

The Irish Catholic

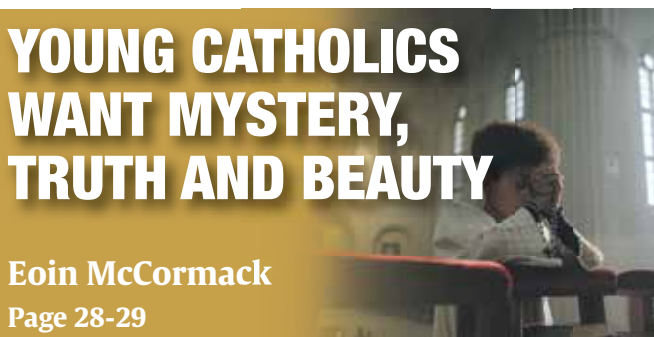
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Thursday, May 16, 2024

€3.00 (Stg £2.70)

The-Irish-Catholic-Newspaper

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Charity staff face threats and abuse

Chai Brady and
Theo McDonald

Charity workers providing support to Ireland's migrants and asylum seekers are facing threats of having their workplaces burnt out as well as racist abuse online.

Chairman of Tiglin, a charity that operates under a Christian ethos, Aubrey McCarthy has said the homeless charity have received online threats in recent weeks for helping incoming migrants.

"There have been nasty threats made to the lighthouse and you see them online," he told *The Irish Catholic*.

"So people are saying they're going to burn down the Lighthouse and we shouldn't be feeding black people."

Project worker for Merchants Quay Ireland, Richard Williams, said that the homelessness charity has seen a "massive increase" in the numbers of people seeking asylum availing of their food services, and that there has been an increase in criticism and abuse from Irish service users.

Mr Williams said: "I suppose within the service you would have a small cohort of people that would be Irish and would be asking 'why are you putting them first? or 'why are you looking after them and not looking after us?' and that they should be getting more".

However, he added the situa-

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Saints and angels descend on Knock



Syro Malabar pilgrimage for Vanakkamasam to Knock Shrine on May 11, 2024. Photo: Sinead Mallee

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GAA priests weigh in after pay-per-view row

Chai Brady

Mixed feelings reign among GAA devotee priests after the hullabaloo following Taoiseach Simon Harris's criticism that the Munster Senior Hurling Championship fixture between Cork and Limerick was shown on the GAA's pay-per-view service.

Fr Harry Bohan AP, former manager of the Clare senior hurling team – a team he played on for eight years – said the fact the match was only available on the pay-per-view GAAGO was "awful".

He said that many older people would not know how to watch the match on GAAGO, saying: "It was obvious that match on Saturday night was going to be a cracker. If they seriously want to promote the game of hurling, that match would have been a real shockwave, showing the game at its best."

He added that RTÉ and the GAA "are letting down a lot of people".

Fr Tom Fogarty, a former Tipperary inter-county player who managed the Tipperary seniors in

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CATHOLIC SCHOOLS NEED VISION

Breda O'Brien

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IVF INDUSTRY AND FALSE DREAMS

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DECADENCE AND DARK PATHS

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Charity staff face threats and abuse

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tion was similar 15 years ago during Ireland's economic crash but the focus was on Polish and Eastern European migrants, "now it's changed to the IPAS (International Protection Accommodation Service) clients".

Before Christmas MQI was serving 80 meals on a Sunday, this has increased to 120. Mr Williams said: "That fiz-zles throughout all aspects of the service, throughout the whole multidisciplinary team, whether that be the GP, the nurse, shower facilities, food, clothing, all that – there's been a massive increase.

"A lot of them would be from different backgrounds, different religions, so if they're Muslim for example they want halal food, they won't eat pork, so all those kind of things present an issue as well. The best we can offer them is the vegetarian option, but a lot of them will eat most meats apart from pork regardless of whether it's halal or not but they do request it but to be able to cater for eve-

rybody's needs is just impossible."

He added that he believes the Government is giving people who are seeking international protection "false hope in that they are under the illusion they are going to find some form of accommodation and they're handed a sleeping bag and a tent and a list of services where they can find food".

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic* last week a man outside the IPAS centre in Dublin said he came to Ireland from Uganda through Doha, after reading in *The Irish Times* that tents were being taken down and accommodation offered. However he was not given accommodation and remains homeless. The man has been sleeping rough on Moore Street, saying he had recently been assaulted and it is very unsafe. "These guys who take weed, they were fighting at night and scraped my leg," he said before adding that he received medical care at the Mater Hospital and was hoping to get accommodation as a result of the assault.

GAA priests weigh in after pay-per-view row

» Continued from Page 1

the mid-1990s and the Offaly senior side from 2001-2002, acknowledged the sheer number of fixtures in a short space of time making it "very difficult to fit them all".

However, Fr Fogarty said: "Having said that, it is very difficult to explain how so many big games have been excluded on national television – there is something wrong there."

"Too many games are being played in a short space of time. I think the All Ireland should take place around the third week of August, and that would give an extra three weeks to a month, widening the window and RTE will be able to cover more games," he suggested,

adding, "I know the GAAGO is not everybody's cup of tea but the reality is at least it's better than nothing. If the games are not on RTE live, people have some option to look at them."

Msgr Lorcan O'Brien, who is based in the Pro Cathedral in Dublin, defended the GAAGO service, saying he used it to watch the match on Saturday. He said: There's always an outcry when a very significant game isn't available on free to air...The fundamental issue is that it is not possible to show all games on platforms like RTE, because the platforms do not make them available."

He added: "I have friends abroad who are Irish and GAAGO is a lifesaver for them."

Church history expert says 10 dioceses enough for Ireland

Chai Brady

An expert on Church history has said the need for a reorganisation of diocesan structures has "reached a critical point".

Prof. John McCafferty, based in the School of History in UCD, told *The Irish Catholic* that Ireland would be better suited to 10 dioceses, "possibly less".

The much-needed change, he opines, will not be hugely impactful – or hurtful – to

laity who are more connected to their parish than diocese.

Prof. McCafferty said: "If Rome came out in the morning and said, 'Right, we're drawing up a map of Ireland and we're going to divide it into 10 roughly equal size units and we're going to use the old historic titles', I can't imagine very many laity being up in arms about it – but there would obviously be administrative burdens."

It is already clear this process is underway, with

the effective merger of the Archdiocese of Tuam and Killala under Archbishop Francis Duffy and that of Elphin and Achonry, led by Bishop Kevin Doran. These dioceses are now under the administration of a single bishop following the retirement of Bishop John Fleming (76) of Killala and the move of Bishop Paul Dempsey of Achonry to the Archdiocese of Dublin as an auxiliary, accompanying Fr Donal Roche.

Pragmatic changes were

made in the past, like keeping the Diocese of Meath but having the cathedral in Mullingar. It is the same with the Diocese of Dromore, with the cathedral being in Newry.

Prof. McCafferty said: "It is the same with Elphin which is in Sligo... a big town. These pragmatic decisions have been made before and, in a way, amalgamating dioceses is just taking that to the next level. The Church has always done this."

Confirming the Spirit in Carlow



The 24 young people who made their Confirmation with Fr Rory Nolan PP, in the Church of the Sacred Heart in Borris, Co. Carlow on May 11. Photo: John Dowling.

Archbishop Martin echoes Pope's AI warnings

Renata Steffens

In a statement, Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, chair of the Council for Communications of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference commented on the Pope's message for World Communications Day.

Nowadays, online content is created by both, humans and machines, mentioned the Archbishop. He also pointed out the Pope's words on how AI in the wrong hands could result in "disturbing scenarios".

The 58th World Day of Communications happened

last Sunday, May 12. This year's theme was 'Artificial Intelligence and the Wisdom of the Heart: Towards a Fully Human Communication'.

Archbishop Martin mentioned how the Pope challenges the people to consider how technology affects humanity and whether it makes persons "humanly richer, or poorer". Which can be an invitations to reflect on how artificial intelligence (AI) might be utilised to promote the mission of the Gospel.

The use of AI in Europe

is regulated by the AI Act. The Act says that AI systems are analysed and classified according to the risk they pose to society.

In his message, the Pope mentioned the possible advantages and disadvantages of AI. It could represent "important innovations in agriculture, education and culture, an improved level of life for entire nations". He also pointed the danger of AI used in weapons and wars, and elements like 'deepfakes' on social media.

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

ISSN 1393 - 6832 - Published by The Irish Catholic, Unit 3b, Bracken Business Park, Bracken Road, Sandford, Dublin 18, D18 K277.

Printed by Webprint, Cork.

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‘Sad day’ for Veritas but talks continue with investors

Staff Reporter

In a letter to Veritas employees, Patrick Cassidy, CEO of Veritas Communications, said that “Despite our best efforts, it is with regret that we announce the closure of the Limerick and Tallaght branches”. He continued, “The Limerick store will officially close on May 15, 2024. The Tallaght branch will officially close on May 17, 2024. We would like to thank each

and every one of the staff in Limerick and Tallaght for their contribution to the company and send them our best wishes for the future. We appreciate that this will be a very sad day for all concerned and our thoughts are with you all”. The letter closes by thanking each staff member individually.

The Irish Catholic has been told that some staff members from the closing branches have been offered full-time positions in the com-

pany’s flagship store in Abbey Street. Others who don’t qualify for redundancy have been told they will receive vouchers as a gesture to thank them for their work.

Potential buyers are still believed to be interested in different parts of Veritas Communications but the company is remaining tight lipped on the negotiations.

It is believed that employees in the remaining six stores can apply for volun-

tary redundancy, but management will only consider the ones from staff members where their role is not deemed essential in the wind-down process. Applications for consideration of voluntary redundancy are to be put forward before the end of May. Workers deemed essential to the wind-down will continue in their role while the company continues negotiations with third party investors.



Kaya Jones speaking at an event in West Palm Beach, Florida. Picture: Gage Skidmore.

Former Pussycat Doll singer to speak at Dublin Rally for Life

Staff reporter

Kaya Jones, who was a singer with the globally famous band, Pussycat Dolls, has described in stark terms how she believes the music industry controls and abuses young women, including pressuring them into having an abortion.

Ms Jones will be speaking at this year’s Rally for Life in Dublin this June.

Last January, Ms Jones opened up on Christine Yeargin’s podcast “Speak Out” where she discussed her experience with having three abortions, describing them as

“painful beyond measure” and as “something that you will live with for the rest of your life”.

Ms Jones subsequently went on a huge spiritual, emotional and physical journey of healing. She regrets her abortions and says that once you have your first abortion you become desensitised to the choice that you are making not knowing the gravity of the “choice”. She describes abortion in today’s culture as a “form of contraception” and says that she will always “regret the three children that I will never have”.

This year’s Rally for Life, will take place in Dublin on Saturday July 6 in Parnell Square.

Alleged “religious discrimination” as Newry Cathedral battles against council building plans

Brandon Scott

A priest has accused a local authority of “religious discrimination” over parishioners being excluded from a meeting on a city centre re-development. The dispute concerns Newry Council and its push to build a civic space on the site of Newry Cathedral carpark, a move that has been slammed by Parish Administrator Canon Francis Brown as one that shows “complete disregard for Newry Cathedral Parish and the thousands of parishioners” attached to the cathedral.

The protest against the move, which has seen over 2,500 objections cast against

the proposed plans, is escalating and Canon Brown feels that this is due to the council’s long history of sidelining the concerns of parishioners and not engaging with them about key decisions.

“A number of parishioners feel this is an act of discrimination against our community on the basis of religious beliefs and they intend to take legal advice on the matter,” he said. “Sadly, this is just the latest incident in a long line of disrespectful behaviour by the council towards our historic cathedral and parish community.”

“From failing to consult us initially about their plan to build offices directly behind the cathedral, to misrepresenting our views to coun-

cillors, to refusing to release details of their own review into the matter, this council has operated in bad faith.”

Canon Brown called for more action to be taken by community leaders, actions that fully highlight the unfairness that those associated with the parish have been forced to face over the last number of years.

“The people of Newry Cathedral Parish demand better from their elected leaders,” he said. “We urge the community to join us in demanding an end to this marginalisation of our historic parish. We cannot allow a culture of religious discrimination to take root in our city.”

A NEW BIBLICAL HEBREW & ARAMAIC-CHINESE DICTIONARY 一部新的圣经希伯来文&阿拉美文——中文辞典

We are now working on an updated Dictionary for today which will set an objective standard in producing Bible language dictionaries and benefit many more people of God and those who seek to know something about the Christian God.

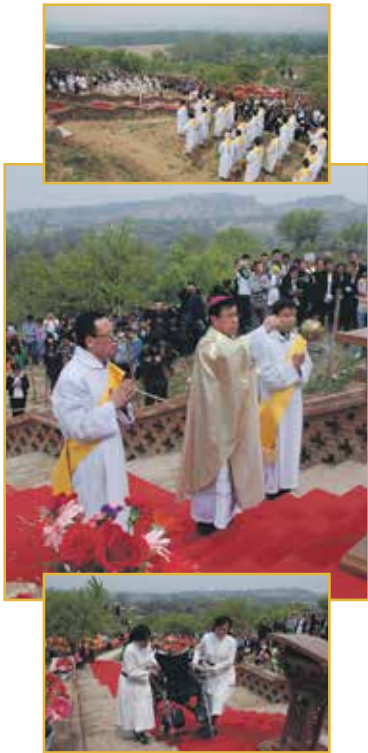
Our hope is to publish with a mainstream publisher and make the dictionary available not only in Church shops but also in public book stores. Therefore it will be available to the many Chinese who seek meaning in modern day China.

The Catholic and Protestant Churches in China have published Bible Dictionaries, but they are outdated, published 50 years ago or based on English Biblical Dictionaries published about 100 years ago.

Rather than a single editor, we have an editorial team, reviewers and external consultants. Our team are translating directly from Hebrew and Aramaic to modern Chinese. The scope of intended readers will be wider than in the past as it will include Bible translators, Bible teachers and non-believer academic scholars.

This is one of the two last projects I am working on as I wind down my mission in China. We are short about 50,000 euro to complete this Dictionary.

Fr Eamonn O'Brien ssc



Opening of an Active contemplative monastery 2014

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Bambie Thug is a sign 'Irish culture is in decline'

Chai Brady and
Brandon Scott

Ireland's Eurovision Song Contest 2024 contestant Bambie Thug is "wide open to dark forces" and it is "unfortunate" she was chosen as a representative, an expert in exorcism and deliverance ministry has warned.

Bambie Thug came sixth in the competition with her song 'Doomsday Blue', one of the best results for Ireland in many years. The musician describes herself as 'queer' and a witch, saying in the past she's been involved in occult rituals and practices and

puts spells in her songs.

Dublin-based priest and psychologist Fr Pat Collins CM told *The Irish Catholic*: "People who are involved in the occult or in witchcraft they are certainly wide open to dark forces, and she certainly does not come across as a happy person."

"I think it is most unfortunate that she is representing Ireland, it is another sign to me that our culture has declined."

He said that as Christian culture is "breaking down" there is a return to a neo-pagan culture. Regarding Bambie Thug's act, Fr Collins described it as "sinister".

"I know what scripture says, that the

evil one is the prince of this world, St Paul refers to him as the god of this world, and it wouldn't surprise me that she will do very well because her partner in the realm of darkness will want her to do well."

Fr Collins added: "One of the things I watch out for is, are people any happier? Is mental health improving as a result of all this liberalisation? My impression is that the more our standards are breaking down, the more the waters of ill-health are rising. I'm amazed that people don't see it."

Speaking to Newstalk's Henry McKean after the competition the Macroom artist reflected on the connection between her

position and the connotations with the number the Devil has been historically associated with. She extolled the characteristics of Satanism, by describing it being about "freedom" and "solidarity".

"There were the northern lights there over Ireland when we were away in Sweden," she said. "I was like, 'oh, what's this witchy sensation'. And then we finished sixth which is the Devil's number and you know what... I'm not a Satanist but Satanism is for freedom and for willpower, solidarity and respect across the board."

'Surrogacy should not be normalised' says scholar

Renata Steffens

In new essay for the Anscombe Bioethics Centre, Dr Pia Matthews, senior lecturer at St Mary's University, Twickenham, London says that surrogacy is "always an injustice." In Ireland, surrogacy is not legal nor illegal, as there is no legislation for it.

In a press release, an Anscombe Bioethics Centre's spokesperson says that "Surrogacy by its very nature makes the child an object of a commissioning agreement," while Dr Matthews wrote in her essay that "the business of surrogacy is built on the com-

modification of women's bodies."

A section on surrogacy was added to the Law Commission of England and Wales and Scottish Law Commission in March 2023, intending to clarify the law, but Dr Matthews defends that the report would normalise surrogacy.

On the possibility of surrogacy becoming recognised as "just another reproductive technique," Dr Matthews says that it could result in many celebrities "building their families through surrogacy thus giving the impression that surrogacy is something to emulate."

In the *Declaration Dignitas Infinita on Human*

Dignity Pope Francis says that the Church stands against the practice of Surrogacy, and argues that the child would become an object in that way of conception.

Dignitas Infinita also mentions the violation of women's dignity during surrogacy. "In this practice, the woman is detached from the child growing in her and becomes a mere means subservient to the arbitrary gain or desire of others," the document reads.

The document also mentions the Pope's "hope for an effort by the international community to prohibit this practice universally."

NEWS IN BRIEF

Belfast Church 'regrets distress caused' by film

A Belfast Catholic Church has said it "regrets the distress caused" by the screening of *Young Frankenstein* for a City Centre festival following accusations of "sacrilege".

St Patrick's Church on Donegall Street hosted an event as part of the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival on, May 7, where it put on a screening of the Mel Brooks classic film starring Gene Wilder.

The church has a long history of hosting community events with music concerts, art exhibitions and film screenings being held there in the past.

However, following the showing of *Young Frankenstein* the church received some backlash online with some people accusing it of "sacrilege" and that a church should not be used for such an event.

Irish priest appointed Nuncio to South Sudan

Pope Francis has appointed Monsignor Séamus Horgan, a priest of the diocese of Killaloe, as the Apostolic Nuncio to South Sudan. The news of this episcopal appointment happened on May 14 at 11.00am Ireland time.

Welcoming this appointment, Bishop Fintan Monahan, Bishop of Killaloe, said, "I warmly congratulate Monsignor Séamus Horgan on his appointment by Pope Francis to be Nuncio to South Sudan, based in the city of Juba."

A native of Ennis and past pupil of St Flannan's College, Monsignor Séamus was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Michael Harty thirty years ago, in 1994, in the Cathedral of Sts Peter and Paul, Ennis, Co. Clare.

Two parishes walking side by side in Tyrone



A picture of the attendees at the walk. Photo: Diocese of Derry.

Renata Milan

In Barons Court Estate, Newtown Stewart Parish (Derry Diocese) embarked on a fund-raising walk on May 12 with the purpose of restoring historic buildings

(churches included), as part of its 'heritage programme'.

The Catholic parish and the Church of Ireland parish, sharing St Eugene as their patron, undertook this joint venture. The participating clergy were Fr Roland Colhoun and Rev Ivan Dins-

more.

Robert Scott, retired land steward of Barons Court, gave an exposition of the history of the estate, which was imparted over two hours and spanning four miles of delightful scenery. "Even the onset of rain

and the rumbles of thunder in the final quarter-hour did not dampen the spirits of almost sixty participants", who visited areas such as Derrywoon Castle (*Doire Eoghain*, 'oak-wood of Eugene'), built on the early 1600s.

The Two-Parishes Walk raised £1025 (€1192) The proceeds were divided equally between the two parishes, St Eugene's Church of Ireland on Main Street and St Eugene's Catholic Church at Glenock.

Decadence or decline, dark paths can lead to new Pentecosts

When I was a teenager – maybe about 16 – a friend and I decided to follow a fad of “decadence”. We weren’t all that sure what “decadence” was, but we knew it had little to do with normal life in our then cosy village of Sandymount in Dublin.

But teenagers soon find out about fads, and it appeared that decadence involved eccentric dressing, following the ideas of the 1890s, and especially reading the handbook of decadence, J-K Huysmans’s *A Rebours*, translated into English as “Against Nature”.

Diligently, I worked my way through this classic of decadence, which, if I remember, advocated turning everything natural upside down. For example, live by night, sleep by day and reject bourgeois norms. The lifestyle to aim at would today be called, I think, “Gothic”.

Another icon of decadence that was the artist Aubrey Beardsley, who had illustrated the infamous “Yellow Book”, which republished illicit



Mary Kenny

French writing – decadent, of course. His singular line drawings were considered hugely decadent, erotic, and on the borderline of pornography.

Obviously, Oscar Wilde was a leading model for decadence. We pored over “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, or listened to Michéal MacLiammoir reciting the story of the man whose sins were so dreadful his portrait, bearing them, became gruesome.

Eurovision

And now, when I observed the antics of the self-styled Bambie Thug and her “satanic” witchcraft carry-on at Eurovision, I wondered: is this just a bit like my teenage fad for “decadence”? Basically, a perversely daft exhibition? Pretending to a lifestyle to draw attention to herself? Is it just show business – where startle and wild innovation are part of the *schtick*; or is Bambie Thug genuinely a symbol of

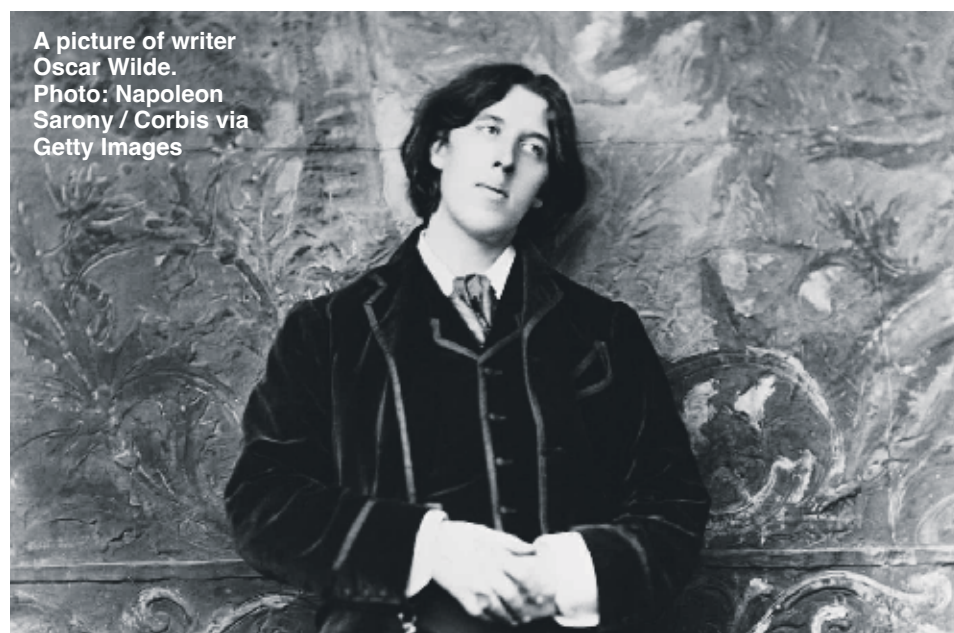
the decadence and decline of our culture?

I suppose one of the differences is that Bambie Thug’s dislikeable witch incarnation is that it is approved of by the establishment – highly praised by politicians like Simon Harris and Michéal Martin – whereas the original cult of decadence was against the grain of the mainstream.

Yet, at least one serious commentator has already suggested that Bambie Thug’s music and lyrics contain spiritual references. Colette Colfer, a lecturer in world religions, has claimed that Bambie Thug’s “performance and song (and video) is fascinating from a religious perspective”: Ms Colfer writes in this current issue of *The Irish Catholic*.

Interestingly, the original purveyors of “decadence” all ended up Catholic converts: Huysmans, Beardsley and Oscar Wilde. Dark paths can lead to unexpected awakenings!

A picture of writer Oscar Wilde.
Photo: Napoleon Sarony / Corbis via Getty Images



“I suppose one of the differences is that Bambie Thug’s dislikeable witch incarnation is that it is approved of by the establishment”

Robert Kennedy Jnr has shocked quite a few people – even some pro-choice advocates – by insisting on the right to abortion up to birth. Yes, abortion should be available even if the pregnancy is “full term”, he told a TV interviewer last week. Following pressure from political and social campaigners – including members of the Kennedy clan – he had to retract that brutal statement, and phrase his views more ambiguously.

His devout grandmother, Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, whose family came from Bruff in Co Limerick, would have been appalled at what he’s been saying on this life issue.

He’s an odd character, this independent candidate for the U.S. Presidency. He’s been obsessed with environmental issues for decades. He has fomented

conspiracy theories about the “evils” of vaccination which most medics consider highly irresponsible.

He has had a troubled life, having witnessed the assassination of his father, Bobby Kennedy, when he was 14, and then expelled from schools for drug offences. His second wife took her own life in a distressing suicide.

Yet he says he’s a believing Catholic and has even written a biography of St Francis of Assisi, whom he venerates as the saint of nature and the environment.

Recently, he disclosed that a parasite had infected his brain in 2016. Perhaps the charitable interpretation was that the infection unbalanced his judgement. But he may yet be a player in the coming Presidential election by taking votes from Joe Biden – or even Donald Trump.

This weekend is Pentecost Sunday, and in quite a few European countries Pentecost it’s a public holiday (observed on the Monday.) These include Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece and Iceland.

I have heard it suggested that Protestant cultures have tended to mark Pentecost, or Whit Sunday, more emphatically than Catholic ones. Certainly, in Ireland, Whit Sunday has receded in consciousness – replaced by a generic “Bank Holiday”. But that’s true in Britain too, where

“Whitsun” was once widely observed as a popular Christian feast. The poet Philip Larkin, though no Christian believer, wrote a book of poetry on the theme of The Whitsun Weddings, since Whitsun featured so strongly in English popular culture as a time for weddings.

I always like the narrative in the Pentecost story. How bewildered the disciples and early Christians must have been in those first days of Christianity. And then the Holy Spirit descended and they became a coherent community.



Annual Novena in Honour of St. Anthony

4th - 13th June

12 Noon & 7pm

National Shrine to St. Anthony
Franciscan Friary
Adam & Eves,
Merchants Quay

Preacher: Fr. John Walsh OP

4th June, 7pm

Celebrant: Archbishop Dermot Farrell

Feast of St. Anthony, 13th June, 7pm

Celebrant: Archbishop Luis Mariano Montemayor

Apostolic Nuncio to Ireland

Blessing of children at 4pm

Blessing of Lillies at both Masses

All are Welcome



Colour and celebration in Knock as Syro Malabar gather for annual pilgrimage



Brandon Scott

Over 1,000 of Ireland's Syro Malabar community gathered in Knock for their annual pilgrimage. The event, which included a Mass that was presided over by Major Archbishop Raphael Thattil, was a fusion of colour and vibrancy as the largest gathering of the Syro Malabar community in Ireland celebrated their Faith in glorious sunshine.

Fr Roy George Vattakkattu is in charge of Blanchardstown, Swords, Beaumont and Navan Mass centres and was in attendance on the day. He described the event as "wonderful" and remarked that it was the first time that this number of Syro Malabar have been able to gather in Ireland.

"The event was wonderful," he said. "It was the first time this number of the Syro Malabar community gathered together in the history of the Syro Malabar Church in Ireland."

"The Church was completely full and there were so many people from different parts of Ireland and from all of the different Mass centres – we have 37 here in Ireland and all laity and clergy were present along with the 30 priests we have here in Ireland."

Speaking about the resolute Faith of the Syro Malabar community in Ireland, Fr Vattakkattu said that the Syro Malabar Faith is one that is active and connected.

"The people in the Syro Malabar Church like to live their Faith and they wanted to meet their major archbishop or just hear him and know more. The Faith that they have in their heart burns so people were just happy to come and meet together."

Fr Vattakkattu offered thanks to those who ensured the event was achievable, an event that brought such joy to one of Ireland's burgeoning communities.

"The pilgrimage happens once a year so the community was able to have their conversations and pray together," he said. "It was a great atmosphere."

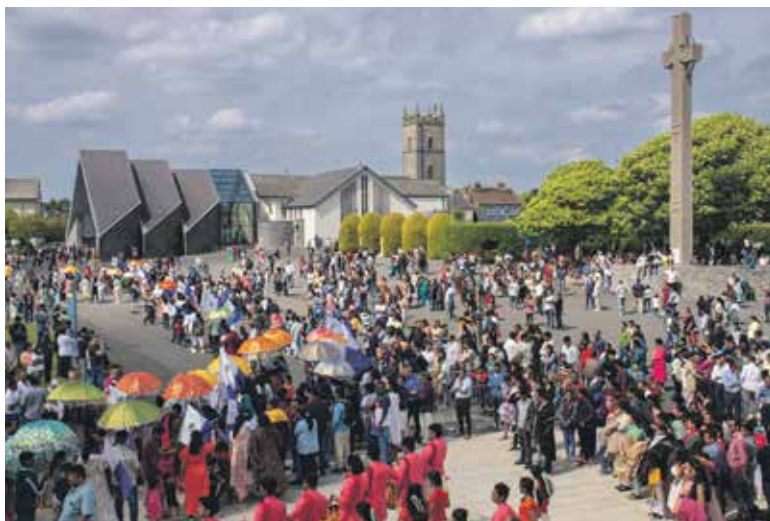
"We're very grateful for the director and bishop who gave us the facilities there. It was a very good and blessed time."



The Matthew Jose family at the Syro Malabar pilgrimage to Knock Shrine, May 11, 2024. Photos: Sinead Mallee



Syro Malabar procession at Knock Shrine



Shrine Grounds from Basilica roof – Syro Malabar pilgrimage.





Syro Malabar Pilgrimage to Knock Shrine May 11, 2024



Major Archbishop Raphael Thattil, Syro Malabar pilgrimage to Knock Shrine May 11, 2024.



Syro Malabar pilgrimage - First Communion children



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We're all heretics in the eyes of the new religious cult in town



Colette Colfer

People have been so distracted by the witchy elements of Ireland's 2024 entry to the Eurovision Song Contest that they have often overlooked the fact that the key religious symbolism in Bambie Thug's on-stage and off-stage performance relates to the new belief system of gender identity. Her act for *Doomsday Blue* blends gender identity belief with aspects of Paganism, Witchcraft and Satanism, as well as some pointers to Christianity.

Sacred Space

The centrality of gender identity is most obviously exemplified by the trans-flag bikini worn by Bambie Thug on the Eurovision stage. The performance starts with her wearing a black tulle dress covered in feathers but this costume comes-off mid-performance to reveal the baby-blue and baby-pink-coloured bikini underneath. This occurs when Bambie Thug is in the centre of a pentagram within a circle of candles that is a type of altar or sacred space.

Bambie Thug identifies as non-binary. Her Instagram account lists her preferred pronouns as 'they/them/fae.' Within the gender identity belief system it is common for people to declare pronouns in order to signal possession of an internal sense of a gendered self and to communicate the wish that others acknowledge this by using the indicated pronouns.

'Fae' pronoun

Many commentators strove to use Bambie Thug's preferred pronouns 'they/them' but no-one, that I'm aware of, attempted to use the 'fae' pronoun which would have involved saying things like: 'Fae said that fae was confident about faer performance. The song was faers. Faer nails were very long.'

The use of flags symbolising gender identity belief was evident throughout the Eurovision. During the semi-final, Bambie Thug held up a trans flag in the performers' area and her co-performer held up the Progress Pride flag. Nemo, the Swiss winner of the contest held a non-binary



Bambie Thug. Photo: Pedro J Pacheco, Wikimedia Commons

“The religious similarities include that there is a calendar of sacred dates... People who express disbelief are treated as heretics and are often ostracised and condemned”

flag in the finals. All of these flags symbolise gender identity belief.

Nemo's song, *The Code*, was about being non-binary and after he was announced as the winner, Bambie Thug went up to him and put a 'crown of thorns' on his head. Again the religious symbolism is very evident here. After the show, Bambie Thug spoke to media saying 'the queers are coming, non-binaries for the f**king win'.

Religious parallels

Gender identity belief has many parallels to religion. The religious similarities include that there is a calendar of sacred dates such as Pride month, Transgender Day of Visibility, and Non-binary Awareness Week. There are also rituals, a community, leaders, and doctrines. People who express disbelief are treated as heretics and are often ostracised and condemned.

We live in a multicultural

society. The National Census of Ireland in 2022 recorded numbers for 53 different religious categories ranging from Roman Catholic to Hindu to Jedi Knight to Pastafarian. With this level of diversity comes the expectation of religious freedom. We express belief (or lack of) according to our own preferences and upbringing, and generally do not force others to use the same religious language or rituals as ourselves.

When it comes to gender identity belief, there is an expectation that everyone should participate in pronoun rituals. There is also a compulsion to believe that gender identity is more important than biology, that men can become women, that women can become men, and that some people are neither male nor female or even both. A compulsion to participate in other people's religious rituals is the antithesis of modern liberal democratic values.

In 21st century Ireland we

associated with the triple moon goddess and the three phases of the moon (waxing, full and waning) that represents woman as maiden, mother and crone.

Symbols

Many people have said that Bambie Thug's performance is about Satanism because of some of the symbols used. In Paganism, horns are used to symbolise regeneration. The pentagram was the symbol of the Greek mathematician Pythagoras and is also the symbol of Wiccans and Neo-Paganism. The five points of the star represent the five elements – earth, air, fire, water, and spirit. The open eye in the centre of the pentagram on the stage alludes to the Eye of Providence, is also associated with the eye of Big Brother, and has also been used in the past to represent God.

The inverted pentagram with a downward point is sometimes used as a symbol of Satanism but Bambie Thug, in an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, has said that she doesn't practice anything other than witchcraft. Satan, by around the 3rd and 4th centuries was seen as king of the demons who were understood by some to be the pre-Christian gods and goddesses.

In Ireland, 189 people put down Satanism as their religion in the 2022 Census.

Jewish connection

The name 'Bambie Thug' is a collage of cute deer, fashion doll, and aggressive or violent person. Bambi the deer was popularised in the 1942 Disney movie that was based on a 1923 book by an Austro-Hungarian Jewish writer named Felix Salten. Many people believed the book to be a parable about the treatment of Jews in Europe and the book was banned and even burned in Nazi Germany. The history of the name is interesting in light of the controversies associated with the show this year relating to Israel's participation.

The heady mix of religious symbolism in Bambie Thug's performance points to a mish-mash of beliefs. However, the one that takes centre stage and is ultimately crowned by Bambie Thug at the end of the finals is gender identity belief. Far from becoming a more secular society, Ireland is becoming more and more religious but the face of religion has undertaken a dramatic change.

i Colette Colfer is a lecturer in religious studies at SETU.

“The heady mix of religious symbolism in Bambie Thug's performance points to a mish-mash of beliefs”

Bambie Thug also used ancient Celtic pagan symbols such as the triskele or triple spiral which is commonly

Teaching of Catholic faith so watered in schools that it is completely ineffective



Breda O'Brien

Recently in *The Irish Catholic*, Fr Niall Leahy SJ mentioned the desire to focus on ministry to young people as one of the reasons that Gardiner Street would no longer function as a parish within the Archdiocese of Dublin.

The Jesuits are to be commended for taking this step as young adults are so neglected within the ministry of the Church. It strikes me, however, 12-18-year-olds are even more neglected.

The majority of this age group are in Catholic schools, so why do parish priests refer to Confirmation as a passing out parade? Some go so far as to believe that the next time they will see these young people will be at a funeral.

It used to be that they would come back seeking the sacrament of marriage but that is often no longer the case. That may not be a bad thing because no-one wants people taking part in sacramental marriage without real faith commitment.

It does raise questions about what is happening regarding formation in Catholic second level schools and the answer, quite often, is not a lot.

Reports

The recent GRACE reports, the result of extensive research into how the Catholic faith is regarded and lived in secondary and primary schools, confirm what has been known anecdotally for a long time. At secondary level, almost 3 in 10 teachers (28%) aged under 29 report not 'witnessing' to Catholic ethos at all, or doing so only to a limited extent.

There is a slow upward curve through the age groups with teachers over 50 being much more likely to consider their faith to be important and to witness to it. Oddly, this drops markedly among the over 60s. Are they the group with the most negative

“We need to acknowledge that we are now a minority in Irish culture, and start supporting efforts to grow faith wherever we can”

experiences of Church?

86% of principals aged 50 or over at second level describe themselves as committed and practising Catholics, but this figure falls to 56% for those under the same age.

One half of RE teachers (50%) are either neutral or disagree that developing a personal relationship with Christ is a central educational aim in their second level schools.

Given that RE teachers are also much more likely to have and practise a faith, the fact that they believe that faith in Christ is not a central aim of their schools is revealing.

“There are lots of reasons for the decline in focus on forming young Christians. Irish society has grown much more secular and at times, even hostile to faith”

The overall picture seems to be that while individuals may make heroic efforts within schools, and the Trusts which now have responsibility for the schools see faith development as central, our Catholic schools no longer have a clear focus on forming young Christians.

Take religious education. Qualitative findings from the GRACE Reports reveal three main reasons why some teachers are not fully meeting RE requirements: lack of personal faith/commitment to RE; time pressures/curriculum overload; and lack of external support and oversight of RE.

There are lots of reasons for the decline in focus on forming young Christians. Irish society has grown much

more secular and at times, even hostile to faith.

Schools are also busy and stressful places. The demands on schools grow by the day. They are expected to solve every challenge that society faces.

There has also been a general lack of formation for laypeople. If you asked most adults, I suspect that they would say that being a good Catholic involves going to mass regularly and being nice to people.

The idea that faith is transformative on an individual and community level would be met with blank incomprehension.

Schools also reflect what parents want and the majority of parents are not interested in seeing their children formed as young Catholics.

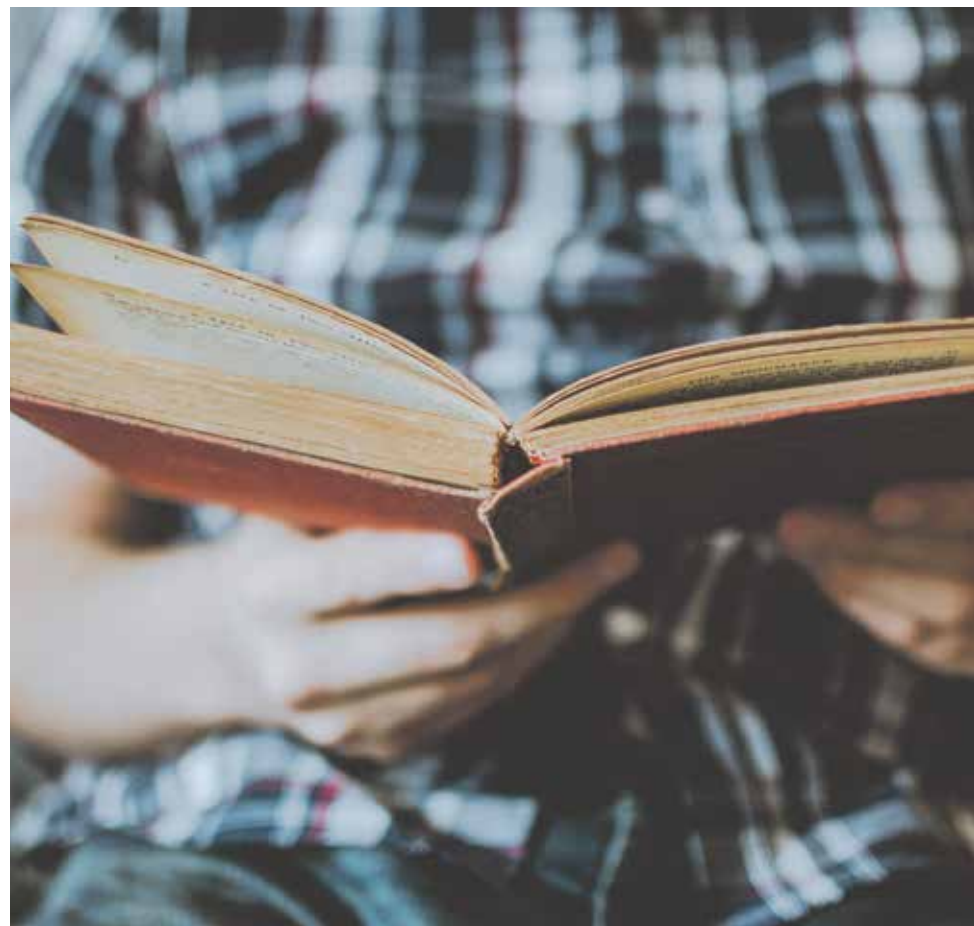
Future

There needs to be an urgent discussion about the future of Catholic schools. Oddly, given their lack of commitment to Christianity, there is no particular desire for divestment among parents. This may be because Catholic schools are generally academically and pastorally of a high standard, but what is being taught about the Catholic faith is so watered down as to be completely ineffective and therefore, unthreatening.

We need to acknowledge that we are now a minority in Irish culture, and start supporting efforts to grow faith wherever we can, including groups like Focus and Net Ministry, which have achieved wonders on university campuses and in parishes. The Jesuit emphasis on youth ministry as outlined by Fr Niall Leahy is a welcome development.

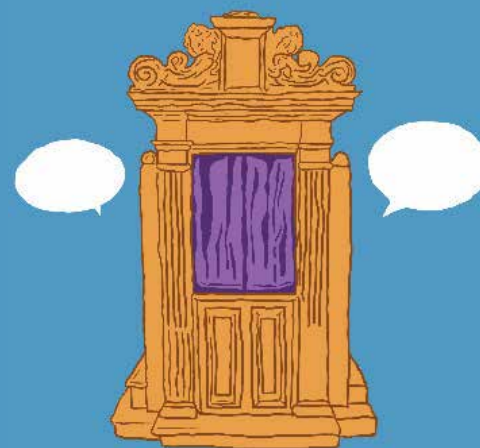
But support has to be ongoing and institutionalised. Unfortunately, the presence of such ministries is often down to the support of key individuals and when that is withdrawn, the model falls apart.

Schools are only part of the picture. But if the hierarchy and religious orders are serious about having Catholic schools which are challenging and transformative, there will have to be far fewer and resources will have to be pumped into them.



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“The Jesuits are to be commended for taking this step as young adults are so neglected within the ministry of the Church”

Why traditionalist voters are shy about talking to pollsters



David Quinn

The first thing to be noticed about the survey is the relatively high number of people who said they are going to church once a week or more. It comes in at almost one in four people.

The reason that is a surprise is because other polls in recent times have indicated that the number is lower than this, especially post-Covid. To the almost one in four that attend church services at least once a week can be added another 12% who go once a month or so.

The survey in question was conducted on behalf of the Electoral Commission on the day of the two referendums

in March, one of those being on carers, and the other on the family. Both were overwhelmingly rejected.

More than 3,500 people were interviewed as they left polling stations, so this was a big survey. The Commission wanted to find out why people had voted as they had, and then ask a range of other questions about such matters as political affiliation, attitudes to immigration and the Traveller community, trust in the media and other institutions as well as on church attendance.

Findings

The finding on Church attendance is basically a proxy for Mass attendance as the religiously observant section of the population remains overwhelmingly Catholic.

For the record, 36% of respondents said they only attended church rarely, and another 28% said they never go, while 2% did not give a response. Whether you attend Mass or not, made a pretty big

difference to how you voted.

If only those who never go to Mass had voted, then the referendum on "durable relationships" would have passed with 54% of the vote when in fact it attracted only 32pc of the overall vote.

Interestingly, regular Mass-goers were more likely to vote Yes than the average because 39% did so according to this poll.

Perhaps that is because Mass-goers are on the older side and are still quite loyal to either Fine Gael or Fianna Fail, and those parties backed a Yes vote.

But there is a pretty big caveat about the polling findings in general, which is that Yes voters were a lot more likely to talk to pollsters than No voters.

For example, while 68% of people voted No to the proposal to insert the term "durable relationships" into the Constitution, only 57% of those who took part in the survey did so. That is an 11-point difference.

So, why were No voters more reluctant to be interviewed for the survey than Yes voters? The survey report offers a reason. It says: "Non-response bias is the likely explanation for the under-representation of No voters, where No voters were more likely to refuse to take part in the survey than Yes voters".

“Unfashionable viewpoints are quite likely to be consistently condemned and demonised”

In plain English, this means No voters were shyer about speaking to interviewers. Why would this be? The likely reason is because of the predominance of certain viewpoints in public debate. When you don't hear your own point of view being expressed that much in public and you hear a different point of view being aired all the time, it will make the average person reluctant to say what they really believe except when they are in safe company.

Furthermore, unfashionable viewpoints are quite likely to be consistently condemned and demonised. This will make a person who does not go along with fashionable viewpoints even less likely to say anything, and that includes speaking to pollsters.

We saw this as work in the same-sex marriage and abortion referendums of 2015 and 2018. They were heavily carried but in the first case almost 40% of voters still voted No, and in the second case, one in three did so, but all you could see in both instances were people wearing Yes badges. People were scared to wear Vote No badges.

But No voters were the overwhelming majority in the last

two referendums. The carers referendum, which would have removed the word "mother" from a key part of the Constitution was beaten by 74% to 26%, and the one on "durable relationships" by 68% to 32%. However, No voters were still reluctant to admit how they voted.

I wonder if No voters who did speak were still shy to give their reasons for voting the way they did to pollsters?

Both sets of voters were asked why they voted either Yes or No. In the case of the carers' referendum, for example, most Yes voters said they regarded the Government proposal as a "step in the right direction", or that it would "modernise" the Constitution.

Most No voters said they did not have enough information, or the proposal was too vague. Only 6% said they voted No to protect the role of mothers and women. But is this finding accurate?

Discussions

It was perfectly clear that the Government wanted to remove the reference to mothers and homes from the Constitution and replace it with a gender-neutral reference that would no longer mention the home.

Online discussions again and again expressed opposition to removing the word "mother". Even if you allow for the sake of the argument that only a minority of No voters were most concerned about this, was it really as low as 6%, or were such voters still reluctant to make such an admission to a stranger, in this case a pollster? My bet is with the second explanation.

By the way, we can see in some of the follow-up questions in the survey what I would consider to be a bias, however unconscious, on the part of the Electoral Commission itself. For example,

it asked respondents if they would mind having a Traveller in the family and whether people believe immigration is good for the economy.

Was the first question to try and ascertain if No voters are more small-minded than Yes voters? And is the second case, why not ask people if they think immigration is too high?

They were also asked to agree or disagree with the statement: "All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job". (24% of Yes voters and 36% of No voters agreed with the statement).

But why not ask if they believed mothers should have the choice to either go out to work or stay at home as the case may be?

So, in some of the questions asked on behalf of the Electoral Commission we can see a bias in favour of what we will call a liberal point of view.

“This is a suppression of the sort Ireland was supposed to have abandoned in favour of ‘openness’”

This sort of thing makes those who don't go along with publicly dominant viewpoints even more reluctant to express their true opinions and makes it ever harder to read the real public mood on issues.

Does this seem healthy from a democratic point of view? Far from it. Instead, what we see is that even when people hold traditionalist, but perfectly moderate views on issues like motherhood, they are reluctant to say so.

This is a suppression of the sort Ireland was supposed to have abandoned in favour of 'openness'. Perhaps we haven't changed as much as we think.

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A woman arrives with children at a polling station in Dublin March 8, 2024, to vote on a referendum to redefine family and delete wording on stay-at-home mothers in the Irish Constitution. (OSV News photo/Reuters, Clodagh Kilcoyne)

Climate 'doomerism' is damaging a just cause



Martina Purdy

I was led down the garden path the other day - at Knock Shrine of all places! There's a new Creation Walk about to be launched on May 25. It's a celebration of God's grandeur, 30 signposts, each marked living word. It begins with *The Birth of the Cosmos* 13.8 billion years ago and the words of *Genesis 1:1*: "In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth".

While one companion thought the project bordered on pantheism, our sneak preview was amazing. Rooted in scripture and science, the walk not only explores the wonders of the universe but also reminds us that God, through his son Jesus, entered his own creation 2,000 years ago. One of the remarkable facts I absorbed was about the Fairyfly. Its body consists of 1,690,000,000,000 atoms, despite being as thin as a strand of hair.

The experience was life-giving and in sharp contrast to *doomerism* - the new buzzword for some of the apocalyptic predictions about the planet.

Future

My hackles often rise when it comes to 'saving the planet'. It's not that I don't care. I do, of course. We must safeguard our environment, save the turtles, rid the oceans of plastic water. All worthy causes. Clean air and water is not just a want. It's a need!

But I am increasingly suspicious that the green agenda has more to do with wealth, and power than the welfare of the planet. It's all very well leaving coal and oil in the ground - but in the absence of 'cleaner' nuclear energy, it's pretty vital on a cold and dark winter's night.

What is more, I really don't see the point in killing off perfectly healthy cows. Homo sapiens date back around 200,000 years and our cave-man diet is preferable to stuff grown in a lab.

God made us (so there can never be too many of us) and God gave us dominion over

the planet (so we must be good caretakers). But Psalm 102 says that the earth will "wear out like a garment".

Indeed, the Book of Revelation sets forth a hopeful vision of what will happen at the end of the world - in sharp contrast to *doomerism* which frightens our children.

Apparently there are four categories of Irish people when it comes to 'Climate Change': alarmed, concerned, cautious and doubtful. I used to be in the alarmed group - but frankly I am moving rapidly into doubtful and I am starting to ask questions!

I do not pretend to understand much about science - like most people and indeed many journalists - I'm at the mercy of the 'experts'. I mean, I believed my teacher when she told the class we were facing another ice-age. In fact, I went home from school rather upset!

“Climate change is a truism. It happens no matter what we do”

And I fretted with the best of them while watching Al Gore's Oscar-winning 2006 film documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. Who wouldn't listen to apocalyptic warnings that humans had caused the snow to disappear on Mount Kilimanjaro? Or that the sea levels would rise by 20 feet due to melting of ice in West Antarctica?

It turns out Al Gore's *doomerism* included nine key errors. His defenders - and there are many - say he got it broadly right despite the alarmism and exaggeration. Maybe he did. It certainly made him richer.

Of course the term 'global warming' has been absorbed into the clever term 'climate change' - removing any embarrassment when temperatures fail to rise. Climate change is a truism. It happens no matter what we do (Ireland's last ice cap melted 30,000 years ago giving us our fertile soil and graceful hills.)

While no expert, I am wise enough to know that there are no simple answers. Try

telling that to the protestors who block roads demanding an end to oil, while wearing jackets made with oil-based products.

Certainly I would take *doomers* a lot more seriously if they didn't fly around in polluting private jets while lecturing the rest of us about our carbon footprint. How many people realise that those expensive wind farms are plugged into coal-fired electricity?

The poster child for *doomerism* is Greta Thunberg whose 2018 tweet, predicting the world would end in 2023, was controversially deleted. (According to AP, her 2018 tweet was actually a quote from "an influential scientist" who warned climate change would wipe out all humans unless fossil fuel ended in five years.)

Contradictions

Fear is an effective way to control people, but any fire-and-brimstone preacher knows it stops working when 'believers' stop being afraid. The Irish government has signed up net zero emissions of the greenhouse gases caused by humans by 2050.

This includes a 51% cut by 2030. We are supposed to find ways to absorb carbon dioxide CO2 but the more I listen to the debate, the more confused I am. Greenpeace founder Patrick Moore is among those who dispute the consensus, claiming that more not less carbon dioxide is beneficial. We have politicians who can't solve the housing crisis - but insist they can save the planet. One thing is for sure - the Green taxes will continue to increase.

While our energy options are limited and increasingly expensive, China is burning cheap fossil fuel like there is no tomorrow. Hence, a big shift in the world's wealth, from East to West.

I fear one of my young colleagues is right: "The planet will be fine but we won't!"

So, enjoy the new creation walk at Knock, inspired by a book, *Creation Walk: The Amazing Story of a Small Blue Planet*, written by Brian Grogan, SJ. The walk is an uplifting experience of God's loving plan, a plan we can trust.

As for *doomerism*, I have trust issues and no desire to be led down the garden path!



King Charles III speaks during the World Climate Action Summit opening session at the Al Waha Theatre during the UN Climate Change Conference COP28 at Expo City December 1, 2023, in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. (CNS photo/courtesy of UN Climate Change COP28, Christophe Viseux)



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Future will be 10 dioceses or less says church expert



Chai Brady

After the monumental changes in the West of Ireland, with three bishops now leading six dioceses, some may wonder what the future is for Ireland's 26 dioceses considering the rapid decline of priestly vocations and practise of the Faith.

Speaking to an expert on Church history it is abundantly clear that the established diocesan boundaries, which date back to 1111AD, are no longer a model that is fit for purpose.

Change

Prof. John McCafferty, based in the School of History in UCD, believes that the need for a reorganisation of diocesan structures has "reached a critical point".

The much-needed change, he opines, will not be hugely impactful – or hurtful – to laity who are more connected to their parish than diocese.

Prof. McCafferty said: "If Rome came out in the morning and said, 'Right, we're drawing up a map of Ireland and we're going to divide it into 10 roughly equal size units and we're going to use the old historic titles', I can't imagine very many laity being up in arms about it – but there would obviously be administrative burdens."

It is already clear this process is underway, with the effective merger of the Archdiocese of Tuam and Killala under Archbishop Francis Duffy and that of Elphin and Achonry, led by Bishop Kevin Doran. These dioceses are now under the administration of a single bishop following the retirement of Bishop John Fleming (76) of Killala and the move of Bishop Paul Dempsey of Achonry to the Archdiocese of Dublin as an auxiliary, accompanying Fr Donal Roche.

While these changes are not the same as the amalgamations of the past, like those of Waterford and Lismore, Down and Connor, Cork and Ross and the wordy Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora – which is currently under the apostolic administration of the Bishop of Clon-



Bishop Paul Dempsey, Archbishop Francis Duffy and Bishop Kevin Doran pictured speaking to the press. Photo: John McElroy

fert, Michael Duignan – it is part of a downsizing Church leaders hope will bring some renewal.

“Initially there were two provinces, north and south, which would’ve been Armagh and Cashel, but by the end of the 12th Century they decided that there would be four”

Looking at the past, and how it has shaped the present in terms of diocesan structures, Prof. McCafferty told *The Irish Catholic* that it is a “snapshot of political power in Ireland” at the time.

He said: “In the 12th Century you have 20+ dioceses

and each of them would have been a regional power. They are all about the size of modern counties – though they have nothing to do with the counties.

“So basically we’ve gone on with these since then in various forms. Initially there were two provinces, north and south, which would’ve been Armagh and Cashel, but by the end of the 12th Century they decided that there would be four. Which roughly corresponds to the modern provinces of Ulster, Leinster, Connacht and Munster,” Prof. McCafferty said.

“In Ireland... there’s a mixture of accommodating the urban systems that are emerging and also the power of the great Gaelic lords. It’s a mixture of those two things but it also reflects where the population was and where

the power was – which is what you do with locating a diocese.”

History

Regarding the past amalgamation of dioceses Prof. McCafferty said: “Some of those amalgamations are to do with power structures in late-medieval Ireland. What you had before the Reformation was that roughly the country ended up divided in a way where in some dioceses the bishops were always of English origin and in some dioceses the bishops were of Gaelic-Irish origin. So when you see these late amalgamations, like Waterford and Lismore in the 15th Century, that’s really an attempt to reflect the changing boundaries of power between the English and Irish populations in Ireland.”

Sometimes a diocese is amalgamated because “they are just too poor to continue to exist or don’t have the resources”, Prof. McCafferty said, giving Down and Connor as an early example.

“The diocesan thing is more the way a passing generation of clergy thought about things. For the laity, the parish is the thing”

However, pragmatic changes were made in the past, like keeping the Diocese of Meath but having the cathedral in Mullingar. It is the same of course with the Diocese of Dromore, with the cathedral being in Newry.

As Prof. McCafferty said: “It is the same with Elphin which is in Sligo... a big town. These pragmatic decisions have been made before and, in a way, amalgamating dioceses is just taking that to

the next level. The Church has always done this. There’s no point in having a cathedral in the middle of nowhere.”

Future

Overall, Prof. McCafferty thinks that in the future there will be 10 dioceses, possibly less, and that originally it was mainly priests who would hold strongly to diocesan identity, not parishioners, adding: “The diocesan thing is more the way a passing generation of clergy thought about things. For the laity, the parish is the thing.”

Looking at how the management of diocesan changes in Ireland has progressed, Prof. McCafferty is not positive, saying: “They did announce that they were going to do this a few years ago and then nothing happened, and they continued with a system where there were still 20+ something bishops, and now things have reached critical point so it now looks half-hearted”, he said, adding, “Now of course the supply of priests is drying up. In a way the handling has been bad...”

“Some of those amalgamations are to do with power structures in late-medieval Ireland”

Less popular alternative for infertility treatment outperforms IVF



Wendy Grace

When it comes to private companies receiving state funding, surely one of the first things the Government should insist on is a cost-benefit analysis. Sadly, the opposite is happening when it comes to assisting couples struggling to conceive.

Last September the Government introduced a state subsidy for IVF for eligible couples. Since then around 500 couples have been referred to private IVF clinics. The question is why has the Government chosen to incentivise one type of fertility treatment over others?

Couples struggling to conceive need to be given a choice and easy to understand data on their chances of success. It is essential that couples have a thorough understanding of the differences in treatment impacts, especially when there are alternatives with greater success rates, at a fraction of the cost.

Reality

Oxford University Professor, Dr Imogen Goold, an expert in medical ethics recently argued that the way in which IVF clinics market their services can often promote a false dream that will never come true. She stressed the importance of offering "unbiased advice, as clinics preying on women who are anxious and getting them to throw money at the problem."

A huge issue is that the IVF industry in Ireland has no regulatory body overseeing it. That means it's easy to

peddle misleading information. Surely now that they are being State funded, regulation and oversight is needed more than ever. All of the clinics I researched in Ireland when detailing their 'success rates' use the metric of 'pregnancy rates' – this is vastly different from a live birth rate, meaning a babe in arms at the end of 9 months.

For example, for a woman over 42 the live birth rate per IVF cycle is between 1-3%, yet the 'pregnancy rate' these clinics use to tout success is 25%. These clinics shouldn't be allowed to sell the dream of a baby with misleading statistics, results should be clearly identifiable by age and number of cycles needed.

“Multiple studies show IVF pregnancies are more prone to complications such as pre-term babies and low birth weights”

In the US the CDC has an easy portal where you put in your age, weight and some other criteria to show your actual chance of success. Surely, at a minimum, we should have the same here. What's stopping the Irish Government from doing this?

That is before we even consider the emotional and physical impact of IVF. A recent survey, from the Fertility Network UK, revealed that 4 in 10 women undergoing IVF have felt suicidal. In contrast, the data on Restorative Reproductive Medicine (RRM) shows an overall improvement in the women's health, wellbeing, and the couple's relationship. Furthermore, multiple studies show IVF pregnancies are more prone to complications such as pre-

term babies and low birth weights.

The 6 Fertility hubs are a step in the right direction, they need to be places where couples can understand their fertility and be given access to clear, unbiased information. A place where funding and information should be available for different types of fertility treatments that can be accountable with demonstrable success rates.

RRM

One such alternative is Restorative Reproductive Medicine. The big difference between IVF and RRM is that the latter aims to treat the root cause of infertility. It doesn't bypass the importance of a woman's reproductive health, it tries to restore it. In many categories it has far superior success rates. In one peer reviewed journal it found one in three couples, with an average age of 37, and two previously failed IVF cycles had a baby with RRM.

Dr Phil Boyle, President of the Restorative Reproductive Medicine Institute has helped thousands of couples to conceive naturally. He explained his attempts to engage with the department of health has "fallen on deaf ears".

"The Government doesn't seem to be interested in accountability and transparency; they are not asking basic questions, for example, how much does the treatment cost and what sort of success rate are we getting? In round figures if you're looking at the cost per baby born, it will cost approximately €20,000, per baby, born through IVF.

"The cost comparable for Restorative Reproductive Medicine is €5,000 per baby. Comparing our peer reviewed data on success rates, they are higher than IVF with an overall birth rate of 40% compared to 24%, we are more than happy to share our extensive data, which shows we will get many more babies for far less

cost, and any clinic receiving public funding should have to do the same.

"There are also couples for which, ethically and morally, IVF isn't an option for them. This funding discriminates against those couples."

“Within three months we were pregnant. I wish I had known this type of treatment existed before we started IVF”

Of the couples Dr Boyle has helped, many were told they couldn't conceive at all, or had multiple failed rounds of IVF. He explained:

"Infertility is usually a symptom of multiple underlying health conditions. By solving the underlying issues, not only do we have greater success rates, but we can achieve a healthier pregnancy and birth."

One of his many success

stories is Niamh and David, who after 3 failed IVF rounds, and using donor eggs, had 2 babies with RRM, naturally.

Niamh said that after struggling to conceive: "I was 31 and I was told I had the ovaries of a 46-year-old and it was unlikely I would ever have my own baby. The path we went on using donor eggs involved so much physical, emotional and financial turmoil."

Niamh and David then went to Dr Boyle and had extensive testing which had never been done before, revealed treatable issues. Niamh explained they were very relieved to be told something they had never heard in the five years they had been trying to conceive: "We will treat the problems not bypass them, and within three months we were pregnant. I wish I had known this type of treatment existed before we started IVF."

Paul and Jennifer shared a similar story: "After years of trying and many failed IVF cycles, being told we needed

donor eggs, we were at a very low point. We felt we had run out of options, then we discovered RRM and within eight weeks we were pregnant." The couple have had three babies successfully with this method.

Oversight

Robert Winston, Emeritus Professor of Fertility studies at Imperial College London, is critical of what he calls the "IVF gravy train". He says the evidence would show that more than half of couples referred for IVF could be treated by cheaper alternatives. The tunnel vision focus of the Government on IVF will sideline giving some couples the most appropriate treatment they need to restore optimal health and fertility. Government spending needs to have oversight, allow couples choice, the taxpayer value for money, and help point couples towards the path that will give them the best possible chance at having a baby.

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New document from the Vatican on apparitions and miracles



It is long overdue to tackle the false prophets, writes **Mike Lewis**

On Tuesday, May 7, the Vatican Press Office announced that a press conference will be held on May 17 where the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) will present a new document containing provisions for discerning the authenticity of claimed

apparitions and other supernatural phenomena.

The last general document on discerning the authenticity of apparitions was prepared by Cardinal Francis Seper and approved shortly before the death of Pope Paul VI in 1978.

History

The 1978 document, *Norms regarding the manner of proceedings in the discernment of presumed apparitions or revelations*, was not initially issued to the public, but was sent out to the bishops as an aid in discerning how to respond to alleged supernatural phenomena in their dioceses. It was finally released publicly by the Vatican in 2011, after its contents were leaked and shared widely in the years that followed.

In his 2011 Preliminary Note for the official publication of the 1978 norms, Cardinal William Levada wrote: "Today, more than in the past, news of

these apparitions is diffused rapidly among the faithful thanks to the means of information (*mass media*)."
Levada also observed that the "modern mentality and the requirements of critical scientific investigation render it more difficult, if not almost impossible, to achieve with the required speed the judgments that in the past concluded the investigation of such matters".

“Popular movements surrounding alleged visionaries and prophets will grow and get out of hand”

Levada's commentary on the Church's inability to respond quickly to reported supernatural phenomenon

reflects a significant challenge for the Church. All too often, popular movements surrounding alleged visionaries and prophets will grow and get out of hand before Church authorities even begin looking into them.

Ireland

One Irish example of this phenomenon is Christina Gallagher's House of Prayer in Achill, which, according to the most recent statement from the Archbishop Francis Duffy of Tuam, "has no Church approval and the work does not enjoy the confidence of the diocesan authorities". The House of Prayer has been in operation since 1993, but it was not until 2008 that the archdiocese widely announced that its activities are "entirely of a private nature and has no Church approval whatever".

The internet has only increased the rapidity with which unapproved apparitions have spread. Veteran

“In cases like this, the last thing church authorities desire is to create a martyr by acting in a public and punitive manner”

Vatican reporter John Thavis recalled in his book *The Vatican Prophecies: Investigating Supernatural Signs, Apparitions, and Miracles in the Modern Age*, the Irish internet visionary known as Maria Divine Mercy, who offered fairly conventional end-of-the-world prophecies until she hit paydirt in 2013 due to a 2012 prediction that Pope Benedict would be forced out as pope and replaced by a false prophet.

Following the election of Pope Francis, Maria Divine Mercy became something of an internet sensation. Thavis wrote: "People poured over her supposedly divine messages, which had been translated into thirty-eight languages and now numbered more than eight

hundred, along with more than one hundred supernaturally dictated 'crusade prayers', five litanies, and twenty other invocations."

“These messages should not be promoted or made use of within Catholic Church associations”

The messages spread like wildfire around the world. The truth of her identity came out in a 2013 blog article, revealing the visionary's true identity as Mary Carberry-McGovern, a middle-aged public relations executive living in Dublin.

Once her identity was known, many reached out

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Pope Francis greets Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, during a meeting with members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on April 11, 2024, in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican. Photo: CNS/Vatican Media



The House of Prayer in Achill, Co. Mayo.

to her archdiocese, asking the archbishop to address Maria Divine Mercy. Thavis opined, "In cases like this, the last thing Church authorities desire is to create a martyr by acting in a public and punitive manner." But finally, in April 2014, the archdiocese posted a notice on its website stating: "Archbishop Diarmuid Martin wishes to state that these messages and alleged visions have no ecclesiastical approval and many of the texts are in contradiction with Catholic theology. These messages should not be promoted or made use of within Catholic Church associations."

Thavis observed, "By now, however, the effort was like trying to stop a runaway train. The prophecies continued unabated, and a few months later her Facebook 'likes' had increased to 350,000." It wasn't until 2015, when a major story in the *Irish Mail* linked McGovern-Carberry to Maria Divine Mercy and exposed the lucrative business her messages had become, that the site was shut down.

Lessons

Hopefully the upcoming Vatican document will help and encourage bishops to

respond more attentively to and publicly to such phenomena before they spread widely and develop worldwide followings.

“A Vatican pronouncement regarding the supernatural character of the event would not be appropriate”

This will be the second document on the subject of apparitions and similar phenomena the DDF will have published since Cardinal Victor Fernández was named prefect last year. The first document was a letter published in October, about an alleged series of miracles in the Archdiocese of Como, Italy. Cardinal Fernández's assessment of the phenom-

enon is generally favourable, but his response, which is signed by the Pope, states that a Vatican pronouncement regarding the supernatural character of the event would not be appropriate.

Exceptions

In fact, Cardinal Fernández notes: "After 1933, the then Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office never directly intervened again in recognising the supernatural character or the authenticity of alleged supernatural phenomena." Nevertheless, Cardinal Fernández encourages the continued support of this devotion by the local Church. He writes, "This Dicastery finds no difficulty should Your Eminence decide to continue in the pastoral appreciation of this spiritual experience. In fact, it is hoped that, treasuring the spiritual fruits that have flowed forth in these years, the proclamation of the

merciful love of the Trinity may be intensified: the love that stimulates conversion in people and that bestows the grace of abandoning oneself with filial trust."

“New alleged apparitions from Catholics opposed to Pope Francis have gained publicity”

Positive experiences, such as that in Como, seem to be the exception. In recent years, new alleged apparitions from Catholics opposed to Pope Francis have gained publicity, such as in the Archdiocese of San Antonio, Texas, where Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Fuller recently suppressed a group in his territory that was promoting the alleged locutions of one of its members, including a message that Pope Francis was an 'antipope'. Last year, a Franciscan sister in Columbia claimed Pope Benedict XVI appeared to her to tell her that Francis was a false Pope and that his death was "a case of slow euthanasia".

“I don't know what Pope Francis and Cardinal Fernández plan to say about discerning the truth about claims of supernatural phenomena, but they have an enormous mess on their hands”

Popularity

Across North America, the condemned apparitions and apocalyptic prophecies of the French Canadian priest Fr Michel Rodrigue have gained widespread popularity. In Ireland, Dom Mark Kirby of Silverstream Priory had his supposed locutions from God collected in best-selling book, *In Sinu Jesu*, before he was revealed to be an extremely troubled figure. Across the internet, there are all kinds of websites promoting unapproved apparitions and apocalypticism, including 'Count-down to the Kingdom' — a warehouse of the statements of unapproved visionaries and theologically dubious end-times prophecies. All of the publicity for these dime-store prophets has been fuelled by the internet.

The number of everyday pewsitters in ordinary parishes who are taken in by seers and prophets

who are not sanctioned by the Church is astounding. These modern visionaries wield enormous influence over the many Catholics who buy their books, watch their videos, and attend their speaking events.

“Hopefully they will do something that will curb the influence of false prophets”

I don't know what Pope Francis and Cardinal Fernández plan to say about discerning the truth about claims of supernatural phenomena, but they have an enormous mess on their hands that the Church has hardly begun to address. Hopefully they will do something that will curb the influence of false prophets.

Out&About

15 years of helping most vulnerable



ANTRIM: Celebrating 15 years of Vincent's on Cushendall Road in Ballymena are SVP members, shoppers and volunteers with Anne McLarnon, SVP Regional Retail Representative for the Northern Region; Mayor of Mid and East Antrim, Alderman Gerardine Mulvenna; Mary Waide, SVP Regional President for the Northern Region; Malachi Cush, SVP Ambassador for the Northern Region; and Mary Dempster, Vincent's Ballymena Manager.



DUBLIN: Nigerian priests, studying in Maynooth, came together to celebrate Sister Nuala O'Donnell's ninetieth birthday.



DERRY: Students of Holy Family Primary and Nursery School, Derry in a fieldtrip during day 2 of Derrymino.

IN SHORT

Beloved Irish sister celebrates 90th birthday

Sr Nuala O'Donnell, a Holy Rosary Sister, celebrated her 90th birthday and remembered her years as an English teacher in Nigeria, in the company of nine Nigerian priests who joined her from all over Ireland.

For many years, Sr O'Donnell taught English in St Thomas Aquinas Seminary, Makurdi, Nigeria, and developed a friendship with her students. When the sister retired after 16 years teaching and moved back to Ireland, some of her students came to pursue higher education in Irish universities.

For many years she was assisting them as a proofreader, advisor and friend. Today, the priests serve in different Irish parishes around the country.

The birthday celebration started with Mass in the chapel of Holy Rosary Convent, Artane, with hymns in different lan-

guages being sang alongside with a drum. Nigerian food was enjoyed afterwards and memories were relived.

One of the priests remembered his experience with the first essay he submitted to Sr O'Donnell. "I had done well at English in my GCE and I knew my language would impress her. Imagine my surprise when my essay came back full of red marks," he said.

Cork school celebrates nationwide achievements

A Cork Catholic secondary school for boys, Coláiste Chríost Rí, celebrated its students' achievements ahead of the 2024 exam period with a number of special events, including a visit from the French ambassador to Ireland HE Vincent Guérind.

Coláiste Chríost Rí is located in the parish of Turners Cross in Cork city, and is committed to Catholic education in the Presentation Brothers' tradition. The school offers a curriculum balanced between preparation for the workplace and personal development.

The school's principal, Pádraig Mac An Rí and the French ambassador presented five Transition Year students with awards for winning the national AIPLF Ireland (Irish Association of French-Language Teachers) video competition.

The Science Department was celebrated with Leaving Certificate student Luis Patrick Miranda, who achieved a Highly Commended Award at the Finals in DCU. While the Junior Cycle Science teams placed 2nd and 7th in the Cork Junior Science quiz.

Recognition was also given to Franciszek Sobolewski and Brendan O'Donoghue for earning the highest mark nationwide in the higher level DCG (Design and Communication Graphics) in the 2023 Leaving Certificate Examinations.

SVP shop in Ballymena celebrates 15 years

The Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) celebrated 15 years of Vincent's shop in Ballymena, Co. Antrim. The charity shop opened in Cush-

endall Road in 2009 and has since become an important pillar for that community.

A Christian voluntary organisation, SVP works with people experiencing poverty and disadvantages. The SVP shops follow the Christian mission to respond to the call of those in need.

The SVP said the shop evolved from its humble beginnings into a place where persons from all backgrounds converge to buy and meet friends. "Vincent's Ballymena is synonymous with compassion, resilience, and empowerment in the local area," a spokesperson said.

The committed and passionate staff and volunteers are in the core of Vincent's Ballymena success.

"I worked closely with other SVP Conference members in the town to relocate this much needed community resource 15 years ago and I am so proud of the staff and volunteers in developing a shop that has made a great impact locally since moving in 2009," said Mary Waide, SVP Regional President for the Northern Region.

Edited by Ruadhán Jones
Ruadhan@irishcatholic.ie



Events deadline is a week in advance of publication



ANTRIM: Vincent's Ballymena Manager Mary Dempster is joined by volunteers as they celebrate 15 years of Vincent's on Cushendall Road in Ballymena.



DUBLIN: Winner of the CPSMA art competition, Aisling Clifford from Loreto national school, Dalkey, Co. Dublin and her parents in photo with Norma Foley.



CORK: Coláiste Chríost Rí' principal Pádraig Mac An Rí and teacher Alan Dineen with students Franciszek Sobolewski and Brendan O'Donoghue, who received recognition for obtaining the joint highest mark nationwide in higher level DCG (Design and Communication Graphics) in the 2023 Leaving Certificate Examinations.



ANTRIM: SVP Ambassador for the Northern Region, Malachi Cush; joins Mary Dempster, Vincent's Ballymena Manager; sales assistant Hannah; and a Vincent's customer, as they celebrate 15 years of Vincent's on Cushendall Road in Ballymena.



CORK: Winner of the CPSMA art competition, Zara Stapleton from Presentation primary, Fermoy, Co. Cork and her parents in photo with Norma Foley.



OFFALY: The 5th oldest person in Ireland, aged 107, Ellen Hynes of Coolderry, Co. Offaly with Fr Michael O'Meara, Kinnitty & Bishop Fintan Monahan.

ANTRIM

Pentecost Ireland takes place Saturday May 18 from 10am-10pm, with guest speakers Fr Oisín Martin CFR and Fr James O'Reilly for talks, prayer ministry, fellowship, worship, Confession, Adoration and Mass, in St Joseph's Church 56 Grey-stone Road BT41 1JZ.

ARMAGH

Armagh parish Holy Spirit Prayer Group invites everyone to 'Growth Seminar' on Tuesday May 21 at 8pm, for prayer, testimony and worship.

CAVAN

Eucharistic adoration takes place in St Clare's Chapel, Cavan Cathedral, from 11am-7pm daily.

CORK

Mass will be celebrated at Carraig an Aifreann Glenville, on Friday May 17 at 8pm. It will be preceded by rosary and Divine Mercy Prayers at 1.30pm.

DONEGAL

Home of the Mother Regional Encounter takes place Saturday May 18 11am-6pm for Mass, lunch, rosary, faith formation, adoration, Confession, and the Pentecost Vigil in St Patrick's Church, Parochial House, and Hall Crossroads, Killygordon F93PN0X.

DUBLIN

Prayers in devotion to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal happens every Monday evening in the Disciples of the Divine Master chapel of adoration, White's Cross, Newtownpark avenue, Blackrock, Co. Dublin. With Holy Rosary; novena prayers at 6.55pm, Chaplet of Divine Mercy at 7.20pm and celebration of Holy Mass at 7.30pm.

KERRY

The Diocese of Kerry will be taking a group of young adults on a pilgrimage from Sunday, June 23 to Sunday June 30. Please contact Tomás Kenny for more information on 086 3683778 or email Tomás at tomaskenny@dioceseofkerry.ie.

LAOIS

Rosary prayed in the Church of the Assumption, the Heath, Portlaoise parish, daily at 2pm and at 3pm on Sundays.

LIMERICK

St John's Cathedral annual novena to St Anthony takes place June 5 and concludes on Thursday, June 13.

LOUTH

A retreat for primary teachers takes place Saturday May 18, 9am-4.30pm held by the Association of Catholic Teachers in Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary, Ardee A92 F8FP.

MAYO

Launch of new 'Creation Walk' at Knock Shrine on Saturday May 25 at St. John's Welcome Centre 10.30am to 3.30pm. The walk will be launched alongside with Brian Grogan SJ's new book *Creation walk – the story of a small blue planet*.

Achonry Diocese Youth Commission's 'Achonry Reed Challenge' to happen in Croagh Patrick, Westport on Sunday June 9 at 3pm. Everyone between ages 18 – 35 welcome (under 18s must be accompanied by guardian). The event is free and refreshments will be served afterwards. Contact Stephen to register at youthministry@achonrydiocese.org.

SLIGO

A retreat for women takes place May 17-19, facilitated by Louise and Frank McGuinness, in Our Lady Star of the Sea Mullaghmore.

TYRONE

First Class Relic of Blessed Carlo Acutis to visit St Colmille's Church, Carrickmore on Friday May 24. The relic will be welcomed at 11.30am, two short talks to happen at 1pm and at 4pm, and the Mass before the relic departs will happen at 7.30pm.

WATERFORD

Procession in honour of Our Lady of Waterford on Saturday May 18 at 3pm. Starts in St Saviour's Church, Bridge Street, passing the Old Walls of the City and by the Black Friary. Concludes in Cathedral.

WEXFORD

Day of Prayer to celebrate Pentecost Sunday, May 19 in the Edmund Rice Chapel Waterford, 10.30am to 5.30pm, with celebration of Mass and Healing Ministry. Enquiries to Sile 086 8590394.

Ireland should raise the age of Confirmation



Alan Whelan

The recent International Catholic GRACE Report pointed out that 35% of Irish Catholic school teachers do not believe in God and that only 48% of Catholic Religious Education teachers attend weekly Mass.

Meanwhile there is the Dublin Archdiocese decision of a very few years ago that sacramental preparation should be more firmly placed in parish hands and the call by the Association of Catholic Priests for sacramental preparation to move from schools to parishes.

Clearly the time has come to consider possible changes in how as Irish Church we approach questions of sacramental preparation. This has led me to reflect upon my own very different English and Irish experiences of Confirmation preparation.

Ever since 1910 when Pope Pius X brought the age of first Communion to age seven, Confirmation has taken place some years after 'reaching the age of reason'. In Ireland it is usually in the last year of national school at age 12. In English dioceses Confirmation is usually at age 15.

As a secondary teacher in three English dioceses, experience taught me many of the positives of delaying Confirmation. Age 15 was agreed upon so as not to interfere with public examinations.

Requirements

Of the many parishes I had contact with all had Confirmation application/enrolment forms, which were only available from the parish. The enrolment forms outlined the requirements in terms of length of preparation course and related matters.

Usually the requirement

was for the regular Mass goer to attend at 10 or 12 evening meetings and at least one weekend residential retreat.

The application appeared in the form of a signed contract and was likely one of the very first documents where the young person had to make a signed commitment of intention.

The priest or catechist interviewed Confirmation candidates or asked them for a Letter of Request before they embarked upon the preparation course.

Although schools had no formal part in sacramental preparation invariably over 60% of students enrolled and completed parish programmes which were run by teams of volunteer catechists.

As a school principal, I promoted parish Confirmation courses and at appropriate times celebrated those confirmed.

“These teams of catechists enlivened parishes with clear visible signs of active evangelisation”

Trained volunteer parish catechists delivered the Confirmation courses. Some parishes, especially in London, had the luxury of full-time paid Pastoral Coordinators who organised and trained the volunteer catechists. It was not uncommon to find several teachers volunteering their talents, skills and faith commitment.

These teams of catechists enlivened parishes with clear visible signs of active evangelisation.

Sometimes these same catechists delivered the first Communion and Reconciliation programmes. Other teams of catechists worked on pre-baptism, pre-marriage and RCIA programmes.

Several parishes had well organised schemes of prayer sponsors who prayed for individual young people as they prepared for the sacraments.

These arrangements



Confirmation candidate Ayden Morocho kneels in prayer as his sponsor Grace Esposito stands behind him during a confirmation Mass May 5, 2022, at Holy Family Church in Queens, New York. Photo: CNS

helped form vital and meaningful links between younger and older parishioners and strengthened parish cohesion.

Preparation

Many of those who did not opt for Confirmation at fifteen did so a few years later as part of RCIA programmes, sometimes coinciding with marriage preparation.

My own family has had children prepared for Confirmation in both England and Ireland and I can say without a shadow of doubt that those prepared at age 15 were far better prepared than those taught at age 11. Sunday Mass attendance by English teens reflects the better option.

Because English Confirmations frequently occurred in the evening, parties and other extravaganzas, sometimes accompanying Irish confirmations, were relatively subdued affairs and often limited to a gathering in the parish hall after the service.

Parishes often organised post-Confirmation outings weeks later.

Our Irish experience, again in a parental capacity, has given me very different vibes. With my wife I supported our two girls in the school-based lead ups to Confirmation. Thanks to effective teaching at school we judged the

instruction and preparation as very good.

We attended the preparatory parish Saturday evening Masses but were usually disappointed at the limited involvement of young people in these liturgies.

“On both occasions this was an uplifting experience and each students was given a meaningful role to play in the service”

We were taken aback at the overall mediocre attendance of their classmates who generally went on to be confirmed. It seemed that there was very little monitoring of attendance at these Masses and that this was some sort of optional extra.

With both our girls we attended The Service of Light, which were held at evenings in their school.

On both occasions this was an uplifting experience and each students was given a meaningful role to play in the service, especially when called up with her/his par-

“We will need to plan carefully for the transition from the present to a new pastoral strategy and be fully prepared to back this up with a well resourced training programme”

ent/sponsor to represent their baptismal candle to the priest in an act of passing on the Light of Faith.

Almost all candidates also took the pledge to abstain from alcohol and drugs until age 18. Sadly 'The Pledge' was not explained to parents especially as the uniquely Irish practice was unfamiliar to non-Irish nationals.

At the Confirmation services in Ireland we experienced the joyful well-rehearsed hymn singing and marvelled at how well our young people could sing when given the leadership and opportunity.

Experience

Overall though what happens now in Ireland does not seem to be working very well. Confirmation in the final year of national school is often experienced more as a graduation from the Church than as a special reception of The Gifts of the Spirit.

When in September 2013 Pope Francis acknowledged this phenomenon, he could well have been speaking of

the Church in Ireland, when he said: "There was this experience: the sacrament of Confirmation – what is this sacrament called? Confirmation? No! Its name has changed: the 'sacrament of farewell'. They do this and then they leave the Church... Many young people move off after receiving Confirmation, the sacrament of farewell, of goodbye, as I said. It is an experience of failure, an experience that leaves emptiness and discourages us. Is this true or not?"

In conclusion, surely the time has come for Irish bishops to acknowledge that leaving sacramental preparation in the possible hands of non-believing teachers has been a disaster and that the time has come for change.

If we are to raise Confirmation age and rely on volunteer parish catechists then we will need to plan carefully for the transition from the present to a new pastoral strategy and be fully prepared to back this up with a well resourced training programme for catechists.

“Clearly the time has come to consider possible changes in how as Irish Church we approach questions of sacramental preparation”

THE SYNODAL TIMES

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

Pope writes letter to world's parish priests

Pope Francis

Dear Brother Priests, The International Meeting 'Parish Priests for the Synod', and the dialogue with all of you who have taken part, provide me with the opportunity to pray for the parish priests the world over. To all of you, I address these words with great affection.

It is so obvious as to sound almost banal, but that does not make it less true: the Church could not go on without your dedication and your pastoral service. So before all else, I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation for the generous work that you do each day, sowing seeds of the Gospel in every kind of soil (cf. Mk 4:1-25).

As you have experienced in these days of sharing, the parishes in which you carry out your ministry vary widely, from those on the outskirts of great cities – as I know personally from Buenos Aires – to those in sparsely populated areas that are the size of vast provinces. They range from those in town centres in many European countries, where ancient basilicas house dwindling and aging communities, to those where celebrations are held beneath the branches of great trees and the songs of birds mix with the voices of small children.

Community

Parish priests are well aware of this, since they know from within the life of God's People their joys and hardships, their resources and their needs. For this reason, a synodal Church needs its parish priests. Without priests, we will never be able to learn how to walk together and to set out on the path of synodality, “the path which God expects of

the Church of the third millennium”.

“We will discover how to set our ministry free from the things that wear us down and rediscover its most authentic core”

We will never become a synodal and missionary Church unless parish communities are distinguished by the sharing of all the baptised in the one mission of proclaiming the Gospel. If parishes are not synodal and missionary, neither will the Church be. The Synthesis Report of the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops is very clear in this regard. Parishes, beginning with their structures and the organisation of parish life, are called to think of themselves “primarily as being of service to the mission that the faithful carry out in society, in family life and the workplace, without concentrating exclusively on their own activities and their organisational needs” (8.1). Parish communities increasingly need to become places from which the baptised set out as missionary disciples and to which they return, full of joy, in order to share the wonders worked by the Lord through their witness (cf. Lk 10:17).

As pastors, we are called to accompany in this process the communities that we serve, and at the same time to commit ourselves with prayer, discernment and apostolic zeal in ensuring that our ministry is suited to the needs of a synodal and missionary Church.



This challenge is set before the Pope, the bishops and the Roman Curia, and it is also set before you, as parish priests. The Lord who has called us and consecrated us asks us today to listen to the voice of his Spirit and to advance in the direction that he points out to us. Of one thing we can be sure: he will never leave us without his grace. Along the way, we will discover how to set our ministry free from the things that wear us down and rediscover its most authentic core, the proclamation of God's word and the gathering of the community for the breaking of bread.

Suggestions

I encourage you, then, to accept this, the Lord's call to be, as parish priests, builders of a synodal and missionary Church and to devote yourselves enthusiastically to achieving this goal. To this end, I would like to offer three suggestions that can help to inspire your lifestyle and activity as pastors.

1. I ask you first to *live out your specific ministerial charism in ever greater service to the varied gifts that the Spirit sows in the People of God*. It is urgent to “discover with faith, the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity, be they of a humble or more exalted form” (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Ministry and

Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9), which are indispensable for evangelising any number of human situations and contexts. I am convinced that in this way you will bring to light many hidden treasures and feel less alone in the demanding task of evangelisation. You will experience the joy of being true fathers, who do not dominate others but rather bring out in them, men and women alike, great and precious possibilities.

“It is important that the practice of discernment be exercised also in pastoral settings”

2. With all my heart, I suggest that you *learn to practise the art of communal discernment*, employing for this purpose the method of “conversation in the Spirit”, which has proved so helpful in the synodal journey and in the proceedings of the synodal Assembly itself. I am certain that you will reap from it many good fruits, not only in structures of communion such as parish councils, but in many other fields as well. As the Synthesis Report makes clear, discernment is a key element in the pas-

toral activity of a synodal Church: “It is important that the practice of discernment be exercised also in pastoral settings, in a way adapted to differing contexts, in order to illumine the concreteness of ecclesial life. This will help to recognise better the charisms present within the community, to distribute wisely different responsibilities and ministries, and to plan in the light of the Spirit pastoral projects that go beyond the mere programming of activities” (2.1).

3. Finally, I would like to urge you to *base everything you do in a spirit of sharing and fraternity among yourselves and with your bishops*. This is something that emerged forcefully from the International Conference for the Permanent Formation of Priests, on the theme, “Fan into Flame the Gift of God that You Possess” (2 Tim 1:6), which took place last February here in Rome, with over 800 bishops, priests, lay and consecrated men and women, engaged in this area and representing some 18 countries. We cannot be authentic fathers unless we are first sons and brothers. And we cannot foster communion and participation in the communities entrusted to our care unless, before all else, we live out those realities among ourselves. I am quite aware that, amid the constant call of our pastoral responsibilities, this commitment may seem burdensome, even a waste of time, but the opposite is true: indeed, only in this way will we be credible and our activity not end up scattering what others have already gathered.

Mission

It is not only the synodal and missionary Church that needs parish priests, but also the ongoing process of the 2021-2024 Synod, “For a Synodal Church: Commu-

tion, Participation, Mission”, as we look forward to the Second Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will take place in the coming month of October. In order to prepare for it, we need to hear your voice.

“Dear brothers, I am at your side in this process, in which I myself am taking part”

For this reason, I invite those who have taken part in the International Meeting 'Parish Priests for the Synod' to be missionaries of synodality, among yourselves and, once you return home, with your fellow parish priests. I ask you to encourage reflection, with a synodal and missionary mindset, on the renewal of the ministry of parish priests, and enable the General Secretariat of the Synod to gather your distinctive contributions in view of the preparation of the *Instrumentum Laboris*. The purpose of the present International Meeting was to listen to parish priests, but that cannot finish today: we need to continue to hear from you.

Dear brothers, I am at your side in this process, in which I myself am taking part. I bless all of you from the heart, and in turn, I need to feel your closeness and the support of your prayers. Let us entrust ourselves to the Blessed Virgin Mary *Hodegetria*, Our Lady of the Way. She shows us the way; she leads us to Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

① Rome, Saint John Lateran, 2 May 2024.

Cardinal Czerny – the human face of the Vatican's outreach to the world



Cardinal Michael Czerny, centre, celebrates Mass Jan. 19, 2024, in Saint-Michel Church in Cotonou, Benin. Photo: OSV News/courtesy Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development



Luca Attanasio

Exclusive

The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development was established *Motu Proprio* by Pope Francis in 2016. The formation of the dicastery was the result of merging the former pontifical councils for Justice and Peace, Cor Unum, Migrants and Travelers, and Health Care Ministry.

The Dicastery promotes the integral development of the person in light of the Gospel and in line with the Social Doctrine of the Church. The main focus is taking care of the goods of

justice, peace and the safeguarding of Creation, as well as issues regarding disarmament, forced migrations, human mobility, health, charitable works.

From January 1, 2022 to head the Dicastery has been the Cardinal Michael Czerny, a Jesuit born in Brno, in the former Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic) and raised in Montréal, Canada. With him, *The Synodal Times* spoke about the Synod on Synodality, his visits to Africa and the Pope's vision for this continent, as well as key issues such as care for creation and the issue of migrants.

Luca Attanasio: Your Eminence, the Church is in the midst of a decisive process – the Synod on Synodality – how do you think this historic event can promote Integral Human Development?

The very idea of 'integral' development, and even the concept of 'integral' ecology, requires synodality. For there to be authentic development, there needs to be many perspectives, multiple voices, in a process that unfolds over time.

Thus, the Synod represents, after many crises across the globe, a powerful moment of listening

between cultures, between different peoples and cultures, who, in the Church, meet with equal dignity, without seeking uniformity.

“Serving the integral human development of each person and each community is the mission of the Church”

This sort of conversation transforms those who participate in it, unlike in a

debate in which each person tends to hold to their own position. The Synod is a great school for peoples to become subjects of their own development and is an opportunity to bring about new and deeper bonds of solidarity, to repair and to heal this broken world.

While the synodal path is organic to the Church, even in this process today, the Church continues to learn better how to listen and to accompany its own members.

Indeed, serving the integral human development of each person and each community is the mission of the Church, which continues, today, the messianic ministry of Jesus, who came so that all might have life and have it in abundance.

You have recently been, exactly one year after the Pope's visit, in South Sudan. what reality have you found? Has the Pope's special attention to this country (trip, appeals,

prayers, meetings, the famous 'kiss at the feet') brought about a change?

The people of South Sudan, including the Church leaders there, the political leaders and other Christians, have fond memories of the Holy Father's visit.

His visit was one of the largest events that South Sudan has experienced since the time that the country seceded from Sudan.

My visit became a further sign that the Holy Father never forgets about their country and that the whole Catholic Church remembers them in her prayers.

Nevertheless, the concrete reality reveals a lack of security and a continuing humanitarian crisis. Many South Sudanese are internally displaced, many are returning from Sudan, and living in camps.

Yet, I underscore that the leadership of any path to lasting peace will have to come from the South Sudanese themselves.

“My visit became a further sign that the Holy Father never forgets about their country and that the whole Catholic Church remembers them in her prayers”

“*Laudato Si’* encourages ecological conversion, allowing us to more fully heed ‘the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’”

The department you lead deals with the most important issues on the world’s geopolitical agenda: peace, environment, migrants. One of its tasks is promoting the implementation of *Laudato si’*, the environmentalist manifesto of the Catholic Church: can you tell us what impact it is having on the Church and the world?

Since its publication in 2015, Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* has attracted attention both within and outside the Catholic Church because of its contribution to the reflection and dialogue on climate change and climate justice, while connecting integral human development and integral ecology, expanding the purely scientific or environmental approach.

Laudato Si’ is a sign of hope and synodality because the Pope calls for everyone to urgently seek new ways of living with “creativity and enthusiasm”, including in the fields of academia, science and civil society organisations.

“The Catholic Church walks with people who are displaced, forced to flee. This is the main message that Pope Francis expresses time and again”

Pope Francis also, following the example of the Orthodox Church, established in 2015 the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, which is celebrated every September 1.

For its part, the World Council of Churches established an ecumenical initiative of the ‘Season of Creation’, which takes place every year from September 1 to October 4 (the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology).

In particular, *Laudato Si’* has inspired numerous initiatives to address the challenges of climate change, pollution, exploitation of the goods of creation, energy transition and the call to

adopt sustainable lifestyles.

These are the motivations behind the *Laudato Si’* Action Platform, which involves Catholics and all people of good will. Similarly, Territorial Networks of Integral Ecology were formed to listen and respond to the needs of vulnerable communities, including the indigenous or other marginalised peoples.

Laudato Si’ encourages ecological conversion, allowing us to more fully heed ‘the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’. This enormous responsibility serves not only the most vulnerable members of society but also future generations.

Within the Dicastery that you lead, Pope Francis wanted to establish and direct personally, the Migrants and Refugees Section (now all incorporated into the Dicastery), furthermore, the Holy Father misses no opportunity to bring to the attention of the international community the issue of forced migration and the mismanagement that Europe and the West in general are carrying out. He is one of the few authoritative voices: what hope do we have that his constant reminders will be at least partially heeded?

The proposed wall-building policies and legislations of many countries only serve to exponentially increase people’s suffering, without offering real solutions to the shortcomings of the current systems.

Governments must always evaluate whether the implementation of practices that have this harmful result is proportional to the goal they want to achieve.

The Catholic Church walks with people who are displaced, forced to flee. This is the main message that Pope Francis expresses time and again.

He is asking the world to listen to them, to understand why they move, and to address the root causes of forced migration/displacement.

In the short-term, the Pope is calling us to act in four ways, by welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating the people on the move, with an urgent concern to save the lives of those on the borders and in the seas.



Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, speaks during a news conference presenting Pope Francis’ Lenten message at the Vatican Feb. 1, 2024. Photo CNS/Lola Gomez



Cardinal Michael Czerny is greeted at the Saint Jean nonprofit health centre in Cotonou, Benin, during his trip to the West African nation Jan. 17-20, 2024. During his visit to the health centre Jan. 18, Cardinal Czerny met with the staff who provide much needed medical services for the people of the tiny African country neighbouring Nigeria on the east, Togo and Burkina Faso on the west. Photo: OSV News/courtesy Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development



Pope Francis poses for a photo with leaders of the *Laudato Si’* Movement in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Nov. 6, 2023. From left to right: Tomas Insua, Lorna Gold, Pope Francis, Jesuit Father Xavier Jeyaraj and Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Photo: CNS/Vatican Media

Angels at play



Penelope Middelboe

My husband and I have visited several care homes recently. His mother, with vascular dementia and Alzheimer's, is in need of professional care.

In one we'd just taken the lift up from the 'Assisted Living' floors to the dementia floor called 'Reminiscences' (or Rem for short). And there, as we were being shown around, rather as if we were choosing a boarding school for a child, we met Michael. He's in his early 70s and has had Alzheimer's for a while. He looked very lost. The nurse accompanying us was very gentle with him.

"That's your room, Michael. Just there."

He looked blankly at the closed door and its photo on the outside.

"That's your room," she repeated. "That's home."

Entertainers

She guided us on to see the piano which, she said, 'entertainers' played on a regular basis. My husband is a musician so, on a subsequent visit, we were pleased to have the opportunity to watch an Elvis impressionist. He was so bad we both agreed he could only get work in a place where people had reverted to what Shakespeare coined so many years ago as 'second childishness.'

Today the sitting room with the piano was empty except for one woman. She looked in her early 70s, was elegantly dressed, and reading a book in the window. We said hello and she looked up and smiled. I asked her if she was visiting.

"No," she said, "I live here."

Embarrassing.

"My husband Michael lives on this floor. I live on the floor below," the woman added. She meant in Assisted Living. "But I spend as much time as I can here with Michael. After all we've been married for 57 years."

I had to turn away sharply and go over and 'inspect' the piano. I was in floods. Later, exploring my reaction with Jon, we both wondered if either of us could do that? Give up our home to live in an institution. For love?

Recently Dominican Fr Timothy Radcliffe gave a Good Friday talk on why what he'd seen in the Paul VI Assembly Hall in Rome during the 2023 Synod had made him believe we were on the cusp of an extraordinarily profound change. The first session was about letting barriers fall so that the delegates could see the face of the Lord in one another. And he was keen



to tell us how a senior member of the Vatican had turned to him, gesturing in delight across the room.

"Look at those Cardinals. They have never listened before. They are bound to be changed."

“The greatest among you will be your servant. Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled”

Encouraging? Or perhaps shocking? Did the senior member of the Vatican really mean that before that day in October 2023, when groups of ten or eleven people were asked to sit at a table and to listen to each other in conversation in the Spirit, many of our Cardinals had never listened to anyone they might consider of a lower status?

If so, at what stage in a typical Cardinal's career does he suffer such memory-loss? When does he forget Jesus's message, "the greatest among you will be your servant. Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled" (Matthew 23:11).

And if we find ourselves encouraged by learning that the Cardinals are finally listening, when did we so-called 'lay' people, brought up on Jesus's message of radical justice and selfless love, begin to accept that Church leaders look down on us, infantilise us, lull us into 'second childishness'?

The good news is that there is a cure for us all. I discovered it at the funeral of the husband of my Danish aunt, tragically killed in an accident

on Easter Sunday. The service was taken by his cousin, a Danish pastor called Charlotte, and she gave the eulogy. Thanks to her, most of us were able to glimpse the blessings we seek but rarely find in loss and grief.

She told us simply to live Preben's values and to keep talking about him. "New insights will be added," she said. "Through other people's stories about him you might see new sides of him." Surely we can do this with Jesus?

Shocking

Just a week before Preben's shocking death some of us had read Mark's Gospel through in 90 minutes in our parish hall for Lent. Afterwards, many had commented on how much they'd enjoyed hearing the full story of Jesus's mission and death come together in one sitting.

They noticed details they'd not see before – was Mark perhaps the man with just a loin cloth on who is almost arrested? We laughed about how the disciples are panicking when they're on a boat with Jesus and don't have any bread – they've already forgotten he'd miraculously fed 4,000 and then later 5,000 people on a few loaves.

We talked about our favourite stories in Luke and Matthew missing from Mark – the Samaritan woman at the well, and the Resurrection stories, for example.

When I heard Preben's eulogy I saw immediately how fortunate we are not to have one Gospel story but four. How there is a richness in the different memories we have of someone we loved.

This is the gift the Gospel writers gave us – the opportunity to



listen to each other, to explore different, sometimes contradictory stories about Jesus, and by doing so to live his values and to discover new insights and new sides of him.

Walking with Mark, listening to Jesus and to the people around him, is to walk a path to transformation, bringing about the Kingdom of God here and now.

Which brings me finally to a relation of mine – an atheist maths teacher called Margaret, who also developed severe dementia. On one summer visit to her nursing home the carers good naturedly told us that she insisted on sitting where she had a clear view, through the large French windows, onto the village green.

"Why do you like sitting here?" I asked Margaret as we sipped our tea. "Do you like watching people walking their dogs?"

She'd always liked dogs. She thought for a bit, all the while keeping her eyes on the green behind me.

"I like it when the Angels come out to play!" she smiled.

We nodded, frowned a bit and wondered. Eventually we worked out what she meant. Of course. Village cricket games! Angels in white, at play. Here, through the eyes of dementia, Christ's Kingdom on Earth had truly come.

Malaise

A cure for the malaise of the Church might simply be for clergy and laity alike to live as though the angels are at play, here, with us, and to sacrifice our own comfort, like Michael's wife, to accompany our neighbour in the ups and downs of life.

To discuss together the different stories of Jesus and by so doing to add new memories of him, rather than forgetting his message. And whenever we meet anyone looking for Jesus, to point to the door to our Church and say, 'there's room for you here. This is your home.'

A Church cautioning against the dangers of artificial intelligence



Elise Ann Allen

People should be conscious of the dangers “both economic wise leading to unemployment and the moral issues” connected to artificial intelligence, or AI, according to Catholic leaders in Nigeria. Bishop Felix Femi Ajakaye of Ekiti on Sunday told leaders in the country to avoid legislation that would give AI the power to hurt the welfare of people in Africa’s most populous nation.

Conscious

“While we approve of the good things that technology have brought to us, we should be conscious of the dangers both economic wise leading to unemployment and the moral issues that go along with it,” he told the congregation at St Patrick’s Catholic Cathedral.

“We still have a high rate of unemployment in Africa, by the time we allow this artificial intelligence, AI, to take control of us and be everywhere, a lot of people and the rate of unemployment would be higher or triple or more,” the bishop said.

“The artificial intelligence, as we know, the rate at which the technology is going, a lot of jobs ordinary being done by human beings are simply being taken over by machine and if these continue, there is going to be a serious rate of unemployment in Africa and other nations,” he continued.

“Technology is very good but at the same time, we have to be weary that God made us, to know Him, Love Him and Serve Him, so that through this means, we have the salvation of our souls. Artificial intelligence



Worshippers are pictured in a file photo praying during Mass at St Gabriel Catholic Church in Abuja, Nigeria. (CNS photo/Afolabi Sotunde, Reuters)

has no thinking, no conscience, where those two things are lacking, there is danger. Otherwise, the future of the world is very bleak,” Bishop Ajakaye said.

“Let us raise our voice against artificial intelligence; there should be restrictions to areas where to use it”

“Our world is in bondage today, look at the level of unemployment in Nigeria, all the technological giants are reducing the workforce with AI, human beings are only looking for financial gain, and it is a direct affront to God. Let us raise our voice against artificial intelligence; there should be restrictions to areas where to use it. It would cause a lot of confusion in our world,” the bishop said.

The Catholic Church in

Nigeria dedicated Sunday, the last day of World Communications Week, to the discussion over AI. The Vatican dedicated the whole Church to look at this issue when it announced last year it was dedicating World Communications Day to Artificial Intelligence.

Awareness

In a statement published last year, the Vatican said the evolution of artificial intelligence “makes it ever more natural to communicate through and with machines, so that it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish computation from thought, and the language produced by a machine from that generated by human beings.”

“Like all revolutions, this one based on artificial intelligence, too, poses new challenges to ensure that machines do not contribute to a large-scale system of disinformation,” the state-

ment said. The Vatican also cautioned against the risk of increasing “the loneliness of those who are already alone, depriving us of the warmth that only communication between people can provide.”

“It is important to guide artificial intelligence and algorithms, so that there is in each individual a responsible awareness of the use and development of these different forms of communication that go hand in hand with social media and the Internet. It is necessary for communication to be oriented towards a fuller life of the human person,” the Vatican statement said.

“We must acknowledge the excitement and confusion that comes with rapid innovation and take necessary precaution”

In his homily at St John Catholic Church in Marabá, Bishop David Ajang of Lafia, said AI is transforming the world of information and communication, and is “affecting everyone, not just

“As artificial intelligence advances, we must not lose sight of our humanity. Rather, we must engage AI with openness and sensitivity”

professionals.”

“We must acknowledge the excitement and confusion that comes with rapid innovation and take necessary precaution,” he said. “The Church recognises the power of media as gifts that can foster human progress and development, but also warns of their potential risks if not approached with discernment and responsibility,” Bishop Ajang continued.

“Starting with the heart, Pope Francis emphasises the importance of the human heart, symbolising freedom, decision-making, integrity, and unity. We must engage our emotions, desires, and dreams, and encounter God in the inward place of our heart,” the bishop said.

“As artificial intelligence advances, we must not lose sight of our humanity. Rather, we must engage AI with openness and sensitivity, starting from our humanity, and strive to become a new kind of

human being with deeper spirituality, freedom, and maturity,” Bishop Lafia said. Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of Abuja said people cannot run the risk of becoming rich in technology but poor in humanity.

“Our actions, guided by modern technology, should begin from the human heart,” he said on last week. “We cannot run the risk of becoming rich in technology but poor in humanity. Our actions, guided by modern technology, should begin from the human heart.”

Communication

Communication is about building relationships, fostering understanding, and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. In a world filled with noise and distractions, it is essential for us to reflect on how we communicate with one another and with God,” the archbishop said.

“While we approve of the good things that technology have brought to us, we should be conscious of the dangers both economic wise leading to unemployment and the moral issues that go along with it”



World Report

IN BRIEF

Pope to Syro-Malabar faithful: Unity is a duty

● Pope Francis met this week with Major Archbishop Raphael Thattil, the head of Kerala's Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. The Pope's address to Archbishop Thattil ranged over a number of topics, from the ancient history of the Church in Kerala to the liturgical dispute which has been raging there for a number of years.

Referring to the fact that, for many years, Western missionaries attempted to force Kerala's Christians to conform to European traditions, Pope Francis said that "some members of the faith" committed "unfortunate acts against you", because of their "insensitivity" to the history of India's ancient churches.

Referring to the ongoing liturgical controversy, the Pope said that he had "recently sent letters and a video message to the faithful, warning them of the dangerous temptation to focus on one detail".

"Let us work with determination to protect communion", Pope Francis urged.

Parishioners in US stop teen armed with rifle from entering first Communion Mass

● Quick action by alert parishioners and local police are credited with averting a tragedy at St Mary Magdalen Catholic Church in Abbeville, Louisiana, over the weekend.

As 60 children were preparing for their first Communion, the parish

located south of Lafayette, Louisiana, reported that an armed "suspicious person opened the back door".

"The individual was immediately confronted by parishioners, escorted outside, and the police were called," the parish indicated in a statement.

US state to ban sex-change treatments on minors

● The majority-Republican South Carolina General Assembly has passed a bill to ban sex-change surgeries and treatments on minors.

Titled the 'Help Not Harm' bill, the measure prohibits health providers from performing sex-change surgeries or hormonal treatments on minors and bans public funding of transgender procedures through Medicaid and other government health plans.

The bill also bars public school officials from withholding information from parents regarding their children's perception of their gender.

The measure received final approval in a 67-26 vote by the South Carolina House on Thursday. This comes after the law was passed by the Senate with additional amendments in an overwhelming 27-8 vote on May 2.

US bishop: Biden mocks Catholic faith by invoking Christ in pro-abortion message

● Bishop Thomas Paprocki of the Diocese of Springfield, Illinois, is accusing US President Joe Biden of "making a mockery of our Catholic faith" after he made the sign of the cross while promoting abortion.

In a May 8 video posted to the diocesan YouTube channel, Bishop Paprocki said: "To misuse this sacred gesture is to make a mockery of our Catholic faith".

"Making the sign of the cross is one of the most profound gestures a Catholic can make in showing reverence for Christ's death on the cross and belief in the Holy Trinity as we sign ourselves in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," the bishop said.

Australian bishops approve new Aboriginal liturgy

Amid the Catholic Church's push under Pope Francis to increasingly engage with and welcome Indigenous peoples and cultures, Australia's bishops have approved a new liturgy incorporating elements of Aboriginal language and culture.

Called the 'Mass of the Land of the Holy Spirit', or *Missa Terra Spiritus Sancti* in Latin, the liturgy was formally approved for use in the Diocese of Broome in Western Australia last Tuesday during a plenary meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in Sydney.

According to a May 7 statement from the Australian bishops, the motion to approve the Mass was brought forward by the Bishops' Commission for Liturgy and was co-sponsored by the Bishops Commission for Relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Throughout his papacy, Pope Francis has made of point of meeting with Indigenous groups and has often spoken out about respecting their land and cultural customs. During his 2019 Synod of Bishops on the Amazon and in his subsequent exhortation on the meeting, *Querida Amazonia*, the Pope stressed the need for a better inculturation of the faith in Indigenous communities, particularly through the liturgy and in the establishment of more seminaries to help foster local



Pope Francis greets Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, an Australian Aboriginal elder, educator and artist, after his weekly general audience May 31, 2023, in St Peter's Square at the Vatican. Looking on is Chiara Porro, Australian ambassador to the Holy See. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

vocations.

In a statement about the approval of the new Aboriginal Mass, Bishop Michael Morrissey, who serves as apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Broome, said, "We have to walk with Aboriginal people. I am so pleased that after such a long period of use the *Missa Terra Spiritus Sancti* has been given official recognition by the bishops of Australia".

"We recognise there are many Aboriginal cultures in

Australia and we pray that they all be guided by the Holy Spirit to develop the best way of celebrating the Eucharist in the most appropriate ways with their people, within the life of the Church," he said.

Two elders from the Bidj- adanga, or La Grange parish, Maureen Yanawana and Madeleine Jadai, participated in Tuesday's meeting in Sydney to present a printed copy of the Mass to the bishops and to discuss their experience with it.

"Singing at the top of our voices brings us peace," Ms Yanawana said, saying, "We would like to see you, all our bishops, stepping in our shoes, be invited to sit around our people, have that patience and just listen."

Though formally approved last week, the Mass, according to the bishops, has been in use in the Broome Diocese for over 50 years, and is celebrated in multiple languages.

Vatican Museums under fire from workers alleging poor treatment

Nearly 50 employees of the Vatican Museums have initiated a labour dispute with the Holy See over what they allege are poor, unfair and unsafe working conditions, which could result in a class action lawsuit against Pope Francis's administration.

First reported by Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, the complaint has been lodged by 49 out of roughly 700 employees of the Vatican Museums – 47 custodians, an art restorer, and a bookshop employee – represented by Italian lawyer Laura Sgrò,

who handles several other high-profile cases involving the Holy See.

In a petition sent to Cardinal Fernando Vérgez Alzaga, president of the Government of the Vatican City State, Ms Sgrò claimed that current rules cause "labour conditions undermining each workers' health and dignity". "The poor management is evident, which would be even more serious if it were the result of the sole logic of obtaining greater profits," she said.

According to Ms Sgrò's letter, "the employer abuses this tool". There are also

complaints about no distinction being made for employees who have seniority, and that workers "are the absolute asset of the manager, who uses them as he pleases. Absolute discrimination reigns, a perpetual state of chaos". Workers claim they have also at times been penalised for taking time off to care for sick family members.

"The Pope talks about rights, we are considered simple commodities," they said.

Protests erupt around papal event, but Pope not the target

Four police officers and one young woman were injured Friday during a protest march attempting to reach an event dedicated to raising Italy's historically low birth rate where Pope Francis was speaking, though the Pontiff was not the target of the protests. The event was

titled 'General States of the Birth Rate,' an annual gathering sponsored by an Italian pro-family association with close ties to the Catholic Church.

Nearby dozens of young protestors attempted to march toward the pro-fertility event to object to the

presence of Eugenia Maria Roccella, the Minister for the Family, Birth Rate and Equal Opportunity in the Meloni government.

Among other things, the protestors identify Ms Roccella with a controversial recent measure pushed through by Ms Meloni's

coalition permitting pro-life groups to be among the consultants at publicly funded family planning clinics, where Italian women wishing an abortion are required to obtain a certificate documenting the state of their pregnancy.



Edited by Brandon Scott
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A universal Church



Pope Francis shares a moment with Mundiya Kepanga, a Papuan activist and leader from Papua New Guinea, at the Vatican May 8, 2024. Mr Kepanga is known for advocating for the rights of Indigenous peoples and for raising awareness about the challenges they face, including environmental issues and land rights. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

Orthodox Church ordains female deacon

The Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa ordained Zimbabwean Angelic Molen as a deaconess in the Orthodox Church. Taking place on May 2, Orthodox Holy Thursday, the ordination was conducted at St Nektarios Mission Parish near Harare, Zimbabwe, by the archbishop of Zimbabwe, Metropolitan Serafim.

The St Phoebe Center for the Deaconess, a US-based organisation that has advocated for reviving the ancient female diaconate, said in a press release that Ms Molen's ordination would prepare the way for the restoration of the role in other branches of the Orthodox Church.

The group's board chair,

Dr. Carrie Frost, wrote: "Being the first to do anything is always a challenge, but the Patriarchate of Alexandria has courageously chosen to lead the way with Metropolitan Serafim laying his hands on Deaconess Angelic".

According to the release, Ms Molen said: "At first I was nervous about going into the altar, but when Metropolitan Serafim blessed me to enter the altar as part of my preparation this week, those feelings went away and I felt comfortable. I am ready".

According to the St Phoebe Centre, Ms Molen was well received by her community and parish.

"The Alexandrian Patriarchate in Africa felt the need

to revive this order to serve the daily pastoral needs of Orthodox Christians in Africa," the release read.

Metropolitan Serafim said that Ms Molen will have both liturgical and pastoral roles. He said: "She is going to do what the deacon is doing in the liturgy and in all the sacraments in our Orthodox services".

Metropolitan Serafim added that "one of the most important fields of work of the deaconess was the exercise of the works of love. They were the angels of mercy and the visiting sisters of the sick, the 'grieving' and poor women, imparting to them the gifts of Christian love".

The Orthodox Patriar-

chate of Alexandria and All Africa has been on the way to diaconal ordination of women for several years. At a 2016 synod in Alexandria, Egypt, the Patriarchate voted to reinstate the female diaconate. In 2017, the Patriarchate ordained six sub-deaconesses in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Among the functions of deaconesses may be baptism, which in Orthodox churches is conducted by full immersion. In the early Church, full immersion for adults was followed by anointing of the whole body, which required the assistance of deaconesses for the sake of propriety.

Church sanctions priest for being an online troll

Last week a public spat on social media platform X, previously known as Twitter, revealed that a Spanish priest has been barred by the Vatican from his online activities for trolling a victim of a Peru-based group currently under investigation.

In a May 7 post on X, Spanish Fr Francisco Delgado, who lives in Vir-

ginia Dale, Colorado in the United States, announced that "By direct order of my Archbishop, I am forced to interrupt activity on all of my networks and suspend my participation in the media".

A lay group founded by Peruvian layman Luis Fernando Figari in the 1970s, the SCV, for 10 years has been

shrouded by scandals involving various allegations of abuse and accusations of financial corruption against Mr Figari and other top-ranking members.

In 2017 he was sanctioned by the Vatican and prohibited from having further contact with members of the group. He is currently living in exile in southern Italy.

Vatican roundup

Vatican prepares for summer Olympics with conference on faith and sports

● As 206 countries prepare to send their top athletes to participate in the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics, the Vatican is organising an event to look at the relationship between the Catholic Church and sports, through both a spiritual and anthropological lens.

"In the current context of wars tearing our world apart, Olympism is first and foremost a message of peace, and the commitment of the universal Church, like that of France, is essential. The role of the Church in promoting Olympism is well known," said Florence Mangin, the ambassador of France to the Holy See, during a press conference held on Monday at the Vatican.

The three-day international conference on sport and spirituality, titled 'Putting Our Lives on the Line', is a joint effort between the Vatican's Dicastery for Culture and Education and the Embassy of France to the Holy See. It will be held May 16-18 at the Institut Français Centre Saint Louis (the French cultural institute of Rome), which sits adjacent to the Piazza Navona.

Catholics, Buddhists must work for peace: Vatican officials

● Catholics and Buddhists abhor war, but the increasing number of armed conflicts in the world show a need for believers to take practical steps to overcome hatred and to promote reconciliation, said officials of the Vatican Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue.

Writing to Buddhists around the world preparing to celebrate Vesak, which commemorates the birth, enlightenment and death

of the Buddha, dicastery officials said, "The continuing escalation of conflicts worldwide calls for renewed attention to the critical issue of peace and deeper reflection on our own role in overcoming the obstacles standing in the way of its growth".

The dicastery officials also said that "the deeper causes of conflicts and violence" must be addressed.

Pope Francis proclaims 2025 Jubilee papal bull: 'Hope does not disappoint'

● The Catholic Church's 2025 Jubilee was officially proclaimed on Thursday by Pope Francis, who presided over a formal reading of the Jubilee's papal bull of indiction.

The papal bull, titled *Spes Non Confudit*, meaning 'Hope Does Not Disappoint,' declares that the Jubilee Year will officially begin with the opening of the Holy Door of St Peter's Basilica on Christmas Eve 2024.

The Pope further decreed that every Catholic cathedral around the world should offer Mass on December 29, 2024. Pope Francis encouraged dioceses to organise pilgrimages to the cathedrals for the occasion.

The 2025 Jubilee will officially conclude with the closing of the Holy Door in St Peter's Basilica on January 6, 2026, on the solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord.

Migration helps offset serious problem of low birth rate in rich countries, Pope says

● During a May 8 audience at the Vatican, Pope Francis said that migration helps fight the crisis caused by low birth rates, especially in "rich countries".

Addressing participants at an event titled 'Care Is Work, Work Is Care,' promoted by the Dicastery for the Service of Integral Human Development, the Holy Father reflected on decent work and social justice.

"Everyone has a dog, a cat, everyone, but they don't have children," he lamented, noting that "the migration comes to help the crisis caused by low birth rates".

The Pope stressed the need to offer decent work and food security while highlighting the crises suffered by war-torn countries, such as Gaza and Sudan, which have "the largest number of people facing famine".



Letter from Philippines

Clerical child abuse, a shocked president, and a silent Church



Fr Shay Cullen

During a meeting of top cabinet members, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. expressed shock and dismay. He was very disturbed about the prevalence of online sexual abuse and exploitation of small children as young as three years old.

This is due to the inaction of the telecommunications corporations that defy the law (RA 11930) that mandates them to stop it. The most frequent violators and abusers of children online in the home are parents and relatives. They are responsible for about 42% of online child abuse.

The Catholic Church and President Marcos and his cabinet know the shocking truth that the Philippines is the worldwide hub of online child sexual abuse. The truth is that child abuse in the family and clerical child abuse is a common crime ignored and left to grow unaddressed by the Church and the State.

The root cause is the failure of telecommunication corporations to install blocking and detection AI-driven software on the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) computers. This is allowing the online streaming of live child abuse to go undetected as they are sent over the Internet to paying local and foreign customers.

Effects

This is where President Marcos and his cabinet, with all the power of government, meet their match. They are out-smarted, out-manuevered, out-foxed, and out-played by the telecoms who make billions from the live streaming of child sexual abuse.

They flout the law RA 11930 which orders them to install blocking and detection AI software. Unicef said that as many as seven million Filipino kids are abused every year. Most remain silent about it since they are trained



Philippine presidential candidate Ferdinand Marcos Jr. delivers a speech during a campaign rally in Lipa April 20, 2022. (CNS photo/Eloisa Lopez, Reuters)

to keep secrets.

The children are wrongly taught “*huwag magsumbong*” (don’t snitch). That is to say, never report abuse. This preconditioning is why children grow up carrying the hurt, pain, and anger of being abused and not allowed to report complain, or speak out.

The psychological damage is enormous. Their learning is impaired and their personalities are affected. Recently, cases of 10-year-old boys raping six-year-old girls are becoming more common as they see it live on mobile phones.

“There are too few leaders to stand against child sexual abuse and human rights violations”

Besides, the decline in moral teaching on the dignity and rights of the child by the Church is also responsible. Philippine Catholicism is morally weak. Christian values rarely impact the behaviour of most people. There are too few leaders to stand against child sexual abuse and human rights violations.

Catholicism, it seems, has become just kneeling in Church at Sunday mass, listening to an irrelevant sermon. Reducing the Gospel to rites and rituals without social commitment to action for justice is a contradiction of the Gospel message.

The sacraments should be the source of spiritual strength to challenge corruption, abuse, and injustice. In reality, without social action, they are in danger of becoming like magical rites and rituals without a prophetic voice speaking truth to power and standing for moral values.

This is clearly seen in the proliferation of crimes against children, human trafficking, online sexual abuse of children, sex bars, drug dens, and the widespread pornographic child abuse materials.

Enable

The government allows it by issuing licenses and operating permits to the bars and dens where minors are abused. Law enforcement is paralysed, not knowing what to do or how to do it.

“If enough people have the Faith, the conviction, and the belief that goodness and truth in social action will move mountains of evil, then they will win”

The Church ignores social evil, it seems, to the extent it has withdrawn from the real world of sin. Silence and permissiveness are other sins that are bordering on the social acceptability of child abuse.

“If we believe with conviction that working for truth, justice, and goodness will overcome evil, we will win”

It could be a serious failure of religion to uphold the dignity and rights of children and a failure by clergy and lay Christians to openly oppose these crimes and the evil that causes them. If the Catholic faith means anything, it is taking a stand as did Jesus of Nazareth against such evil and giving protection and justice to the child victims.

The relative silence and absence of Catholic social action today is glaring. Many

years ago, youth leaders could rally thousands to protest injustice and protect child rights. If we believe with conviction that working for truth, justice, and goodness will overcome evil, we will win.

The Kingdom will be a reality. That is what Jesus of Nazareth taught by words and action. Living out the beliefs that are the bedrock of the Christian Faith is the only true authentic Christianity.

Action

Without that action, Faith is dead, said Saint James. We are left with empty rites and rituals and millions of children abused. Jesus of Nazareth himself has made it absolutely clear that the most important in the kingdom here on earth are children and unless adults are as innocent as children, they will not enter the Kingdom.

In the Gospel of Matthew 18:1-7 Mark 11:33-37 he said we must be as innocent as a child and to accept one such child was to accept him and the one who sent him. For the abusers of children

that destroy their faith in Him, he declared they must be brought to accountability and justice with a millstone around their necks in the deep sea.

“Strong words indeed but mostly ignored by some church leaders that prefer to deny and cover up”

Strong words indeed but mostly ignored by some Church leaders that prefer to deny and cover up the widespread reality of child sexual abuse and especially the most shameful of all clerical child abuse.

This has to change as Pope Francis has tried to do. If enough people have the Faith, the conviction, and the belief that goodness and truth in social action will move mountains of evil, then they will win.

i Irish Fr Shay Cullen, SSC, established the Preda Foundation in Olongapo City in 1974 to promote human rights and the rights of children, especially victims of sex abuse. The views expressed in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial stance of LiCAS.news.

Letters

Letter of the week

There has to be some form of clericalism

Dear Editor, I was pleasantly surprised to read, 'Don't altogether dismiss 'clericalism'' by Mary Kenny [*The Irish Catholic* – May 9, 2024]. Mary articulated my sentiments so well. I too am attempting to discuss 'clericalism' with my priest confreres, on a somewhat informal basis.

As a recently appointed co-PP, home from Zambia and formation ministry with seminarians, I am relatively new to pastoral ministry. I come armed with a basic

understanding of synodality accrued over the last three years, along with two clerical shirts. Black! I was confronted with the accusation that I was "too clerical". However, Fr Trendy never really did "cut the mustard" for me. I feel that to dress as a cleric is a form of professionalism rather than clericalism.

Interestingly, the appointment of a co-PP came as a relief to many of our senior parishioners. There was a palpable sense of security among

them, now that a leader was in place. The point I want to make is: "It is about the specific style of leadership that the cleric provides. This is a leadership of service, a leadership founded on the basic dignity and equality of all the baptised, a leadership that recognises gifts and calls them forth in order to build up the parish." A leadership that absorbs ministries that ought to be exercised by the laity is clericalism "at its worst".

A good balanced priestly

formation will always be necessary. Recognising common baptism, the cleric ought to be formed in order to engage professionally with an educated laity. Anything less will be a disservice to the people of God. Yes, there has to be some form of clericalism and I would agree with Mary Kenny that we don't altogether dismiss it.

Yours etc.,
Fr John Denvir SMA
Cork City, Co. Cork

Call for compassionate response to asylum seekers

Dear Editor, While the sentiments expressed by Aubrey McCarthy of Christian Charity Tigin are hopeful, they shed light on a harsh reality: Ireland's immigration policies are in disarray. The recent clearance of migrant encampments along the Grand Canal underscores the Government's chaotic and severely unplanned response to people seeking international protection.

Eugene Quinn's observations about the government's struggle to translate rhetoric into action are undeniable. Ireland's record numbers of homeless people paint a grim picture of a nation grappling with deep-rooted social inequalities. The failure to provide adequate housing and support for both migrants and locals in need highlights a systemic flaw in governance.

The Christian call for hospitality over hostility, as emphasised by Mr Quinn and echoed by Fr Niall Leahy, demands urgent attention from policymakers. Migrants, far from being a burden, bring a wealth of generosity and fervent faith to our communities. Their willingness to volunteer and inte-

grate speaks volumes about their desire to contribute positively to Irish society.

Cllr John Kingsley Onwumereh's plea for compassion at the heart of the response is timely. The Government must prioritise the well-being of all its citizens, irrespective of their nationality or immigration status. A comprehensive approach that addresses housing shortages, social support networks, and integration programmes is urgently needed to prevent further marginalisation and hardship.

As Ireland reflects on its immigration policies, it must confront uncomfortable truths and commit to meaningful change. By embracing compassion and solidarity, we can transform the current narrative of neglect into one of resilience and inclusivity. It is time for the Irish Government to heed the call of Christian values and enact policies that uphold the dignity and rights of all people, regardless of their background or circumstance.

Yours etc.,
Michael O'Riordan
Tallaght, Dublin 24



A call to solidarity: supporting Christians worldwide

Dear Editor, Aid to the Church in Need's (ACN) commitment to expressing concrete solidarity with Catholics facing adversity resonates deeply with the ethos of our faith. As Catholics, we are called to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who endure persecution and discrimination for their beliefs.

The poignant reminder by Pope Francis of the "ecumenism of blood" underscores the urgency of addressing the plight of persecuted Christians. Red Wednesday, an initiative by ACN, serves as a powerful annual reminder of the challenges faced by Christians around the world.

The Religious Freedom in the World Report, published biennially by the foundation, provides crucial insights into the state of religious freedom

globally as former Editor of *The Irish Catholic*, and new Director of Public Affairs for ACN, Michael Kelly highlighted [*The Irish Catholic* – May 9, 2024]. It highlights the importance of defending the fundamental right of individuals to freely practice and express their faith without fear of discrimination or persecution.

In the face of immense challenges, it is heartening to witness the unwavering commitment of organisations like ACN. Their efforts to provide essential support, including catechetical materials, aid to refugees, and assistance with church buildings, embody the compassionate spirit of our faith.

Yours etc.,
Donal Keogh
Foxrock, Dublin 18

GAA needs the revenue, but can't forget roots in communities

It is in the nature of politics that politicians feel obliged to say that they love elections, and always welcome an opportunity for the people to have their say. The reality is, of course, that politicians mostly dread elections because it might herald the day when the magic dies.

With just over three weeks to go until polls open for the European and local elections, a war of words of sorts opened at the weekend. The Taoiseach Simon Harris, Tánaiste Micheál Martin and even the Green Party leader Eamon Ryan expressed serious misgivings about important GAA championship fixtures being behind a so-called 'paywall' on GAAGO rather than free-to-air on RTÉ.

Uachtarán Chumann Lúthchleas Gael Jarlath Burns was quick to defend his association, and the need to generate additional revenue to pump into the grassroots of the game.

Mr Burns accused the politicians of 'electioneering' given that in recent meetings with senior ministers not one word has been uttered about GAAGO. And then when the paywall gets negative feedback on radio phone-in programmes, the ministers suddenly have an issue.

The president of the GAA may be on to something, but there is also a real issue at stake here: one that potentially excludes whole swathes of people, particularly elderly people who struggle with online billing and families who live in areas where the broadband is not sufficient to support a high-quality livestream.

The GAA is flourishing in every corner of this island – even in areas not traditionally associated with Gaelic games. East Belfast GAA, in the shadow of the shipyard cranes once the symbol of unionist hegemony, is now the largest club in Ulster. In prosperous south Dublin, once dominated almost exclusively by hockey and rugby, Cuala is one of the largest clubs.

Irish people can be rightly

proud of the GAA and the fact that monies generated are spent in local areas. In almost every parish in the country, the local GAA facilities are a vital resource in a community when other facilities have been stripped away.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, it was many GAA clubs who worked hard to ensure that people who were shielding could get their groceries. As the ban on public Masses was lifted, it was often volunteers from the local GAA club who helped ensure people could gather for worship in a safe manner.

The genius of the GAA has been the amateur status and the fact that it is a common project in a parish: the players might lift the silverware after a thrilling performance on the pitch, but they do so not only on their own behalf but on behalf of the man who cut the grass on that pitch, and the woman who prepared the half-time sandwiches, the mummies who washed the kits and the dads who were up at the crack of dawn opening the gates and getting the ground ready.

The future of the GAA relies on this interconnectedness, and the fact that it is a project people share in.

Mr Burns is evidently unrepentant about the commercial decisions to put certain games behind a paywall. The organisation, he says, is spending some €500 million in developing club and county facilities in the next few years, and that money has to come from somewhere.

However, a way should be found to ensure that people are not left behind and that those with inadequate broadband or an inability to navigate the digital world can enjoy the sports that they have enjoyed their entire lives.

The GAA is nothing if it is not community, and all the shiny stadiums might as well be museums if committed Gaels living down the road who can't make it to a match can't enjoy it in the peace of their own homes.

Evidence that the Devil exists

Dear Editor, Regarding the reference to the article of Fr Lyons OSB concerning the existence of the Devil [*The Irish Catholic* – May 9, 2024], after the "delight" of Ireland being represented at a defunct international music festival by a witch, I thought that it was evidenced that he does!

Yours etc.,
Fr John McCallion
Coalisland, Co. Tyrone

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.

Young Catholics want Mystery, Truth and Beauty



Eoin McCormack

Last week 'Associated Press' highlighted the polarising shift that is taking place across Catholic America in which younger Catholics are opting for more traditional liturgies and practices than their older counterparts. It reported that younger cohorts of committed Catholics consider the Vatican II generation to have exchanged "the promise of eternal salvation [with] guitar Masses, parish food pantries and casual indifference to Church doctrine". In the Irish context, similar sentiments were echoed by younger Catholics during the Irish synodal process when a group of 500 young people submitted a document stressing their commitment to Church

doctrine, particularly in relation to "human sexuality, marriage and ordained ministry". This, of course, differs from much of the wider synodal contributions which expressed difficulties with the Church's teaching in these areas.

Divide

While many often dismiss or simplify the growing polarisation amongst the different generations, we have to begin asking what exactly is driving this divide in order to have a coherent future as a Church. Why is it that younger generations of committed Catholics are pining for traditions that their older counterparts thought they had dismissed with? Is it just a reactionary nostalgia for the past? Or is there something

deeper going on? Perhaps it is both, although there are no simple answers to these questions. To ignore them, however, only feeds the polarisation and further divides the Church.

“Many young people are now searching for something which the culture not only doesn't give them but in fact denies them”

As much of our evangelisation efforts understandably focus on reaching out to those who have left the Church, the challenge is also to pay attention to those

young people who have remained committed to the Church despite the prevailing secular culture. What exactly are they looking for from their Church? It is prudent not to forget them while we also strengthen our efforts in reaching out to those who have walked away. Given there no longer exists a social pressure to remain Catholic, young people who have committed to the Church in our modern times have sincere philosophical and theological reasons for doing so. Many young people are now searching for something which the culture not only doesn't give them but in fact denies them. What am I talking about? Meaning and truth, or more fundamentally - God.

“The time is opportune to set out our stall clearly within the culture and offer the light of Christ to the world. We need to rethink our strategy, not only as a matter of survival, but as a matter of integrity”

Fundamentals

Young Catholics now find themselves in a culture which denies the fundamental drive for human existence. They are discouraged from adhering to any particular truth claim in the fear of causing offence to the other - "How can this religion be true and not that one?" - "How can I be 'inclusive' if I consider this claim true and another false?" This hyper-sense of inclusivity has left young people feeling adrift and therefore offers nothing but a radical relativism and ultimately provides an ironic truth claim of its own, that 'there is no truth'. 'Diversity', 'inclusivity' and 'tolerance' are becoming ideological traits replacing

Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. Same thing? Not at all. The latter are consequences of a life imbued with meaning and a definitive claim that life stems from God who is love. The former however are feeding a culture of meaninglessness. The time is opportune to set out our stall clearly within the culture and offer the light of Christ to the world. We need to rethink our strategy, not only as a matter of survival, but as a matter of integrity.

The lack of meaning within the prevailing culture perhaps in part explains why young, committed Catholics are opting for more traditional liturgies and practices. What are they looking for?

“Younger cohorts of committed Catholics consider the Vatican II generation to have exchanged “the promise of eternal salvation [with] guitar Masses, parish food pantries and casual indifference to Church doctrine”

Fundamentally, they want to attend somewhere that takes seriously the mystery they yearn for, but many however, when they go searching at their local parish Church, find the average experience is lacking in inspiration.

“Nowhere else is giving them the very grounds for objective truth. This is the USP - the unique selling point - of the Church”

So how can we respond in providing a coherent vision that is not stuck in nostalgia, but that is also not shy about who we are and what we are about? Young people are already inundated with social justice and environmental groups in their workplaces and social circles, but nowhere else is offering them the one unique factor they are missing - a pathway to God, a glimpse into the eternal mystery. Nowhere else is giving them the very grounds for objective truth. This is the USP - the unique selling point - of the Church and is exactly where we can focus our efforts for effective youth ministry.

A number of weeks ago, I wrote an article on the ‘Hunger for God in Dublin’ referencing a ‘meet-up’ event that took place in a city centre café where people were invited to discuss the existence of God. To my surprise, the event sold out with 60 people packed into this small café and many more turned away due to the size of the venue. Similarly, in the Western world more broadly, interest in topics such as these are becoming much more mainstream with Canadian Psychologist Jordan Peterson for example selling out stadium sized venues to discuss the Bible and the

meaning of life. Who would have thought 13,000 people would fill the 3Arena in Dublin in 2022 to hear a 2-hour lecture on the Bible and responsibility?

Contemporary Catholics are searching for mystery. They want a taste of what they cannot get anywhere else, a taste of the Divine. But if we don’t want to lose them to specialised chaplaincies with the old rite of the Mass and rather have them become active members in their local parishes, we need to begin asking, how beautiful are our local liturgies? How well do they make manifest this sublime mystery? How high is the quality of music that animates our liturgies? Does it truly raise the hearts and minds to the “glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful” as Vatican II decreed? How professional are our sound systems? How well kept are our Churches? Do they evoke awe and wonder and entice people to prayer and enter deeper into this mystery? These might seem like mere embellishments, but for the young people who are searching for authenticity and professionalism, these are key priorities. Are we sufficiently funding youth ministry in our parishes?

Uniqueness

Young Catholics want to experience the great mystery of truth, beauty, and goodness which the Church is positioned to give them. In light of Vatican II’s earnest desire “that all the faithful should be led to fully conscious, and active participation”, these ‘embellishments’ are fundamental in assisting that participation. We therefore need not be afraid to embrace that which differentiates us from the culture, the uniqueness and mysteriousness of our traditions and practices, it is precisely what people are searching for.

i Eoin McCormack is a Catechist & Pastoral Worker in the Parish of Rathmines Dublin. He holds a Licentiate in the Catechetical Sciences.

“We therefore need not be afraid to embrace that which differentiates us from the culture, the uniqueness and mysteriousness of our traditions and practices, it is precisely what people are searching for”

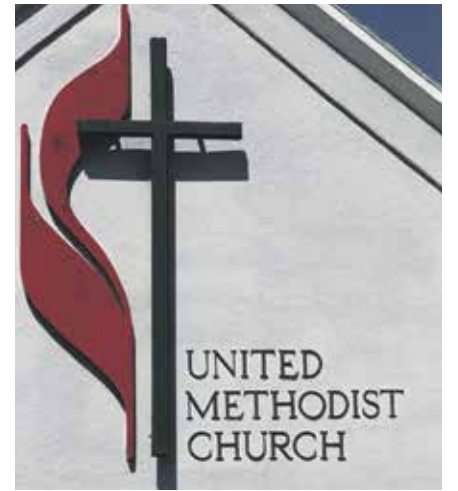


Your Faith

The Irish Catholic, May 16, 2024

Can I go to a Methodist church since there are no Catholic churches nearby?

Jenna Marie Cooper
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Union with God in 'The Living Flame of Love'

A person lights another's candle at the beginning of Pope Francis' Mass marking Candlemas, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Feb. 2, 2024. The Mass also marked the Vatican celebration of the World Day for Consecrated Life. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)



Laurretta Brown

When I mention to priests and religious that I am reading one spiritual classic a month this year, I often immediately get the advice not to read *The Dark Night of the Soul* by St John of the Cross. I have obligingly avoided that intimidating work, but when one Carmelite encouraged me to add St John's *The Living Flame of Love* to my list, I was intrigued and took it up for the month of April.

The Living Flame of Love is a poem written by the 16th Century Spanish mystic with beautiful, fiery imagery to describe a soul's perfect union with God. St John wrote both the poem and a commentary on it for Doña Ana de Peñalosa, a widow who went to him for spiritual direction in Granada.

Zenith

Poetry about a soul that has reached the zenith of the spiritual life on Earth in perfect unity with the Lord may seem far removed from our lives, but this view from the top provides beautiful insights into the

closeness God desires to have with every soul and the emptying of self-needed to make room for the Lord.

St John explains how the "living flame of love" refers to the activity of the Holy Spirit within the soul so transformed in love that the soul's interior acts are "acts of inflamed love" as "the will of the soul united with that flame, made one with it, loves most sublimely."

"As the cautery of love touches the wound of love, it causes a deeper wound of love, and thus the more it wounds, the more it cures and heals"

St John draws on Scripture to illustrate this union. He quotes Jeremiah 23:29 where the Lord asks, "is not my word like fire?" The Lord's words which are "spirit and life" are perceived by these souls so closely united to God in a manner that "savors of eternal life."

He points to the language of the bride in the Song of Songs who says "as soon as he spoke my heart melted" to show the effect that this speech of God produces in the soul.

He also uses the image of a "sweet cautery" that causes "a delightful wound" in the soul. Having worked at a hospital in his teenage years, St John was familiar with the practice at the time of using a

hot metal as a cautery on wounds to stop bleeding and infection.

St John writes that in the use of a cautery "if applied to a wound not made by fire, it converts it into a wound caused by fire." Similarly, he writes, wounds of past sins and griefs in the soul touched by the divine cautery become wounds of love. St John calls the "delightful wound" made in the soul "incurable" for "as often as the cautery of love touches the wound of love, it causes a deeper wound of love, and thus the more it wounds, the more it cures and heals."

Paradoxical

This paradoxical wounding that cures is part of a necessary purifying of the soul so that it can fully receive God.

St John calls the memory, intellect and will "caverns of feeling," illumined by the Lord's "lamps of fire" when the soul is in a perfect state of union with God.

When these caverns are filled with earthly goods, they "do not feel the vast emptiness of their deep capacity" and instead feel fully occupied by every little thing.

"It is an amazing thing," he writes, "that the least of these goods is enough so to encumber these faculties, capable of infinite goods, that they cannot receive these infinite goods until they are completely empty."

In contrast, he paints the radical picture of the soul in perfect

union with God in this life, saying "the intellect of this soul is God's intellect; its will is God's will; its memory is the memory of God; and its delight is God's delight; and although the substance of this soul is not the substance of God since it cannot undergo a substantial conversion into him, it has become God through participation in God."

"Though many 'desire to reach the state of the perfect' they 'do not want to be guided by the path of trials that leads to it'"

St John looks back on the soul's journey to this lofty union with God, recalling a time when the flame of love was "oppressive" consuming the imperfections of the soul's habits "making a person faint and suffer with self-knowledge." The flame was not itself harsh, but the will was so hardened that the love and tenderness of God felt oppressive to it.

He emphasises that suffering through trials is an absolute necessity for growth in holiness, and he writes that "the highest union cannot be wrought in a soul that is not fortified by trials and temptation, and purified by tribulations, darkness, and distress." He adds that souls still unpurified on Earth "must

undergo the sufferings of fire in the next life to attain union with God in glory."

St John writes that the reason "so few" reach a perfect union with God in this life is because the Lord "finds few vessels that will endure so lofty and sublime a work. Since he tries them in little things and finds them so weak that they immediately flee from work." Though many "desire to reach the state of the perfect" they "do not want to be guided by the path of trials that leads to it."

He exhorts people to "live with great patience and constancy in all tribulations and trials God places on them, whether they be exterior or interior, spiritual or bodily, great or small, and they should accept them all as from God's hand as a good remedy" for "they bring health."

Soul

God dwells in every human soul, he writes, but "it is in the soul in which less of its own appetites and pleasures dwell where he dwells more alone, more pleased, and more as though in his own house, ruling and governing it."

While his image of the soul radically transformed in God may seem distant, St John's writings shed light on the path to closer union to God as lying in a deep surrender to God's will and an acceptance of purification through suffering.

i Laurretta Brown is culture editor for OSV News.

Reducing the influence of the media in Catholic homes



Silvio Cuéllar

Over a decade ago, my wife Becky and I decided to cut our cable service and go without television. It was a drastic decision at the time, but one that helped our children learn many skills, such as playing instruments, painting and developing their talents at a young age. We made that decision because statistics increasingly indicated that excessive television use was having a negative effect on children, and we wanted to limit its influence.

Today, it is no longer television but cell phones, tablets and social media that have become a source of anxiety for our young people and an addictive tool of bad influences that negatively affect their mental health, leading our children away from the faith and values we try to instill.

Although television is being used less and less today, streaming services have increased, making it increasingly difficult for parents to monitor what their children are watching.

Excessive

Statistics and studies show that the excessive use of social media negatively affects the mental health of young people and adolescents; we urgently need to put limits on the time our children spend in front of a monitor, whether on the phone, tablet, or computer.

As Pope Francis said in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, families “need to consider what they want their children to be exposed to”.

To do this, “means being concerned about who is providing their entertainment, who is entering their rooms through television and electronic devices, and with whom they are spending their free time.”

Some strategies to reduce the influence of the media:

Promote electronic-free family activities. One may be to turn off all electronic devices during family dinners, encouraging conversations between parents and children.

You can ask, for example: How about telling us something you are thankful for? Or, Would you like to



A Catholic family is pictured having dinner together at their home in Valatie, New York. Photo: OSV News

share a good thing that happened to you this week?

Set specific times for media and technology use in the home. This can also be done by setting limits for each smartphone app, reviewing screen time every week and making adjustments accordingly. This requires us as parents to be more involved in our children's lives and activities.

“In our home, we subscribe to Pure Flix, and we also follow the series *The Chosen*, which is based on the life of Jesus with his Apostles”

Decide as parents what the appropriate age for children to have access to a cell phone is. In our household, we say 15 years old, but some parents may have different opinions. The important thing is supervision.

Establish good routines to encourage the practice of faith, dedicating

“Only if we devote time to our children, speaking of important things with simplicity and concern, and finding healthy ways for them to spend their time, will we be able to shield them from harm”

time for family prayer and reflection.

Dedicate more time to sports, arts, after-school clubs and other activities that help develop their talents.

Promote selective media consumption, prioritising inspirational content that nurtures faith and Catholic values. For example, in our home, we subscribe to Pure Flix, and we also follow the series *The Chosen*, which is based on the life of Jesus with his Apostles.

Finally, encourage Bible reading and participation in the parish youth group or look for one in the area if your parish does not have one.

Example and communication

It is not enough to make rules or set limits; we as parents are

also responsible for modelling good behaviour and setting an example. We can't ask them not to drink if we consume alcohol without measure.

We cannot tell them not to use their phones excessively if we use our phones all the time.

“Excessive exposure to social media has a negative effect on our children's mental, spiritual and physical health”

It is also essential to develop good communication techniques with them, explaining what we expect from them, knowing how to listen to them, and applying consequences when they do not behave as expected.

Pope Francis also said, “Families cannot help but be places of support, guidance and direction, however much they may have to rethink their methods and discover new resources”.

“Only if we devote time to our

children, speaking of important things with simplicity and concern, and finding healthy ways for them to spend their time, will we be able to shield them from harm,” he wrote in *Amoris Laetitia*.

Excessive exposure to social media has a negative effect on our children's mental, spiritual and physical health.

At the same time, parents must not only set limits but also lead by example, finding a balance and filling our children's time with positive activities that help develop their talents.

This is not to mention the practice of our faith at home and the opportunities that may present themselves in our parish community.

A start might be to choose a week in May, as is done in many places in the United States, and declare it a screen-free week, opting for fun and positive activities for the whole family.

That can be the beginning of new positive habits for our family that lead us to use less media and spend more time as a family doing things that nourish our body, mind – and also our faith.

i Silvio Cuéllar is a writer, liturgical music composer and journalist. He is a former coordinator of the Hispanic Ministry office and editor of *El Católico de Rhode Island* newspaper in the Diocese of Providence.

“Parents must not only set limits but also lead by example, finding a balance and filling our children's time with positive activities that help develop their talents”

Finding gratitude in what is given



Effie Caldarola

One morning, I was half-listening to America's National Public Radio as I quickly prepared for an appointment. Into the shower, grab the coffee, find the toothbrush and in the midst of this, bits and pieces of the day's news.

Then, 'StoryCorps' was playing. An independent nonprofit, StoryCorps exists to let people tell their stories. According to their website, since 2003, they've helped "nearly 700,000 people across the country have meaningful conversations about their lives." These stories are housed in the US Library of Congress.

The people who tell their stories are ordinary people, if any child of God on this earthly pilgrimage qualifies as "ordinary."

My ears perked up when I realised the family talking in the story was journeying through the terminal illness of the family's husband and father, who we learned at the end had died shortly after the recording was made.

Miracle

His wife remarked that people would tell her they were hoping for a miracle. She resisted this, because she said, "My whole life has been a miracle," referencing her relationship with this man she loved.

That line captured my attention, and her comment infiltrated my whole day. I saw in her words the spirituality of gratitude.

Because true gratitude, a very deep well, is profoundly spiritual.

Sometimes in our contemporary culture, gratitude is portrayed as just another self-help scheme. You'll be happier if you focus on thankfulness. At Thanksgiving, we enumerate our 'thanks' at grace.

We focus on family, success, 'stuff'. Our consumer culture tempts us to glide over the richness and depth of real gratitude and to feel thankful for material things and the completion of our ambitions.

“It is gratitude that ultimately asks one thing, but at a great price: fall extravagantly in love with what is given”

Years ago, I belonged to a Jesuit parish on a university campus. Our beloved young pastor, Jesuit Fr Pat Malone, was quite ill.

Because of treatments that had negatively affected his immune system, the day came when he could no longer celebrate Mass for us. I will never forget a Sunday morning, walking down the sidewalk to Mass, when we saw Fr Malone, standing on the hill above us, alone outside the Jesuit residence, where he could wave good morning but keep a safe distance.

It wasn't long before he died, but in my memory, he stands there still, a solitary figure wanting to be one with his flock. After his death, a compilation of his writings and homilies was published.

There was one line that I have carried with me ever since: "It is gratitude that ultimately asks one thing, but at a great price: fall extravagantly in love with what is given."

Those are 21 words I've pondered. It is one thing to be thankful for a good test result, the pay raise, the healthy baby. It's another to find gratitude in the hard things, the standing alone in illness and being able to appreciate the miracle therein.

Challenge

What a great gift and challenge it is to fall extravagantly in love with that which is given.

Can I fall extravagantly in love with the absence of a loved one? Can I accept with gratitude the givenness of old age, of defeats, of loneliness, of the memory of sins for which I have expressed sorrow and contrition?

And what does it mean, 'at a great price?' What is the coin of this realm of gratitude?

St Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, told us we can find God in all things. That means God is there in sorrow and joy, in loneliness and togetherness. To live into that is itself a miracle. If God is there, we are called to be thankful for God's presence, no matter how high the price.

Effie Caldarola is a wife, mom and grandmother who received her master's degree in pastoral studies from Seattle University.

Questions of Faith?

Jenna Marie Cooper

Can I go to a Methodist church since there are no Catholic churches nearby?

Q: I recently moved to a rural area, and my current parish is now nearly an hour drive away. There are no Catholic churches in my new area. There is, however, a Methodist church right across the street from my new home, in easy walking distance. They are open for services on Sunday morning and Wednesday night.

I know the two faiths are different in some key areas, but, as a Catholic, how wrong would I be if I simply went to this Methodist church? I asked a cradle Catholic friend about this, and they said as long as I go to Catholic Mass once a year, I'll be considered active in the Catholic faith, but if I miss over a year I'll be considered a 'lapsed Catholic', and that if I ever want to come back I'll be considered a 'revert', and have to go through RCIA again. Could you comment and clarify?

A: There are several questions within your question. To start with the first one: It is not wrong or sinful for a Catholic simply to attend a non-Catholic religious service. However, a Methodist Sunday service would not fulfill the Sunday obligation for a Catholic.

Deliberately missing Sunday Mass is in itself 'grave matter' and a serious sin that should be brought to the sacrament of penance. Still, it's good to recall that the Church's law does not bind us to do the impossible. The sinfulness of your personally potentially missing Sunday Mass in your own situation might be diminished due to mitigating factors.

Regarding the idea that a Catholic only needs to attend Mass once a year to remain 'active', I think your friend might be a little confused. As noted above, Catholics are required to attend Mass every Sunday. But strictly speaking, a Catholic is only required to receive Holy Communion once per year (after the sacrament of penance if the Catholic is conscious of having committed a mortal sin in the past year). Among Catholics this is sometimes colloquially referred to as the 'Easter duty'.

Naturally, we as Catholics are encouraged to go to Confession

and receive Holy Communion much more often than once a year! But if a Catholic for whatever reason discerns that he or she is not spiritually prepared to receive the Eucharist on a weekly basis, it is legitimate for him or her to fulfill the Sunday obligation by attending Mass without receiving Communion, as long as they receive Communion at least once during each Easter season.

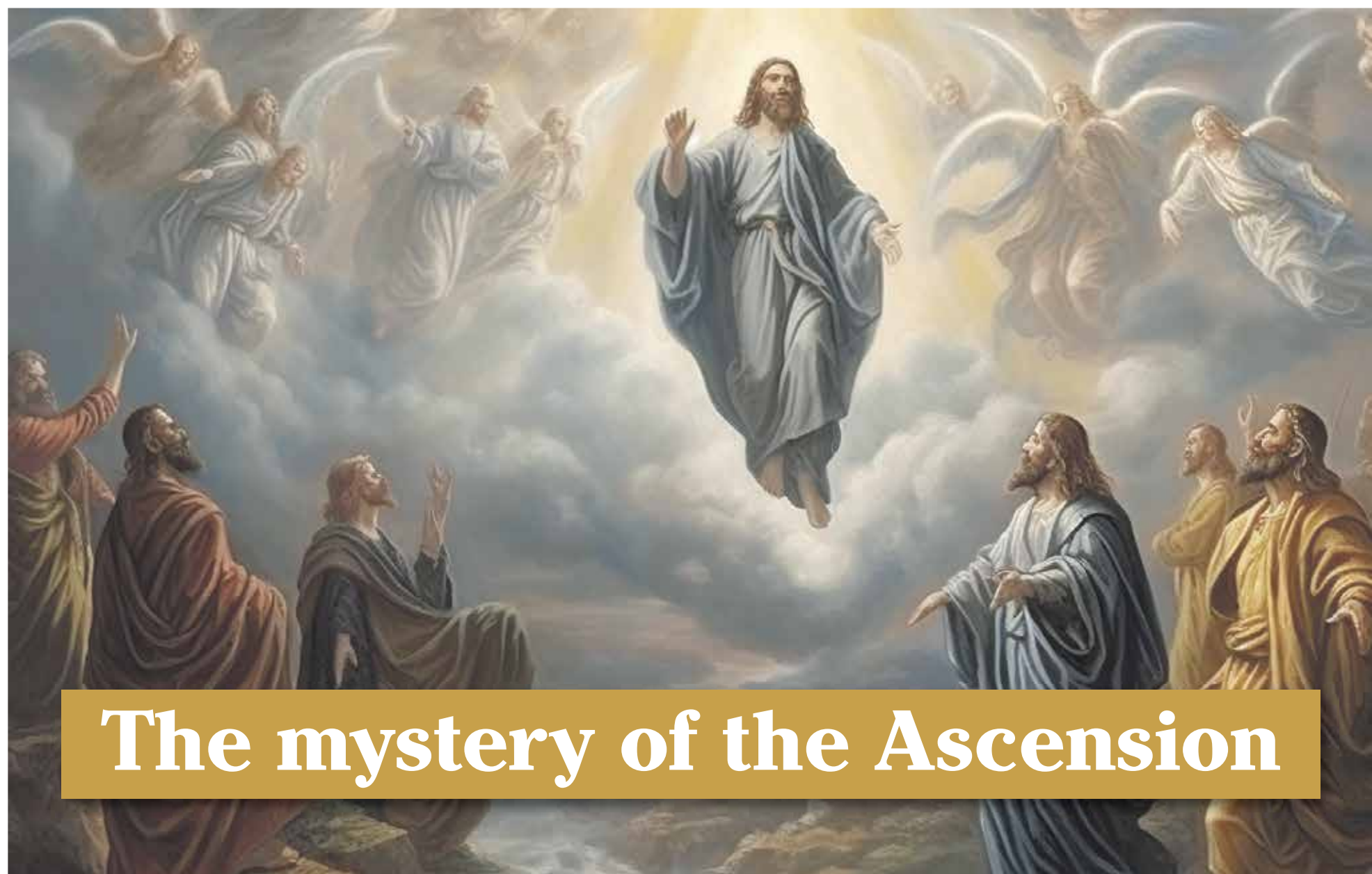
While we might popularly use the term 'active Catholic' to describe a Catholic who takes their faith seriously, technically 'active Catholic' is not a category in canon law. Canon law does have some specific penalties such as excommunication that might restrict a Catholic from fully participating in the life of the Church; and canon 916 reminds us that a Catholic should not receive Communion if they are conscious of having committed a serious sin that has not yet been absolved.

But once someone is baptised Catholic or formally received into the Catholic Church, they are always considered Catholic, even if they fall away from the faith or fail to practice it regularly. Nothing - not even neglecting the Sunday obligation - can 'de-activate' a person's identity as a Catholic.

Because of this, a lapsed Catholic who wanted to return to a full practice of the faith would not be eligible for RCIA, that is, the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. RCIA is primarily intended for catechumens, or unbaptised persons who are preparing to receive the sacraments of initiation. As such, RCIA would not be appropriate for a Catholic who has already been fully initiated. In the majority of situations, all a lapsed Catholic would need to do to return to a full participation in the life of the church is sincerely repent and make a good confession.

Jenna Marie Cooper, who holds a licentiate in canon law, is a consecrated virgin and a canonist whose column appears weekly at OSV News. Send your questions to CatholicQA@osv.com.





The mystery of the Ascension

What is the Ascension? The Ascension is an event in the life of Jesus and his original disciples, a feast day for Christians, a theology, and a spirituality, all woven together into one amorphous mystery that we too seldom try to unpack and sort out. What does the Ascension mean?

Among other things, it is a mystery that is strangely paradoxical. Here's the paradox: there is a wonderful life-giving gift in someone entering our lives, touching us, nurturing us, doing things that build us up, and giving life for us. But there's also a gift in the other eventually having to say goodbye to the way he or she has been present to us. Passing strange, there's also a gift in one's going away. Presence also depends upon absence. There's a blessing we can only give when we go away.

That's why Jesus, when bidding farewell to his friends before his ascension, spoke these words: "It's better for you that I go away. You will be sad now, but your sadness will turn to joy. Don't cling to me, I must ascend."

Understanding

How might we understand these words? How can it be better that someone we love goes away? How can the sadness of a goodbye, of a painful leaving, turn to joy? How can a goodbye eventually bring us someone's deeper presence?

This is hard to explain, though we have experiences of this in our



Fr Rolheiser

www.ronrolheiser.com

lives. Here's an example: When I was twenty-two years old, in the space of four months, my father and mother died, both still young. For myself and my siblings, the pain of their deaths was searing. Initially, as with every major loss, what we felt was pain, severance, coldness, helplessness, a new vulnerability, the loss of a vital life-connection, and the brute facticity of the definitiveness of death for which there is no adequate preparation. There's nothing warm, initially, in any loss, death, or painful goodbye.

“My parents' deaths were no longer a painful thing. Instead their absence turned into a warm presence”

Time, of course, is a great healer, but there's more to this than simply the fact that we become anaesthetised by the passage of time. After a while, and for me this took several years, I didn't feel cold anymore. My parents' deaths were no longer a painful thing. Instead their absence turned into a warm

presence, the heaviness gave way to a certain lightness of soul, their seeming incapacity to speak to me now turned into a surprising new way of having their steady, constant presence in my life, and the blessing that they were never able to fully give me while they were alive began to seep ever more deeply and irrevocably into the very core of my person. The same was true for my siblings. Our sadness turned to joy and we began to find our parents again, in a deeper way, at a deeper place of soul, namely, in those places where their spirits had flourished while they were alive. They had ascended, and we were better for it.

Absence

We have this kind of experience frequently, just in less dramatic ways. Parents, for instance, expe-

rience this, often excruciatingly, when a child grows up and eventually goes away to start life on his or her own. A real death takes place and an ascension must happen. An old way of relating must die, painful as that death is. Yet, as we know, it's better that our children go away.

The same is true everywhere in life. When we visit someone, it's important that we come; it's also important that we leave. Our leaving, painful though it is, is part of the gift of our visit. Our presence depends partly on our absence.

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder. For the most part, that's not true”

And this must be carefully distinguished from what we mean by the axiom: Absence makes the heart grow fonder. For the most part, that's not true. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, but only for a while and mostly for the wrong reasons. Physical absence, simple distance from each other,

without a deeper dynamic of spirit entering beneath, ends more relationships than it deepens. In the end, most of the time, we simply grow apart. That's not how the ascension deepens intimacy, presence, and blessing.

Sadness

The ascension deepens intimacy by giving us a new presence, a deeper, richer one, but one which can only come about if our former way of being present is taken away. Perhaps we understand this best in the experience we have when our children grow up and leave home. It's painful to see them grow away from us. It's painful to have to say goodbye. It's painful to let someone ascend.

But, if their words could in fact say what their hearts intuit, they would say what Jesus said before his ascension: "It's better for you that I go away. There will be sadness now, but that sadness will turn to joy when, one day soon, I will be standing before you as an adult son or daughter who is now able to give you the much deeper gift of my adulthood."

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder, but only for a while and mostly for the wrong reasons. Physical absence, simple distance from each other, without a deeper dynamic of spirit entering beneath, ends more relationships than it deepens”

Jesus' offering of peace at Pentecost



A painting on the ceiling of St. Catherine Church in Spring Lake, New Jersey, depicts the Holy Spirit descending upon the apostles. Photo: OSV News

Acts 2:1-11
Ps 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34
1 Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13 or
Gal 5:16-25
Jn 20:19-23 or Jn 15:26-27; 16:12-15

The Sunday Gospel

Jem Sullivan



disciples are in the grip of fear after Jesus' death on the cross.

“The risen Jesus showed them the nail marks in his hands and the wounds in his side, the signs of his self-giving love revealed on the cross”

They stayed behind locked doors for fear of being found by the religious authorities. They were expecting the same fate as their lord

and master. It is at this moment of deep fear and isolation that Jesus comes to the disciples.

And his first words to them are, “Peace be with you”.

Then the risen Jesus showed them the nail marks in his hands and the wounds in his side, the signs of his self-giving love revealed on the cross.

When Jesus showed his wounded hands and side, the disciples' fear turns to hopeful rejoicing in the presence of the risen Lord.

Bestow

And when Jesus breathes on them, he bestows the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Now they are empowered by the divine life flowing in them to abandon the chains of fear and become bold witnesses to faith in Jesus' resurrection.

For as St Paul notes, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit”.

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Blessed Trinity, the love of the Father and the Son

“We are given the gift of the Holy Spirit who gives strength to leave fear behind and live in the freedom of friendship with Jesus”

whose presence sanctifies and enlivens the Church in every age.

At Pentecost, the Church receives the Holy Spirit that Jesus first promised to his disciples.

Today, the same gift of the Holy Spirit is offered to every disciple of Jesus to empower all to face and overcome the fears, anxieties and worries of life.

“What do Jesus' words, ‘Peace be with you’, mean to you?”

In the power of the Holy Spirit, we are strengthened to replace

fear with faith and exchange the anxieties and worries of daily life with trust in God.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit who gives strength to leave fear behind and live in the freedom of friendship with Jesus, as we say in faith, “speak to me, Lord”.

Question: What do Jesus' words, “Peace be with you”, mean to you?

Jem Sullivan holds a doctorate in religious education and is an associate professor of catechetics in the School of Theology and Religious Studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

When St John Paul II was elected to the papacy in 1978 among his first words to the world, spoken during his inaugural homily, were, “Be not afraid! Open wide the doors for Christ...”

As a youth, a seminarian, a young priest and bishop, the pope had experienced firsthand the intense fear that gripped his native land of Poland as the Nazis ruthlessly occupied his country during World War II.

Having lived through

both the Nazi invasion of Poland and the Communist regime after the war, the pope understood that fear was a powerful weapon used by totalitarian regimes to control and intimidate people.

Conquered

He knew also, in faith, that Jesus conquered fear and sin in the saving mystery of the cross.

This was the deep Christian conviction that shaped his saintly life and his papacy.

In today's Gospel, the

“In the power of the Holy Spirit, we are strengthened to replace fear with faith and exchange the anxieties and worries of daily life with trust in God”

TVRadio

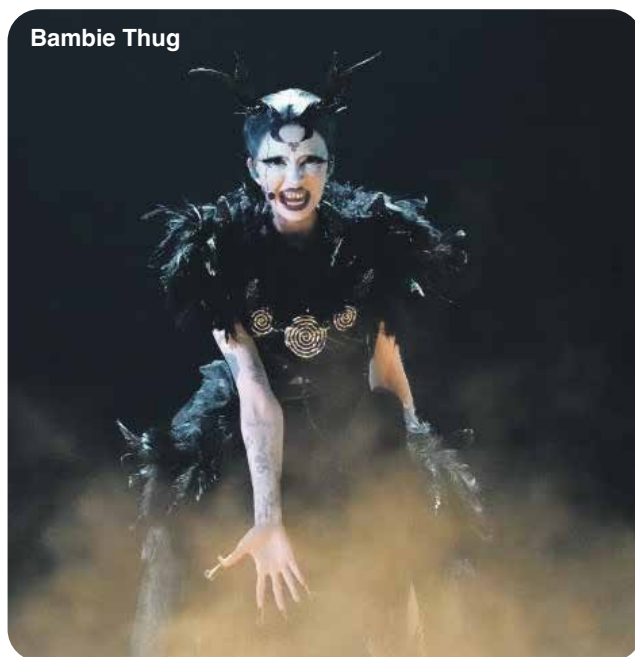
Brendan O'Regan



Bambie, booing, and bullying

Some days I get more confused than others – it could be the weather; it could be the politics but Wednesday of last week it was the law.

Listening sleepily to **Morning Ireland** (RTÉ Radio 1) I heard an interview with Padraic Jones, Chief Superintendent of Community Engagement with An Garda Síochána on foot of news reports of a rise in the figures for 'hate crimes and hate incidents', which puzzled me. It seems confusion is caused by the Gardai recording 'non-crime' hate incidents, based on an alleged victim's subjective perceptions. According to Garda Jones, 103 of the 651 reported incidents did not feature an 'underlying crime'. The whole thing made me even more concerned about the proposed 'hate speech' legislation. Are there not enough real crimes to be investigated – even by the 'diversity officers'? Of course, promoting hate is offensive and I get it that if someone is attacked for what they are it can feel extra damaging, but I wonder if we're not too hung up on polarising and divisive identities rather than on our common humanity, a concept that unites. I've always thought the law supposed to be objective, so I'm uneasy about 'hate crime'



Bambie Thug

getting so much more attention than, say, 'greed crime' or 'lust crime'.

Divisiveness caused by identity issues was certainly a feature of last weekend's Eurovision Song Contest, which was among the items discussed on **Sunday** (BBC Radio 4). It was pointed out that the contest which was supposed to be a source of unity had produced plenty of controversy and divisiveness – particularly over the inclusion of an Israeli song, which entry gained considerable support from the

public, though not from the juries. Reporter Sophie Yardley described the event as 'highly charged' and told us that the Israeli singer had to be confined to her room for her protection. It was a lost opportunity for this religious affairs programme not to confront decency issues and the demonic imagery used in the Irish entry. Was the song's presentation just provocative theatrics or something darker? On the **Nine O'Clock News** (RTÉ One, Sunday) coverage of the contest aftermath was celebratory in tone, with

chants of 'Crown the Witch'. Supporters declared that Bambie Thug's song represented modern Ireland (God help us, literally). Strangely I couldn't find any trace of this segment in the catchup version on the RTÉ Player.

Facing demons, in a metaphorical sense, was a theme in **The Real Story of Hacksaw Ridge** (Virgin Media Two, Sunday), a moving docudrama about American soldier, medic and conscientious objector Desmond Doss whose story was told in the film **Hacksaw Ridge**. Like many conscientious objectors he faced ridicule and bullying – in this case from fellow soldiers, until he saved 75 of them during the World War II battle for Okinawa and subsequently received the Medal of Honour, the only conscientious objector to receive the award. He was motivated in his determination to serve only as a medic and never carry a gun by his intense religious faith – he was a Seventh Day Adventist. In training he was saved from total isolation in his unit by the support of a Catholic fellow soldier Clarence Glenn. The story of his later life was particularly interesting – including struggles with what we now know as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and personal tragedy

PICK OF THE WEEK

NIGHT OF THE PROPHET
EWTN Sunday May 19, 9pm

Through the eyes of a Roman journalist, a dramatisation of Padre Pio, who is unveiled as a man of purity and Christian charity.

BETTER OFF DEAD?

BBC One Tuesday May 21, 9pm (also BBC 2 Tuesday -night- 2.50am)

Actor and disability rights activist Liz Carr on why she believes we shouldn't legalise assisted suicide. As a long-term campaigner against that change, Liz fears disabled lives will be put at risk if the law is altered.

EVERYBODY LOVES RAYMOND

Channel 4 Wednesday May 22, 7.45pm

The whole family meet the school counsellor and their parish priest to uncover what – and who – is to blame for the constant bickering between them and Michael's parents.

with the death of his wife in a car accident.

On an entirely different note, Michael Kelly has certainly not been idle since leaving *The Irish Catholic*. Contributing to **Prayer for the Day** (BBC Radio 4, Monday), he spoke of how the new week brings fresh promise, but sometimes fresh anxiety too. As a teen he wanted life to go faster, but now at 40-something and 'somewhat grown up' he wanted life to slow down. He admired in today's teens their 'passionate and intense impatience... often aimed at making the world a bet-

ter place'. At a time when we can become too cynical, he recalled Jesus calling us to be more like children – to be childlike rather than childish. He was impressed by the wonder of his 8-years-old nephew when something special happened – 'the best day of my life' was his frequent expression. He prayed that day for an open heart, an open mind – he wanted to view the world with the wide eyes of a child and embrace the opportunities ahead. A good start to the week – available on BBC Sounds.

Film

Aubrey Malone



Cheerleading and loving the craic

If you uttered the word 'Cheer' to me before I saw Tanya Doyle's *Eat/Sleep/Cheer/Repeat*, I'd have thought you were giving me an instruction to support someone. In actual fact it's shorthand for cheerleading.

For those of you who, like me, thought cheerleading was 'an American thing' here's a corrective to that mindset. Though we're still in 'Generation One' of Team Ireland, the country has been making big strides in the activity in recent years.

In fact, in 2022, during the height of Covid, we participated in the world finals of it in Orlando.

Ferrying cheerleaders to America, I would have thought, would be a bit like bringing coals to Newcastle – or a hurling team from New York to Tipperary.

Think again.

Like all good sports documentaries, this one enables us to get to know the participants (mainly girls) as people. We experience their highs and lows – literally – as they rotate like spinning tops, somersault like eels, backflip until your heart is in your mouth watching them, and coordinate brilliantly in pyramids.

As the title of the documentary suggests, these people live and breathe what

they do. In many ways they are like an extended family. If they falter in any way, their zealous trainer (suspecting a domino effect from absenteeism or lack of commitment) ships them back into shape sharpish.

What came through most forcibly for me in it was the likeability of the entrants. They love the 'craic', radiating an infectious charm while remaining refreshingly unconscious of the camera. This is something their American counterparts didn't share in any stateside footage of cheerleaders I've watched over the years.

One thing that's missing from the film is footage of

the other teams after the Irish one gets to Orlando. This doesn't lessen its value. In some ways it gives it more focus. But I still found it curious.

The skills on display are sometimes not as polished as those of the Yanks but let's not forget they have been at it for decades. Also, in many cases they do little more than twirl a baton. The activity has moved on from those days.

Tanya presents us with a gutsy bunch of teenagers bubbling over with energy as they contemplate everything from their sexuality to life after 'Cheer'.

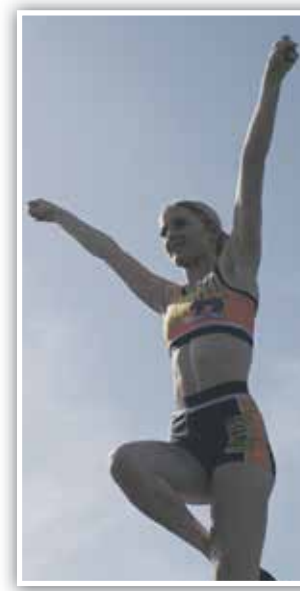
One of them has refused

to be vaccinated. As a result, she isn't allowed to go to Orlando. Her devastation as she watches her teammates competing on the TV is heart-wrenching. Covid changed so many of our lives in all sorts of ways.

At the end of the day this is a celebration of dedication. 'Cheer' doesn't get any Government funding. It demands great application, great trust – and of course great skill.

In one sequence we see a girl being flung upwards, then flipping around in the air before landing on the hands of one of the people who flung her – on one foot.

Don't try this at home.



BookReviews

Peter Costello



Gerald Boland and the struggle for the soul of Fianna Fáil

Gerald Boland: A Life,
by Stephen Kelly
(Eastwood Books / Wordwell,
€20.00 / £18.99).

Felix M. Larkin

Enoch Powell famously wrote that “all political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure”. The career of Gerald Boland was no exception.

A senior figure in the Fianna Fáil party from its foundation in 1926 until his resignation in 1971 and a member of every Fianna Fáil government from 1932 to 1954, he is long overdue a biography. This fine study by Stephen Kelly, of Liverpool Hope University, is therefore greatly to be welcomed.

Boland was born in Manchester in 1885 to an Irish family with deep Fenian roots; his father had links to the Invincibles who murdered Lord Frederick Cavendish and Thomas Burke in the Phoenix Park in 1882.

Growing up in Dublin, his involvement in advanced nationalist movements began at an early age. His role in the 1916 Rising, in the War of Independence and in the Civil War on the anti-Treaty side, while significant, was less noteworthy than that of his younger and more charismatic brother, Harry.

Harry Boland became a republican martyr when he was killed in doubtful circumstances during the Civil War.

Shortly before Harry's death, Gerald had been captured by Free State troops near Blessington, Co. Wicklow.

He would not be released until July 1924, and Kelly records that he was interned for longer than any other anti-Treaty prisoner.

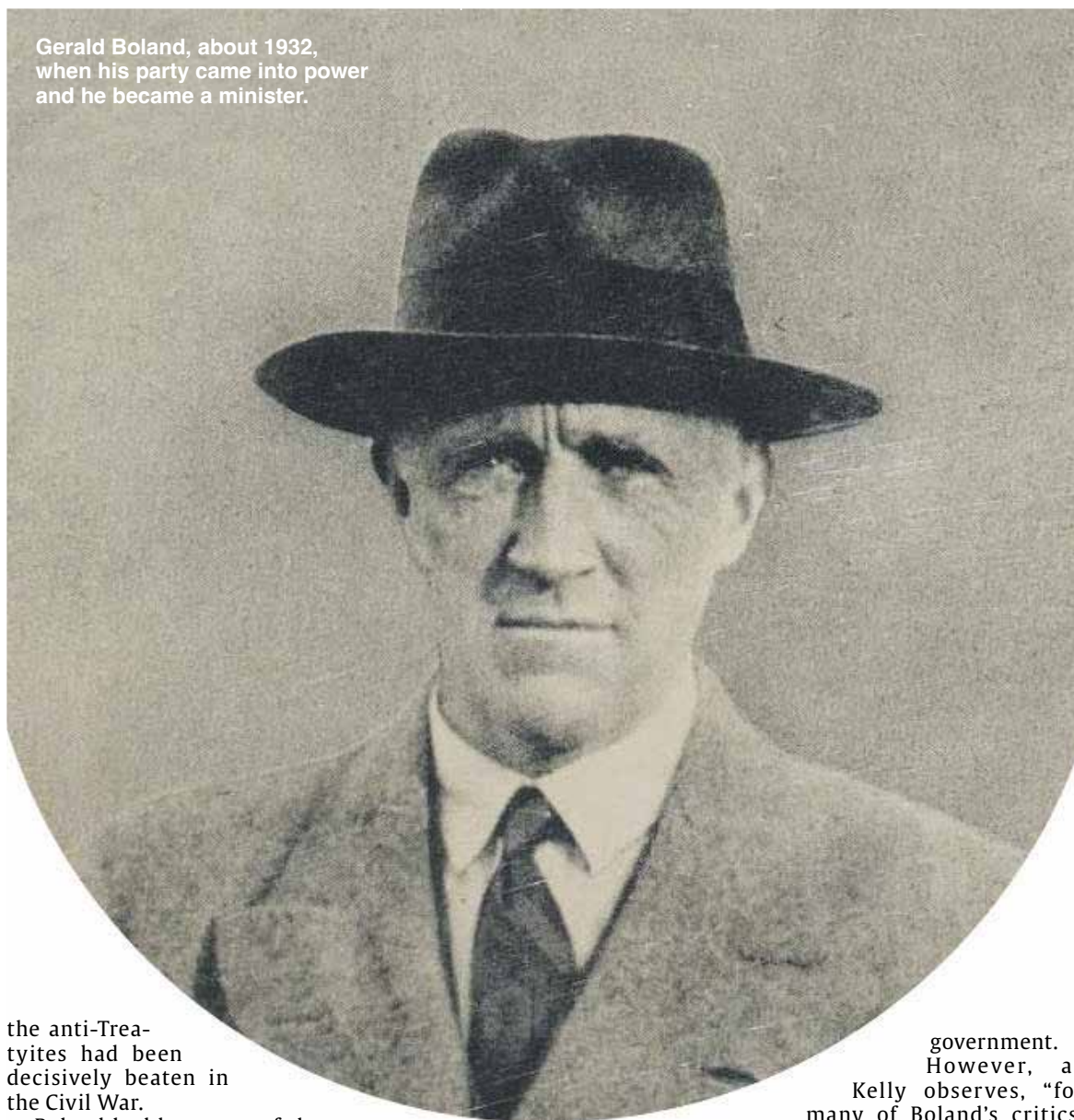
Beginning

During his imprisonment, he and fellow prisoners went on a hunger strike that lasted 40 days in a futile attempt to secure their release. While imprisoned, he was elected TD for Roscommon to fill the seat which had been held by his late brother. He would retain that seat until 1961, after which he served two terms in Seanad Éireann.

In the early days of Fianna Fáil, Boland and Seán Lemass were appointed joint honorary secretaries and tasked with setting up the organisation nationwide and preparing for elections.

They were a remarkably successful team, and their efforts bore fruit quickly when Fianna Fáil came to power in 1932, six years after the foundation of the party and less than ten years after

Gerald Boland, about 1932, when his party came into power and he became a minister.



the anti-Treatyites had been decisively beaten in the Civil War.

Boland had been one of the first within Fianna Fáil to call for the abandonment of the policy of abstention from Dáil Éireann, his view being that the party would otherwise be irrelevant.

“Boland pursued a particularly hard line against the IRA”

His government service was successively as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, Minister for Lands and, most controversially, Minis-

ter for Justice. Kelly gives a full account of his achievements in these offices.

As Minister for Justice from 1939 to 1948, Boland pursued a particularly hard line against the IRA: six IRA members were executed and three were allowed to die on hunger strike on his watch.

Kelly argues that Boland believed his stance was necessary in order to safeguard Irish neutrality during the Second World War in view of IRA dalliance with Nazi Germany – and so did the

government.

However, as Kelly observes, “for many of Boland's critics, his stern – some have called it ruthless – suppression of the IRA looked like a classic example of the poacher-turned-gamekeeper, given his own revolutionary background”.

Conflict

On other matters, Boland could be more liberal than many of his Fianna Fáil colleagues. For instance, he opposed the initial draft of the religion article (Article 44) in the 1937 constitution as sectarian and, in his own words, “equivalent to the expulsion from

our history of great [Protestant] Irishmen”.

His objections resulted in the compromise text that was eventually adopted recognising the “special position” of the Church but going no further than that.

In the 1950s, Boland was increasingly at odds with Seán Lemass' efforts to modernise the Irish economy and to move away from outdated policies in other areas, especially in relation to Irish reunification.

“The struggle for power between these two titans in de Valera's declining years as leader of Fianna Fáil led to Boland being dropped from the cabinet”

Boland regarded much of this as contrary to the core values of Fianna Fáil. The struggle for power between these two titans in de Valera's declining years as leader of Fianna Fáil led to Boland being dropped from the cabinet at Lemass' insistence when de Valera formed his last government in 1957 and it presaged the divisions in Fianna Fáil which threatened to break up the party in 1970 when Charles Haughey and Neil Blaney were sacked from the government on suspicion of being involved in a plot to secure arms for nationalists in Northern Ireland.

Gerald's son, Kevin – who had replaced him in the cabinet in 1957 – resigned from the government in sympathy with Haughey and Blaney, and was supported in this by his father. Both father and son later resigned from Fianna Fáil. Gerald died soon afterwards, in 1973.

Stephen Kelly's biography makes extensive use of Gerald Boland's unpublished memoir and associated personal papers. His book is, accordingly, an important contribution to the historiography of the first half-century of independent Ireland.

“They were a remarkably successful team, and their efforts bore fruit quickly when Fianna Fáil came to power in 1932, six years after the foundation of the party”

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

The scintillating minds and memories that exist in weakened bodies

How We Survived and Surprised: A Collection of Writing by Polio Survivors in Ireland

(Post Polio Support Group Ireland, €10.00 plus postage; contact Post Polio Support Group, Unit 319 Capel Building, Mary's Abbey, Dublin 7; email info@ppsg.ie; tel: 01 889 8920)

Peter Costello

From time to time in these pages we review books published in support of charities. These are often of variable quality, but this one, for a charity dealing with a little known but crippling affliction, Post Polio Syndrome, is an excellent volume in support of an import cause.

Polio (according to the HSE site) is an infection caused by a virus, which causes fever, vomiting and muscle stiffness.

Most people with polio do not have any symptoms and do not know that they're infected. But for some people, polio causes temporary or permanent paralysis, involving the loss of the ability to move some or all of your body. The paralysis can be life-threatening.

Polio used to be common in Ireland and worldwide. It's rare today because it can be prevented with a vaccine. Cases of polio in Ireland fell when the vaccine was introduced in 1957. The last recorded case of polio in Ireland was in 1984.

But the infection is still found in some parts of the world, such as Nigeria and South Asia, areas Ireland has strong contacts with. Because of this, there is a very small risk that polio could be brought back to Ireland.

There's no cure for polio, so it's important to make sure that you and your children are vaccinated against it. So much for what the HSE says about the disease.

Personal

Here in Ireland there was a significant outbreak in the later 1940s and early 1950s. Many people were affected but survived. But in their later years the effects of polio returned in the form of Post Polio Syndrome.

I speak from family experience as two members of our extended family network suffer from it. It involves a debilitating weakness of the muscles in arms and legs which leads to mobility prob-

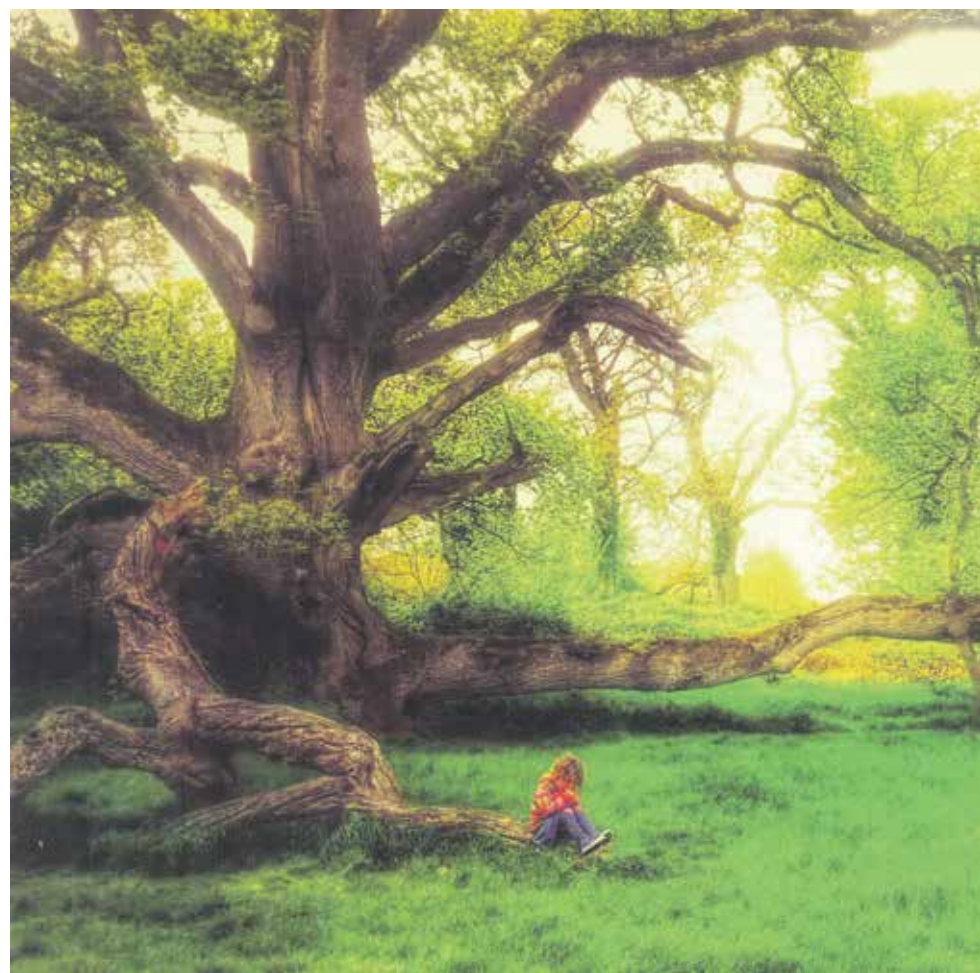
lems and incapacity. That a loved one should be haunted by an illness of their childhood is very concerning.

Yet I know from experience that to the present generation polio has no meaning at all, not even as a legend. Diseases have their fashions. Polio is just not the fashion anymore.

“This is all over a very heart warming and entertaining as well as informative read”

This book is written, composed, illustrated, and designed by those who live with the condition. It contains poems ranging from *haiku* to longer recollections of childhood in verse, but also a well judged selection of prose pieces. These are of all kinds. Two that especially struck me were 'Louis Heels', by Anne Shanahan, and 'Delivering for Santa' by Mary Byrne.

But others equally good are printed. So this is all over a very heart warming



A very small child and a very ancient tree, one of the photographs from the Post Polio album.

and entertaining as well as informative read. It's so good you wouldn't think it was all done for charity.

Mary Byrne describes her life running with her husband a well-established family business in Daingean Co. Offaly. This is full of interest for the insight it gives on rural life in the 1950s and 1960s, with all its ups and downs and difficulties. It shows what can be achieved against the odds.

Theirs was a good local shop of the old fashioned kind that sold everything you think, and always with a smile. There is a brief hint of the coming times when service has become less personal, when a few of the customers begin to talk of the

cheaper prices at Dunne's Store in the county town Tullamore – not of course that the local people chose to go there.

Influences

Strangely enough there seems to be very little, hardly hint indeed, of the blighting darkness of those days which we are told so often was spread over the land by the baleful influences of State and Church.

'Louis Heels' is a charming vignette of a 16-year-old girl's venture into the Wolds of fashion and boys. Because of 'her leg' things are different for, and a special shoe with those fashionable heels named after Louis XV, were

specially made for her by a friendly cobbler.

"What with the new shoes and the dress in Japanese silk her granny had made up from a McCall's pattern" (ah yes, those were indeed the days of the home made dress) she got to dance all the evening to the music of Elvis and Pat Boone, with "a new boy" to the place – wearing "a black shirt and dark rimmed glasses, with a sort of intellectual air about him", someone's cousin who has ambitions to be a writer and promises to lend her books by Hemingway, and makes a date for the pictures the following Saturday... readers of a certain age will recognise all of this with a happy sigh.

Those other Americas

The River Healer and other stories: A Journey to the Heartland of America,

by Paddy Reid
(Liberties Press, €19.99 / £18.99)

Peter Costello

During the long 20 years after the Second World War, the large American glossy magazines which circulated in Ireland then, such as *Life*, *Look*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *House Beautiful* brought Ireland a vision of abundance, ostentatious elegance, and motor cars, a white goods paradise of new style cookers, fridges and Hoovers, that everyone began to aspire to, banishing the old gas cooker as quickly as they could.

These notions were brought to an abrupt end in the 1960s, in books like Michael Harrington's *The Other America*. He was writing about the poor of rural America, the cold water flat Americans of the big cities, that were far removed for the other vision, a place inhabited by poor blacks and even poor whites, that echo those images of Depression American people thought were something in the past.

Though the experiences related in these memoirs by a Dublin author about his 30 odd years working in the lower depths of American society, down in the Delta of the Mississippi, and up in the wide spreading acres of Indiana, among the poor, the disadvantaged, the AIDS-riddled 'other

Americans' that middle Americans of 'good taste' seldom thought about.

Photography

The sharp revealing prose of the book is reinforced by the very fine photographs of the late Al Clayton, with the echoes of deprivation in the space age that echoed everywhere those by such people as Dorothy Lange, or the people written about in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

This too is the world of the illegal emigrants of all kinds, people drawn in by that 'American dream' that is now so hard to grasp outside of a dream.

These stories are very relevant to the American of the very present moment. These are people that Joe

Biden, in the tradition of the Democratic Party, is very aware of, but those who vote support Trump are not these people either.

These are in effect the Americans who never vote because in their poverty they see little of the 'Great America' that so many running for office talk about.

But a book like this has its own values, which Paddy Reid slowly reveals. It tells you all about the real America. Its epilogue, 'Where are we today', makes chilling reading.

But we must not despair. However bad things look in general, a book like *The River Healer* reminds us that there are always good and kind people at work in the world.

Indeed, it is on them that the future of the world depends.

A Delta midwife in State Line, sign of Good Taste, Southern style. Photo: Al Clayton (alclaytonphotography.com)



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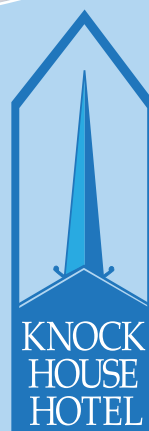
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— Pope St Pius X, June 4, 1912

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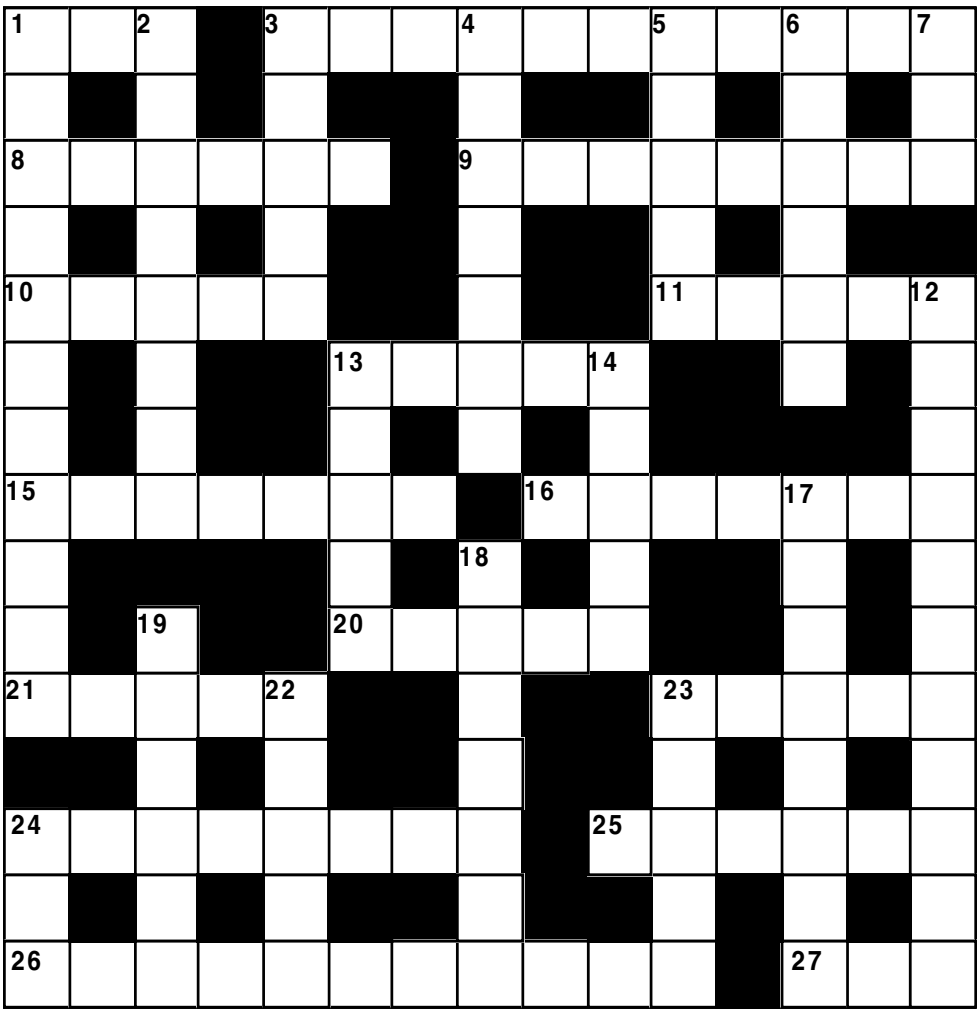
Gordius 663

Across

- 1 Sound like a dove (3)
3 Tolstoy novel (3,3,5)
8 Dried grape (6)
9 Creature that lives in a drey (8)
10 Cereal crop (5)
11 Object (5)
13 Ecstasy (5)
15 Member of the armed forces (7)
16 Bird with an enormous bill (7)
20 Enemy of Dr Who (5)
21 Demise (5)
23 & 24 Benison from the Pope (5,8)
25 From the French, a feeling you have experienced something previously (4,2)
26 Crank-driven musical instrument (6,5)
27 Japanese theatre style (3)

Down

- 1 Ingredient used in desserts and casseroles (7,4)
2 Versatile liquid (5,3)
3 Your wear a belt around it (5)
4 Type of poison (7)
5 Colourful liquid (5)
6 Deft (6)
7 Snakelike fish (3)
12 Wicklow location as-



- sociated with St Kevin (11)
13 Bakers' produce (5)
14 Make a statement (5)
17 Religious person attached to an institu-

- tion or military unit, for example (8)
18 One who is prolific on the internet (7)
19 Lifelong job or vocation (6)

- 22 Unseemly or inconsiderate speed (5)
23 Groom oneself, as a bird may do (5)
24 Mr Dylan or Mr Geldof, perhaps (3)

SOLUTIONS, MAY 9

GORDIUS No. 662

Across

- 1 Retrospect 6 Stew 10 Three 11 Genuflect 12 Vespers 15 Adder 17 Lamb 18 Elms 19 Leave 21 Propose 23 Liner 24 Echo 25 Able 26 Naval 28 Retreat 33 Tarantula 34 Bugle 35 Nook 36 Wholesaler

Down

- 1 Rite 2 Target man 3 One up 4 Pager 5 Cent 7 Tread 8 Watermelon 9 Affable 13 Emir 14 Slipper 16 Wellington 20 Archangel 21 Praline 22 Shot 27 Virgo 29 E-mail 30 Robes 31 Push 32 Fear

Sudoku Corner 533

Easy

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

Hard

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

Last week's Easy 532

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

Last week's Hard 532

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

Notebook

Fr Vincent Sherlock



Knowing the Lord enters our lives quietly

This is the season for First Holy Communion ceremonies. Important, and sadly often misunderstood occasions, they have the potential for so much good. I enjoy them. Through the years I have had some very memorable moments.

I remember my own First Holy Communion Day but, oddly enough, not as much about the Mass or receiving for the first time as of my mother getting me ready for Mass. I can even remember the clothes I wore – cardigan, cream shirt, tie and short trousers. My mother got me ready before the others got up and she covered my ‘Communion clothes’ with a kitchen coat. We had a garage at home and the potential for an oil stain was very real! There is something I like about remembering this part of the day – a bit like Heaney’s poem around peeling potatoes with his mother. I think of this when I see children in front of me and hope that in years to come, they will feel that strong connection with the love that dressed them the morning of their First Holy Communion.

Communion

There is a memory I have from a First Holy Communion ceremony from close on 30 years ago. A mother told



me that her son came back to the seat, having received for the first time. He knelt beside her, hands joined in prayer and spent a few minutes like this. Then he sat up, leaned into his mother and whispered in her ear: “Mammy, I am not as full as I thought I’d be!” His mother was amused and so was I. Thinking of it in later years, I have come to see it as a very significant comment. The little boy had heard about “the body of Christ” and must have imagined that this would fill him and how small the wafer must have seemed to him. I like this image and take consolation in knowing that the Lord enters our lives quietly and meaningfully and not in an oppressive way. It is about

friendship, nourishment, choice and never about control. Maybe that is why I don’t have a clear memory of my own receiving for the first time but I am convinced the friendship is real and that is the friendship and connection I believe is possible for all celebrating First Holy Communion in these days of 2024.

Gospel

At a recent ceremony, I had used the Gospel passage of the feeding of the multitude. I used this passage to focus attention on the small boy in the crowd who offered a handful of bread and fish in the hope that it might feed those gathered in a packed field. Mathematically his offering made no sense but spir-

itually it was perfect. It was rooted in generosity and wanting to give to Jesus. I stood with the children and began to develop this thought with them. I asked, “What did the little boy give to Jesus?” One of the children surprised me when he replied: “A spin on his bicycle!” People laughed and so did I but quickly realised the boy was talking about a story I shared at Christmas Mass about a young child coming into the church on Christmas morning, cycling his new bike to the crib and taking the baby Jesus from the crib before quickly cycling out of the church. The priest saw this happening and was frozen in terror and wondered what he would do. Within minutes the boy returned, placed Jesus back in the crib and, when the priest asked him what he was doing, the boy explained that he had asked Santa for a new bike and promised Jesus that if Santa brought the bike, he would give Jesus the first spin on it! He kept his promise. I was so pleased to think that this lad remembered this Christmas story and was able to bring it to this moment. It reassured me that the words we share at Mass do not fall on deaf ears and remain in that place called soul and memory.

Yes, there is truth in the pes-

simism we might feel around lack of practice and some people coming to church to celebrate what can just be a social occasion. I believe nonetheless that the seeds of memory can be sown and the two young friends I mention, though three decades apart, help us to recognise a truth, Jesus comes to us as friend and we promise to respect that friendship and deepen it.

The hope, indeed the belief, for me is that memories of these days of celebrating faith remain and find their way into the depths of the soul and long after the new suit or dress are hung up and no longer fit, a memory will return. That memory will spark afresh a friendship begun in that wonderfully short and life altering conversation: “The Body of Christ. Amen.”



The Little Way Association

A Ugandan parish urgently needs our help to roof its new church

Fr Charles Osire has written to us from Uganda’s Soroti Diocese. His bishop tells us, “The local Christian community together with Fr Charles have struggled to bring the structure to its current state and they now badly need some external financial help in order to complete the roofing of their church.”

Father explains to The Little Way Association: “The construction of St Kizito’s church started in 2013 and has been done in phases, but now has slowed down as we look for help to put up a roof and finish the building. We look forward to having a much better House of Prayer for our growing Christian community. Living conditions here are very difficult but the new church, when finished, will enable us to promote real catechesis and to empower the people to collaborate in work and prayer.

“I believe the Prophet Haggai is inspiring me to approach The Little Way for help. As he said : ‘Go up to the mountain and bring wood, and build the house; I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, says the Lord.’ On behalf of all our Christians I thank you in advance for the financial aid you are able to give us. May Our Lord bless your Association.”

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“True glory is that which will last eternally, and to reach it, it isn’t necessary to perform striking works but to hide oneself and practice virtue in such a way that the left hand knows not what the right is doing.” – St Therese

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