statement continued, "They have been received by Vatican authorities, in compliance with agreements of good faith and good will, which seek to promote understanding and improve communication between the Holy See and Nicaragua, for peace and good".

The statement struck an unusually respectful tone — far from the government's frequent accusations of terrorism and coup mongering against Church leaders, who attempted to unsuccessfully facilitate a national dialogue after mass protests erupted demanding Ortega's ouster. The Nicaraguan government also severed relations with the Vatican and expelled the nuncio, Archbishop Waldeomar Stanislaw Sommertag, in 2022. The Vatican subsequently closed its embassy in March 2023.

"We recognise the chance for direct, prudent and very serious dialogue, a responsible and careful dialogue," the gov-

ernment statement said.

The release of 19 churchmen — including Bishop Mora and more than a dozen priests detained during a wave of detentions over the Christmas period — provoked reactions of joy among Nicaraguans in exile, along with statements of defiance.

"Get up quickly. The chains fell from his wrists", Bishop Báez said on X, formerly Twitter, quoting Acts 12:7.

"With great joy, I thank God that my brother bishops, priests, and seminarians are out of prison. Justice has triumphed. The power of the prayer of God's people has been displayed."

Catholic aid agency's staff remain in Yemen amid coalition strikes

Staff from Caritas Poland will remain in Yemen following US and UK-led strikes on Houthi rebels, mission head Radosław Sterna told OSV News.

"These airstrikes have affected a different government from where I am; therefore, we are quite safe here as for now."

On January 11, the US and the UK launched air and sea military strikes on 16 Houthi positions in the Arabian peninsula nation, which has been racked by civil war since 2014, resulting in what

the UN has called the "largest humanitarian crisis in the world".

In a statement that day, President Joe Biden said he had ordered the strikes — conducted by a coalition of forces and support from the UK, Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands — "in direct response to unprecedented Houthi attacks against international maritime vessels in the Red Sea".

The waterway, connected to the Mediterranean Sea by the Suez Canal,

is a vital artery for international shipping, transited by some 10% of global trade and 40% of Asia-Europe trade.

Mr Sterna, based in the south of Yemen, told OSV News the strikes were taking place in the country's north. For the millions of Yemenis in need of humanitarian aid, Caritas Poland's commitment to remain brings hope. "So far it is stable here in the south", he said. "Whether it will change — I do not know."

Pope confirms election of new head of Syro-Malabar Church

Pope Francis confirmed the election of the new head of the India-based Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. Bishop Raphael Thattil of Shamshabad (67) was elected major archbishop of Ernakulam-Angamaly by the Syro-Malabar bishops' synod January 9. Pope Fran-

cis confirmed the election the same day, the Vatican announced January 10.

Archbishop Thattil succeeds Cardinal George Alencherry (78) who retired December 7. He had led the Syro-Malabar Church, the largest of the Eastern-rite Catholic Churches in

India, since 2011.

In a letter to Archbishop Thattil, Pope Francis wrote, "I pray that, after the example of your venerable predecessors, you may strive to offer a generous and fruitful pastoral ministry to the flock now entrusted to your care" and to remember

the poor and those most in need.

"May the Holy Spirit foster the unity, fidelity and mission of the Syro-Malabar Church, so that it may grow and flourish under your paternal guidance," the Pope said in the letter released January 10.



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Popular piety in the Philippines



Pilgrims join the annual procession of the Black Nazarene during its feast day in Manila, Philippines, January 9. The wooden statue, carved in Mexico and brought to the Philippine capital early in the 17th Century, is cherished by Catholics, who believe that touching it can lead to a miracle. Photo: OSV News/Lisa Marie David, Reuters

Ecuador bishops plea for unity amid wave of violence

Amid an unprecedented wave of violence in Ecuador, the South American country's bishops' conference issued a statement asking the people to unite against the disturbance caused by criminal gangs, whose operations were defined as acts of "treason against the nation".

The incidents began after José Adolfo Macías Villamar, the leader of the criminal gang *Los Choneros* escaped from prison in Guayaquil, Ecuador's major economic hub. Riots erupted in several penal facilities and another

drug lord escaped as well.

Since then, terrorist acts have been propagating in Quito and other cities, including car explosions and kidnappings. On January 9, a number of armed men invaded a TV station and took control of it for hours during a live transmission until the police managed to get into the building and arrest the criminals.

In a continued wave of violence, schools and stores sat shuttered, many people stayed home and soldiers roamed the streets of Ecuador's largest cities

January 10.

President Daniel Noboa declared a state of emergency and deployed troops to the streets of Quito. A curfew has also been in place.

"Organised crime has been seeding in our daily lives chaos and despair," the bishops' message read.

The bishops declared that Ecuadorians should stay united against violence and work to make their country a place "of peace, work, and fraternity again".

The letter also asked the citizens to avoid panic and not to "believe in any scare-

monger image shared on social media".

"Every activity against the law, in any stance of society and of the State, must be considered an act of treason against the nation, against the most sacred values of our Ecuadorian identity, and against God, who will be the Judge of our lives," it went on.

The document concluded by saying that Ecuador is a country of faith and that its people trust that God will restore the stability of the State, and that "peace will return as soon as possible".

Vatican roundup

Argentine president invites Pope to visit 'beloved homeland'

● Argentine President Javier Milei has invited Pope Francis to visit their "beloved homeland" and he will also come to the Vatican in February.

"I believe that your trip will bring fruits of pacification and the fraternity of all Argentines, eager to overcome our divisions and conflicts," he said in a letter sent to the Pope.

"Your presence and your message will contribute to the long-desired unity of all our compatriots and will provide us with the collective strength necessary to preserve our peace and work for the prosperity and enhancement of our beloved Argentine Republic," he wrote.

The letter, addressed to "Holy Father," was dated January 8, and was released January 11 by the president's office on X, formerly known as Twitter, using the official account @OPRArgentina.

The next day, the Argentine daily newspaper *La Nación* reported that Mr Milei would be coming to the Vatican to attend the canonisation ceremony of Blessed María Antonia de San José February 11. She will be the first female of Argentina to be canonised.

Canopy over main altar of St Peter's Basilica to undergo restoration

● The nearly 400-year-old sculpted canopy towering over the main altar of St Peter's Basilica will be surrounded by scaffolding for most of 2024 as it is washed, repaired and restored. Standing over 30 feet tall, the baldachin, designed by Baroque master Gian Lorenzo Bernini, has stood over the tomb of St Peter since 1634. And for all that time it has gathered dust, cracks and rust despite regular cleanings.

As a result, "we can't not intervene" to restore the structure, said Alberto Capitanucci, the head engineer of the *Fabbrica di San Pietro* – the office responsible for upkeep of the basilica.

Speaking at

a news conference announcing the Vatican's restoration plans January 11, Mr Capitanucci said the procedure will follow that of the baldachin's last recorded restoration in 1758, only using an independent scaffolding structure that was not previously possible to build.

The restoration process will begin after February 12 and the scaffolding, which will allow for direct restoration work, will be installed around the baldachin before Holy Week, Mr Capitanucci said.

The entire restoration process is expected to last about 10 months and papal liturgical ceremonies will continue to take place at the altar.

Doctrine chief says his book on sexuality not something he'd write today

● The Vatican's doctrine chief said the sometimes-graphic book on sexuality and spirituality that he published 25 years ago is "a book of my youth that I certainly would not write now".

In comments to Church news websites *Crux* and *InfoVaticana* January 8, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández addressed controversy surrounding his 1998 book, *La pasión mística: espiritualidad y sensualidad* (Mystical Passion: Spirituality and Sensuality).

The 90-page book, circulated among journalists and posted online in early January, contained a chapter detailing the differences between male and female orgasms – and how one can find God's love in either – while another chapter was titled "God in the partner's orgasm".

The cardinal wrote that if mystics can obtain sensual experiences of the presence of God, then "he can also make himself present when two human beings love each other and reach orgasm; and that orgasm, lived in the presence of God, can also be a sublime act of worship of God".

Cardinal Fernández told the two websites that he wrote the book after speaking with young couples "who wanted to better understand the spiritual meaning of their relationships," but after the book was released, he feared it "could be misinterpreted".

Scottish govt proposes sexuality 'conversion practices' ban

The Scottish government released a document proposing the criminalisation of "conversion practices," which it defined broadly as "acts which are intended to change or suppress a person's sexual orientation or gender identity."

The Equality, Inclusion, and Human Rights Directorate's 86-page consultation paper, released on January 9, contains detailed proposals for "conversion therapy" legislation in Scotland.

The directorate, a department of the Scottish government that focuses on public policy development, is requesting public discussion on the matter through

an online consultation where citizens may submit their opinions until April.

Titled 'Ending Conversion Practices in Scotland: Consultation', the paper promotes criminalising "conversion practices," which include acts with "intent" to change the person's gender identity or sexuality.

"Conversion practices are harmful to individuals subjected to them," the consultation paper states. "They are promoted within an ideology that views LGBTQI+ identities as wrong and believes that they can be changed. Their existence contributes to this way of thinking even

further."

The directorate claimed these "conversion practices" range from "controlling" someone's appearance to "restricting where a person goes and who they see". Prescribing sexual suppressants intended to suppress a person's sexuality or "gender identity" would also fall under this category, the document said.

Conversion practices also included "therapy or counselling that requires a person not to act on their same-sex attraction, including through celibacy".



Letter from Poland

Turbulent times for Church and state as Poland's Tusk takes charge



Jason Osborne

Polarisation in Poland has reached new heights as it enters the new year, following the election of a left-leaning government more in line with those “European values” we frequently hear about from the continent’s top bureaucrats than the nation’s previous right-wing PiS (Law and Justice) administration.

At the top of the new government’s agenda, headed by returning Prime Minister Donald Tusk, are a series of reforms that have proven controversial among Poland’s conservatives but also more broadly. Plans to introduce abortion, same-sex civil unions, to limit religion classes in public schools and to abolish the state ‘Church Fund’ immediately raised red-flags with Poland’s religious and political right, but a heavy-handed takeover of state media brought internal and international scrutiny from both sides of the political spectrum to bear.

Complicated

The situation is complicated by the fact that there seems to be little to no common ground between Poland’s warring political factions over the judicial system. The new administration is setting about undoing what it says were eight years of repeated “rule-of-law” violations under PiS, by which it means the perceived moulding of the judicial system into a shape and constitution favourable to the former ruling party.

However, the new government’s attempts to introduce its policies are seen by PiS and its supporters as a re-writing of the judicial system in the opposite direction – one unfavourable to them. Just on Monday, prosecutors appointed by the previous PiS government protested the decision by the new government to remove and replace the national prosecutor,



Police stand outside the Polish public television TVP building as protesters and Law and Justice politicians gather after Poland’s new government took a public news channel off the air and dismissed executives from state media to restore “impartiality,” the culture ministry said, in Warsaw, Poland, December 20, 2023. Photos: OSV News/Kacper Pempel, Reuters

which is the second most senior position in the prosecutorial system. The move, they say, was carried out illegally.

“This is the torn, angry setting that a Church falling in popularity and prestige has to speak to in Poland”

This isn’t to mention the debacle over the jailing of two former PiS government ministers, which PiS’s supporters say is politically motivated, but which is being carried out following a conviction for abuse of power. The President – and PiS man – Andrzej Duda has announced that he will begin new pardon proceedings for the two men – Mariusz Kamiński and Maciej Wąsik – after meeting

with their wives, both of whom were obviously concerned by the two prisoners’ decision to go on hunger strike in protest at being “political prisoners”.

This is the torn, angry setting that a Church falling in popularity and prestige has to speak to in Poland. Just before Christmas, the President of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, Stanisław Gadecki issued an appeal for “national reconciliation”. He was keen to convey that a “common concern for the fate of the homeland” should outweigh any of the many things threatening to divide Poles.

Concern

“It is with great concern that I look at the recent events in and around our Homeland. We are living today in very difficult circumstances. The war in the East and, in the West, the attempt of the European Union to become a single state make

national reconciliation particularly important. We can only meet these challenges if our common concern for the fate of our Homeland becomes more important to us than anything that divides us,” Archbishop Gadecki said.

“This is the principle of the ‘rule of law’, in which the law is sovereign, and not the arbitrary will of individuals”

“In particular, this requires a return to the principle of a democratic state of law enshrined in the Polish Constitution... Since people have a tendency to abuse power, in a democratic state under the rule of law, the separation of powers and their balancing is necessary. The idea is that one political party or coalition should not exercise full power in the state – as happens in a totalitarian regime – but that certain institutions of power should be in the custody of opposition forces or be independent of any political parties at all.

“On the formal side, this means that those in power are not above

the law, but subject to the law. ‘This is the principle of the ‘rule of law’, in which the law is sovereign, and not the arbitrary will of individuals,” he said.

Responsibility

He appealed to Polish citizens, “with a sense of responsibility before God and their own conscience” to grow open to the possibility of reconciliation with one another, and encouraged them to seek out the opportunity to resolve the “conflicts plaguing our political life” without resorting to the use of force.

“As a nation, we have a beautiful history of over a thousand years, of which the legacy of Solidarność [‘Solidarity’] is an important page. ‘Solidarity – it means: one and the other... So never: one against the other... Struggle cannot be stronger than solidarity,’ said St John Paul II in Gdansk. Thanks to solidarity understood in this way, we were able to change the course of European history. But in our history we also have the painful page of the loss of independence. We must not repeat this mistake,” the archbishop concluded.

Whether or not this rallying cry will be heard remains to be seen, but the prospects are dim as the political turmoil flails on.

“We can only meet these challenges if our common concern for the fate of our Homeland becomes more important to us than anything that divides us”

Letters

Post to: Letters to the Editor, The Irish Catholic,
Unit 3b, Bracken Business Park, Bracken Road, Sandyford,
Dublin 18, D18 K277 or email: letters@irishcatholic.ie

Letter of the week

Freely discussing the use of fatal poisons

Dear Editor, Esther Ransen has been pressing for the UK to embrace so-called 'assisted dying'. The former BBC journalist might wish to consider neonatal medicine advances and English abortion practice. Consider two unborn children at just under 24 weeks into pregnancy. One is for 'resuscitation'

in a London hospital but 'termination' awaits the other. Remember, too, how there are an escalating number of self-harm consultations in UK hospitals. Complex risk assessments can take 1-2 hours and client numbers seen on a single psychiatrist's on-call shift can be high.

'Assisted dying' could leave us with one set of doctors at a London hospital imploring clients to "choose life", while another group freely discussing the use of fatal poisons.

Yours etc.,
James Hardy
Belfast, Co. Antrim

Can't complain enough about media bias

Dear Editor, Indeed, Brendan O'Regan need not worry that he appears to be "complaining too much" about bias in the media [*The Irish Catholic* – January 4, 2024]. In fact, as far as I am concerned he could never manage to complain enough. I'm tired asking for balanced and unbiased debates on important matters, but to no avail. His article was aptly accompanied by a picture of a debate between then Minister for Health, Simon Harris, and Peadar Kirby of Aontú. An interesting aside to this is that RTÉ refused to allow Maria Steen to take part in that debate and it was very fortunate that Peadar Kirby stepped into the breach. It seems the station rightly assumed that she would have been more than able for the minister. This is not to detract from Peadar's impressive performance but to confirm RTÉ's effort to curtail debate.

Yours etc.,
Mary Stewart
Ardeskin, Donegal Town



Respect the boundaries of what can be blessed

Dear Editor, There is a veritable cacophony of commentaries on the recent Vatican declaration 'Fiducia Supplicans' regarding blessings for those in irregular unions. Yet one commentator stands head and shoulders above all the rest, even on a world scale; he is Cardinal Gerhard Muller who served as Pope Benedict XVI's doctrinal chief.

His 'Pillar' essay is entitled 'The Only Blessing of Mother Church is the Truth That Will Set Us Free' and is worth reading in its entirety. A clear point arising from the essay is the importance of strict compliance with the conditions attached to such blessings, something that progressives are keen to overlook or even deny. Without a proper understanding of *Fiducia Supplicans* terms and conditions the "only effect [of such proposed blessings] would be to confuse the people who receive it or who attend it. They would think that God has blessed what He cannot bless. This 'pastoral'

blessing would be neither pastoral nor a blessing". This is the nature of scandal. One must respect the boundaries of what can be blessed: "According to the Catholic faith, the Pope and the bishops can set certain pastoral accents and creatively relate the truth of Revelation to the new challenges of each age, as for example in the field of social doctrine or of bioethics, while respecting the fundamental principles of Christian anthropology. But these innovations cannot go beyond what was revealed to them once and for all by the Apostles as the Word of God (*Dei Verbum* 8)."

Cardinal Muller's essay title says it all: "The Only Blessing of Mother Church is the Truth That Will Set Us Free". This truth is that licit sexual acts are strictly limited to a validly married man and woman who are open to life/procreation.

Yours etc.,
Andy McMahon
Miltown Malbay, Co. Clare.

Holy Spirit guiding towards serious discussions

Dear Editor, The Archbishop of Malta Charles Scicluna, has called for a "serious discussion" about celibacy and that the Catholic Church should consider revising its rules to allow Catholic priests to marry.

As a married permanent deacon, I have the best of both worlds, a loving family and the opportunity to minister in my parish partnership. My

father had a great saying "never say never", perhaps the Holy Spirit is guiding us to serious discussions about ensuring that we will always have priests to minister in our parishes, and that those priests will feel loved and supported by their families and their parishioners.

Yours etc.,
Deacon Frank Browne,
Rathfarnham, Dublin 16

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.

Rolling out the red carpet for those who suppress religious freedom

The Irish Catholic

Ireland gave a warm welcome to China's second-in-command this week, Premier Li-Qiang, in what was the first visit of a high-ranking Chinese official since Mr Li's predecessor, Li-Keqiang's 2015 visit. It isn't a stretch to say that on this occasion, the red-carpet was rolled out ahead of Mr Li's visit, with Taoiseach Leo Varadkar saying that he looked forward to extending "a warm welcome" to Premier Li.

"It comes in a year in which we will mark 45 years of diplomatic relations between our two countries. China is one of the world's great powers politically and economically and I am glad that Premier Li has decided to include Ireland in his itinerary," Mr Varadkar said ahead of Mr Li's arrival.

He added: "China is an important economic partner, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and has a huge role to play in overcoming the shared challenges the world faces, including working for peace and security in the world and ensuring we stop climate change."

All of that is undoubtedly true, and represents good reason to take relations with China seriously. Coupled with the above is the fact that China is Ireland's fourth-largest trade partner and that since Chinese President (then vice-president) Xi Jinping's 2012 visit bilateral trade has significantly grown in Ireland's favour from €3.7 billion in 2014 to a record €25.3 billion in 2022.

But should good relations for trade come at the expense of serious advocacy for religious freedom? Since the last significant Chinese visit to Ireland, international scrutiny has come down like a hammer on China's treatment of religious and ethnic minorities – particularly, but not exclusively, its Muslim population.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom describes religious freedom conditions in China as continuing to "deteriorate," with the Chinese government making use of "facial recognition and artificial intelligence" to create a "high-tech surveillance state".

To what end? "To monitor and harass Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Falon Gong and other religions."

"Independent experts

estimate that between 900,000 and 1.8 million Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other Muslims have been detained in more than 1,300 concentration camps in Xinjiang," a vast expanse of western China.

As reported by *The Irish Catholic* newspaper this week, when asked whether the Taoiseach would address these abuses of religious freedom – taken very seriously by the US and UK, among others – the department responded nebulously that the Taoiseach would "raise human rights during his engagement with Premier Li this week".

If the reports of recent years have any accuracy to them whatsoever, mass internment, surveillance, torture and an ongoing, heavy-handed policy of 'Sinicization' (compelling religious groups, particularly 'foreign' religions, to align their doctrines, customs and morality with Chinese culture) are the daily reality for a not-insignificant number of adherents to minority religions in China.

Crosses have been removed from churches, mosque domes and minarets destroyed, priests, pastors and imams asked to focus on religious teachings that reflect the Chinese communist government's socialist values. Reports have even surfaced of government plans to issue newly annotated holy texts to help religious teachings align with "Chinese culture in the new era".

A wealth of religious freedom abuses have been well-documented at this stage, enough that the US State Department felt it could accurately describe the aforementioned conditions in Xinjiang as "genocide". If Taoiseach Leo Varadkar didn't take the opportunity to raise these specific concerns with Mr Li this week, Ireland cannot pretend to champion human rights, much less religious freedom.

In a world where Christians routinely face death for espousing their belief in Christ, or prosecution for standing by age-old Christian tradition and teachings – such as is the case with Finnish politician, Paivi Rasanen's, ongoing 'hate speech' trial – Ireland should use its well-earned diplomatic heft to speak up for those that can't.

Life and death in Gaza: no water, mass burials, mosques and churches bombed, heritage destroyed

Liz Harris

Gaza is in the grip of a humanitarian catastrophe. But how has the war affected the religious life of Muslims and Christians in the area?

Water shortages and wudu

Gaza is running dry. Water shortages have been rife in the strip for decades, but since the war began after the Hamas attack on 7 October, the situation has become critical. The World Health Organisation states the minimum amount of water a person needs a day in an emergency is 15 litres. Gazans are surviving on three or less.

Hashim holds up a squeeze bottle filled with water to his three children. It looks like it once held washing-up liquid and holds about a litre of water.

"My grandfather used a container which held 1½ litres of water, which lasted him the whole day for wudu and washing his hands after eating. So, I am going to show you how this bottle will last me for four wudu a day," he tells them in a video he sent from Khan Younis to his cousin Maha, 42, on 19 October.

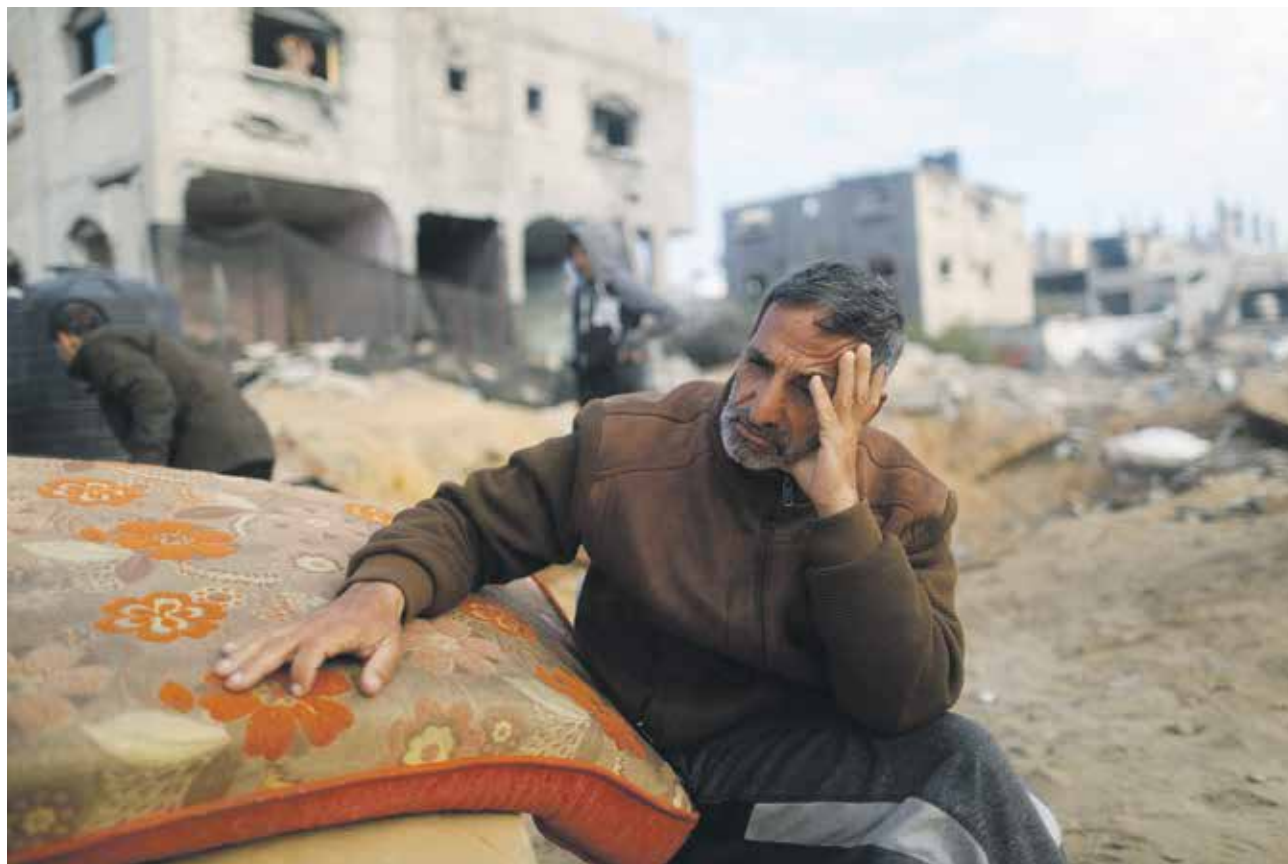
Wudu is the Arabic name for the ablution Muslims perform before prayer, as laid out in the Quran. It's an essential ritual, carried out by millions every day. "In Islam, water is crucial for physical and spiritual purification," the British Islamic scholar Shafiur Rahman, 52, tells me.

Hashim is staying in a house with about 100 other displaced people, and the pressure on sanitary facilities is extreme. Tap water, unsafe to drink in normal times, stopped running altogether for 12 days in early December.

A plane buzzes overhead as Hashim squirts water onto his hands and rubs them together. He washes his mouth out and spits, then splashes water into each nostril and snorts. Then he cleans his eyes and face.

Next come his arms – the right first – and then his head from back to front and his ears. Finally, he washes his feet.

He holds up the bottle again. He's used no more than three inches of water to clean his body. "You see?" he says to the



A displaced Palestinian man who fled his home due to Israeli airstrikes reacts January 5, as he takes shelter in a tent camp in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas. Photo: OSV News/Saleh Salem, Reuters

children, over the buzzing from the sky.

Funerals

"A proper funeral is now a luxury in Gaza," says Ahmed Najar, 42, a London-based Palestinian originally from the Jabalia refugee camp in north Gaza.

Every day the death toll jumps up by tens or hundreds according to the Hamas Ministry of Health. With the cemeteries full, bodies are buried in mass graves without ceremony.

His 91-year-old grandmother had Alzheimer's and was unable walk.

"She lived with my uncle," he tells me. "But when the IDF [Israel Defence Forces] came to the house, they ordered him out at gunpoint, and she was left behind because they couldn't move her. Three days later, my uncle returned and found her dead. She had been shot in the chest and the leg."

The horror of his grandmother's death was compounded by her burial. "My uncle buried

her somewhere – I don't know where. She wasn't washed because there was no water, and she wasn't prayed for."

“Gazans are even considering cremation, although it is forbidden (haram) in Islam, because at least six cemeteries have been damaged or destroyed by Israeli ground forces”

Shafiur Rahman tells me: "Funeral rites are laid out in the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, known as hadith. Burials should take place as soon as possible, preferably on the same day.

"In normal times, family and friends gather together to view the body. It's a time to say goodbye and comfort one another. The body is then washed and wrapped in a shroud; ideally, three layers of cloth for men and five for women. Prayers are said over the deceased, who

is then taken to the graveyard for burial. Graves are marked with a headstone."

But since the war began, Ahmed Najar tells me: "There have been no proper burials. People are burying their dead wherever they can – in the garden or in mass graves." The acute water shortages mean there is not enough water to wash the dead.

He says Gazans are even considering cremation, although it is forbidden (haram) in Islam, because at least six cemeteries have been damaged or destroyed by Israeli ground forces according to *The New York Times*. There are also unconfirmed reports that bodies buried in a mass grave at the Kamal Adwan hospital were dug up by the IDF's bulldozers in early December.

The Israeli Defence Forces did not answer my question about the Kamal Adwan hospital. Ahmed Najar did not wish me to seek verification from them about his grandmother's death because he fears retaliation against his family in Gaza.

But thousands of miles away in London, thoughts of her weigh heavily on him. "This has been most distressing for me. I can't sleep for nightmares."

Places of worship targeted

Dozens of mosques and churches have been hit by missiles since the assault

on Gaza began, according to the Geneva-based Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor.

In November, it said 66 mosques had been destroyed and 146 damaged, which accounts for 20 per cent of all mosques in Gaza.

“Three historic churches have also been bombed, including the Church of St Porphyrius in Gaza City”

"A mosque is more than a place of worship for Muslims," Shafiur Rahman says. "It's a community hub – a place where you go to socialise, for tranquillity, or to speak with an imam for advice. When the Prophet Muhammad went from Mecca to Medina with his followers, the first thing he did was to build a mosque."

People having been worshipping on the site of the Great Omari Mosque in Gaza City for at least 1,600 years. Originally a fifth Century Byzantine church built over an ancient temple, it was converted into a mosque in the seventh Century and back into a church by the Crusaders 400 years later. In the 13th Century, it became the Great Omari Mosque. Now its minaret is surrounded by rubble

after being bombed for the second time since the war began.

Three historic churches have also been bombed, including the Church of St Porphyrius in Gaza City. The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem told Al Jazeera that 18 people – including several children – were killed as they sheltered there. Meanwhile the Holy Family Church, the only Catholic church in the Gaza Strip, has come under fire. The besieged congregation include members of British MP Layla Moran's extended family.

Ahmed Najar is horrified at the bombing of St Porphyrius. "As children we went on school trips to churches. We'd watch the bells being rung – it was part of our childhood. It's horrible to see them destroyed, like losing someone."

He tells me that the Muslim and Christian communities are intertwined and have always lived together harmoniously. Muslim Palestinians baptise their children and Christians use the same names as Muslims.

Testament

As testament to this relationship, the Palestinian Arab Orthodox Priest Antonius Hanana announced on social media on 13 December that: "If the mosques are bombed and there is no muezzin and I am present in Gaza, I will raise the call to prayer ... on behalf of my Muslim brothers."

Shireen Allan, president of the International Council on Monuments and Sites in Palestine, said: "During the war, these religious centres provided services to displaced people, providing free shelter and food and water. It seems that the insistence on destroying the heritage and non-heritage, religious and non-religious buildings in Gaza aims to disassemble institutions in all fields of life in Gaza Strip."

"The intentional and deliberate destruction of infrastructure will be at a high cost to recovery, and there are destructions that cannot be restored ... What is being done is a cultural genocide".

1 This article by Liz Harris was first published by the Religion Media Centre on January 11, 2024.

Your Faith

The Irish Catholic, January 18, 2024

Questions of Faith

Why does the Christmas season end with Jesus' Baptism?

Page 32



Navigating marriage after baby

Ever have one of those days when you lose the hamburger you were defrosting and find it later in the washing machine, full of soap? And you can deal with that, but you cannot deal with being accused of leaving the medicine chest door open again, when you are fairly sure you closed it. You just cannot deal with being treated this way.

Chances are, this level of bone-headedness and this level of inappropriate drama mean one thing: You're tired. And you're tired in a way that only a parent of a new baby can be tired, and you're angry at your spouse in the way that only a parent of a new baby can be angry at his or her spouse: truly, thoroughly, with your whole heart, tired and

Expect your marriage to change following the growth of your family, writes Simcha Fisher

angry.

This is what marriage can look like when a baby comes on the scene.

No matter how much a baby was desired, his arrival will often turn a marriage on its ear. Take a snapshot of a married couple with a new baby and it may look less like a holy card and more like an S.O.S.

Is the secular world right, and are babies the fast ticket to

misery and grief?

In general, no. But yes, change is going to happen when couples start a family. Dr Gregory and Lisa Popcak, authors of the book *Then Comes Baby: Surviving and Thriving in the First Three Years of Parenthood* (Ave Maria Press), say that the principal idea is to embrace that change deliberately, rather than fighting it. Take possession of change, and take charge of where your marriage is

heading.

A couple can take charge even before the baby is born.

Connecting rituals

"It's incredibly important for couples to establish rituals for connecting across work, play, talk and prayer, before baby comes on the scene so that they are used to relating on those levels," the Popcaks say. "Then, once the baby arrives, they need to talk openly and regularly about how those rituals need to continue evolving so they can maintain those connections."

Work at forming a habit of talking things through rather than assuming that your needs are obvious. It's ok to be vulnerable as long as you're also prepared to be generous. Care

for each other as things stand now, not as they used to be, or how they ought to be, or how everyone on TV seems to be. Rededicate yourself to the person in front of you, rather than a fantasy or a memory of a person.

Fr Dwight Longenecker, himself a husband and father as well as a priest and author, says that many couples poison their marriages and families by buying into fantasies of a tidy, prosperous, airbrushed "Disneyland" life.

"Recognise that subtle propaganda and laugh it off," he counsels. "That's not real."

If you chase after shiny illusions, you will rob your real life of its real joy and peace.

What about when the little one is actually born?

The first few weeks and months are intensely demanding, but it won't be that way forever. Focus on surviving each day, and remember that chronic exhaustion makes rational thought impossible – so don't take tired thoughts and words to heart. Forget housework, forget socialising, forget everything you can afford to forget and rest as much as possible – all three of you – until you turn the corner.

“To a postpartum woman, there is no hero like the husband who lets her sleep”

In these early days, there is no such thing as too much patience. Even young, fit moms don't instantly spring back to supreme physical and emotional health after the birth.

According to the Popcaks, “It can take a year or more to feel normal after pregnancy and delivery, but husbands – and often the women themselves – don't appreciate how hard it really is to get your ducks back in a row after a baby and how normal it is to feel and be out-of-sorts for months afterward.”

Here is where husband and wife must talk, talk, talk – and listen. In the first several months, the husband really needs to step up while his wife recovers. Only moms can breastfeed, but there's no reason dads can't deal with diaper explosions and howling werewolf babies. To a postpartum woman, there



is no hero like the husband who lets her sleep. And many men are surprised to realise how much they enjoy being with their babies.

Recovery for fathers

But it's not all about mothers. Fathers also need time to recover. They are going through changes, too.

“Postpartum depression is surprisingly common in men,” the Popcaks said. “Part of it has to do with tiredness, the disruption in schedule and the feeling of being torn between wanting to be with

wife and baby and having to be at work, combined with a little jealousy if mom gets to stay home. Some husbands also struggle with the feeling of being displaced or replaced.”

“Babies have a way of stretching your comfort zones”

Moms and babies need to bond, but they don't want to bond dad right out of the picture. Gratitude, affection, admiration and trust can go a long way toward reassuring

a new dad that he's still the one.

But these are all secular problems, aren't they? Shouldn't Catholics have an edge over their nonreligious peers?

Maybe, but Catholics are still human, and it still takes us time to learn new tricks. Learning flexibility can be harder than any other skill. Legalism and rigidity masquerading as religious piety can increase domestic conflict as husband and wife adjust to their new life.

“Babies have a way of stretching your comfort zones,” the Popcaks write. “If your faith helps you deal with that and respond accordingly, both your faith and relationships will become healthier as you grow as a person. But if your faith is mainly about having hard and fast rules to live by, you might not adapt as well to the unpredictability that comes with post-baby life.”

“Concentrate on creating small moments of connection. You've built this life together. Instead of running away from it to connect, use it”

Fr Longenecker agrees: “Rigid gender roles are subjugated to the law of love. Loving our spouse and children in a free and generous way is what it's really all about. Gender roles are not law; they are there to help us achieve complementary love.”

So how, specifically, do we learn to adapt?

Always be looking for ways to spend time together, and revel in the small but happy moments. “Look for little ways to connect instead of holding out for big things (dates, sex),” the Popcaks say. “Concentrate on creating small moments of connection. You've built this life together. Instead of running away from it to connect, use it!”

Worry less about doing

things the right way, or the way your mother, your friends or the expert of the week says to do it, and worry more about staying close to each other no matter what. There are many, many right ways to raise a child. But when the child, or the parenting theory, edges out the one we've vowed to love, then misery will follow for everyone.

And what about that spiritual life? Becoming a parent both deepens and complicates your relationship with God. There ought to be a trophy for surviving Mass with an infant in tow. But if you do get to hear some of the Scripture readings, be prepared to hear them with new ears. God as tender father; the Church as merciful mother; Christ as the one who gives up his body because of love – suddenly these mean so much more when you're a parent yourself.

Maintaining a spiritual life while raising a child is parenthood in a nutshell: It's hard, complicated, tiring, sometimes frustrating and confusing – but rich, deep, profound beyond measure.

So pray together, even if – like so many things in life with a new baby – it's just a quick one. Look at your new baby and remind yourself that love is in the small things. Thank God for the gift of your child; and ask God, over and over again, to make you a gift to your spouse.

Simcha Fisher writes from the US.



Annoyed but full of hope: My Catholic wish list for 2024



Elizabeth Scalia

You have no idea how many of my columns have begun as a germ of a thought – usually an annoyed question – scribbled on a scrap of paper. This one reflects my late, rather curmudgeonly, “wish list” of what I’d like to see happen within Catholicism in 2024.

Indulge me, please. Let me just get it off my chest.

It’s not a bad list. In fact, it may well reflect the thoughts of many who, after reading about the rather opulent Roman apartments used by Cardinal Raymond Burke (recently told by Pope Francis to start paying market rates for the place), and the newly convicted embezzler Cardinal Angelo Becciu (whose vast residence adjacent to St Peter’s Square includes a “restaurant quality” kitchen and servant quarters for which he reportedly pays only a “nominal monthly rent”) may perhaps wonder:

– Why are these followers of Christ, who wear red as a symbol of their readiness to die for the faith, living in luxury to begin with?

– How do they look at the poor living under Bernini’s colonnade and then swan off to their fancy digs in good conscience?

– Do they learn about housing shortages in every great city, and of working people being unable to afford reasonable living space, and consider how incongruous their lived lives are to their stated purposes?

– In the 21st Century, well past the age of medieval monarchies and religious peerages, what justifies their privilege?

– If two cardinals are living like this in Rome, there are others, of course. Why are any cardinals living large while the Bishop of Rome resides in a fairly humble suite at the *Domus Sanctae*



Cardinal Angelo Becciu speaks with journalists during a news conference in Rome in this 2020 file photo. Photo: OSV News

Marthae (St Martha’s House) and takes his meals in common with visiting priests and prelates?

This, in a way, touches on the second item on my list and prompts another question: Why are bishops still living in pretty mansions instead of parish rectories, where they could, importantly, be among their priests and (perhaps more importantly) with the parishioners they are meant to shepherd?

I’ve written about this before – and some bishops have, in fact, either sold or repurposed their mansions and taken up residence in rectories, but why aren’t more of them? In 2024, can’t the shepherds become more incarnational, living

and praying and hoping and laughing and crying with the people they serve?

Isn’t that what Jesus did?

Number three? This should be an absolute no-brainer, yet we are still waiting to hear the findings of an investigation into Fr Marko Rupnik, the accused sexual abuser of over 20 women and at least one man, whose own Jesuit order found the accusations highly credible before they dismissed him for being disobedient. His accusers were initially not even going to get an investigation until news broke that Rupnik had been quietly incardinated in Slovenia, which rightly created a worldwide furore and finally set the fact-finding wheels in motion.

Learning lessons

And here, we’d thought the Church had at least learned its lesson about moving around bad priests!

Speaking of learning and lessons, can 2024 be the year when the institutional Church finally reads the room – or the emptying pews – and begins to seriously address how to better teach this fascinating, well-reasoned but often complex faith? Clearly the “just get them through to Confirmation,” method is an abject failure. The kids aren’t staying, and neither are the parents, and for one enormous but simple reason: They don’t know why they should.

Most Catholics don’t know what they don’t know. They know the scandals; they see the privileged princes; they’re savvy enough to understand media missteps and walk backs, but Catholics don’t know enough about the Eucharist, or the varied, subversive and uplifting power of prayer (and all the little whys and wherefores of the Faith)

to perceive that the Mass is nevertheless the most exciting place to be.

“It is good, even exciting, to know the Faith. It is good to serve justice and mercy with abiding love”

People want to believe in something, but Catholicism is doing a lousy job of explaining itself. It’s precisely because folks want to believe in something bigger than themselves – something extraordinary and powerful and real – that people accept invitations to learn about sigils and supernaturalism and the mediocre magic of “New Age” gnosticism.

But while they’re doing that, they’re missing out on the greatest supernatural engagement in their midst

– the one that begins with the sign of the cross and concludes with the veil between heaven and earth being penetrated as the God-man becomes present and alive to us and within us – with miracles and angels and saints all along the way.

Listen, perhaps if we seriously teach the adults – not just pointing them to 2,000 years of documents and expecting them to know where to start, but really forming the adults – they will become on fire for the Faith and will want to pass it on to their children, not as an obligation but as a gift bestowed.

It is good, even exciting, to know the Faith. It is good to serve justice and mercy with abiding love.

And, ahh! It is good, now and then, to indulge a frustrated rant.

Elizabeth Scalia is culture editor for OSV News.

“Some bishops have, in fact, either sold or repurposed their mansions and taken up residence in rectories, but why aren’t more of them?”

Shia LaBeouf's conversion: Let's rejoice over the movement of grace



**Fr Patrick Briscoe
OP**

In August 2022, when *Transformers* star Shia LaBeouf revealed during a conversation with Bishop Robert Barron that he had experienced a conversion and begun to attend Mass, I wrote that LaBeouf seemed to me to have undergone a genuine change of heart. He spoke regretfully of the pain and harm he had caused in his life.

More moving still was his testimony about the way that playing *Padre Pio* in a recent film affected him. "Pio ... saved my life, this is not just a movie or something, and I don't mean that lightly," Mr LaBeouf told Bishop Barron. Mr LaBeouf later told *OSV News* that he "fell in love with Christ" as part of his preparation for the role.

Shia's past

Many scorned that conversation, and not altogether unreasonably. A 2020 lawsuit by his former partner, British musician FKA Twigs, accuses Mr LaBeouf of physical, mental and emotional abuse.

Knowing his past, social media users doubted Mr LaBeouf's authenticity, even challenging the possibility of a spiritual change of heart altogether. And last August, in the middle of all this discourse, I wrote: "I'd rather believe in the power of conversion and the healing grace

of the Holy Spirit than live under the tyranny of constant cynicism and suspicion."

And so it's with that same hope that I share the news of Mr LaBeouf's conversion to the Catholic Church. On December 31, Bishop Barron confirmed Mr LaBeouf at the Old Mission Santa Inés in Solvang, California. Surrounded by the Capuchin Franciscan friars that Mr LaBeouf had come to know so well during the production of Abel Ferrara's film *Padre Pio*, Mr LaBeouf received the Sacrament of Confirmation. In today's world, where the noise of scepticism and secularism often drowns out the quiet call of spirituality, stories like Mr LaBeouf's shine as beacons of hope.

Longing for others to meet Christ

“After all, conversion is not merely a one-time event but a continuous process of growth and integration in the Body of Christ”

We don't have to canonise Mr LaBeouf. In fact, we'd do well not to ... after all, only the Church canonises saints! We ought to pray for him. We ought to rejoice in the movements of grace that have brought him to the Church. We should hope, too, that his story will inspire others.

Our Lord's Gospel message is about the hope of conversion at its very core. Whether we're talking about Shia LaBeouf, politicians, our family members or friends, that's worth remembering. To be a Christian means that, at a fundamental level, we long for others to meet Christ as we have met him and to

change.

In order for those we love to change, we have to give them space and allow room for the designs of the Holy Spirit to work. Faith is transformative, but not according to the designs or ideals we have on a purely human level. Faith is transformative according to the plans of Divine Providence, according to God's plans, which so often elude our understanding.

Supporting converts

Mr LaBeouf's story encourages us to reflect on our role in supporting converts. Are we, as a community, prepared to welcome them with open arms? Do we offer guidance, understanding and the companionship they need as they navigate this life-changing journey? After all, conversion is not merely a one-time event but a continuous process of growth and integration in the Body of Christ.

And Mr LaBeouf's conversion should prompt us to think about our own conversions. "Sometimes even Catholics have lost or never had the chance to experience Christ personally: not Christ as a mere 'paradigm' or 'value,' but as the living Lord, 'the way, and the truth, and the life' (Jn 14:6)," says Pope St John Paul II. Jesus Christ calls each of us to know him, to love him and for that knowledge and love to grow ever more complete.

Mr LaBeouf has also shared that he hopes to be ordained a deacon. We'll see whether or not Mr LaBeouf pursues holy orders. But in the meantime, we'll pray that the Church will be edified by his conversion.

i Fr Patrick Briscoe OP, is a Dominican friar and the editor of Our Sunday Visitor.



Shia LaBeouf stars in the 2023 film *Padre Pio*. Mr LaBeouf entered into full communion with the Catholic Church after receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation on December 31. Photo: *OSV News/Gravitas Ventures*

Questions of Faith?

Jenna Marie Cooper

Why does the Christmas season end with Jesus' Baptism?

Q: I always thought the end of the Christmas season came with Epiphany and the arrival of the Magi. A priest recently said the season doesn't end until a week later with the Baptism of the Lord. What has the Baptism of the adult Jesus got to do with Bethlehem? If it's supposed to mean a "turning of the page" in the life of Jesus, wouldn't a better event be the last scriptural appearance of the Holy Family, "the finding of the child Jesus in the temple" (Lk 2:48)?

A: In our current liturgical calendar the last day of the Christmas season is indeed the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Normally, that feast is celebrated on the Sunday after Epiphany – although if Epiphany falls on January 7 or 8, as it does in 2024, the Baptism of the Lord is celebrated the following Monday.

But it is interesting to note that traditionally, February 2, the Feast of the Presentation, was considered the end of the Christmas season. We can still see a few echoes of this even today. For instance, the Vatican keeps their Christmas tree and creche up in St Peter's square until February 2. And the blessing of candles customarily celebrated right before Mass for the feast of the Presentation opens with a prayer stating: "Brothers and sisters, 40 days have passed since the solemnity of Christmas. Today the Church once again prepares to celebrate the day in which Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple."

I would say that Jesus' Baptism truly is a major "turning of the page" in Jesus' life, since, after his baptism at the hands of John the Baptist his quiet, hidden life became one of public ministry, wherein he actively sought to make his saving mission and identity known and proclaimed.

Further, the Baptism of the Lord, the Epiphany, and – perhaps surprisingly – the wedding at Cana all connect

thematically, as they are all about the first manifestations of Jesus as the son of God. That is, they are all instances where the glory of Jesus' divine nature, which would ordinarily have been obscure and hidden to human eyes during Jesus' early life, is revealed.

At the Epiphany, (a word which literally means "revelation") Jesus' glory is revealed to the Magi. Traditionally, the Church sees the Epiphany being, by extension, Jesus' manifestation to "the nations," or to all the other non-Jewish pagan cultures of the world who would not have previously known the one true God. In the narrative of Jesus' Baptism, it is revealed that he is the beloved Son of God (See Mk 1:9-11 and Lk 3:22). The wedding at Cana is the setting for Jesus' first public miracle, when he changes water into wine at Our Lady's request, (see Jn 2:1-11) and as such was a revelation to Jesus' friends and disciples of his glorious divine power over nature.

The connection between these seemingly unconnected events in the life of Jesus is particularly clear and intuitive to those of us who pray the Liturgy of the Hours. For example, the Magnificat antiphon for Evening Prayer for the Epiphany is: "Three mysteries mark this holy day: today the star leads the Magi to the infant Christ; today water is changed into wine for the wedding feast; today Christ wills to be baptised by John in the river Jordan to bring us salvation."

All these scriptural manifestations, even those that occurred decades apart, harken back to Bethlehem, because the birth of Christ was the first and most radical revelation of the Incarnate Word of God.

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 law of gravity and the Holy Spirit

A sound theology and a sound science will both recognise that the law of gravity and the Holy Spirit are one in the same principle. There isn't a different spirit undergirding the physical than the spiritual. There's one spirit that's speaking through both the law of gravity and the Sermon on the Mount.

If we recognised that same Spirit is present in everything, in physical creation, in love, in beauty, in human creativity, and in human morality, we could hold more things together in a fruitful tension rather than putting them in opposition and having the different gifts of the God's Spirit fight each other. What does this mean?

Dichotomies

We have too many unhealthy dichotomies in our lives. Too often we find ourselves choosing between things that should not be in opposition to each other and are in the unhappy position of having to pick between two things which are both, in themselves, good. We live in a world in which, too often, the spiritual is set against the physical, morality is set against creativity, wisdom is set against education, commitment is set against sex, conscience is set against pleasure, and personal fidelity is set against creative and professional success.

Obviously there's something wrong here. If one force, God's



Fr Rolheiser

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Spirit, is the single source that animates all these things then clearly we should not be in a position of having to choose between them. Ideally we should be choosing both because the one, same Spirit undergirds both.

“Take away your breath, and everything returns to dust”

Is this true? Is the Holy Spirit both the source of gravity and the source of love? Yes. At least if the scriptures are to be believed. They tell us that the Holy Spirit is both a physical and a spiritual force, the source of all physicality and of all spirituality all at the same time.

We first meet the person of the Holy Spirit in the opening line of the Bible: In the beginning there was a formless void and the Spirit of God hovered over the chaos. In the

early chapters of the scriptures, the Holy Spirit is presented as a physical force, a wind that comes from the very mouth of God and not only shapes and orders physical creation but is also the energy that lies at the base of everything, animate and inanimate alike: Take away your breath, and everything returns to dust.

Ancients

The ancients believed there was a soul in everything and that soul, God's breath, held everything together and gave it meaning. They believed this even though they did not understand, as we do today, the workings of the infra-atomic world: how the tiniest particles and energy waves already possess erotic electrical charges, how hydrogen seeks out oxygen, and how at the most elemental level of physical reality energies are already attracting and repelling each

other just as people do. They could not explain these things scientifically as we can, but they recognised, just as we do, that there is already some form of “love” inside all things, however inanimate. They attributed all of this to God's breath, a wind that comes from God's mouth and ultimately animates rocks, water, animals, and human beings.

“We need to let the Holy Spirit, in all its fullness, animate our lives”

They understood that the same breath that animates and orders physical creation is also the source of all wisdom, harmony, peace, creativity, morality and fidelity. God's breath was understood to be as moral as it is physical, as unifying as it is creative and as wise as it is daring. For them, the breath of God was one force and it did not contradict itself. The physical and the spiritual world were not set against each other. One Spirit was understood to be the source of both.

We need to understand things

in the same way. We need to let the Holy Spirit, in all its fullness, animate our lives. What this means concretely is that we must not let ourselves be energised and driven too much by one part of the Spirit to the detriment of other parts of that same Spirit.

Absence

Thus, there shouldn't be creativity in the absence of morality, education in the absence of wisdom, sex in the absence of commitment, pleasure in the absence of conscience, and artistic or professional achievement in the absence of personal fidelity. Not least, there shouldn't be a good life for some in the absence of justice for everyone. Conversely, however, we need to be suspicious of ourselves when we are moral but not creative, when our wisdom fears critical education, when our spirituality has a problem with pleasure, and when our personal fidelity is over-defensive in the face of art and achievement. One Spirit is the author of all of these. Hence, we must be equally sensitive to each of them.

Someone once quipped that a heresy is something that is nine-tenths true. That's our problem with the Holy Spirit. We're forever into partial truth when we don't allow for a connection between the law of gravity and the Sermon on the Mount.

“God's breath was understood to be as moral as it is physical, as unifying as it is creative and as wise as it is daring”

The call addressed to each and every one of us



Outside the Vatican audience hall March, 2023, Pope Francis receives a replica of a first-century boat found in the Sea of Galilee in 1986. The replica is believed to be of the type used by Jesus and his disciples. Photo: CNS/Vatican Media

Jon 3:1-5, 10
Ps 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
1 Cor 7:29-31
Mk 1:14-20

Do you hear it? Jonah did. So did the brothers Simon and Andrew, and then James and John.

It's the insistent invitation to drop everything, change direction and follow where God is leading. It can take you where you don't want to go, where you never expected to go. And it can change your life forever. It is 'The Call'.

We hear about it in Mark's Gospel this Sunday. It's tempting to think the call of God and the invitation of Christ apply only to a certain kind of person – maybe someone who is profoundly holy or feels compelled to become a priest or religious. We tell ourselves, "That could never be me," and we shrug it off.

But turn to Mark's Gospel and you realise the beauty

The Sunday Gospel

Deacon
Greg
Kandra



and wonder of this episode is that Jesus didn't make those kinds of distinctions. He called out to humble fisherman tending their nets and said plainly, "Come after me". That was all it took.

“We aren't alone. When Jesus called those fishermen, they weren't alone when they left the lives they knew. They had company”

Whether we realise it or not, this Gospel is about something affecting all of us, no matter who we are or what we do. It is about the great call of all our lives

– the one that attracts us, challenges us, invites us, redeems us.

It is the call to follow Christ. It is a summons. To sacrifice. To surrender. To bear witness. To pray. To love God and love our neighbour, and do it as Jesus did, with profound gratitude and humility and trust.

Never alone

It isn't easy. But there's one compelling detail from the Gospel that should give us hope: We aren't alone. When Jesus called those fishermen, they weren't alone when they left the lives they knew. They had company. They went in pairs. Simon and Andrew, James and John.

It reminds us that being a follower of Christ is not a solitary act. Being a Christian involves another. Many others, in fact. The early Christians understood that this kind of faith was about celebrating Christ's life, death and resurrection in community. Scripture describes their first missionary journey and

describes how they went in pairs. This was for more than mere companionship. They had a support system. They had one another.

“In community, they found sustenance and endurance during times of great joy, and great suffering”

And so, they prayed together. Shared the Eucharist together. They travelled together. They preached together.

But that wasn't all. Together, they were persecuted. Together, they were martyred. Together, they found resolve and hope, grace and strength – consolation and renewal.

In community, they found sustenance and endurance during times of great joy, and great suffering.

And all these centuries later, so do we. Encountering this story today, we realise that we are continuing

what they began. That first call of the fishermen, two by two, has echoed around the world, many times over. Today, we believers gather again and again in community, to share together our love for God, our love for one another, our passion for the Gospel message. We proclaim what we believe, and we lift our eyes to a miracle: Christ's presence in a piece of elevated bread.

The body of Christ is uplifted. And so are we.

“We are called to leave our old ways of doing things, our familiar and comfortable habits of being – and not just at the start of a new year, but every day”

By happy coincidence, this reading comes near the start of a new year, when we resolve to make changes

and amend our lives. Mark's Gospel makes us aware once more that, like Simon and Andrew and James and John, we are called to leave our old ways of doing things, our familiar and comfortable habits of being – and not just at the start of a new year, but every day. We are challenged to follow another way, to set aside the nets we mend and the reassuring routines we've gotten used to and dare to do something new.

Ultimately, we are called to walk away from the familiar and easy, and journey into the unknown, following Christ Jesus. It involves sacrifice and surrender, a desire to trust and to change.

The call to be "fishers of men," it turns out, is one that is sent out to all of us.

Do we hear it? Are we listening?

i Deacon Greg Kandra is an award-winning author and journalist, and creator of the blog, 'The Deacon's Bench'.

TVRadio

Brendan O'Regan



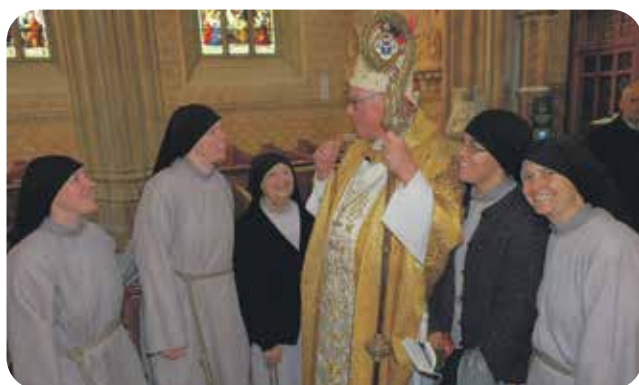
RTÉ's 'last priests and nuns' swings from sympathy to cynicism

You know the way you sometimes get the impression that someone is trying to give you a hint, but you're not quite sure. I felt that way when I saw two programmes flagged – about the last priests and nuns in Ireland – was this a nudge? Wishful thinking? An attempt at self-fulfilling prophecy?

The Last Priests in Ireland on RTÉ One last Monday night was the first, and it was interesting and well made. Presenter Ardal O'Hanlon is one of the few Irish comedians I like, so I was looking forward to it, though I'm not convinced that a comedian, and an agnostic one at that, was the best choice.

He presented from an abandoned looking Clonliffe. The tone varied from serious to flip-pant, from cynical to respectful. The best of it was when we heard contributions from priests currently serving their communities – their ongoing commitment was impressive.

We met a childhood neighbour of Ardal O'Hanlon, now ministering in Wales, an army chaplain who served for years on the missions, a young priest recently ordained and a young priest from abroad now ministering in Dublin, a vocations director with a challenging



Cardinal Timothy Dolan meets with the Franciscan Sisters of the Renewal, based in Drogheda, Co. Louth.

task. These will certainly not be the last priests in Ireland and they give hope for the future.

Much of the programme was predictable – old footage of full seminaries, plenty of liberal sentiments like celibacy and women priests, heavy emphasis on the decline of the Church in Ireland with little on the many green shoot initiatives, the obligatory shot of Bishop Eamon Casey and Fr Michael Cleary during Pope John Paul II's visit to Galway.

I thought former priest and author Michael Harding was unfairly critical and dismissive of that pope. One thing that did surprise me was learning that Father Ted co-writer Arthur Matthews was

a descendant of the 19th Century Cardinal Cullen!

The presenter seemed conflicted – at one stage he said he wasn't making any value judgements, later he described the Church as "an organisation that is inherently sexist". Towards the end he wondered if he was being a hypocrite or a coward – the agnostic getting his children baptised.

Certainly, he saw the value of a special person who supported people spiritually in times of crisis, "a professional empathiser". It was good to hear of an upcoming vocations initiative – I hope it bears fruit, though I'm not sure what fruit was intended by this programme.

Then, last Tuesday night we got **The Last Nuns in Ireland**, also on RTÉ One. This time the presenter was journalist Dearbhail McDonald. She presented from an abandoned looking convent. I felt this was a warmer, more serious presentation. She had been educated by nuns and educated to be an independent and critical thinker. She valued the contribution of nuns to education and healthcare, especially when the state wasn't adequately providing these services.

She declared up front that she had voted yes to same sex marriage and to repeal of the 8th Amendment. She was rightly angry at all the abuse scandals and the way State and Church treated children in these situations.

And yet, if she wanted to understand why such things happened despite the values the Church espoused, she could have asked herself how she could have supported the repeal of that pro-life clause in the Constitution – the effect, and purpose, of the repeal was to make it easier to end the lives of living unborn children. When we swap one cruelty for another, the moral high ground becomes very shaky.

Again, the best thing about the documentary was the

PICK OF THE WEEK

WALK FOR LIFE WEST COAST EWTN Saturday January 20, 7.30pm

Hear from pro-life leaders and walk participants during EWTN's live coverage of Walk For Life West Coast, San Francisco's largest pro-life event, drawing thousands of marchers.

WITNESS

RTÉ Radio 1 Friday January 26, 10.05pm

Siobhán Garrigan returns with a new run of the topical religious affairs show.

GREAT BOOKS EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW EWTN Sunday January 21, 3.30pm also Friday January 26, 10.30am

Works covered by Joseph Pearce are *The Waste Land*, a poem by TS Eliot, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, a trilogy written by Sigrid Undset, and *C*, a novel by Maurice Baring.

contribution of the nuns she interviewed – bright, enthusiastic, selfless women who continue to serve God and society despite all the vilification some elements in that society have heaped on them. One sister described the distress many of them felt when, in relation to the controversy surrounding St Vincent's Hospital, they heard of the effigies of nuns being burnt in street protests.

Finally, if you wanted an uplift, you could listen back to **Liveline** (RTE Radio

1), from Wednesday of last week. A caller, John, rang in to speak of a warning in Mayo about undrinkable water. It turned out that he was terminally ill, but his infectious positivity about life and death was an inspiration. One touching detail – he liked his Netflix, but because of his situation would only get into a mini-series, rather than a show with several seasons to catch up on!

Music

Pat O'Kelly



Musical centenary celebrations for 2024

The current year celebrates a number of musical centenaries not least those of the deaths of France's Gabriel Fauré and Dublin-born Charles Villiers Stanford who became a particularly potent figure in the musical life of the UK where he was professor of music at Cambridge from 1887 until his death.

Now maybe best remembered for his music for the Anglican Church, however, the National Symphony schedules a number of his orchestral works over the coming weeks. These include his Clarinet Concerto with Carol McGonnell at the NCH on February 2 and his 2nd Piano Concerto with Finghin Collins also at the NCH on



French conductor Jean-Luc Tingaud.

February 16 and at Waterford's SETU Arena the following evening.

But the NSO's opening 2024 event was basically a Fauré affair. The main work was the composer's *Requiem* that amalgamated the NSO

Chorus, Cór Linn and Cór na nÓg together for the first time. The soprano and baritone soloists were Zoë Moore and Benjamin Russell under French conductor Jean-Luc Tingaud.

It was an oddly 'managed' affair with the soloists entering and leaving the platform on cue but really disrupting the music's natural flow. Seems odd they could not have remained in situ for the entire performance that is really relatively compact.

This concert had opened with Fauré's short and elegant Victor Hugo choral setting *Les Djinns*. A djinn is a kind of spirit that can be either threatening or benevolent when an opportunity arises.

As the piece rarely gets an airing this was an occasion to redress the imbalance to proved highly successful.

The programme also had an additional Fauré novelty – his *Fantaisie Op 79* for flute and orchestra. Through the suave and sophisticated endeavours of NSO's principal flautist, Catriona Ryan, it proved extremely pleasant. As an encore NSO harpist Andrea Malirsh joined Ms Ryan for another Fauré bon-bon in which the artistes forged a charming bond.

The second half of the concert was devoted to the *Requiem*. The soprano's single contribution is the *Pie Jesu* sung here with finesse by Zoë Moore even if her

tender teenage tones occasionally sank without trace into the accompaniment.

The latest NCH NSO concert coupled Brahms with Dvořák with the former's 2nd Piano Concerto and the latter's *New World* Symphony. Russian pianist Denis Kozhukhin was the vibrant and commanding soloist in the almost symphonic four-movement Brahms.

Under young Spanish conductor Julio Garcia-Vico, the *New World* offered its own pleasures especially the cor anglais' exquisite solos – ever-expressive NSO principal Philip Howarth – in the Symphony's intoxicating slow movement. Dvořák's *molto vivace Scherzo*

skipped merrily along while the Finale gushed with zest and exhilaration.

As part of its International Concert Series last month the NCH presented the Irish debut of the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen. Playing superbly under Estonian conductor Paavo Järvi, the classical programme had Beethoven's First Piano Concerto separating two of Haydn's marvellous *London* Symphonies – Nos 97 and 102.

The Bremen orchestra's performance with soloist Fabian Müller proved totally at one in the Concerto. Like the composer, Herr Müller hails from Bonn. For me, this was among the most satisfying concerts of 2023.

BookReviews

Peter Costello



Michael Healy – the special genius of a stained glass artist

Michael Healy 1873-1941: A Túr Gloine's Stained Glass Pioneer,
by David Caron
(Four Courts Press, €55.00 / £50.00)

Peter Costello

Back in October 1906, Robert Elliot in his pioneering book *Art and Ireland* lamented that so many churches in Ireland seemed to prefer to fill the windows of their churches with stained glass imported ready made from Europe, largely from Munich in Germany, a Catholic kingdom of the German Empire.

This was then true. Since

the post-famine decades there had been a huge burst of Catholic church building all over the country. Irish clergy and their advisors chose the readymade, already admired glass, as an easy option. It was also comparatively cheaper to use German glass than trust, as the Irish clergy saw it, the vagaries of Irish artists and craftsmen.

So much so that St Brendan's, the new Cathedral in Loughrea, influenced by the remarkable administrator of the day, Fr Jeremiah O'Donovan (the diocesan clergy's choice in the diocese for bishop), was a showcase of Irish art of all kinds.

Some of the windows were by Michael Healy from a new firm he called An Túr Gloine ("The Tower of Glass") in the manner of Irish myth. (I described the literary background to all this some years ago in one of my own books about the Irish literary revival).

Recluse

Michael Healy was a genius, but a recluse; a man and artist whose life was mysteriously vague. Now, however, at long last Dr Michael Carron has devoted a large, well researched and beautifully illustrated volume to the man, his career and his mysteries.

Dr David Caron studied at

the National College of Art and Design, later returning there to lecture. He undertook a Masters degree in the United States, and a PhD in Trinity College, Dublin.

He was one of the three original compilers, along with Nicola Gordon Bowe and Michael Wynne, of the first edition of the important *Gazetteer of Irish Stained Glass*, of which a new updated edition was issued a couple of years ago.

“The chapters of the book explore the shadowy life of the man and the course of his artistic development in exemplary detail”

He observes that when Michael Healy died in 1941 only two people of importance wrote about him, the lawyer CP Curran and Thomas MacGreevy, the poet, critic and director of the National Gallery. It was as well they did, though they admitted they had never really been close to the man himself.

The heart of this book are long periods of research in which David Caron tracked down, annotated, recorded and had photographed Healy's windows wherever he could find them.

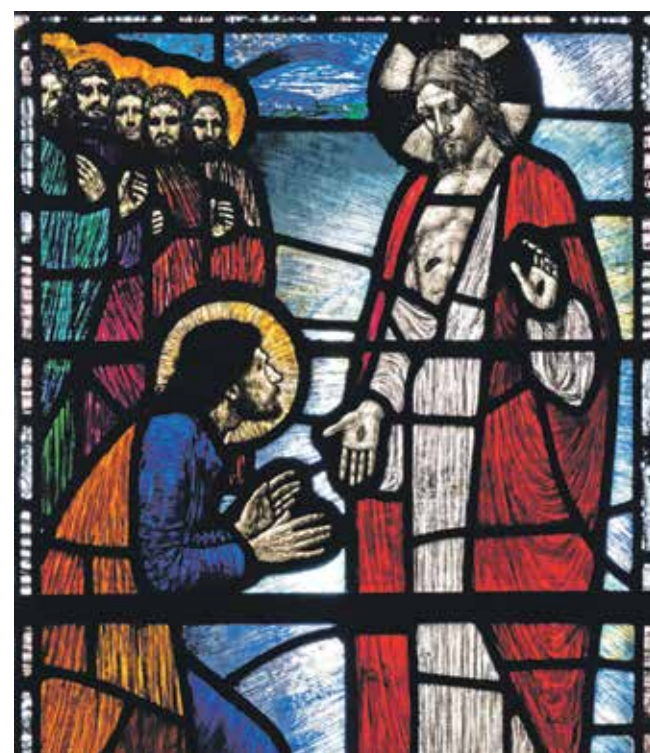
The six-page list of locations alone is revealing of Healy's work. The photography by Joseph Vrtiel is superb. The chapters of the book explore the shadowy life of the man and the course of his artistic development in exemplary detail.

There is no denying at this date the accomplishment of the artist. But what is of interest is to compare him with two other stained glass makers whose works have also been recently surveyed, Harry Clarke and Wilhelmina Geddes.

In Clarke's work there is always a sense of fantasy that at times takes from the religious purpose of the windows, while Geddes's people all seem to have an aspect of strong willed Ulster pride about them.



Detail of The Holy Women at the Tomb (1918), St Ruadhan's C of I, Lorrha, Co. Tipperary.



Detail of Christ appearing to Thomas and the other disciples in Doubling Thomas, and Judith (1923), Most Holy Rosary Catholic church, Bridge a Crinn, Co. Louth.

But Michael Healy's work is not only exceptional, but deeply human too, Jesus, the saints, and the heroes, appear in a very human

aspect. They are real people rather than merely imagined.

What a wonderful way to explore our churches



Detail of St Anne from St Peter and St Anne, with the Lamb of God (1907-8), Sacred Heart

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.

and perhaps come to some understanding also of Ireland past and present. It is also a good reason to buy a copy of this book: for where there are windows by Michael Healy, there will be works by other artists as well.

Wander

Aside from his glass work Healy also loved to wander the streets of Dublin catching in his notebook rapid little sketches of people and street life that have an extraordinary fascination of their own.

I thought it a pity that David Carron could not give more space to Healy's quick sketches and drawings done on the streets of

Dublin, with which the artist was deeply familiar.

“These records of ordinary people, living out their lives, are an important, indeed essential complement to the work of an Túr Gloine”

But very striking also are the translations of this kind of record into stained glass, as in the Emma Cons Memorial at the London Old Vic.

Of interest too are the oil on canvas Dublin landscapes, which I do not recollect ever seeing before, from a pri-

vate collection. These open another aspect of Healy's talent. They are calm and untroubled in a way the windows often are not.

Appreciation

I have long thought they would provide the ideal illustrations to a book about the real people of Joyce's Dublin. But in reading this book and writing this appreciation a new idea came to me. These records of ordinary people, living out their lives, are an important, indeed essential complement to the work of an Túr Gloine.

For these people are the people who every Sunday, and in that era, other days of the week as well, crowded into the city church churches. These

are Michael Healy's essential audience, the very people and not the clergy indeed that these windows were really made for.

But this gave rise to another, more sobering thought. That the age of stained glass has come to an end. It is unlikely that many churches requiring them will be built in future.

The few churches built and most of the other public buildings now erected have little place for these kinds of windows. Lancet lights filled with abstract designs, perhaps, but no true windows in the older manner. The stream of books celebrating Irish stained glass artists are records of the past. We will never see their like again.

Colouring in our past

A Nation is Born: Ireland in Colour 1923-1938, edited by Michael B. Barry and John O'Byrne (Gill books, €26.99 / £25.99)

Peter Costello

The title of this book is a complete misnomer. But then that is the sort of thing that happens when a complex subject is popularised for Christmastime consumption.

Ireland in 1923 did not see 'The birth of a nation', but the founding of a state. The old song by Thomas Davis that everyone one once knew from the popular Christian Brothers, which were then in all the schools, was that "Ireland long a province, be a nation once again".

The whole argument for Irish independence was erected around the idea that Ireland was an identifiable nation since Celtic times and at its people were asserting a long suppressed right.

Constitution

That too would have been the claim of the new constitution introduced to the people by Mr De Valera: a constitution now under fire for its old-fashioned ideas about the role of religion and women in the life of the country.

But on the cover of this book De Valera is inspecting the colourful Blue Hussars, a unit later abolished as not in keeping with modern democratic aspiration. They gave a sense of dash and vigour to state public occasions.

Actually the Irish Army dress uniforms were copied not from Britain or the United States, but from Catholic Austria in the days



Waterford family celebrate the Eucharistic Congress in 1932

of the old Austro-Hungarian empire. (In photographs of the Eucharistic Congress in 1932, not included in this book, senior officers can be seen at the Pro-Cathedral wearing them.)

This is not a narrative book, but a picture album which illustrates a wide variety of events. As a mem-

oir of people and happenings from those interwar years it will have a great interest for many readers.

Revisionism

This writer, however, has to maintain his own long held view that colourisation is a species of 'revisionism': it aims to make what was in

reality a grey and shabby past into an era more vividly alive.

But a reviewer has to recognise that his own views having been stated, they must be balanced by a recognition of the stated aims of the talented editors, especially Michael Barry, a writer of great industry with high aims of his own.

The limits of the Kingdom defined in history

Kerry from Maps and Charts, by Noel Kissane (Killiney Press, €30.00 / £24.00)

J. Anthony Gaughan

Maps are nearly as old as mankind itself. They are treasured by historians, as they can provide important information in a variety of ways.

The author of this book was a librarian at the National Library, a well informed and helpful scholar in a way some libraries these days cannot manage having gone over to administrating rather than curating.

In this collection of maps Kissane, now in a productive retirement, begins his survey with Ptolemy's *World Map*. Ptolemy was a celebrated mathematician, astronomer and geographer who resided in Alexandria in Egypt.

With information from sailors, traders, travellers and literary sources he published his *Geography* in the year 150, a detailed compendium of place names, on which a map was created (though many think not by Ptolemy himself).

However, seemingly it did not arrive in Ireland until about 1400, when printed editions featuring it were published on the Continent and widely disseminated.

Kissane reproduces from Ptolemy's map the figures of an island named *Hibernia*, which is placed at the edge of Western Europe, the very edge of a world centred on Jerusalem.

He points out that the geographical features in it for the Kerry area are estuaries or bays that seem to represent the Shannon estuary, Tralee Bay, Dingle Bay and Kenmare Bay.

In addition the tribes Vel-labori, Ivernii and Gangani are assigned to the general region of the present counties of Kerry, Cork and Limerick.

As part of its conquest and to facilitate the administration of the country, the English produced maps of Ireland. The author reproduces a number of those from the Tudor Period (1485-1603).

They provide 45 names for places in the Kerry area. They also name and locate the principal families: O'Connor Kerry, Fitzmaurice, Knight of Kerry and O'Sullivan Mór. And they delineate the rivers Feale, Lee, Maine, Inny, Caragh, Laune and Roughty.

From the late 17th Century onwards enterprising landlords had their estates surveyed and mapped. Kissane reproduces the estate maps for the Fitzmaurice estates, Trinity College estate, Denny estate and other individual estates.

This is of interest in the first place, as it indicates who were the proprietors of the lands of Co Kerry. Some of the holdings were enormous: the Fitzmaurice estates amounted to 70,000 acres, that of Trinity College to 50,000 acres. Both of those acreages were far less than that of the Lansdowne estate.

The estate maps provided a wealth of information. They showed the townland boundaries, the border lines between arable land, pasture, bog, woodland and the acreages of each.

The Fitzmaurice estate map includes the plans of Listowel, Ardfert and Lixnaw. The plan of Listowel, with the fully developed Square in the centre of it, is dated 1762.

Arguably the most interesting maps are those of roads. One of the first aspects of Irish infrastructure to which the United Kingdom directed its attention was the network of main roads used for the carriage of mail.

Legislation was enacted in 1805-6 to enable the post office to undertake a national survey to determine the most practicable routes for the provision of postal and passenger services. To this end the Kerry roads were surveyed by William Larkin in 1810-16.

In this study it is fitting that the remarkable civil engineer Richard Griffith (1784-1878) is given a chapter to himself. Best known for his *Griffith's Valuation* (1830-64) he was always engaged on a number of projects. In 1821 he compiled two estate maps for Trinity College.

The county map shows rivers, lakes, bogs and roads. The Iraghtic Connor map shows churches, ruins, demenses, towns and villages. But Griffith is best remembered for laying out 243 miles of road and erecting 18 bridges – much of this work in Kerry. His finest bridge, still to be seen, is one of five arches and spans the river Feale at Listowel.

Historians and especially local historians will warmly welcome this excellent monograph, delighting in its insights, the product of a lifetime of dedicated scholarship.

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Leisure time

Crossword

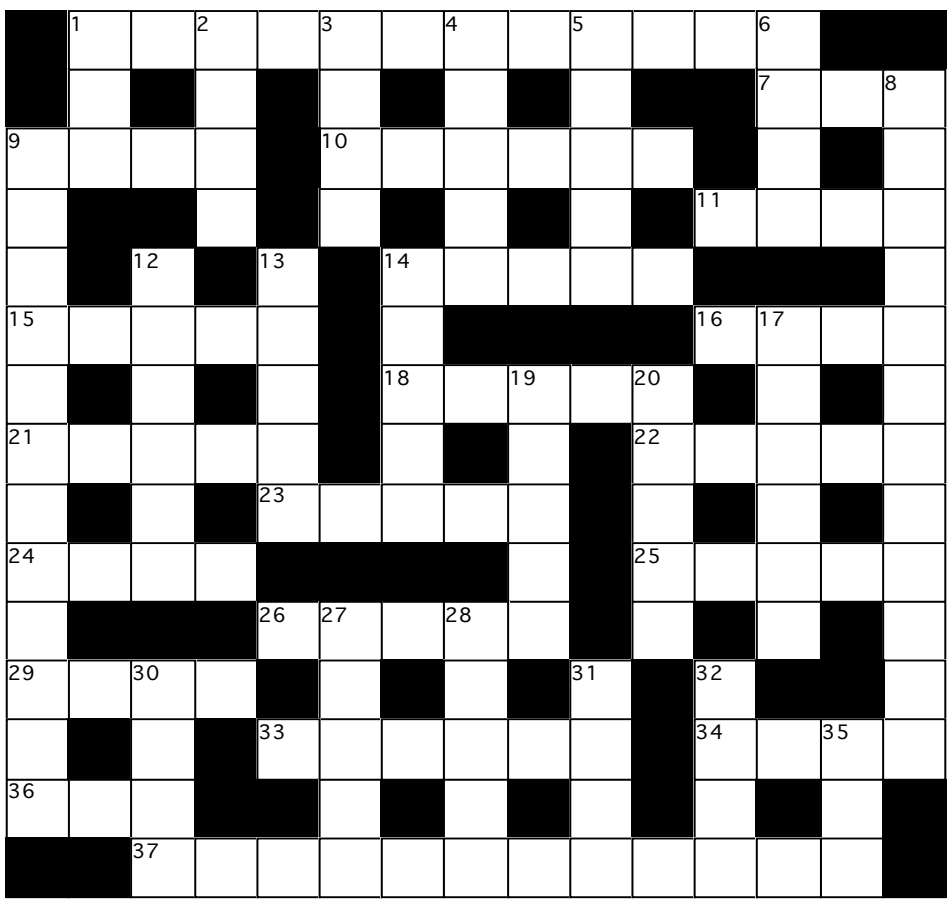
Gordius 646

Across

1 Item of gymnastic equipment (8,4)
7 Jump on one foot (3)
9 Introduce a baby to a solid food diet (4)
10 Andy, influential twentieth-century pop artist (6)
11 Train like a boxer (4)
14 Use it to beat eggs (5)
15 Artist's stand (5)
16 Falsehoods (4)
18 Perfectly clear (5)
21 Funeral song (5)
22 Ancient Greek famous for his Fables (5)
23 One of the five senses, or refinement (5)
24 Immense, huge (4)
25 Desert plants (5)
26 Pursue (5)
29 Back of the neck (4)
33 The world's largest desert (6)
34 Mislead (4)
36 Fish eggs (3)
37 Nursery rhyme shepherdess (6,2,4)

Down

1 Edgar Allan, author of 'The Raven', etc (3)
2 Jewellery for the finger (4)
3 Grassy garden feature (4)
4 Soil (5)
5 Tomes (5)
6 Marine vessel (4)
8 Local clergyman (6,6)
9 Dowser (5,7)
12 Egyptian god of the deceased (6)
13 One's full complement of ships (5)
14 Principality in the west of Britain (5)
17 Creepy-crawly (6)
19 Cheshire town important in the British railway system (5)
20 Surname shared by Elizabeth Bennet's beau Fitzwilliam and Irish rugby legend Gordon (5)
27 The 'ticker' (5)
28 Look fixedly (5)
30 Remove the skin of a fruit or vegetable (4)
31 Light around a saint's head (4)
32 Azure (4)
35 Take a tiny drink (3)



SOLUTIONS, JANUARY 11
GORDIUS No. 645

Across - 1 Clean slate 6 Aces 10 Never 11 Cathedral 12 Asphalt 15 Ended 17 Rose 18 Earn 19 Cover 21 Selfish 23 Input 24 Flea 25 Rage 26 Evade 28 Dormant 33 Artichoke 34 Teeth 35 Etch 36 Dawn chorus

Down - 1 Cone 2 Eavesdrop 3 North 4 Local 5 Tote 7 Cured 8 Salad cream 9 Beseech 13 Apse 14 Trifled 16 Deliberate 20 Volunteer 21 Stretch 22 Soar 27 Aztec 29 Ocean 30 Match 31 Goya 32 Thus

Sudoku Corner

516

Easy

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

Hard

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

Last week's Easy 515

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

Last week's Hard 515

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

Notebook

Fr Martin Delaney



A frustrating frontier for faithful priests

I always find these first weeks of January a somewhat reflective time. A new year has begun, and I find myself reevaluating where I'm at as a person and as a priest and what might I try to do differently in the coming months. I have also spent a few days on retreat with my brother priests from our diocese and that too brings me to a place of reflection on what I am about.

Responsible

Like many of my colleagues around the country I'm now responsible for two parishes. Thankfully, at almost 62 years old I'm reasonably healthy with a lot of energy and enthusiasm for the priesthood which began 38 years ago. However, I'm conscious that most of my classmates and contemporaries in the secular world are either retired or planning their retirement in the next few years. How much longer will I be able to work at the pace and level that my present assignment demands? As it stands, the most likely change that will come in my workload will be the addition of a third parish at some unknown point in the future.

As I reflect on my life now, I



notice a significant change in the kind of ministry I'm involved in. At a recent senior citizens party in our parish, I sat beside a lady who proceeded to criticise me quite openly in front of the others at the table about how I never visit her or her neighbours in their homes as priests always did in the past. Perhaps unwisely, I found myself becoming defensive along the lines that I'm now the only priest where there were six 30 years ago. My dinner companion was having none of it so in the end I just gave up. I could of course dismiss her outburst as being very

unreasonable, but the exchange left me a little uncomfortable. I realised, not for the first time, that while our diminishing numbers as priests has a significant impact on our workload, I'm not sure that the expectations of our parishioners have changed accordingly.

Moments

I now find myself ministering for the most part through 'events' and 'moments'. Much of my work is about responding to those events or moments in people's lives be that at the time of a death in the family, a birth which

in turn may lead to a Baptism, a wedding, First Communion, or some other rite of passage. Often, I may be meeting the people involved in these events for the first time. How is that different to ministry in the past? In my earlier years as a priest there was more time to cultivate relationships with parishioners through house visitation or an involvement in groups and organisations. Regular visits to the local school were also a useful way to come to know families and thus build up a ministry through relationships. I'm finding it more and more difficult to find the time and space to build those

valuable relationships and yes, it is frustrating.

I'm not sure where my New Year musings will take me in the coming months, but I hope and pray that I will continue to have the faith, hope, health and enthusiasm to remain open to whatever God has in store for 2024.

Breaking the ice

A couple drove down a country road for several miles, not saying a word. An earlier discussion had led to an argument and neither of them wanted to concede their position. As they passed a barnyard of mules, goats, and pigs, the husband asked sarcastically, "Relatives of yours?" "Yep," the wife replied, "in-laws".

Seeking is seeing

Seeking God is as good as seeing God. Who, but a saint, could know so clearly that the journey is the reality, the steps are sight, the effort is reward, the seeing is the searching, the dream is the reality? Seeking God is seeing God. (Julian of Norwich)



A bishop in southern India looks to The Little Way Association for vital aid for many suffering from flooding

Bishop Antony 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.

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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.



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- St Therese

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