



The Irish Catholic

CLOISTERED CHRISTMAS: CELEBRATING LIKE A NUN

Renata Steffens
Page 12-13



I HAVE COME TO BELIEVE MORE AND MORE IN EMMANUEL

Martina Purdy
Page 11



DO NOT BE AFRAID TO QUESTION YOUR FAITH, THAT'S HOW IT GROWS

GAA All-Star Niall Morgan
Page 10



Thursday, December 19, 2024

€3.00 (Stg £2.70)

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Christmas generosity of Catholic school kids hailed

Brandon Scott

Catholic school leaders have praised the enormous work and generosity of school children and staff who throughout the country have been raising tens of thousands of Euro for those in need at Christmas.

"Across the country, in schools large and small, pupils and staff are actively engaged in fundraising for those less fortunate. The type of fundraising activities range from selling Reindeer Food for the St Vincent De Paul, to collecting non-perishable food for the Giving Tree in the local church, to collections at carol services across the country for a variety of worthy causes" said Seamus Mulconry, General Secretary of the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association.

One school principal said 'It is important that we raise awareness among our pupils and our school communities of those who are in need. This is central to who we are as a school, and this is expressed in a special way when we fund-raise for the local St.

» Continued on Page 2

For unto us a child is born



Students from St Gerard's Junior school in Bray, Co Wicklow pictured around the school crib. Front row (l-r): Mabel O'Reilly, Grace Le O'Sullivan, Eoin Gibb, Christopher Le O'Sullivan. Back row (l-r): James Boyle, Charlie Hegarty, Dara Wilson Carroll, Cónal McDermott, Erica Gallagher, Izzy Quinn. Photo: Courtesy St Gerard's Junior School

Pray politicians are open to Holy Spirit – archbishop

Chai Brady

Newly elected politicians must have a "sincere commitment" to serving the common good and a "prioritisation of the needs of the most vulnerable", according to the Archbishop of Dublin.

After the formation of the 34th Dáil, Archbishop Dermot Farrell called on parishes to pray for politicians.

Archbishop Farrell said that in current times "wise" governance is needed due to "increasing political polarisation across the globe, with greater inequality between – and within – rich and poor nations, and with the deepening climate crisis".

"As we prepare for Christmas, the celebration of our Saviour's birth, we take heart from the hope that his birth heralds [Eph 1:8], and the confidence of our God in "what his hand has made" [Isa 66:2]. Each day we pray the *Our Father*; we pray each day for the coming of God's Kingdom, a way of living in which 'justice shall flourish and peace till the moon fails', [Psalm 71(72):7]," the archbishop said.

"May we pray then that our civic institutions may be open to God's Holy Spirit in their service of justice and peace."

He stated that even during a time in Ireland of "unprecedented revenue flows, our expectations of politics and government must be tempered with realism".

"That said, we can expect from our politicians a commitment to the highest standards of public life, a sincere commitment to serving the common good and a prioritisation of the needs of the most vulnerable," Archbishop Farrell said.

CHRISTMAS IS A TIME TO COUNT OUR BLESSINGS

David Quinn

PAGE 8



GAZA AT CHRISTMAS: WHERE THERE IS LOVE, THERE IS HOPE

Michael Kelly

PAGE 9



THERE IS A SPECIAL VISITOR COMING ON CHRISTMAS NIGHT

Jason Conroy

PAGE 46



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Christmas generosity of Catholic school kids hailed

» Continued from Page 1

Vincent De Paul in the weeks prior to Christmas.

Alan Hynes, CEO of the Catholic Education Partnership said that all this fundraising is “very authentic and a very important expression of what it is to be a Catholic school... that sense of what we owe each other and what we owe our communities. As Pope Francis talks about, what we owe to the global common good.”

Mr Hynes said that Catholic schools are integral to the community. “Our schools are community schools – I know other people have tried to claim that title for themselves. Our schools have always been an integral part of their community and have been involved in the life of their community. That’s everything from these charitable activities and involvement in other activities in their communities, sports clubs and so on.

“It’s not just the pupils giving, it’s also about the time that a lot of our staff, teachers, SNAs give to assist local causes. It’s a huge testament to how schools understand themselves as being part

of the common good of the society they exist in. All of this flows from the ethos of our schools”.

But Christmas is not the only time schools fundraise. “Christmas brings a particular focus to this in terms of charitable activities that are aimed at others. For a lot of our schools Christmas is the time that they intensify this activity but it’s not the only time of the year that you’ll find Catholic schools engaged in this type of work.

“We’d understand this (charity) to be a key aspect of our ethos. Sometimes those who think about reforming the education system think ethos is just education and that the only change that will be made is to get rid of religious education.

“Ethos should inform the whole culture of the school, the way it works, and certainly what is taught. We see this kind of charitable activity as being key to understanding the ethos. To have a concern for others, a concern for Catholic Social Teaching and social justice issues. We see this as the key in our schools, primary and post-primary. Both in terms of what’s taught but more importantly what’s done.”

Bishops reflect on 2024 in their dioceses

Renata Steffens

Looking back at the Kilmore Diocese in 2024, Bishop Martin Hayes said they had significant events. “We had our pilgrimage to Lourdes. One of the features of it was that we brought some young people.” The young people who went on that pilgrimage raised the money to go, the bishop said. “They raised over 17,500 in their own locality.

Another highlight for Kilmore Diocese in the past year was the visit of the relics of St Kilian from Würzburg in Germany. “There is a long-standing link between one of our parishes, Mullagh, going back 1,300 years when St Kilian and his companions, Totnan and Colmant, they went via Cork and Kerry, and via Rome eventually and they arrived in Würzburg.

“Unfortunately, they were martyred for their faith. To this day, the people of Würzburg in the Franconia region of Bavaria in Germany celebrate St Kilian...

Some of our local community in Mullagh asked,” would it be possible to have the relics of the three Saints to visit Ireland.

Other 2024 highlights Bishop Hayes mentioned were the visit of the relics of St Bernadette and the visit of the relics of St Oliver Plunkett.

For the Bishop of Ossory Niall Coll, “as a new bishop, the highlight for me in 2024 was the slow work of my getting to know the people and clergy of the diocese. Thankfully, both people and clergy are welcoming and supportive, and I am happy to report progress on this front and a determination to press on in the years ahead.”

In the Diocese of Killaloe, 2024 saw “a very significant ordination in the course of the year, where we had a man who is a native of Ennis and he was ordained as a Papal Nuncio,” Bishop Fintan Monahan said. The diocese received the Vatican’s Secretariat of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin at Msgr Séamus Horgan’s consecra-

tion as Papal Nuncio to South Sudan at Ennis Cathedral, Co. Clare. “There were three cardinals on that particular day. It was a very joyful and happy occasion.”

This past year, Bishop Monahan and the Diocese of Killaloe have “been working hard on our latest Pastoral Plan, which was Together in Faith, Hope and Love... We participated in the Synodal Pathway process and that was very much appreciated by so many people, to have the opportunity to meet and put their views forward.”

Bishop Monahan said that “very central” to the good news in Killaloe Diocese in 2024 was that between 40 and 50 lay people have signed on for a second round of volunteer pastoral ministries. “We had 24 people who were commissioned two years ago, and this is the second round of that.” The bishop said they were “really pleasantly surprised to see” the number of people who signed up and had begun their discernment programme this year.

Dublin Diocese highlights the importance of Eucharistic Adoration

Renata Milán Morales

Two Diocesan Eucharistic Adoration Committees have been commissioned on Saturday December 14 at a Mass celebrated by Bishop Paul Dempsey in St Mary’s Pro Cathedral, Dublin. Each attendee received a badge of office blessed by the bishop.

The formation and training took place during the months of October and November. The two committees, one for Dublin North and one for Dublin South, are formed by lay people, sent as delegates by parishes of the Archdiocese of Dublin. The two committees are trained to set up a system of weekly adoration in parishes of the Archdiocese at the invitation of a PP or Adm. The sessions were conducted by Brendan Cleary




Delegates outside the Pro Cathedral on December 14 with Auxiliary Bishop Paul Dempsey. Photo: John McElroy.

of the National Apostolate of Eucharistic Adoration, at the invitation of Archbishop Dermot Farrell.

Given formal recognition

by Pope John Paul II, at the behest of Irish Bishops it was invited to come to Ireland in the late 80s for the upbuilding of parishes through ado-

ration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Many parishes have requested it already, with a presentation date to be arranged shortly.



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Time: 10:30am

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

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

Printed by Webprint, Dublin.

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Christmas, 'a time to bring hope to those in need,' says SVP Area President

Renata Milán Morales

"Christmas is a very expensive time," John Anderson, the Tallaght Area President of the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) said. "For many families, the joy of the season is overshadowed by financial hardship. Parents

worry their children will feel left out when everyone else is exchanging gifts and celebrating. Simple things, like visiting loved ones, can seem impossible when there's no money for a train ticket."

For John Anderson, Christmas is not just a season of celebration but a time to

bring hope to those in need. Through his work with SVP, Anderson helps struggling families overcome challenges during one of the most challenging times of the year.

SVP help families overcome these obstacles. Whether it's providing food, funding gifts, or covering transport costs,

they make sure no one is left behind. "We might facilitate something as simple as a train ticket so someone can see their family for Christmas," he explains. "It's about allowing people to share in the spirit of Christmas."

For Mr Anderson, this work is deeply personal and spiritual. "I feel like God uses us as tools to answer prayers... We're like angels on

those people's wings," he said. "We walk with them through their struggles until they see a light at the end of the tunnel." Seeing families lifted out of despair is, for him, a fulfillment of a higher mission.

Mr Anderson told this paper that the season can highlight the divide between the wealthy and those struggling. "There's a great buzz in the air at Christmas, but

many families are left out because they simply can't afford to celebrate." For these families, Mr Anderson and the SVP offer more than material support. They provide hope.

"At the end of the day, we're all frail, fragile human beings," the Area President said. "But if we depend on God and trust Him, He will give us everything. Christmas reminds us of that."

Opening of life-sized crib



Children from Loreto National School, Scoil Bhride, assisted at the opening of the crib in St Mary's Cathedral Killarney, inspired by the late Rena Kennelly, who created the life-sized crib in the cathedral for over 50 years. Last year a new crib was designed and built by Eamon Mulvihill. This year, Rena's daughter Kate Kennelly and her children, continued the family tradition with the help of Andrew Joy and Fr Kieran O'Brien. From left: Angels Sophia McDonald, Sarah McSweeney, Joseph - Tadgh O'Donnell, Mary - Beibhinn O'Donnell, Shepherds Sophie Taylor and Amber O'Donoghue, with Fr Kieran O'Brien Administrator of St Mary's Cathedral, Killarney. Photo: Valerie O'Sullivan

Irish bishops call for peace in the Holy Land

Staff reporter

"This war must end now." These are the words of the Primate of All Ireland, Archbishop Eamon Martin, in an Open Letter, 'Embracing our Faith: A Call to Speak out on the Holy Land', written after the Bishops of Ireland discussed the humanitarian crisis in the Holy Land during their Winter Meeting in Maynooth, held recently. The bishops unanimously decided to take part in this letter.

The letter calls for an immediate ceasefire and humanitarian access, the release of hostages and the protection of civilians, dialogue, efforts to address the root causes of violence and measures to respect the status quo on Jerusalem's Holy Sites.

"As we enter that time

of year when the Prince of Peace comes amongst us, I encourage everyone to support peace in the Holy Land through prayer, by supporting the work of Trócaire, and by advocating for peace to bring an end to the profound misery in Gaza. Since October 7, 2023, about 42,000 people

have been killed," expressed Archbishop Eamon Martin.

The Open Letter is a joint initiative of Pax Christi International, CIDSE (an international family of Catholic social justice organisations, of which Trócaire is a member) and ACT Alliance Europe.

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Archbishops of Armagh stress light in darkness in Christmas message

Brandon Scott

The Archbishops of Armagh have called for all Christians to embrace "the light that has the last word and not darkness" and to pass on this light amid "life's obscurity, complications, and suffering" in their joint Christmas message.

Catholic Archbishop of Armagh Eamon Martin and Anglican Archbishop of Armagh John McDowell wrote collaboratively:

"The Christmas story as we will encounter it at Midnight worship on Christmas Eve, or on Christmas morning, will include the words '...and the light shines in darkness, and the darkness did not over-

come it'.

"And the outcome is that the Father's love follows Jesus into the darkness of the world and that light has the last word and not darkness. And that for all of life's obscurity and complications and suffering, that Jesus Christ and his love for the cosmos is the foregone conclusion of all things.

"At Christmas time we should never forget that this same light guides our feet 'into the way of peace'. Our responsibility is to pass it on, as if to say in the words of 1 John 1:5 'This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness'".

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Misean Cara 'building-up' youngest country- South Sudan

Brandon Scott

A member of Misean Cara, an Irish membership organisation supporting the overseas development projects of missionaries who work with poor, marginalised and vulnerable communities, has said that the organisation's aid to South Sudan, the youngest country in the world, is "building-up" systems and commended the efforts of missionary priests committed to improving the lives of the South Sudanese, saying that "you won't meet anyone in the missionary circle that doesn't want to be there".

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, Seamus O'Leary, Organisational Change Manager of Misean Cara said that the organisation's funding of humanitarian efforts in South Sudan has gradually amassed to over €10 million in just over 10 years.

"Since 2012, we have approved €10 million in funding for South Sudan," he said. "That would put it in the top 10 countries where Misean

Cara channels the funding.

"We put a lot of funding into an organisation called Solidarity with South Sudan, which is an umbrella body of many different missionary organisations, about 40 in total are involved. The director at the moment is Fr Jim Greene who is a Missionary of Africa Father from Kilkenny."

The goal for Misean Cara is the development of systems in the nascent country and this is something that Irish missionaries have played an integral role in, particularly in the provision of education and healthcare. According to Mr O'Leary, missionaries working to improve the structures in the country are there because "they believe they can make a change".

"Solidarity with South Sudan has a focus on building up systems," he said. "A thing we like about the organisation is the way they work with the local Church structures. In many parts of the world, Church structures and institutions are the primary providers of education and health

care. So trying to strengthen the Church structures around that is a key area of focus."

"You won't meet anyone in the missionary cir-

cle that doesn't want to be there. They're there because they believe they can make a change."

See page 28

Airport church gets priest for Christmas

Chai Brady

The new chaplain of the church in Dublin airport has said he is "excited" to take up the role, just before Christmas.

After months without a priest Fr Justin Obijuru took the reins in Our Lady Queen of Heaven in the second week of December, just in time for Christmas.

Fr Justin is from the Diocese of Owerri in Nigeria and is currently also studying a Master's degree in Maynooth.

He told *The Irish Catholic*: "I'm quite excited to take up this particular role

as chaplain. I'm delighted. When the appointment came, I was really happy, it gave me a sense of belonging."

The priests said the church is "beautiful", there is a "lovely community" and thanked Archbishop Dermot Farrell for the "wonderful opportunity".

Fr Justin took over from Fr Des Doyle who served as chaplain for 16 years. The church was opened in 1964.



Kilkenny Christmas Crib Walk touches locals 'very deeply'

Brandon Scott

The annual Kilkenny Christmas Crib Walk, an event that has touched locals "very deeply" over the past 10 years, will return to the city on St Stephen's Day. This year's event will include a special prayer for peace in the Middle East and Bethlehem, calling on pilgrims to reflect on the ongoing conflict in the region and pray for an end to the violence.

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, organiser Fr Willie Purcell reflected on the origins and mission of the annual tradition, a mission rooted in charity and outreach.

"It's the 10th anniversary of the Christmas Crib Walk, it was established 10 years ago," he said. "At that time it was established in collaboration with the homeless community in Kilkenny.

The idea was that each crib would be visited to reflect a little on homelessness and the fact that Mary and Joseph were homeless and that they needed somewhere to find to rest.

"This year we are being united with our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land and this year's Crib Walk will very much reflect the journey that we're making with our brothers and sisters through the war, through violence, and through famine."

Commenting on the significance of the crib, its universal association with Christmas and the message of the season, Fr Purcell said that the crib walk in Kilkenny was a formative experience for him as a young boy exploring his faith and is something that touches those who attend "very, very deeply".

"The crib has a very important place in our psyche, it really has," he said. "We all grew up with seeing the crib, knowing the crib and understanding the crib. The Crib Walk was very much a tradition in Kilkenny, even for myself as a young child when we were brought to the cribs on St Stephen's Day in the various churches.

"It's something that touches us very, very deeply. Not only does it remind us of the poverty that exists in our world, it also reminds us of our own poverty and our own poverty for God. It makes us enter into the mystery of Bethlehem. So for that reason it touches us very deeply on a spiritual level."

The Annual Kilkenny Church Christmas Crib Walk will take place on St Stephen's Day beginning at the Friary Church at 11am.

Blessing the baby Jesus



Children gather to celebrate Bambinelli Sunday – when the faithful bring their Baby Jesus figures from their cribs at home to churches to be blessed – with Fr John Carroll in Barntown parish, Co. Wexford.

President remembers children of the world at Christmas

Staff reporter

President Michael D Higgins in an address at a Christmas reception in the Aras has said that at Christmas "Our hearts go out to children all over the world, wherever they may be, particularly those who are victims of the many horrific scenes of war and conflict in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan and so many places across the world that have been darkened by the taking of so many lives. We think of all those who have lost parents and those who are continually on the move."

He added: "We think too of those living in hunger and poverty around our world for

whom Christmas may mean little more than survival.

Closer to home, we think of all those who are finding this Christmas difficult. Our thoughts are with those who feel the weight of loneliness, grief, or uncertainty. We think of those marginalized or facing adversity. Our hearts go out to the homeless, those struggling to keep a roof over their heads, and those facing illness or other difficulties. We think of all the children who are spending this Christmas in hospital too.

Let us also take a moment to honour and think of our emigrants, who may be far from us physically but remain

close in spirit, close to our hearts.

Let us warmly welcome members of our new Irish communities, those who have come to Ireland in recent times to make a new home here and who will be creating their own cherished traditions and adding them to our traditions here in Ireland, bringing their own special memories to our Christmas celebrations, of what this time of the year means to them."

We also think of the people who cannot be physically present to celebrate Christmas with their families this year.

We send a special message to the many members, and

their families, of our Defence Forces who are serving abroad at this time of year. In building peace and offering aid in places where it is most needed, they represent the very best of our sense of our values of Irishness, and we are so proud and grateful for their efforts.

We remember all the people who will be working tirelessly to ensure our safety and wellbeing during the festive season, making it possible for us all to celebrate, including the Gardaí and all the emergency services, and the medical staff in hospitals, all across the country, including the many medical staff whose families are abroad.



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An unusual Advent talk

We had an unusual Advent in the Kent parish of Deal: the parish priest, Canon Brian Coyle (originally from Northern Ireland) invited one of the parishioners to give a talk, with response and reflections from parishioners in true Synodal fashion.

The subject involved the German Jesuit martyr, Fr Alfred Delp, hanged by the Nazis in 1945 because of his resistance to the regime; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor and theologian who was an active anti-Nazi and died in a concentration camp in the spring of 1945.

Ben Bano, who gave the talk, is a parishioner of senior years who has been active in supporting refugees, and who recently completed a Masters in Theology on Christian opposition to the Nazi regime.

Conscience

Both of these brave Christians of conscience were



Mary Kenny

held in captivity just 80 years ago, in the winter of 1944 – Fr Delp was kept in shackles in Berlin-Plötzensee prison. And yet during this tormenting time, Alfred Delp meditated on the spiritual meaning of Advent, and the significance of waiting – waiting for something better. “I see this year’s Advent with an intensity and presentiment like never before,” Fr Delp wrote. “When I pace back and forth in my cell, three steps forward and three steps back, hands in irons, ahead of my unknown destiny. I understand very differently than before those ancient promises of the coming Lord who will redeem us and set us free.”

He went through some moments of despair – echoing John of the Cross’s

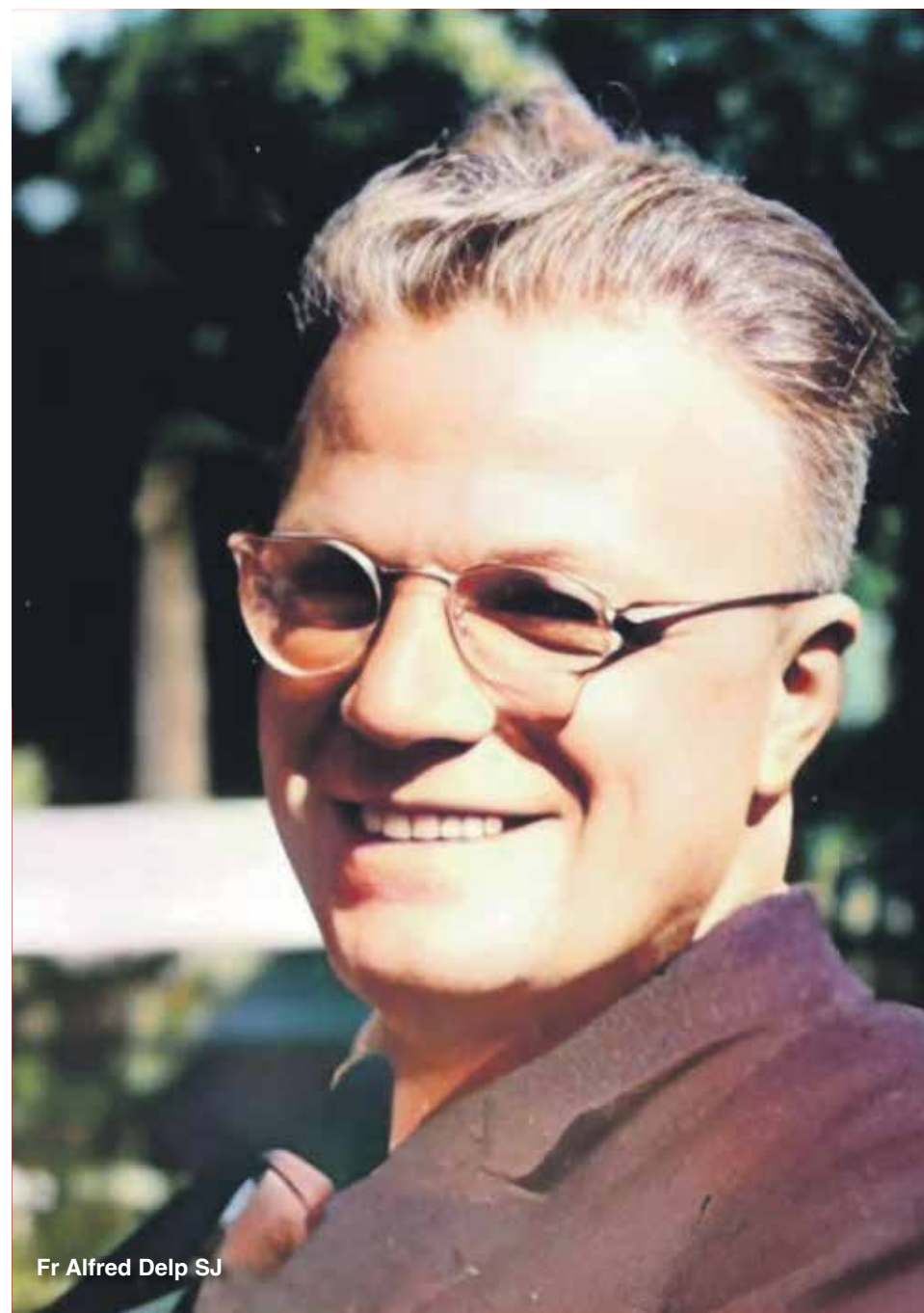
“*Dark Night of the Soul*” – and yet he wrote that in his cell “God becomes a living presence of all that is good.” He came to feel that “we are blind to spiritual things” and that “we must find ways to tackle spiritual wilderness.”

“We have learned to see the great events of history from below, from the perspectives of the outcasts, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled”

He also wrote: “May the Advent figure of John the Baptist, of the inexorable messenger and warning prophet in God’s name not be a stranger in our wilderness.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected that “we have learned to see the great events of history from below, from the perspectives of the outcasts, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled. In short, from the perspective of suffering.” Bonhoeffer had been a follower of the rationalist philosopher Kant, but came to see that reason was not enough.

“When I pace back and forth in my cell, three steps forward and three steps back, hands in irons, ahead of my unknown destiny. I understand very differently than before those ancient promises of the coming Lord who will redeem us and set us free”



Fr Alfred Delp SJ

Christmas would symbolise for both these men at Advent that there could be a better world. They went to heaven: we also hope for a better world on earth.

The wonder of creation

The Booker Prize for literature was won this year by a slim volume called *Orbital* by Samantha Harvey. It has proved popular with readers – perhaps part of its appeal is that it is short (136 pages) at a time when some books are veritable doorstoppers, (though they may also be good.)

Orbital is unusual, as the author imagines what it is like to be an astronaut, held

in space, and orbiting around the Earth. What is enchanting about the story is that it illuminates the wonder of Planet Earth, and its place as the common home to all of humanity. During a day in space, astronauts will “circle the Earth sixteen times. They’ll see sixteen sunrises and sixteen sunsets, sixteen days and sixteen nights... autumn and spring, glaciers and deserts, wildernesses and war zones.” Weight-

lessly, they feel the awe of the universe, and experience a huge appreciation of the beauty of our world.

Although I know it’s in human nature to go exploring through the cosmos, I cannot believe anything but barren rocks will ever be found on Mars, or any other planet. Our Earth is absolutely unique, and the one that the Creator made for us. *Orbital* puts it in poetic perspective.

Young people, in general, are said to be dropping the Christmas card tradition, accustomed as they are to sending texts. I’ve debated with myself whether to follow their example. The cost is not an inconsiderable factor – although I

know that sounds stingy. I have friends and relations who haven’t sent cards for years, and they tell me that nobody minds (or even notices) and it’s saved them from another Christmas stress or chore.

But then, every card that drops through my letter-box becomes a source

of guilt. Surely I should reply to those who went to the trouble of sending me a card? And isn’t it a nice way of keeping in touch with old friends and acquaintances? A card with a Christmas message brings pleasure. “Goodwill to all people,” is part of the meaning of Christmas.

What will probably happen is that I’ll bung off a few at the last minute, so that the exercise will be half-done. But after all, it’s the thought that counts, and so with all the powers of telepathy, I wish one and all a truly peaceful and blessed Christmas, full of the joy of the Nativity.



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Living faith traditions as a family



Renata Steffens

Christmas is a time for traditions. Some families like to gather at the grandparents every year for a big dinner with the whole extended family, while others will watch together the same movie every year. Some families will pray together a certain number of evenings before Christmas, and others will help in charity events every December. The traditions will vary from family to family, but they most certainly will be there.

Catherine McLoughlin, a social media coordinator for a Catholic diocese in England, and her husband James McLoughlin, Youth Ministry Director for the Diocese of Clogher, live in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh with their three children, three boys, Michael is five, Patrick is two and Andrew is a bit over six months. They share their Catholic faith traditions with their children, not only during the Christmas period, but all year round.

"As a family, obviously, weekly we go to Sunday Mass. We have a children's liturgy in our parish," Mrs McLoughlin told *The Irish Catholic*. "Our oldest, Michael, who is five started going [to it]." However, their faith sharing is not limited to activities outside the house. Every night they pray together as a family before bedtime, and then individually with each child as they are being put to bed.

Elements

Mrs McLoughlin explained they include different elements to their daily prayers, "depending on the saint of the day or [if] something else exciting is happening... During May, we had a nice little May Altar in one of our bookshelves."

She said they were "looking forward to Advent" to have themed decorations and prayers with their children. "It's kind of seasonal, [we] make sure that we have our Nativity sets out and ready." The McLoughlin do not decorate lightly, "we try to be intentional when decorating our house. [To] have our faith in obvious amongst the mess of daily life."

To Mrs McLoughlin, it is really important to share and teach their faith with their children, "mainly because that's what I received as a

child and it's a precious gift that I have because of my own family. To be able to share that with our sons is very important to me. But it's important to them as well, that they know individually that they are so important to Jesus and God."

Other family tradition the McLoughlin family practice involves attending family anniversary Masses in her old parish in England. "My mam and dad still live in England, so going to my old parish church" is something they do a few times annually as a family.

They are "trying to teach up [that] the links to your faith isn't just here where we live, but also wherever we go, if we've ever been on holidays over the weekend, [we] make sure that we go to Mass, when we pass [by] a church, [we] make the sign of the cross."

The main Catholic value, Mrs McLoughlin believes is the most important to pass on to her children is generosity. She mentioned that this is one of the best values her husband shows, "and being generous not only with time but with the things that we have. Our money and how we share with the Church and with the community. I think that's probably the most important. We can give back, particularly to our parish and we've been trying."

“Now that we are approaching Christmas, it's very important to teach the children how to share, how to give”

"We have been intentional with [our] sharing. Sharing our own gifts with the parish. I run the parish Facebook page, and we have a baby and mother prayer group."

"After my third [son] was born, we haven't found the time," to give as much as they want. However, they try to give back to the parish with their "talents" and "gifts" as well as "monetary things". "Generosity [is] really how we give back to the community, but particularly the parish community."

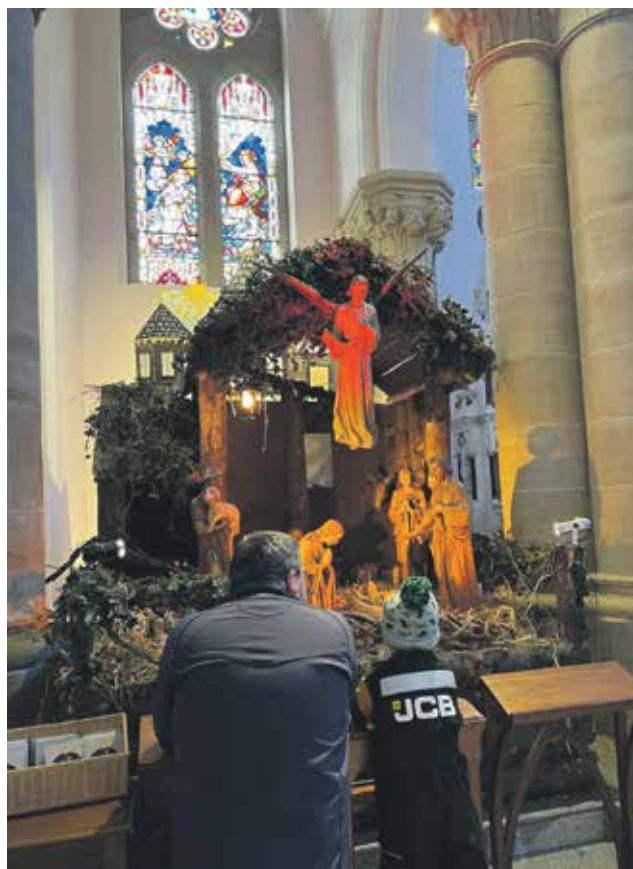
"Now that we are approaching Christmas, it's very important to teach the children how to share, how to give," Mrs McLoughlin said. "Generally, through talking about it [the faith] in everyday conversations," Mrs McLoughlin said, they teach their children "that [faith] isn't just a Sunday thing, it's everyday."



9-month-old Patrick at the end of the Torchlight Procession in Lourdes on July 2023



Michael as a toddler reading a baby book of Catholic teaching.



Praying in front of the Crib in their parish Church, St Michael's, Enniskillen.



They visited Lourdes in 2023 with their two oldest sons and plan on going back with the three children next year.



Andrew's Baptism on August 10 at Church of Saint John the Baptist, Alton, Staffordshire.



Michael with his grandparents visiting Lough Derg on Pentecost Sunday 2024



Michael in Lourdes on a Diocese of Clogher Pilgrimage in 2023



Patrick's Baptism on March 18, 2023 in St Michael's Church, Enniskillen. The family pictured with Fr Raymond Donnelly.



The whole family in Knock during the Summer.

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The Irish Catholic

Christmas is a time to count our blessings



David Quinn

The night of Jesus's birth must have been a very mixed experience for Mary and Joseph. Their child was born and that would have been a happy experience, but they were away from home, they could not find a room for the night and therefore their baby was born in a manger. That was not an auspicious beginning for their child. And then, according to the Gospel of Matthew, they had to flee to Egypt in order to escape the wrath of Herod who was terrified of the prophecy that a boy would be born who would one day replace him as king. Is this how you would want your family life to begin?

But, of course, the story of the extremely difficult start to the life of the Holy Family is overwhelmed by the fact of who Mary had given birth to, namely Jesus, the Messiah, the Saviour, the Son of God, God Incarnate, the Word Made Flesh.

Nativity

This is why the nativity scene is ultimately a happy one, even though Jesus was born in a stable, surrounded by animals, and then shepherds, and eventually the Three Wise Men, and not the family of either Mary or Joseph, which, when you think about it, is rather remarkable.

In those days, and down to very recent times, the vast majority of babies would have been born at home and surrounded by members of the family of both parents, with the women in particular keen to lend a hand. There might have been a mid-wife present as well.

It is one thing for Jesus to have been born to a humble family, and raised for most of his childhood in a humble town, namely Nazareth, but it is quite another that when he was born no members of the family of either Joseph or Mary were there, because circumstances made it impossible. That is unusual by any circumstances, and rather sad when you think about it, especially for Mary. This can't have been what she dreamt about when she became pregnant with Jesus.

But even though the Christmas story is an overwhelmingly happy one, the fact that there is also an element of sadness to it, and that Mary and Joseph were away from their families for the birth of Jesus, reminds us that Christmas from that day to this can be a mixed experience for people.

“My father did talk about the Christmases he experienced when he was a child though, and I think it was because they were generally miserable affair”

Take my own parents, for instance. My mother was from a happy family from what I can gather they had nice Christmases. I wish now I had asked for more details. For instance, who would visit on Christmas Day? Or who would her family visit? What kind of presents did they get? (She was born in 1932 so I would imagine the presents were modest). What they did eat on Christmas Day?

I'm guessing that ate the same as what my mother used to cook up on Christmas Day when we were growing up, namely turkey and ham and then the pudding.



But she didn't talk about what Christmas Day was like when she was a child. I guess it didn't occur to her to do so. She was a quiet enough woman anyway.

My father did talk about the Christmases he experienced when he was a child though, and I think it was because they were generally miserable affairs. His parents did not put up a Christmas tree, they did not appear to get on very well, and they received few visitors. He was an only child, which meant he had no-one to play with on Christmas Day. Not cheerful.

Lonely

A fellow I have the occasional pint with does not like Christmas at all. It is not that he dislikes Christmas per se, but I think he

finds it a fairly lonely time of year, especially the day itself. It can remind you of what you don't have in your life. A lot more people than we think probably have lonely Christmases and it does remind them of what they are missing.

“At Christmas, like over the rest of the year, there are still plenty of homeless people for whom there is almost literally no room at the inn”

It is also one of the times of year when children whose parents have gone their separate ways have to divide their time between two households, when in most cases, the children would have much preferred that their parents were still together.

It is precisely because Christmas is such a family time that it can bring home that you might not have a family anymore, or that yours is in a bad state of repair.

And at Christmas, like

over the rest of the year, there are still plenty of homeless people for whom there is almost literally no room at the inn.

Knights of St Columbanus

This is why the Knights of St Columbanus organise a special Christmas day every year for the homeless. If there were not any Christians doing such a thing at this time of year in particular, that would simply defeat the purpose of Christianity.

It's a good sign that the Knights are oversubscribed with volunteers to serve at the dinner. That's the true spirit of Christmas. And let's not forget all the good work other organisations like the Society of St Vincent de Paul do to help the poor and the lonely have a good Christmas.

When I lived in Australia, I did some volunteer work for the Society and I remember that after Christmas we would go into some of the trailer parks and it was sometimes then that the poor who lived in the caravans, or 'trailers' needed money most of all. One woman had spent her remaining money on presents for family and

friends over Christmas and had nothing left.

“Christmas is a time to count our blessings, and consider also those who don't have so many to count”

If she didn't have the Society to fall back on, she might not have bought so many presents, but on the other hand she would not have had a very happy Christmas. The money from the 'Vinnies' helped her pay her utility bills.

Christmas is a time when we return to our hearth and home. We renew relationships and deepen other ones. Imagine if there was not such a time of year at all? It is very necessary, and this is without even considering the religious aspects. It's fitting that it takes place right in the middle of Winter because it helps to break up the season and it gives us something to look forward to in November and December as the days draw in.

Above all, Christmas is a time to count our blessings, and consider also those who don't have so many to count.

“Christmas is a time when we return to our hearth and home. We renew relationships and deepen other ones. Imagine if there was not such a time of year at all?”

Gaza at Christmas: where there is love, there is hope



In the midst of war, the Holy Land's Christians are struggling to remain united, writes **Michael Kelly**

It was not in splendour and worldly power that God came to earth, but in the humility of a defenceless baby born in the manger of Bethlehem. No wonder the strong and the powerful are so perplexed by the paradox of Christmas with God seemingly stripped of power, while the poor and the powerless see in it immediately 'Emmanuel' – a God who is with them.

It is to that same God-made-flesh in Jesus that the tiny Christian community in Gaza, and indeed across the Holy Land, turn again this Christmas as they live another nativity season surrounded by the guns of war.

In Gaza City, the remaining Christians live in the heart of the largely destroyed city in the Catholic Holy Family Parish and the neighbouring Orthodox Church of St Porphyrius. Immediately after the October 7 terrorist attacks, they decided that they would be together for the inevitable war. And they have shared their joys and hopes, sorrows and despairs together day after day.

Humbling

It has been a humbling honour for Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) to serve God's holy and faithful people struggling to survive in an existential periphery between a wider conflict in the Holy Land.

Responsible for their pastoral care is the war-weary Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa. An Italian Franciscan, he has dedicated his life to trying to build peace, reconciliation and mutual



understanding in the Holy Land.

He is cautiously optimistic this Christmas, as many dare to dream of a better future for all the people who share the Holy Land, and particularly for the people of Gaza.

"I think that the peak of the war in Gaza is behind us. The ceasefire with Hezbollah also influences Gaza and Hamas. My impression is that in the coming weeks or months we will arrive at some compromise," the cardinal told a recent meeting of ACN.

But, when the war ends – for all wars end – what will the future hold? "The end of military hostility is not the end of conflict. When the military operation finishes, what will life be like in Gaza? Who will be there? It will take years to rebuild, and I am sure the border with Israel will remain closed, so what is the future for these people?" the patriarch asked.

“We have had other wars, but there is a before and an after October 7, because the kind of violence that took place, and the emotional impact on the respective populations has been enormous”

The cardinal, who some speak of a potential future Pope, is clearly downbeat about the current atmosphere of distrust in the Holy Land, saying that "what concerns me is the level of hatred. The hate speech, the language of contempt, the denial of the other, is very problematic.

"We have had other wars, but there is a before and an after October 7, because the kind of violence that took place, and the emotional impact on the respective populations has been enormous. While the events were a sort of 'Shoah' for Israelis, for Palestinians what happened afterwards is a new 'Nakba', trying to expel them from their land."

A man steeped in the history of the peoples of the Holy Land does not use such words lightly – the Shoah, of course, is the Hebrew word the Jewish people use to describe the 'catastrophic destruction' that was the Nazi holocaust. For the Arab inhabitants displaced at the creation of Israel in 1948, the Arabic word Nakba describes their own experience of 'catastrophe'.

When the war finally ends in Gaza, he added, "we can rebuild the infrastructure, but how can we rebuild relationships?"

Patriarch

The patriarch believes that Christians, who compose about 1.5% of the population of the Holy Land, are in a privileged position to contribute in this respect. "Because we are so small, and politically irrelevant, we have the freedom to connect with everyone. Where there are so many wounds and divisions, being able to reconnect is one of the main missions for the future."

Although the Christians in the Holy Land may be few, and Latin rite Catholics fewer still, there is no shortage of variety. The Arab-speaking Christians form the majority, but there is also a small community of Hebrew-speaking Catholics, and another of refugees and asylum seekers. Holding these communities



The Catholics of Holy Family Parish in Gaza City gather every evening to pray for peace in the Holy Land. Photo: ACN.

together has at times been difficult, Cardinal Pizzaballa readily admits.

"While in this war everybody is struggling to divide, we are struggling to remain united. It was not easy, especially at the beginning of the war. We have one faith, but people have different visions and ideas. Now it is much better, but after the war we must talk about our differences and about what unity is. This is also something very healthy, for us Christians, it helps us to take a step forward. We must grow in our relations, to have a deeper, more serious relationship between us," he said.

“Keep the memory of Jesus alive in the land of Jesus”

The war in the Holy Land is having serious economic consequences for the Christian population. Almost all the Christians in the West Bank who worked in Israel have had their permits revoked since the beginning of the conflict, and those who depended on pilgrims have been faced with the paralysis tourism sector.

Stressing that it is essential that Christians remain to "keep the memory of Jesus alive in the land of Jesus", the Patriarch insisted on a narrative of hope which cannot, however, be confused with a belief in a short-term political solution to the crisis.

"If you identify the hope for the future with a political solution, there is no hope, because there is no short-term solution. I hope to be wrong. But I am afraid I am not," he said.

"However, hope is an attitude of life, a way of seeing the reality of your life with faith. Faith is to believe in the presence of God, who transcends our earthly life. If you can see with faith, you are able to see something that transcends, goes beyond the dark reality we are in. Only with faith can you do this. And this is still possible!" the patriarch exclaimed.

"Many people think these are just nice words, but it is real. Everywhere, from Gaza to the West Bank, Jerusalem and Israel, I see wonderful people ready to commit themselves to doing something for others. Where there are these acts of selfless love, there is hope, it means it is possible to change something. Maybe we cannot change the macro political situation, but we can change something where we are, and this is what comforts me.

Powerless

"I also feel powerless sometimes, because I see problems everywhere, but when I see all these wonderful things still being done in all the parts of our Church, I see there is still hope," the cardinal said.

During the conference Cardinal Pizzaballa thanked ACN who has had projects in the

Holy Land for many years, but since the beginning of the war in October 2023 has stepped up its support. According to executive president Regina Lynch, who welcomed the patriarch to the conference, "thanks to our benefactors we have been able to provide more than €1.2 million in emergency relief support to the Christians, specifically as a response to the acute crisis. The projects supported include emergency food, water, medicine supplies and job creation and internship opportunities.

“We also have a duty to promote reconciliation and peace between religious and ethnic groups, however impossible this may sometimes seem”

"But ACN's mission is not only to provide material support for the Christians in the Holy Land but to pray for them and to give them a voice. We also have a duty to promote reconciliation and peace between religious and ethnic groups, however impossible this may sometimes seem," the Tyrone native concluded.

i Michael Kelly is Director of Public Affairs for Aid to the Church in Need, Ireland. You can find out more about ACN's work in the Holy Land, and support the community there this Christmas by visiting www.acnireland.org

Do not be afraid to question your Faith, that's how it grows – GAA All-Star



Chai Brady

Named a GAA All-Star this year, Tyrone man Niall Morgan has warned against the dangers of gambling and the challenges of raising children in a world where so many hazards are easily accessible, but that Faith can keep you on the right path.

Tyrone's All-Ireland winning goalkeeper, who has two young children, said that it is "challenging" for the new generation who are not as "sheltered" from the world of drugs and gambling.

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic* the 33-year-old Edendork school principal said it's important for kids to get outside and be active, not sit at home on screens, adding that some parents can be too "risk averse".

While advocating for joining the local GAA club, he said there are some issues with gambling that must be addressed in some clubs, saying: "I worked in a bookies for five years when I was younger, as I was going through university, it's just scary what you see happening on a day to day basis."

"Obviously there's a few high-profile GAA players who have come out and spoke about their addictions. Sometimes when you're so involved in sport, you nearly think you know how sport works, but you never know, and at the end of the day the bookies are always going to win – it's just how much the win by. With gambling now on phones as well, you would be fearful of how easy it can take place," he said.

"Going back to how accessible everything is now – people can now access whatever they want whenever they want to do it."

Awareness

Mr Morgan is the co-chair of the Gaelic Players Association, who are raising awareness of these issues and trying to help people that have difficulties.

He said: "I know there are some clubs even in Tyrone where there would be issues, you hope it's not in your own club. Knowing the likes of myself is against it, they would stay clear of you. I think it's just a worrying time in general for the new generation, everything is just so easily accessible, it's scary. Looking at my own children I wonder what is it going to be like in 10-15 years? If everything like it is now and



Niall Morgan in action.

it's only going to get more progressive, how dangerous is the world going to be?

"When I was growing up you nearly felt sheltered from all of that, maybe it was out there and you just didn't realise. You just hope that people see the good in things and they try to keep themselves on the right path."

“I think it's important to speak about it because one in five pregnancies end in miscarriage, which is a huge chance, and people would not really realise it”

Faith has always been part of Mr Morgan's life. Before their first child his wife lost two children to miscarriage, which was a "huge test of Faith, because you're thinking, 'why us?'"

"At that stage you almost thought that you were the only one because people did not really talk about it, I think it's important to speak about it because one in five pregnancies end in miscarriage, which is a huge chance, and people would not really realise it," said Mr Morgan.

"We had a priest in our parish when I was younger... and he always said it was good to question your Faith, because it is only at the times you question your faith that

you realise what you've actually got. It is good to ask yourself 'what do I have Faith in and why do I have faith?'

Advised

He advised people to "remember everybody has a reason to be here and there is a plan for everybody, just have faith in that journey and know that there is love there and there is someone in this world that you are making the world better for".

"Trust that process and have that Faith... for some it takes that little bit longer to find that purpose and some of us have tougher periods than others, but we all face our battles at different times and in different ways – have that strength to perceive and push through, know that there will be help there and you will get through it in the end."

Despite Tyrone not reaching the All-Ireland quarter finals, Mr Morgan was one of the 15 selected as 2024 PwC GAA/GPA Football Allstars last week due to his exceptional performance.

He added that he does not pray to God to fix things, saying "I feel that God presents himself in different ways and through different channels, and it could be through the smallest bit of advice that you get from someone at a time that you don't expect it, or it could be when whenever you ask a tough question to somebody and they tell you something you don't want to hear, that's where my Faith presents itself".



Niall Morgan with his family.

Christmas Eve and the year of hope



Martina Purdy

It was Christmas Eve, 1977, and my brothers and I had finally stopped waking up my parents, in the wee small hours, as we crept a little too noisily along the hall to see if Santa had arrived. My mother, one eye open and one eye closed, would meet us on the stairs, around one or two in the morning, and tell us to get back to bed.

But as I turned twelve, it was my mother who woke me Christmas morning, to tell me that my granny had died quite suddenly in Belfast. She was 63 and had suffered a heart attack.

My parents did their best to 'get through' Christmas that year: we exchanged our gifts under the tree, with less excitement than usual, went to Mass, and feasted, as usual, on traditional turkey and trifle.

But it all seemed to be in slow motion. There was a terrible sadness, and a look in my mother's eye that still lingers in my mind, a look that returned and never left after my father died quite suddenly more than twenty years ago.

Unbearable

Christmas is all too often something we have to 'get through' when life becomes quite unbearable. "Well, that's Christmas out the window," I heard someone say, after a particularly sad loss, some days ago.

And yet, even in death, especially in death, we need to celebrate Christmas, somehow. Because in the face of devastating loss, Christmas offers our only hope, a hope

This is the season for Christmas movies, many of them pretty saccharine. But the late Dublin actress Maureen O'Hara, a Catholic, starred in a more edgy film, *The Christmas Box*, some 30 years ago. One of the memorable lines is posed by her character, Mrs Parkin.

"What is the first gift of Christmas?" she repeatedly asks a young father who is too busy working to pay attention to his young daughter. He initially responds rather flippantly. "A tie!" She tells him to keep thinking. His second answer is "love." He eventually works it out. The first gift of Christmas? The Christ child.



Pope Francis speaks to visitors joining him for the recitation of the Angelus prayer in St Peter's Square at the Vatican December 8, 2024. Photo: CNS/Vatican Media

that does not disappoint.

It is why Pope Francis has announced that this Christmas Eve will mark the start of the Jubilee Year of Hope which will last until the Feast of Epiphany 2026.

"I took myself off on a retreat, and painted on the wall were those words: 'Hope does not disappoint...'"

Those words "Hope does not disappoint" came to me when my own life had pretty much fallen apart, pretty spectacularly. My convent was closing and after five years I had to leave. My religious life as Sr Martina of the Blessed Sacrament was over.

It seemed I had lost everything, and I was falling into anger, bitterness and resentment - the very things that kill hope. I took myself off on a retreat, and painted on the wall were those words: "Hope does not disappoint..." A cosmic sign, which I read with all the cynicism and misery of the Grinch who stole Christmas.

Question

I could not wait to question the monk assigned to give me spiritual direction.

It had been years since I had asked such a pointed question in my best BBC accent, the one reserved for lying politicians. "Brother," I began, "It says on your wall that 'hope that does disappoint'. But is that really true? Aren't hopes dashed all the time? I mean I'm dis-

appointed..."

He looked at me as if I was not the first person to ask this question. "Yes, Martina, it is true. The words of St Paul in Romans Chapter five. 'Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us...'"

"We know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character hope"

Well, I was not going to argue with St Paul, but I figured he must have written those words when the mission was going well... in between floggings, stonings and shipwrecks! But,

"An Old Christmas Card..." by the late crooner, Jim Reeves, was always turned up when the radio played in our house. My mother loved the sentimental song. And although fewer cards are now sent, it is well worth the effort. It turns out Christmas cards in the post can bring more joy than an email. "Letters and cards have been found to boost positive emotions in both the receiver and sender," said Stephen Gallagher, of the University of Limerick, in *Saga Magazine's* December issue.

actually, St Paul wrote those words two thousand years ago, while under house arrest in Rome, where he was awaiting trial and execution. And far from raging and despairing, Paul was rejoicing in his suffering. "We know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character hope."

Suffering

It is in suffering that I really came to understand what Christian hope really means.

Christian hope is not worldly; and it does not depend on our circumstances: whether we are mourning, or dying, whether we are in hospital or homeless, in prison or persecuted, whether we are broken or failing. Christian hope depends on faith, our belief in the love of God, and his amazing plan for our lives.

And that love, that amazing love is the love that came down at Christmas, the love that died for us on Good Friday, and the love that rose again at Easter. It is the love that brings life because it is stronger than death.

And it is the hope that brought my family and I to

St Bernadette's Church in Toronto, after an ice storm at Christmas, 2013 when I was between two worlds. It would be my last visit home before I entered religious life. I had a secret sense I was about to let go of everything.

"The priest at St Bernadette's spoke of the birth of Jesus, and my niece was especially tickled when he declared, in particularly loud tones: 'God is not aloof'"

That was the Christmas that really was a winter wonderland. We had awoken two days before Christmas to a glistening, frozen world, where thick ice covered everything from cars to lamp posts to trees, some of which had split right down the middle, as if hit by lightning. It was a phenomenon I had never seen before.

There were power outages and the generator at St Bernadette's was not working, so Christmas Eve Mass was by candlelight.

What I remember most was my little niece and how she delighted in the homily.

She was only eight at the time and enjoyed her own "secret" language, which was essentially taking English words and speaking them backwards. She would call me Anitram, and anyone acting the eejit, including me, was referred to, not as a fool, but as 'a loof'.

The priest at St Bernadette's spoke of the birth of Jesus, and my niece was especially tickled when he declared, in particularly loud tones: "God is not aloof."

My niece whispered excitedly into my ear: "He used our word!"

I am not sure she knew what "God is not aloof" actually meant. But I did.

And I have come to believe more and more in Emmanuel, His eternal loving presence which, even in suffering, brings hope, a Christmas hope that does not disappoint.

Cloistered Christmas: celebrating like a nun



Renata Steffens

When a woman decides to become a nun, they leave behind old traditions and practices and open themselves for a new life with their religious order, which becomes their new family. That include Christmas traditions. As every family has their own Christmas customs, with the nuns that is not different.

The Irish Catholic talked to representatives of two cloistered orders to understand a little about the Christmas behind the walls of a monastery. Sr Gwen, a Carmelite Sister from the monastery in New Ross, Co. Wexford and Sr Gabrielle, Prioress of the Redemptoristine nuns in Dublin commented about their traditions from the start of the Advent to the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6.

The Carmelites in New Ross are a group of nine sisters, and it's a rather young group, with four of those nuns in the mid-40s to mid-50s age group. The Redemptoristines community in Dublin is composed of seven different nationalities. Out of fifteen nuns who live there, only five are Irish.

Diversity

All this diversity plays a role, not only during Christmas, but all year round. "We encourage different nationalities to have, for example, some of their food." For Thanksgiving Day this year, the nuns celebrated "with two American sister and one Filipino American... We share each other's cultures," Sr Gabrielle explained.

The Carmelites start their Christmas celebration with Advent. "The idea is to focus on the great miracle of the incarnation," Sr Gwen explained. "We journey together as a Carmelite community and with our prayer for pondering of the Word of God. The daily readings of Advent. That's a very powerful way for us to go through the Advent and keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus and on the Blessed Virgin Mary."

Sr Gabrielle began by stating how important Advent is for the Redemptoristines. "We are very fortunate that we're not caught



Redemptoristines making their procession on Christmas eve after evening prayer.

in the commercialism," she said. "We actually live Advent with a gradual dawning of life. The various candles been lit every week and it is an intense spiritual journey of preparation for us."

During Advent, every Saturday evening, the Redemptoristines will have a liturgy, "celebrating the different aspects of the coming of Christ... Because Christ has come in Bethlehem, Christ is coming every day to us... Christ is our joy and our light," the Prioress said.

The Carmelite nuns when preparing for Advent, "go out to the garden, we collect lovely greenery from around the various parts of the garden and prepare the wreaths, which will be in the church... We're lucky to have a public church."

“We decorate the external parts earlier, but not inside where we live, because we live the Advent”

Decorating the church is part of the preparation for the Carmelite community, the preparation for the sisters starts to be planned earlier. They have planned "a few days of Advent reflection for the sisters, the whole community participates in this," Sr Gwen explained.

"This year we're having it with one of our Carmelite Friars. He's coming down and he's going to spend a few days just giving us some Advent reflection talk. We find that's a great help to move us into the season of Advent too."

The Redemptoristines do not



Sr Gabrielle holding baby Jesus.

decorate during Advent. "Just at the very end," Sr Gabrielle told. "We decorate the external parts earlier, but not inside where we live, because we live the Advent... It's important we live the simplicity. We're in that preparation stage." This preparation stage involves "a great cleaning going on around the house."

The Redemptoristines' Christmas begins on December 25, "not beforehand. [For] the rest of the world, after Christmas day [it] is nearly all past for them, where we're just beginning our celebration and living more deeply in that divine life, united with our humanity and divine life, appreciating and loving through humanity," the Prioress explained.

Custom

Sr Gwen talked about a "custom which I think all the Carmelites have. I suppose in the older days, like when we came here in 1817, there wouldn't have been many statues in the monastery, it might have been only one of the baby Jesus." Because of that a very peculiar tradition was created in the Carmelite

Monastery in New Ross.

During the month of Advent, "each sister, she can take an Advent treat day. So, she has that day, she can spend it especially in prayer, but she can also take the figure of the baby Jesus... She can take that to her room with her, or to the Hermitage, wherever she's spending that day," Sr Gwen explained.

"Let's say I'm going on retreat tomorrow. Tonight, [the sisters] would all come up near my room upstairs on the corridor. All the sisters would gather outside my room and the prioress would bring the figure of the infant Jesus carried out with her. They would stand around and they would sing one of the Advent hymns." That is the Carmelite way to keep their eyes "fixed on the Advent."

While the nuns are journeying through Advent, Sr Gwen said "there will be a quietness on the monastery too. We just try and focus on our readings and so on." A day or two will be dedicated to practice carols they will sing over Christmas.

"A few days before Christmas, we have to unpack all the crates... the decorations.



Carmelite sister reading a book she received as a Christmas gift last year.



Carmelite sisters unpacking the Christmas crib decorations to use in the chapel.

Various sisters will be pulling out the crib. That would be our main decorations around the house." The main crib is in the Carmelite's church, but they "have cribs in different places around" the monastery, she said. "We have a Christmas tree, but we don't overdo decorations around the house too much."

Tradition

On Christmas Eve, the Redemptoristines have a tradition of going in procession around the monastery with candles after the evening prayer. "Welcoming Jesus Emmanuel into our home, into every corner of our monastery and into our hearts,"

the Prioress explained.

The same happens in the Carmelite monastery. "On Christmas Eve, maybe late afternoon, it's quite dark, so the community will process all around the monastery," Sr Gwen explained. They will be "carrying candles and little handbells. We just ring those gently and we process with the baby Jesus. Just turn around to different parts of the monastery."

"This procession happens before Mass, so they would walk to the church and place the baby Jesus in the crib, which will be blessed by the priest... We're very blessed to still be able to have a night Mass. Lots of friends and local



Redemptoristines welcoming baby Jesus with candlelit procession.

people would join us for the night Mass and then we have an early Mass at 8am again on Christmas morning," Sr Gwen said.

On Christmas day, after the morning Mass, the Carmelites gather to discuss which sisters are assigned to cooking dinner. After dinner, "at night-time, after tea, we would open our gifts that we've got maybe from friends or family. We'd all gather at our tea-time and we'd open our gifts and we'd be pulling crackers and we'd be telling jokes. That's great fun, actually."

On the other hand, for the Redemptoristines, "Christmas is not about exchanging presents, it's about receiving Christ in the world," the Prioress explained. For that reason, they do not exchange gifts between themselves. "We don't have things to give each other. But people give us gifts and some give gifts for each individual sister, and we open them on Christmas Day. But everything goes to our community, we share everything... Whatever is there is shared among us."

Exchange

That doesn't mean the Redemptoristine nuns don't exchange something. "They get their joy. The present we give each other is being present to each other... You don't have to give physical gifts. But give time to somebody is so very important."

As any other family, "we have our traditional Christmas dinner," Sr Gabrielle said. "People are very generous to us... everything that we have for our Christmas dinner is

gifted to us by our families and friends... We realise that it comes from the Lord himself."

For Christmas dinner, the Redemptoristine nuns are free to come into the kitchen and prepare a dish from their countries. "It's a wonderful time to come in during the day and do our little bit to contribute to the meal. It's a group effort," the sister said.

"After Christmas dinner, the fire is lit in the community room and we gather around there, sharing stories and hearing about stories from different families, from different countries and how they celebrate. It's a beautiful moment," Sr Gabrielle said.

“When the visitors come, they ‘receive them with respect... It’s a time for greater deep recollection for us, as far as possible in our daily life’”

Normally, on Christmas day the Redemptoristines don't receive family visitors. "We try to keep it simple," she explained. "But life has changed for people. We were never allowed to have visitors before during Advent, but it doesn't suit people anymore, we have to consider people. So, people come, for example, our families and friends come, give in the food for Christmas and give gifts in."

Sr Gabrielle said that, when the visitors come, they "receive them with respect... It's a time for greater deep



Carmelite sister preparing Advent Wreath in the chapel.

recollection for us, as far as possible in our daily life."

For the Carmelites, Sr Gwen said that some sister might miss spending Christmas with their families, especially the younger ones, but the community is also a family. The community is their new family, the family they chose to be a part of.

However, the Carmelites do receive visits of family and friends. "Say, on the day after Christmas, my family will come and visit me, then somebody else's family will come. It's not that we're cut off," she explained, "If they [the families] wanted to come on Christmas day, [they could], but most people are too busy on Christmas."

On the three days after Christmas, the Carmelites meet "at 5:30 in the choir, all the sister gather and we're singing a number of Christmas carols as a community. We just sing them together, for ourselves".

Young People

On the Feast of the Holy Innocence, December 28, "the young people kind of take over a bit in the monastery. Their job is to entertain us... They often try to play something hilarious, funny... They might put on a play, or they might have some games organised for us... Or a quiz or sing along. It's very exciting and funny and be great fun that night," Sr Gwen said.

Because of the Feast of Holy Innocence, the Carmelites "let the young people go wild a bit."

On January 1, they gather in the community room around 7pm. On the table,

a tray with envelopes will be waiting for them. Each sister will get one of the envelopes not peeking inside. "Inside that envelope will be our patron saint for the year... It usually is a Carmelite saint... That's our prayer companion and our patron saint for the year."

On January 2, the nuns go into a three-day retreat to prepare for the Feast of the Epiphany. Celebrating the "women's Christmas on January 6", the Carmelites try to honour famous Irish women, like St Brigid... The more adventurous ones might try to dress up and we might have to guess who they are."

"It's great fun," Sr Gwen said. "We pray, but we got the joy of the Lord and we share that with each other. And we



Redemptoristine nuns, Sr Maire Bríd, Sr Deirdra and Sr Louisa preparing Christmas dinner.

enjoy Christmas."

Inside the monastery, Sr Gwen explained, they don't get caught in the craziness of commercial Christmas, with shopping and flashing lights. They don't feel like they are missing out on anything.

Sr Gabrielle said that

when celebrating Advent and Christmas, it is important to "never forgetting that in welcoming Christ, the light, we welcome all people. We cannot separate Christ from the rest of humanity. That is surely the message of Christmas."

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Carmelite sisters singing hymns celebrating the winter solstice on December 21, 2023.



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Monks carrying hope in the Holy Land



Fr Josef San Torcuato (second left) and Abbot Nicodemus Schnabel (centre) pray on the Feast of the Multiplication at Tabgha

Br Justin Robinson OSB

The Sea of Galilee laps gently against the shoreline at Tabgha Priory, a Benedictine monastery offering an oasis of peace in an otherwise troubled Holy Land.

Over the past year, the soundscape of war has enveloped the small community of monks who live, pray and work at the place where Jesus multiplied loaves and fish for his hungry followers. A church has stood here since the fourth century, with the Benedictines serving as its guardians for over eight decades.

“Last week was pretty quiet” says Fr Josef San Torcuato, prior of the monastery. “A ceasefire is now in place, so we’re no longer running everyday into the bomb shelter, and we had a wonderful feast of the Multiplication. It’s kind of comforting” he tells me, sitting on the shore of the lake.

Born in Düsseldorf to a German mother and a Spanish father, he has lived in



The coast of the Sea of Galilee near Ein Eyov Waterfall in Tabgha, Israel

the Holy Land for nearly thirty years and spent the past two years as leader of the small monastic community on the Galilee shoreline. He speaks softly and reflectively, though the stress of

the situation is evident in his voice.

Conflict

Over the past year the Benedictine community – like so many others in the region –

has found itself caught at the edge of a conflict spiraling out of control. The still calm of the Galilee has been punctuated by the roar of fighter jets running sorties to Lebanon, Syria and farther afield, whilst the boom of artillery fire rattles the window frames.

“We often heard the rockets from Lebanon, some intercepted and others that made impact. This summer we had

a lot of problems with wildfires sparked by the rockets,” he tells me. “We’re tired, our workers are tired, everyone is exhausted by this conflict and the sheer lack of political perspective, where the problems won’t be solved and further conflict will just be postponed until next time. It’s a bitter thing.”

A big source of hope and strength for the monastic

community has been its daily routine of prayer, work, and community life. Hospitality shown to pilgrims was once the monastery’s main outreach, though the 5,000 daily visitors who came before the pandemic and war has reduced to a trickle. This has plunged the monastery into a financial crisis.

“With no visitors or pilgrims, our income has dried up” he explains, his tone heavy with concern. “We’re determined not to lay off our workers and to keep this place open for anyone seeking peace and neutrality. But I don’t know how much longer we can sustain this.”

Christmas

As Christmas approaches the thoughts of Christians around the world will be turned towards this conflicted Holy Land. In Bethlehem – birthplace of the Prince of Peace – celebrations will once again be low key, owing to the absence of visitors and in solidarity with those suffering the effects of the year-long war.

Calling from the Benedictine motherhouse on Jerusalem’s Mount Zion, Fr Matthias Karl shares his concern for the brethren in the Galilee but looks forward to his community’s upcoming pilgrimage to the town where Jesus was born.

“Bethlehem holds a special

“We’re determined not to lay off our workers and to keep this place open for anyone seeking peace and neutrality. But I don’t know how much longer we can sustain this”



Abbot Nicodemus Schnabel prays with the names at the Church of the Nativity



Fr Matthias Karl leads prayer over names at Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem

“We carry their intentions with us, and we encourage solidarity and support for needy people in Bethlehem and the Holy Land. We hope for the success of this year’s pilgrimage”

place in everyone’s heart at Christmas,” Fr Matthias reflects. “We feel blessed to walk there in prayer, and we invite people from around the world to join us spiritually on this sacred journey of light and hope amidst the darkness all around.”

“The basic idea is to create a spiritual bridge from wherever people live to the birthplace of Jesus in the Holy Night”

Fr Matthias speaks of the Christmas Eve walk which the monks make from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, carrying with them a scroll of names which they will place on the star at the Church of the Nativity. Tens of thousands of people will submit their names and those of loved ones to be remembered in prayer by the monks.

“The basic idea is to create a spiritual bridge from wherever people live to the birthplace of Jesus in the Holy Night,” explains Fr Matthias. “When we walk to Bethlehem, we stop in moments of prayer for the people whose names we carry with us, and we remember them when we reach the Church of the Nativity and pray for their intentions.”

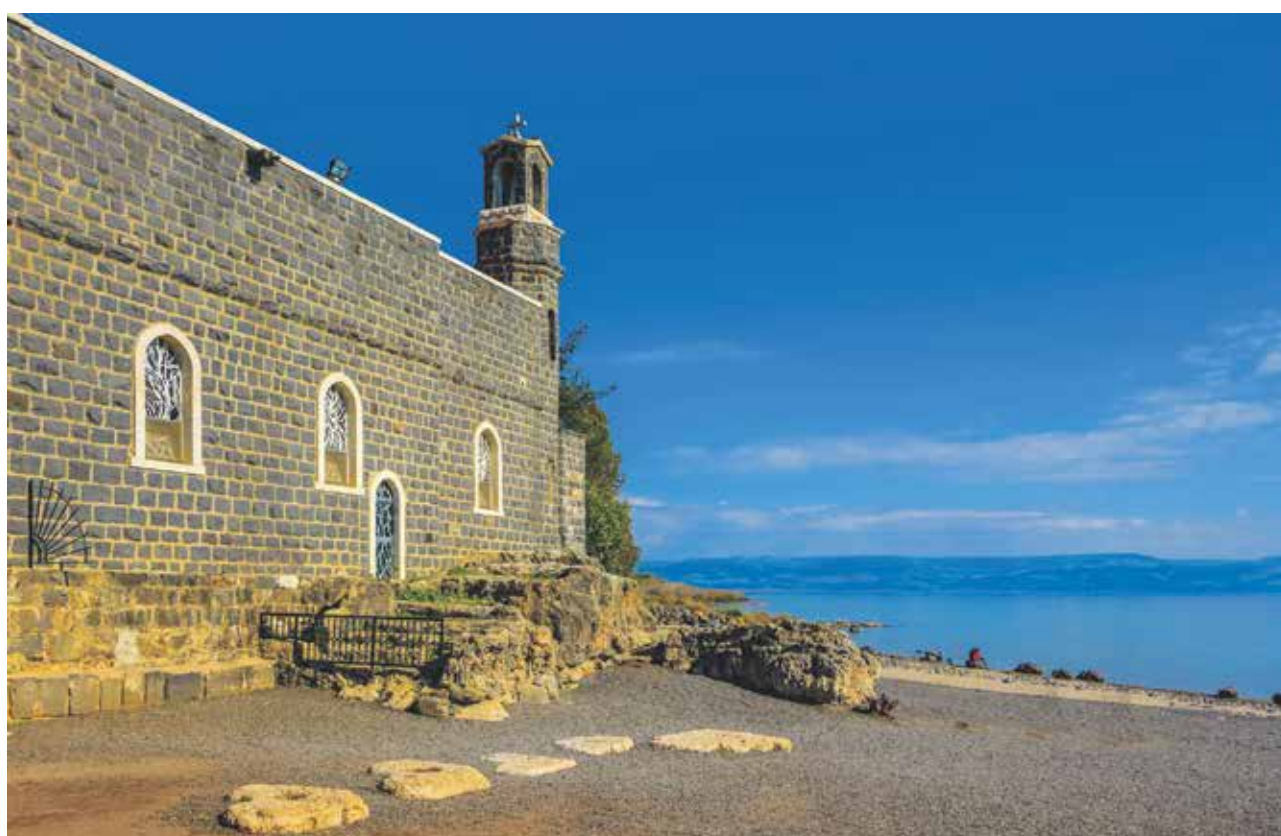
The monks’ pilgrimage –

titled “I carry your name to Bethlehem in the Holy Night” – also raises money for social projects in the area, many of which experience a more pressing need in light of the ongoing conflict afflicting the region. Those who submit names often make a small donation which goes to help local people in need.

“I’m very happy to have the possibility to do this walk, to touch the star in the place where Jesus was born and bring people with me on the journey,” Fr Matthias says. “We carry their intentions with us, and we encourage solidarity and support for needy people in Bethlehem and the Holy Land. We hope for the success of this year’s pilgrimage.”

As the multifront war continues to cast its shadow over the Holy Land, the Benedictines of Tabgha and Mount Zion remain steadfast in their mission. Through prayer, work, and hospitality, they nurture an oasis of peace – a quiet light of hope that seeks to extend beyond their cloisters to a region and world desperately needing it.

The *Irish Catholic* will send all reader donations directly to the Tabgha monks with no fees deducted. If you would like to help the monks in this difficult time, email accounts@irishcatholic.ie and we’ll organise your donation.



Sea of Galilee in Israel. The Church of the Primacy - Tabgha. The Holy Church was built on the Sea Gennesaret. Jesus then fed with bread and fish hungry people.



The Church of the Primacy of Saint Peter, Franciscan church in Tabgha, Israel, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee

Portlaoise, a parish alive!

Ann Marie Foley

Portlaoise is growing as a commuter town and in diversity, and the parish is something of a 'United Nations' of priests and religious from Brazil, China, Romania, Indonesia and India serving with PP Msgr John Byrne, PPVG and a local Deacon Eugene Keyes.

"When I came here (in 2000) I was one of five priests, all Irish," Msgr Byrne told *The Irish Catholic*. Now, he is the only Irish priest but he feels very fortunate to have the other priests. "It is a microcosm of the many changes that have taken place," he said.

Portlaoise Parish has wel-

comed immigrants since the earlier Direct Provision Centres were set up, including one just outside town at the Montague Hotel, to facilitate Syrian and African refugees. Now these new Irish are part of the fabric of the parish involved in the liturgy, Eucharist, altar service and choirs.

Community

There are more than 400 lay people involved in parish ministries. A different choir sings at each of the four Sunday Masses. The Legion of Mary does visitations to new houses in a town where currently several housing estates are under construction. "This morning we have a list of around 10 house-

holds that want our blessing. A priest will visit each house. So there is that active outreach with the new Portlaoise," said Msgr Byrne.

“Churches of ease outside town, Church of the Assumption, The Heath, and Holy Cross Church, Ratheniska, bring the population to around 30,000”

St Peter & St Paul's church is always busy, as it is the only Catholic church in Portlaoise, which has a population of approximately 25,000. Churches of ease outside town, Church of the Assumption, The Heath, and

“St Peter & St Paul's is always busy, as it is the only Catholic church in Portlaoise, which has a population of approximately 25,000”

Holy Cross Church, Ratheniska, bring the population to around 30,000.

Connection

In Portlaoise between 100 and 400 attend weekday Masses each morning. The virtual congregation through the webcam and Shalom World numbers more than 100,000 for Sunday Mass and half of that on week days. Every week the 24+ page full-colour Link Up newsletter includes photos of virtual congrega-

tion members who, having attended online Masses from Portlaoise, visit the parish in person from abroad.

“We hope that this will translate into they, themselves finding the beauty and joy of being a member of a Catholic parish”

"It makes us aware of how small the world is and how global the church is," said Msgr Byrne. "Just yes-

terday two ladies visited us from the Philippines having found us during the pandemic. We have had visitors from America, Australia, all over the world. People who come to the church that they have been (virtually) worshipping in."

Msgr Byrne feels that the young people in the parish are the hope for the future. As part of the John Paul II Awards, they participate in the Lourdes pilgrimage, sing for the 10.30 am Sunday Mass, and do stewarding. "They are available and with us throughout the year, and we hope that this will translate into they, themselves finding the beauty and joy of being a member of a Catholic parish," said Msgr Byrne.



Parish Centre with its grass-covered roof and modern design.



Parish centre welcomes people for a cuppa after Mass.



Parish shop with everything from ordination cards to angels.

Parish Shop

Mass cards are the biggest seller in the shop in the Parish Centre, which stocks everything from *The Irish Catholic* to prayer and other books, cards for everything from ordination to jubilees, personalised

candles, statues, medals and more.

Phyllis Ging was invited to help at a sad time in her life, after her husband died, and found it so fulfilling that she stayed on. Celina Buggie is on a CE scheme and said she is now "part of the furniture".

The shop manager Claire Scully says it was non-stop all day with the visit of the relics of St Bernadette, but it is always busy. "From now on people will want nativities (cribs) for Christmas and Mass Bouquets as gifts," she said.

Parish Centre

The futuristic grass-roofed Parish centre is something of a hub for the town as well as the parish with meetings for everyone from HSE, Laois Partnership, grinds, camera club, Order of Malta, County Council, karate, to charities like Irish Hospice, Cuisle Centre and parish groups.

"We get a lot of support from the community and local organisations and businesses," said Declan Kelly, Manager of the Parish Centre. "Anyone from political parties to yoga."

He explained that the difficult days of the pandemic are finally over but it took time. "We are only back up and fully running since last September," he said. "People were not confident enough to come back out and go to their groups, especially the elderly generation who are big supporters."

Mr Kelly arrived when the walls were being painted. "I started in July 2005 and haven't looked back since. Every day is different. I don't mind getting out of bed in the morning for it. It's rewarding, it's interesting, it's different,

and it's sometimes challenging, enjoyable too."

On the day when Irish Catholic visited the church and parish centre Pupils of the Scoil Chríost Rí secondary, with its roots in traditions of the Presentation, were filling the church for their annual opening Mass, the earlier morning Massgoers were having a cuppa and chat in the parish centre before going home. Irish Hospice volunteers were holding a fundraising coffee morning, and mums were arriving for play and music for toddlers.



Parish Centre shop: (L/R) Claire Scully (manager) Phyllis Ging (volunteer) and Celina Buggie (CE scheme).

Parish Secretary Michelle Bartley
With 28 years working in the parish, Michelle Bartley must be one of the longest-serving members of the team. She started in the priest's house one day a week. Now she is full-time in the Parish Centre dealing with everything from lotto tickets to paperwork for baptisms, marriages and liaising with the priests and parish teams.

"There wasn't much traffic when I was in the priest's house, maybe someone looking for a Mass card or wedding papers, and the priest did a lot of that. Now the role is reversed, I do a lot more of that now" she said.

Parish Council
As a member of the parish council, Michelle Bartley explained that they share ideas and plan for liturgies and other parish events.

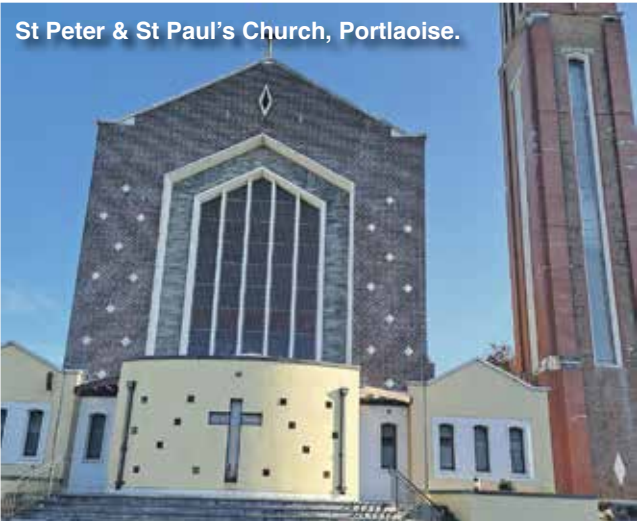
"Sometimes we have members from different teams like the baptism team, Eucharistic team, or lay people from outside to get their feedback and to see what people are thinking about what would be best for the parish," she added.



Parish secretary Michelle Bartley.



Sr Sybil, parish sacristan, Ursuline Sisters of the Immaculate Heart.



St Peter & St Paul's Church, Portlaoise.



St Peter & St Paul's Church.



Msgr John Byrne PPVG



Fr Simon Jin, Fr Erick Ebot SVD, and Anna Gullane at Irish Hospice Foundation coffee morning in Parish Centre.

Welcomed from abroad

Fr Simon Jin from Shanghai, China has been in the parish for three years and said he is happy to go "wherever there is a need to serve God's people."

He worked in the USA for a spell and was visiting his sister, a Presentation nun, in Blanchardstown, Dublin and their house in Portlaoise, Msgr Byrne asked him to stay. He has received a friendly warm welcome in the parish.

Fr Erick Ebot, SVD, from Manggarai-Flores, Indone-

sia who is a Divine Word Missionary said Portlaoise is a lovely place to settle. For him, some things are different to home.

"The way we celebrate the Mass, (in Indonesia) participation is strong, everyone answers loudly. Here we have to help people a little more with the responses," he said. "But the Mass is a sacrifice and a sacrament -that is the same everywhere in the world."

Fr Ciprian Matei from Bucharest, Romania joined the parish in 2019. While

Catholics are less than 10% of the population of Romania, the Church there is experiencing a vocations boom. In his town, there are five parishes and 100 priests have been ordained.

Fr Adriano de Oliveira is a diocesan priest of the Diocese of Divinopolis, in Minas Gerais, Brazil. He served in several parishes in Brazil before fulfilling his desire to experience ministry abroad when invited to the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin by Bishop Denis Nulty.

Sr Sybil and Sr Julie

Sr Sybil and Sr Julie, parish sacristans, came all the way from Kerala in India with another colleague in 2017. A member of the Ursuline Sisters of the Immaculate Heart was working in Portlaoise, and with the invitation of Msgr Byrne, they moved into a former Presentation sisters' house. These sisters are not as active as they used to be but celebrated 200 years in Portlaoise earlier this year.

Srs Sybil and Julie also

work in the community. For example, they visit the prison.

"We have to go through those big gates," said Sr Sybil. "They (prisoners) are good and polite, they want to know more about Jesus," she says. They say the rosary with the prisoners and the Chaplain, a Deacon who distributes Holy Communion.

Sr Sybil who celebrates her 50th jubilee next year had no expectations of travelling half way across the world when she joined the Ursulines.

"That's God's plan. I only have thanksgiving, nothing else. It is God's perfection and all his care and protection."

She notices that in Kerala there are many more priests and religious and more opportunities for sacraments and daily Mass than in Ireland. But she finds the Irish still have a deep faith. "Ireland is the island of saints and scholars. Before, the missionaries used to go from Ireland. Now, they are coming from other places to Ireland," she said.

Suffering, literature and the meaning of Advent



“Writing this book was an act of faith,” hears **Renata Milán Morales**

On the day Josephine Brady was diagnosed with cancer, the world seemed to shake. For this librarian and lover of literature, the initial shock was overwhelming. Yet, during the uncertainty, she found herself reaching for books. Not just any books, but ones that might help her understand the reality of her situation. The result of this journey is her new book, *The Breath of Consolation: Finding Solace in Cancer Literature*. In this time of preparation for Christmas, her book takes on a special significance.

Diagnosis

“When I received my diagnosis, like anyone in such a situation, I was in shock,” Josephine recalls. “As a librarian, my first instinct was to search for profound writing about cancer. Something beautifully written that captured the complexity of living with the disease - the suffering, the endurance, the search for meaning. But I struggled to find a book that truly spoke to my experience.”

Months later, during the cycles of treatment and



Josephine Brady pictured with her book *The Breath of Consolation: Finding Solace in Cancer Literature*.

recovery, Josephine had an idea. “I decided to write the book I couldn’t find,” she said. “It took me ten years. Between treatments for cancer and diving into research, I explored cancer literature across three cen-

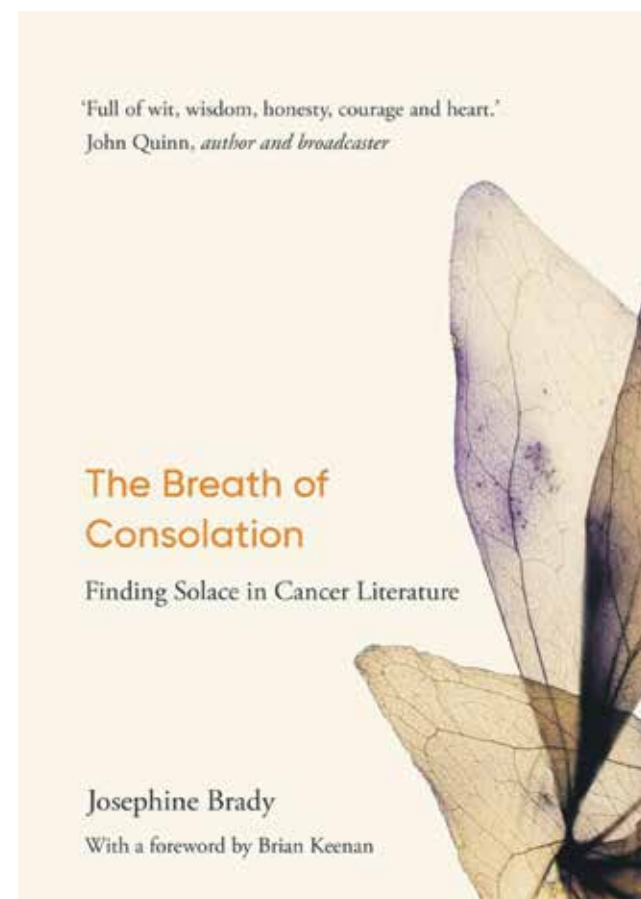
turies, six continents, and thirteen countries.”

This task became a personal and intellectual odyssey, concluding in *The Breath of Consolation*. Through it, Josephine aimed to offer a support to read-

ers struggling with illness or loss, especially during moments of vulnerability such as Christmas.

“Deep writing allows us to explore the meaning of life, why there is suffering, and how we can find hope”

As a librarian, Josephine is a firm believer in the healing power of books. “Libraries are places for the cure of the soul,” she explains. “That’s how I feel about the importance of literature. With physical dis-



The Breath of Consolation: Finding Solace in Cancer Literature.

eases, we hand it over to the medics and hope they look after us. We have no control over it. But literature helps with the mental and emotional struggles.”

Hope

For Josephine, profound writing has the ability to help readers face life’s essential questions. “Deep writing allows us to explore the meaning of life, why there is suffering, and how we can find hope. It reminds us that there is significance in our lives, even in suffering.”

One of the writers who influenced Josephine’s work is Christian Wiman, a professor at Yale Divinity School. “He describes reading profound literature as a form of liturgy, a sacred practice,” she says. “I love his writing. He’s deeply spiritual and explores themes of faith, doubt, and the universal need for compassion and empathy.”

Josephine also draws inspiration from Henning Mankell, whose reflections on living authentically caught the author’s attention. “These voices emphasise the significance of life and the natural cycle we are all part of,” she notes.

This connection between

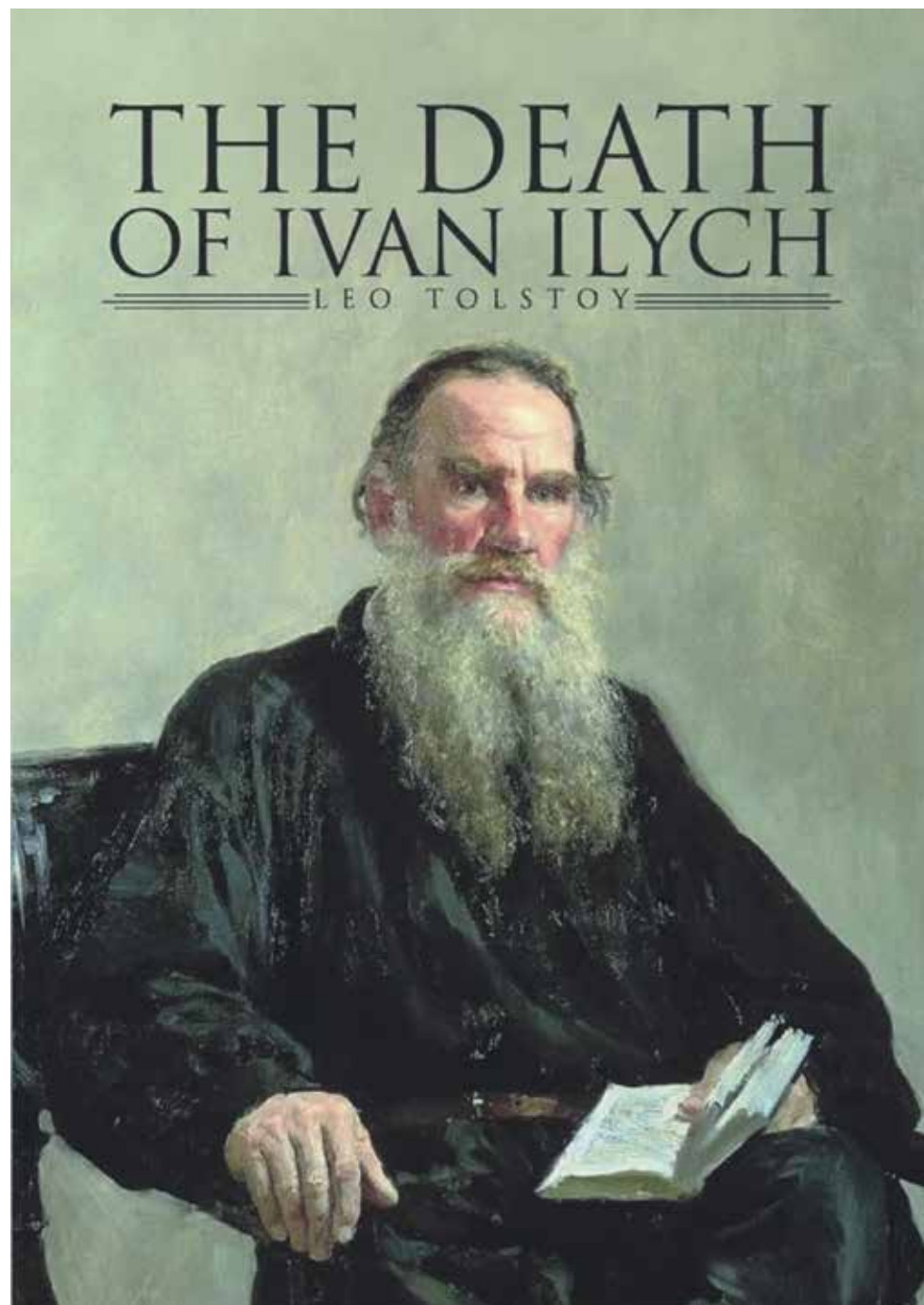
reader and writer is deeply personal for Josephine. “You feel an intense bond with the writer. They articulate what you find difficult to express. I’m not a poet, but they capture feelings I have myself, like compassion and empathy.”

“I included writers like CS Lewis, who grappled with suffering and questioned God. In the end, he didn’t doubt his faith. His journey reflects the complexity of belief”

Raised in a Catholic household, Josephine’s faith has been a constant, though her relationship with the Church has sometimes been complicated. Writing *The Breath of Consolation* was an act of faith, a means of engaging with life’s larger questions. “My upbringing made God a presence in my life,” she reflects. “But it’s when you read profound writing about suffering, death, and fear that you discover your inner self and your values.”

Josephine’s book incorporates a diverse range of per-

“My upbringing made God a presence in my life,” she reflects. ‘But it’s when you read profound writing about suffering, death, and fear that you discover your inner self and your values’”



The death of Ivan Ilych, Leo Tolstoy

“I still dip into the Bible regularly. It reminds me that God is with me, that there’s a greater purpose. We can’t always see it. It can’t be rationally explained, but it’s there. I believe it’s divine”

spectives to meet the needs of all readers. “I included writers like CS Lewis, who grappled with suffering and questioned God. In the end, he didn’t doubt his faith. His journey reflects the complexity of belief.”

Voices

Josephine’s research brought her into contact with different voices, each offering wisdom in the face of suffering. Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych* was a standout. “It speaks to the mental, emotional, and spiritual suffering that accompanies illness. Such works give readers the language to articulate their pain and the courage to

confront it.”

Poetry, too, played a critical role in Josephine’s journey. “Mary Bradish O’Connor’s poetry was a lifeline during my treatment. I brought one of her poems to every cycle of chemo. When I couldn’t read anything else, that one poem got me through it. It reminded me that it wasn’t my fault.”

Jane Kenyon, the American poet who passed away from leukaemia, also left a profound impression. “Her poem ‘Let Evening Come’ is beautiful. It’s about acceptance. It transforms suffering into beauty.”

“The writers I turned to during my illness under-

stood this. They remind us that light comes even in the darkest moments,” said Josephine.

Resource

In crafting *The Breath of Consolation*, Josephine sought to create a resource that readers could turn to during difficult times. “I designed the book to be accessible, with essays and excerpts that people can dip into as needed,” she says. “The writing process was transformative for me. It revealed aspects of myself I hadn’t fully understood.”

Josephine’s faith deepened during this time. “Writing this book was, in many ways, an act of faith.

Josephine Brady during the book launch of her book *The Breath of Consolation: Finding Solace in Cancer Literature*.

It was a way to contribute meaningfully to the world.”

Her choices show this spiritual journey. Writers like John O’Donohue, whose reflections on Celtic spirituality celebrate the sacredness of life, are included in her book. “I want readers to take away the message that suffering is an inescapable part of life, but through it, we can find meaning, serenity, and a deeper appreciation for life’s preciousness.”

“Physical problems and death may be looming, but there’s a sense of acceptance, of appreciating every moment while we’re alive”

“Every human being experiences suffering in some shape or form. Some seem to bear a heavier load than others, but it happens to everyone. And every life ends in death. But there’s also a sense of continuity – the world continues, and our role is to live as best we

can, to make a difference, to play our part.” This perspective has reshaped how Josephine approaches her own life. “Physical problems and death may be looming, but there’s a sense of acceptance, of appreciating every moment while we’re alive.”

Anchor

For Josephine, faith remains an anchor. “I still dip into the Bible regularly. It reminds me that God is with me, that there’s a greater purpose. We can’t always see it. It can’t be rationally explained, but it’s there. I believe it’s divine.”

Josephine stresses the importance of engaging with faith and literature consistently. “You forget lessons if you don’t continue to practise. Whether it’s religion or reading, you need to engage, or you risk losing the perspective they provide.”

For her, Advent is an invitation to reconnect with these truths. “Bad things happen, but God is there. Literature reminds us of life’s greater purpose. It keeps us from despair and

urges us to keep going.”

In *The Breath of Consolation*, Josephine Brady has created a work that bridges literature, faith, and the universal human experience of suffering.

“Life is fragile, but it is also precious,” Josephine says. “It’s about waiting for the light and embracing the hope it brings”

By gathering the voices of poets, novelists, and thinkers from across cultures and centuries, Josephine has crafted a book that speaks to the heart. In this season of Advent and Christmas, her message feels timely: through courage, reflection, and connection, we can find meaning and serenity in even the darkest moments.

“Life is fragile, but it is also precious,” Josephine says. “It’s about waiting for the light and embracing the hope it brings. That’s what literature and faith offer: hope during life’s struggles.”

The true meaning of Christmas



Generosity is part of our national identity, hears Renata Milán Morales

For 100 years, the Christmas Day dinner has been a sign of hope and generosity for those in need in Dublin. Since its establishment in 1924, this event has grown into a tradition, offering not just meals but also companionship and a sense of community to the homeless, the lonely, and those facing hardship.

Originally held at the Mansion House, this initiative has evolved over time, ensuring that the true spirit of Christmas shines brightly for all who participate.

"For 51 years, the dinner was held in the Mansion House," said Trevor McNamara, chair of the organising committee. The Lord Mayor hosted the dinner annually until growing numbers and practical challenges forced a move. "The Mansion House was going through some refurbishments, and we couldn't use the toilet facilities that particular year. So, we needed a different venue, and the RDS came along."

The RDS has provided the perfect space for the event, which now includes seating for up to 500 guests and takeaway meals for thousands more. "We have been able to have the dinner every single year. We did not stop for the world wars. We didn't stop for COVID," Mr McNamara proudly shared. Even during the pandemic, the organisers offered a takeaway service, ensuring no one was left without a meal on Christmas Day.

The event welcomes people from all walks of life. "We don't ask any questions. A couple of years ago, with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, we had a big Ukrainian contingent that we worked with. We've had lots of different nationalities, different religions, everybody as well."

They have created dedicated spaces for families, providing gifts for children and entertainment to make the day extra special. "If you've got a family and you're living in your car, it's very easy to think of Christmas Day as just being one more day when I've got to feed myself and my family," Mr McNamara said.

The event's success relies on the dedication of its 300 volunteers, whose enthusiasm and commitment make the day possible. "We open up the volunteering at 9am on October 1 every year online. Always within a couple of days, we reach our quota," Mr McNamara explained.

Volunteers come from all backgrounds, creating a unique sense of togetherness. "We can have barristers and judges and architects and students and unemployed people and retired people. Everybody's wearing a Christmas jumper and a funny hat, and it doesn't matter where you've come from. We're all the same."

The day begins early, with the first volunteers arriving at 6:30am to prepare the hall, turn on the cookers, and organise meals. By 8am, takeaway meals are being packed and distributed to agencies for delivery, ensuring that everyone can enjoy a Christmas meal, even if they can't attend in person.

As the dinner marks its Centenary in 2024, the committee has chosen to maintain its humble focus. "When we knew we were going to be celebrating 100 years, it was very tempting to consider inviting RTE and making a documentary," Mr McNamara reflected. "Very quickly, as a committee, we decided not to do it. We're going to treat 2024 exactly like 2023."

This decision shows the event's ethos of simplicity and service. "If you're hungry, we're privileged to have been able to provide a Christmas Day dinner for the last 100 years," he said.

For Mr McNamara, the event represents the true meaning of Christmas. "For me, it's Christianity in practice. I'm a very practical Catholic," he explained. His commitment has the focus on passing on values of generosity and service to the next generation.

The dinner is not just a day of giving for the guests but also a meaningful experience for the volunteers. "Bringing community together from all walks of life is very important," Mr McNamara said. The event often sees families volunteering together, creating multi-generational connections to the cause.

The Christmas Day Dinner is a fundamental part of Dublin's Christmas tradition, not just for the meals provided but for the sense of community it fosters. "Generosity is part of our national identity," Mr McNamara said.

As the committee looks forward to another century of service, their mission remains simple and committed: to provide a warm meal and a warm welcome to anyone in need. "There will always be hungry people, but we can do our part," he said.



Mirta Lopez, Mariana Rios and Caoimhe McGuinness who attended the training day on Sunday December 1. Photos: John McElroy.



Grace O'Dowd, Avril McHugh and Aisling Leddy who attended the training day on Sunday.



Sisters Doireann and Rachel McGarry who attended the training day on Sunday.



Some of the 300 people who attended the training day on Sunday., December 1.



Ekaterene Hatzis and Stephen Campbell who attended the training day.



Liam and Eileen Hynes with Abbey Pigott (centre) who attended the training day.



Maria Scarletella and Francesco Alvarano who attended the training day.



Takeaway meals

When did we see you... as a toddler and take care of you?



Penelope Middelboe

I've been a granny for 21 months. My grandson calls me *MorMor* which is a tradition we've taken from the Danish side of my family. It means Mother's Mother. While looking after him I find myself thinking about Jesus at the same age, and naturally about his mother. And also about Joseph who, in today's rather awkward jargon, would be called 'the secondary caregiver'.

In Bethlehem Mary was without her female family and friends. Their shelter was so unsatisfactory that Luke says it didn't count as lodging. Even if, in fact, Joseph's female relations in the town made sure young Mary didn't deliver alone, she must have been scared. As I was, as all first-time mothers are - even with the best modern medical care.

We must assume Joseph would have removed himself from the birthing scene, as was the custom. Gone off perhaps for a glass of wine with his extended family, or simply taken a long walk under the night stars? One was exceptionally bright!

Miracles

I know there's a long-held tradition that being without sin Mary was spared the pain of childbirth. But Jesus was without sin and not spared the agony of crucifixion. As a grown man Jesus took the agony of childbirth as a given, using it as an analogy for how the disciples would feel when he left them. Surely it doesn't help us to make Mary or Jesus different from us in their *degree* of humanity? Conversely it helps me to imagine that Mary and her son share the suffering of the thousands of women giving birth in war zones as they deliver their babies without medical help, in cars, in tents in overcrowded shelters.

Babies cry as soon as they're born. They breathe before the cord is cut. For the first minutes outside the womb they are still *one* with the mother, being nurtured with her body and blood. The significance of this image of Mary requires some thought.



Kids Nativity. Photo: Studio-Annika

It's different from the breastfeeding Madonnas. At the birth Mary literally gave us the body and blood of Jesus. Modern biology now tells us that for the first few months babies continue to believe they share their body with the mother. A breastfeeding mother passes two billion stem cells to her baby daily through her milk. These cells create new tissue and repair damaged tissue. Another miracle of creation. Another miracle of being fully human. An extraordinary insight into the early months of Jesus's life.

The shepherds seem to have got there pretty quickly. So, no time for quiet parent-child bonding like today. They were suitable first visitors though, I'd say, completely used to birthing their animals and watching lambs suckle.

“My tears prick at the image of this little boy, without the language to express his emotions, being frightened by an incomprehensible knowingness of his own torture to come”

The first three years we now know are the most important in creating neural pathways. My own Mother's Mother wrote a book in her 80s imagining Jesus's missing years. Although she admitted she was not maternal towards her own children, she has imagined most tenderly the early years of Jesus or *Jeshu* as she calls him. In one incident,

older girls who are playing with him make little *Jeshu* a king and put a crown of flowers on his head. (He's known to love flowers.) But he pulls the crown off, as if stung, and runs crying to his mother.

'Do you think the crown could have hurt him?' one of his playmates asks Mary. 'Some of the stalks might have been a bit prickly...'

My tears prick at the image of this little boy, without the language to express his emotions, being frightened by an incomprehensible knowingness of his own torture to come.

Childhood

He would have spent most of his early years amongst the female members of his family, and he never lost his ease with women. As a toddler on the streets of Nazareth, I wonder how he felt when he first saw human suffering? As a young child, my son was terrified of drunks and clowns and Father Christmas. I can imagine Mary trying to reas-

sure Jesus. Did she tell him, as I told my little one, 'It's just an *ordinary* man who needs our prayers'? Did she give alms with her son at her side beginning to wonder how he could help? Children have an innate sense of fairness. It must have been all the more acute for the young child Jesus.

“Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you”

For my grandmother, young Jesus has a fleeting awareness of his Father in Heaven. In her book he is questioning his teachers long before his visit to the Temple aged twelve. As Mary and Joseph retraced their steps to Jerusalem to find him, did they view their panic as the beginning of the suffering blind Simeon had spoken of

that first time they'd taken Jesus to the Temple? Jesus might only have been a month old back then, but Simeon had been very clear what was in store for them as a family. 'He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him... *And a sword will pierce your very soul.*'

One August bank holiday we lost my 7-year old stepson on the cliffs of Aberystwyth. We called out the Coast Guard, and volunteers scoured the coastal paths. He was lost for three hours not three days. It pierced our souls. 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you' - is a huge understatement.

Inspiration

We're not told any details about Jesus's three days in the Temple - where he slept, who took him in. But we get the point of the story. It was a sign that he was filled with the Spirit. He was 'sitting among the teachers... everyone was amazed at his understanding and at his answers.' Luke doesn't seem to think Mary and Joseph understood their son's reply, but they must have. Mary would surely have explored the words of the Angel Gabriel and the prophecies of Simeon and Anna, if not with 'Granny Annie', then certainly with Cousin Elizabeth?

After this we're told Jesus went home and was obedient. For my grandmother, he's an eager student of the Torah but a reluctant carpenter's apprentice - much happier as a part-time shepherd boy like his ancestor David. Whatever work he undertook for his

family he would have gone on questioning injustice and arrogance. His later hostility to the Pharisees and Sadducees for example was based on experience.

His mother may be almost silent in the Gospels, but that's an editorial decision. Of course, mother and son would have talked. At Cana she knew his time had come, even if he didn't. As soon as she said to the servants 'Do whatever he tells you,' Jesus got up and did as his mother had asked. It's an interesting detail too that after the feast, with both of them struggling we imagine with the significance of this *first* miracle, he invites some of his disciples back home... to get to know his mother. Tradition says that his step-father Joseph had died by then.

“I now have a new way to explain Mary's importance. She is our role model for parenthood- the humanly messy and humanly miraculous labour of selfless love which lasts a lifetime”

My girl child has been fortunate to have her own child. My second husband and I are now united with her and her partner and his parents in the miracle of parenting. It's one of the greatest human acts - a labour of selfless love that lasts a lifetime. Of course we get it wrong but it helps to see it as a daily reminder that the giving of love is Jesus's calling: not the avoidance of sin, or the rehearsal of dogma, but the trying to do something infinitely good.

Pope Francis speaks of Mary as a role model who guarded Jesus's health and helped him grow, face life and be free. I wonder why it's taken me until now, as a grandmother, to meditate upon Mary the mother of a newborn, the mother of a toddler, and the mother of a teenager. Non-Catholics often ask me about the Catholic dedication to Mary which they view suspiciously. But having thought more about Jesus as a small child perhaps I now have a new way to explain Mary's importance. She is our role model for parenthood- the humanly messy and humanly miraculous labour of selfless love which lasts a lifetime.



Nativity scene. Photo: Adnya

THE SYNODAL TIMES



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

A decisive step forward: The Catholic Church after the Synod



Pope Francis and members of the Synod of Bishops on synodality offer a prayer of thanks to God after the synod's final working session October 26, 2024, in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. Photo: CNS photo/Vatican Media.



Gerry O'Halon SJ

The World Synod ended in dramatic fashion last October (2024) with the announcement of Pope Francis that he was accepting in full the Final Document. This announcement was received most positively by participants in the Synod. It was clear that, in dispensing with the usual post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Francis was signalling that a document compiled by bishops, priest, religious and laity, ordained and non-ordained, men and women, was to enjoy the full status of Church teaching.

This interpretation has now been confirmed by Pope Francis in a Note accompanying the Final Document (November 25, 2024). In it Francis states unequivocally that the Final Document ‘will form part of the ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of Peter, and as such I ask that it be accepted...it represents a form of exercise of the authentic teaching of the Bishop of Rome, with some novel features but in fact corresponds to what I had the opportunity to point out on October 17 2015, when I stated that synodality is the appropriate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry’.

Reimagining

This is quite a mouthful. The ‘novelty’ Francis alludes to is of course the mixed composition of the group which is the source of this teaching – women and men, non-ordained and ordained. And the ‘appropriate interpretative

framework’ that he already alluded to in his 50th Anniversary Address in 2015 graphically illustrates the primacy of baptism over Orders. This is the end, as Archbishop Timothy Costelloe of Perth has referenced, to the notion of the ‘professional Christian/Catholic’ (i.e. clericalism), and the ushering in definitively of the era of ‘differentiated co-responsibility’ in the Catholic Church, involving in principle all the baptised.

“The significance of the Synod is that after a global consultation this is now official Church teaching and policy”

The Final Document itself illustrates this in many ways – the baptised are to exercise their rights in the arenas of

“The Synod Document roots all this not in some self-referential organisational reform, but in our faith encounter with Jesus Christ, leading to our mission, through dialogue, to bring hope to our troubled world and our vulnerable planet Earth”

both Church teaching and governance, parish and diocesan councils are to be mandatory, laity are to have a greater say in the appointment of bishops, there is to be appropriate transparency, accountability and evaluation of office holders in the Church, the gap between consultation and deliberation or decision taking is to be narrowed – and so on. This is a radical re-imagining of Church, a ‘quiet revolution’, the putting flesh on the bones of the ‘inverted pyramid’ paradigm of Church to which Francis has often referred.

And the significance of

the Synod is that after a global consultation, this is now official Church teaching and policy, and has now been handed on to bishops world-wide for implementation. In doing so they are to take into account ‘the various contexts...through processes of discernment and decision-making envisaged by law and by the Document itself’ (Note).

Decisions

The voting participants at the Synod clearly received all this with joy and peace, and overall there has been a positive response world-wide as well. However,

this positivity has been tempered in our parts of the world by the lack of progress on two contested issues which are of deep concern to us – the role of women (crystallised for now in the discussion around the female diaconate), and aspects of Church teaching on sexuality (with a focus for now on the LGBTQ+ community).

“Each local church would be free to decide whether to make use of this possibility or not”

I think there are hopeful straws in the wind here too. First, with regard to women, it is clear from the document that strong recommendations are made to encourage a decision-making/ taking role for women within the opportunities

already existing, but not always availed of, under current Church law and practice. And, secondly, against great pressure (perceived to be coming from the Vatican and even from the Pope himself), the synodal dynamic and mechanisms proved strong enough to allow the question of the female diaconate to be left open. I note, in addition, the succinct post-Synod statement of a theological heavyweight and ecclesial moderate, Cardinal Walter Kasper, that "...there are good reasons that make it theologically possible and pastorally sensible to open the permanent diaconate to women". Indeed, in a more controversial addendum, he goes on to suggest that "...each local church would be free to decide whether to make use of this possibility or not" (The Tablet, 9 November, 2024).

Unity

Curiously, in his note, Francis having said that the Final Document is of Magisterial standing, also adds that it is 'not strictly normative'. This seems to mean, taking it in the context of the note itself, that while the teaching is authoritative, it cannot be applied literally everywhere at once, but must operate

in a discerning and creative way to respect diverse contexts. And in developing this he refers back to a paragraph in *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love, 2016) where he states: "Not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it....each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs" (AL, 3).

“It will be interesting to see whether current teaching can withstand such close theological scrutiny without considerable revision”

Could the female diaconate issue be resolved, *ad experimentum*, at local level first, before waiting for a more universal consensus, as Kasper

“The ‘novelty’ Francis alludes to is of course the mixed composition of the group which is the source of this teaching – women and men, non-ordained and ordained”



Pope Francis speaks to members of the Synod of Bishops on synodality after they approved their final document October 26, 2024, in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. Photo: CNS photo/Vatican Media.



New recruits of the Pontifical Swiss Guard stand at attention at the Vatican, ahead of their swearing-in ceremony May 6. Photo: CNS photo/Lola Gomez.

seems to propose?

Similarly, on sexual issues, Fr James Martin SJ, the great champion of gay rights, noted the reduction of acrimony when the topic was discussed this time, and the mention of sexual identity in the Final Document as a category that needed to be recognised and received inclusively. Also, Tom Reese SJ has noted that one of the study groups is going to examine in-depth the whole issue of Church teaching on sexuality: it will be interesting to see whether current teaching can withstand such close theological scrutiny without considerable revision.

It should be noted finally that the Synod Document roots all this

not in some self-referential organisational reform, but in our faith encounter with Jesus Christ, leading to our mission, through dialogue, to bring hope to our troubled world and our vulnerable planet Earth.

Ireland

Where does all this leave us here in Ireland? Well,

as it happens, the Irish Bishops have already indicated their intention to convoke a pre-synodal assembly for October 2025, and a full assembly for 2026. To that end Julieann Moran (General Secretary of the Irish Synodal Pathway) and her team have been engaged in the training of over 250

synodal leaders throughout the length and breadth of Ireland. This gives us here in Ireland an ideal opportunity to further implement the synodal pathway for our Church, including addressing the issues with which we remain dissatisfied. Let's take the next steps together!

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World Report

IN BRIEF

Pope: World leaders must broker Christmas peace

● Pope Francis issued a heartfelt plea for peace during the Sunday Angelus on the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, urging international leaders to broker ceasefires in conflict zones by Christmas.

"I appeal to governments and the international community that a ceasefire may be reached on all war fronts by the Christmas celebrations," the Pope said on Sunday from the window of the Apostolic Palace, addressing pilgrims and visitors gathered in St Peter's Square.

The Pope specifically called for continued prayers for peace in "tormented Ukraine, in the Middle East — Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, and now Syria — in Myanmar, in Sudan, and wherever people suffer from war and violence".

Papal Foundation announces almost €800,000 of scholarship awards

● The Papal Foundation, a US-based organisation that provides funding for Catholic projects around the world, recently announced that it has awarded almost €800,000 to recipients of its scholarship fund.

The awards were distributed across 42 countries and helped enable 110 priests, brothers, sisters, and laypeople to pursue their studies at 14 pontifical universities in Rome as

participants in the foundation's St John Paul II Scholarship Program.

"Since its founding, the program has provided over €13 million in scholarships to more than 1,700 individuals, known as Saeman Scholars, to advance their education and prepare them to return home and serve in leadership positions in their own countries," the foundation stated in a recent press release.

Pope Francis is a proponent of popular piety, expert says

● Fr Juan Miguel Ferrer Grenesche, a Spanish priest and an expert in liturgy and popular piety, explained that the Pope "has highly valued popular piety" throughout his life.

After the Second Vatican Council, the priest explained, the Latin American bishops decided at a conference held in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 to distance themselves in some way from popular religiosity.

"As cardinal of Buenos Aires he played a key role (in promoting popular piety) because in it popular religiosity is clearly seen as an element that expresses the inculturation of Christianity in the masses of people on the entire continent," Fr Ferrer explained.

Vatican could reportedly restrict Latin Mass for Chartres pilgrimage

● The Vatican Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments is reportedly looking into enforcing restrictions on the Latin Mass at the annual Chartres pilgrimage, according to a French media outlet.

The three-day walking pilgrimage from Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris to the Chartres over Pentecost weekend culminates in a massive Latin Mass inside the Notre-Dame de Chartres Cathedral. The pilgrimage drew a record attendance of 18,000 people earlier this year.

Citing anonymous sources in Paris and Rome, *La Croix* reported that Vatican officials are examining whether the Latin Mass offered in the Chartres cathedral at the conclusion of the popular pilgrimage is in accordance with the restrictions laid out in *Traditionis Custodes*, the *motu proprio* Pope Francis issued in 2021 that sharply curtailed the celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass worldwide.

World's youngest cardinal is just 44 years old

● Among the new crop of cardinals created by Pope Francis on December 7, Cardinal Mykola Bychok, CSSR, stands out. He is the bishop of the Eparchy of Sts Peter and Paul in Melbourne for Ukrainian Catholics in Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania, and at age 44, he has become the youngest cardinal in the world.

The website of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Australia explains that the new cardinal belongs to an Eastern-rite church, so for the December 7 occasion he wore "a purple robe according to the old Kyivan tradition" that was "adorned with embroidered images of Sts Peter and Paul".

Mystery surrounds missing keffiyeh from Vatican's Palestinian nativity



Pope Francis stops to pray in front of a Nativity scene from Bethlehem in the Vatican audience hall. The baby Jesus is lying on a white and black keffiyeh, a Palestinian headdress. Around the star, written in Arabic and Latin, are the words of the angels: "Glory to God in the highest and on Earth peace to people of good will." Photo: CNS/Vatican Media

In the moments before Pope Francis' arrival at the Paul VI Hall on Saturday (December 7), a final addition was made to a nativity scene gifted by Palestinian artists: A keffiyeh, the black-and-white checkered scarf that has come to represent the Palestinian cause, was placed on the manger beneath the baby Jesus.

Sitting in his wheelchair, Pope Francis was led to the nativity scene where he prayed in silence, before making an impassioned speech for peace in the Middle East. "With tears in our eyes, let us raise our prayer for peace. Brothers and sisters, enough war, enough violence!" the Pope said, while looking at the nativity scene.

The latest Vatican intrigue revolves around the sudden appearance and even more sudden disappearance of that keffiyeh at the Vatican, but it also highlights the challenges Pope Francis faces as he attempts to navigate a complex geopolitical balance in the Middle East without becoming an instrument of political propaganda.

Nastas Mitwasi started working on the project in March 2023 and said she wanted the work to represent the artistry and heritage of Palestine. The three figures of the baby Jesus with Mary and Joseph were handmade from a single olive tree using typical Palestinian carving techniques. The star hanging

above the nativity is shaped from mother of pearl using a style of ornamentation dating back to the 15th century in Bethlehem. The sheep surrounding the scene were made by children of the Ma'n Lilhayt Catholic charity, which offers opportunities for the disabled.

"It's also the idea that this is a gift from the Palestinian people. So, it's holding and carrying the Palestinian identity," she explained.

"It's displayed at the Vatican so the Pope can see it, and the whole world can see it, and celebrate the culture, the beauty of that country," she added.

The appearance of the keffiyeh on the nativity

scene caused quite a stir and was widely reported by major news outlets. Several Jewish organizations expressed concern over its presence at the Vatican.

Several days later on Wednesday, when Pope Francis celebrated his weekly general audience at the Paul VI Hall, the manger — and the keffiyeh — were gone.

The Vatican has stated, in response to broad speculation over the keffiyeh's disappearance, that it's tradition for the baby Jesus to be removed from the nativity until the night before Christmas. While true, the explanation doesn't entirely answer the question of why the manger and the keffiyeh were also removed.

Nancy Pelosi criticises Pope's China deal

Democratic Representative Nancy Pelosi criticised Pope Francis for the Vatican's deal with China regarding bishop appointments during an interview with the *National Catholic Reporter*.

The congresswoman from California and former speaker of the House

of Representatives told the outlet that she is "not too happy" about the Vatican-China agreement, saying: "I don't know what they have achieved" and adding: "Do you know of any success?"

"We have, for decades, seen the suffering of Catholics in China,"

Ms Pelosi, who is Catholic, told the Reporter. "I have a completely different view [from Francis]. ... Why should the Chinese government be having a say in the appointment of bishops? I've talked to some folks here and they say, 'Well, we have to keep up with the times', What?! I don't get that".



Letter from the Philippines

Who was Jesus of Nazareth?



Fr Shay Cullen

Most people who consider themselves Christians will have their own imagined image of Jesus of Nazareth. Few really know who he was, what he did and said, or was reported as having said. Most know him as the child of poor parents born in a manger in Bethlehem, in what's now the West Bank. They know about him from the Good Friday passion plays as a man falsely accused and condemned to death by the ruling authorities in Jerusalem. They had him arrested, jailed, tortured and executed by the Romans occupying Palestine then. Let us consider the kind of person he was — and is.

Few people, even many in the clergy, ever read from start to finish the accounts of Jesus' life in the four Gospels. The attributed writers of these historical accounts are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and they give detailed accounts of Jesus as a person and relate what he did and said. The first three all seemed to have a copy of a written account by another disciple, and they copied stories from that and added them to their own documents. Only John has his own storytelling style.

So, what we can learn from these historical accounts is something about the character of a man who lived a simple life with an extraordinary intellect, insight and wisdom. He was a person of deep compassion for his fellow humans, especially the poor, the down-trodden, the outcasts, and women and children. He had extraordinary courage and had powerful self-confidence and charisma.

Shocked

Jesus of Nazareth shocked and disturbed the rich elders, religious leaders and the educated elite by identifying himself with the most deprived and exploited in society. These were the poor, the sick and the outcasts, without any importance, status or rights of any kind. The elites and religious leaders regarded them as sinners cursed by God. They, however, considered themselves



This stained-glass window at St Aloysius Church in Great Neck, New York, depicts Jesus in a manger surrounded by Mary, Joseph and three shepherds. Photo: OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz.

the blessed and the chosen, the most exalted, virtuous and important in the nation.

“Jesus did not recognise or acknowledge the prestige and status that the different social classes may have”

Women and children had no status or rights at the time, but Jesus clearly established their equal rights and dignity. During a meeting with community leaders, he called a child to stand before the leaders and said to them: “Whoever humbles himself as this young child will be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, and whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” (Matthew 18:1-5)

Jesus did not recognise or acknowledge the prestige and status that the different social classes may have. He may be in solidarity with all humans, but he sided with the poor, the most vulnerable and those who have less in life. Children were his priority. He considered himself one of humankind, one in solidarity with humanity. He wanted all people to cast aside pride, arrogance, racism, discrimination, selfishness and ambition and never to dominate others but live in harmony instead.

Humble

He was humble and honest with all but stood strongly for the values he shared and lived. He taught by example and got down and washed the feet of his disciples, encouraging them to treat people as equals, serve each other and sacrifice their lives for others.

“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28).

He told us that there was “no greater love can anyone have than to give their lives for their friends,” and to be friends with the poor, the exploited, and the abused is to follow in his footsteps.

“Jesus taught us that serving humanity and doing good, and having love of neighbor, is faith in action and that, one day, it will overcome violence and wrongdoing”

Jesus' view was that people can be fully human only

when they help and serve each other. They will live life more fully when they love each other with a commitment to serve humanity with their talents and gifts, as friends and helpers.

He once told the story of a traveler who was attacked by robbers and left to die on a roadside. A simple trader — a stranger, an outsider, not a Jew — was the only one who stopped to help him while those who came earlier hurriedly left the man. This trader was unafraid and risked being attacked and robbed himself. The trader washed and bandaged the traveler's wounds, took him to a resthouse and paid for his lodging while he was recovering. In this story, Jesus taught us that serving humanity and doing good, and having love of neighbour, is faith in action and that, one day, it will overcome violence and wrongdoing.

Tradition

He broke with tradition and invited his disciples to be his friends, not his servants. “I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know what his master is doing, but I call you friends, for everything that I have learned from my

Father, I have told to you. (John 15:15)

“He believed with total conviction that people could choose to change and be inspired to commit themselves to do good and oppose evil”

It was clear that he wanted them to continue his work to transform an unjust, class-conscious society from one of extreme poverty, inequality and oppression to one where all humans, regardless of their religion, color, nationality or gender, could live together in a caring, supportive community.

Jesus believed that people could actually love and help each other as good neighbors. Seemingly impossible and distant as attaining that ideal is, he believed with total conviction that people could choose to change and be inspired to commit themselves to do good and oppose evil, and that goodness, truth and justice would win out in the end. That is what he said was faith.

“I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know what his master is doing, but I call you friends, for everything that I have learned from my Father, I have told to you”

Your Faith

The Irish Catholic, December 19, 2024

Not an
answer to
suffering

Emily Nelson

Page 50



Adoration of
the Shepherds,
Domenico
Ghirlandaio



Caring to the end?

For years, Ronan Collins kept up a great tradition on RTÉ radio: starting from December 8, he would play a different rendition of *O Holy Night* every day until Christmas. Indeed, they never start playing Christmas tunes on Radio 1 or Lyric FM before that date.

What's so special about December 8? It's the feast of the Immaculate Conception, which always stands near the beginning of Advent. The liturgy calls Mary the first glimmer of morning light before the dawning of a new day. She's the first sign of Jesus' arrival and has already all the gifts of grace that we're looking forward to. Whenever we start getting ready for Christmas, we always start with Mary. Every holy person in the Old Testament was looking forward to Jesus, but no one did it better than her.

Celebrating

But even though the Christmas tunes have started, we can't start celebrating quite yet. Advent songs are moodier and more pensive. They're about keeping watch for the One who will save us in our hour of need. He will fulfil all our hopes when he comes - soon, but not yet.

The most famous Advent song is



There is a special visitor coming on Christmas night; He will leave gifts that do not disappoint, says Jason Conroy

O Come, O Come Emmanuel, which is over 1,200 years old, and is full of Old Testament prophecies which are even older. It tells us about all the gifts Jesus will bring us, and all the troubles he will save us from, when he comes.

There are seven names for Jesus in this song, with seven promises about what he will do for us. He's called "Wisdom" because when he comes, we'll finally understand the meaning of life. He's called the "Rising Sun" - when sin makes us fearful, confused or depressed, it's like being in the dark, and when he comes, he chases these away like the Sun chases away the dark. He's called "Emmanuel" which means "God is with us" - whatever we're going through, we can be brave and cheerful, because he's going through it with us.

But hasn't Jesus come already? Yes: though in Old Testament times, everyone had to wait a very long time to see him, we're lucky

enough to live in the time when he has already arrived. That "holy" and "silent" night we sing of, two thousand years ago in Bethlehem, was the turning point of history, and the opening of its final chapter. We live, right now, in that climactic moment when everyone who wants can be saved because of him.

However, we still talk about his coming for two reasons:

Firstly, in Advent we are also looking forward to the end of history, which we wait for like the ending of a great story, when Jesus will come again with the angels and defeat evil once and for all. We don't know when this will be, but Jesus taught us to always expect him soon: it could be in a thousand years, or it could be tomorrow.

Grace

Secondly, Jesus still wants to give us, here and now, all the presents - the gifts of grace - he promised us. At Christmas, it's like Jesus is

born again in Bethlehem, and it's also like he is returning in glory too - but secretly, inside our own hearts. This is the real meaning of Christmas: that in a few days, on December 25 in the year 2024, Jesus Christ will really arrive, and we will really meet him - spiritually. He can bring us joy, just like he brought joy to the shepherds and the wise men at Bethlehem, and he can defeat the evil in our hearts, just like he will defeat all evil at his second coming. But we have to be prepared!

There are four steps to preparing for Jesus: getting the heart ready, being humble, trusting in him, and looking forward to his arrival as much as possible.

First, since he wants to live in my heart, I need to make sure my heart is full of good thoughts and deeds when he arrives. It really makes a difference whether you've been 'naughty or nice' - that's why in Advent, like Lent, we practice charity and fight our bad habits.

But we can't do it alone. When we try our best, we sometimes fail, and this teaches us to be humble. We can't save ourselves, so we have to rely on Jesus to save us. So we learn to trust in him. St Therese said, "we can never have too much confidence in the good God... as we hope in him, so shall we

receive." All he needs is our trust to work miracles.

When one sports team beats another, people say "They wanted it more": so it is with God. The more you want, the more you get! The more we want to see Jesus, the more presents of grace we're able to receive from him when he arrives. St Catherine says "there is nothing we can desire or want that we do not find in God." No matter what it is we're looking for, we can find it in him when he comes; and having this certainty, we look forward to his coming all the more.

So trying our best teaches us humility, humility leads to trust, and trust makes us look forward to his coming, so that when he comes we're ready to receive him.

Mary

Advent starts and ends with Mary because no one teaches these four crucial dispositions better than her; she is master in her field. There is a special visitor coming on Christmas night; He will leave gifts that do not disappoint. When he arrives, then there will be good reason to celebrate.

In short: get your hopes up!

Jason Conroy is a philosophy student from Co. Kildare, currently studying at KU Leuven, Belgium.

The wrong end of the stick

Garry O'Sullivan sat down with columnist and retreat giver Fr Ron Rolheiser and asked him about Catholics and the reading of scripture.

G: Often people see some of the things you say somehow against Church teaching, is there a problem for many Catholics in their reading and understanding of the bible?

Fr Rolheiser: I came from that background. I grew up a very pious Catholic, memorised the Baltimore Catechism where you worry about anything that doesn't fit catechetically, so where I get on a lot of push back on is safe dogmatic things, to say 'God isn't a man'.

God is ineffable, God is as much woman as man and so on. But like I said at the talk that God didn't want Jesus to die like that. God didn't want Jesus to really suffer. For God it would have been good enough for Jesus, dying of old age, dying in bed with people, holding his hand, singing the *Salve Regina*.

G: People would come back to you especially on taking the stories of the Gospel literally, were they taught to take them literally?

Fr Rolheiser: That's complex, but very important. See, when you take stuff literary, like in the Old Testament, some of the stories literally are horrifying stories, they literally kill everybody. But even in the New Testament in Ephesians, Paul - we think Paul wrote Ephesians - says, "Women be subject to your husbands." Well, is that meant to be taken literally? People say yes/no. In the same epistle at the end of that, Ephesians, Paul says, 'In Christ... everybody is equal.'

The Bible is normative. But not every line is normative. Jesus says,



Fr Rolheiser

"preach from the housetops" - have you ever done that? - or "call nobody your father." "You got to hate your father and mother," and so on. Incidentally, in that same epistle where Paul says women be subject to husband, he said, slaves be subject to your masters.

Read the overall book and see Paul says, be subject to your husbands, be subject to your masters. And then he ends the thing with a Christian license. But in Jesus Christ everybody's equal.

The danger of reading lines literally, fundamentalism, is it just strips scripture of its richness. But those texts are just powerful texts. The Old Testament, if you take that text literally, they kill everybody. First, it's awful, but there's no lesson to it if you take it, in its meaning. I tell people, it makes a great text for marriage. You're getting married, you need to kill the old Canaanites, all your old boyfriends and girlfriends.

If you take them into your marriage, you're going to ruin your marriage. When you move into the promised land, you can't take the old with you, or it's going to ruin the new.

That's the richness of the text. If you take it literally, you don't get that, you get the wrong message.

You miss the point of the texts. All those texts are there for a reason. In scripture every line needs to be in there. And then it gets tricky because sometimes in the new testament there is a literal point. Sometimes you have to take it literally and other times not. That's why you have to study in seminary. You study scripture for 4 or 5 years to get some sense of it.

G: Have we been Creed Catholics? Do we need to understand Jesus better?

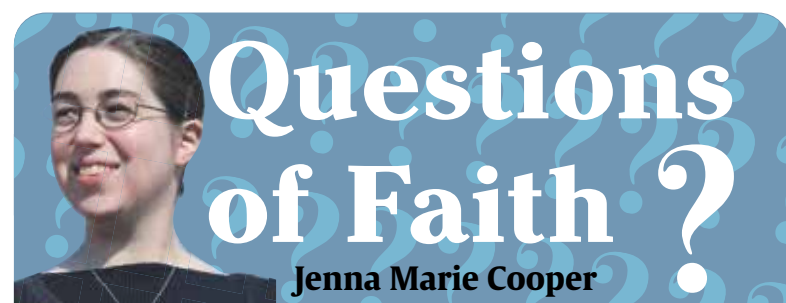
Fr Rolheiser: We all have our own take on Jesus. But the wider Christ escapes us. There's always more. To our credit, we get a lot of stuff right. But also, there's a lot that can make us narrow. Like saying 'Protestants can't go to heaven'. The word Catholic means universal, we sometimes forget that. That means everybody. Jesus is there for everybody, which includes Buddhists and Protestants.

In Scripture when Joseph and Mary found the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple, he says to him, didn't you know I need to be about my father's business. He wasn't just saying some snappy answer to his mother.

Jesus is still telling us he is about his father's business, which means I'm your kid. But he's an uncontrollable kid, as Mary found out. 'I'm doing stuff that you can't understand.' He's still doing that in world religions all over, in atheism and paganism and so on.

You know, and see that that's where as Christians, we have to stretch ourselves, we still control Jesus. He's our kid. He better stay within our boundaries.

The more I live in life, the more I realise that Christ is 'the universal Christ'.



Questions of Faith?

Jenna Marie Cooper

Can my son be baptised?

Q: Could Jesus sin? If not, was he truly human and free?

A: This is a rather complex question that gets into some deep Trinitarian theology. But I think we can still break this down into some accessible takeaway points.

For some background, we believe that Jesus is truly and fully God, the second Person of the Trinity, the "Word" who was "in the beginning with God" (Jn 1:1-2). We also believe that Jesus is, at the same time, truly and fully human; he is the Word which "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1:14). Jesus is one divine person with two inseparable natures. Incidentally, that is why we call Mary "the mother of God" - because in giving birth to Jesus in his human nature, she also gave birth to him in his divine nature.

If we consider sin as a turning away from God or breaking God's commandments, then it would seem to be a logical impossibility for Jesus to sin. Jesus, as God, cannot turn away from or betray himself. And we know that Jesus never did sin in fact.

At the same time, we know from the Gospels that Jesus was subject to temptation. The most notable example of this is the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert, where he prayed and fasted for 40 days before beginning his public ministry. Mt 4:1-11 and Lk 4:1-13 give us a narrative where the devil appears to Jesus in the wilderness and tempts him to use his power frivolously by changing stones into bread; to insultingly test God's love by throwing himself from a great height; and to gain all worldly riches and power by worshipping Satan.

The Gospels do not tell us what exactly was going on in Jesus' mind and heart at the time of this trial, or to what extent he may or may not have found any of these possibilities genuinely desirable or attractive. Yet the mere fact that the devil made an attempt at tempting Jesus implies that Jesus did indeed have the same free will

with which all human beings are endowed.

Similarly, on the night of the Last Supper, immediately before his Passion Jesus is recorded as having prayed: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will" (Mt 26:39). This suggests that it was ultimately up to Jesus whether he would accept his death on a cross. Perhaps it could be debated whether potentially "backing out" of the Passion would have been the exact same thing as committing a sin per se. But this passage of Scripture gives us the valuable insight that: 1. Jesus was free to accept or not accept his passion according to the will of God the Father; 2. It was hard for him to do this; and 3. He did choose to endure his Passion anyway, out of love for his Father and for us.

This also calls to mind the famous passage in St Paul's letter to the Hebrews, where he reminds us that "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help" (Heb 4:15-16). That is, Jesus' sinless humanity should not make him less approachable to us, but rather more so.

At the end of the day, my own thought is that pondering whether Jesus could hypothetically have sinned - even though we know he didn't - is for most people less fruitful than meditating on the great mystery of his humanity. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us: "Everything that Christ is and does in this [human] nature derives from one of the Trinity...In his soul as in his body, Christ thus expresses humanly the divine ways of the Trinity" (CCC, No. 470).

i Jenna Marie Cooper, who holds a licentiate in canon law, is a consecrated virgin and a canonist.

The girl from Nazareth

AC

O Blessed Virgin, Immaculate, Inspirer and Cause of so much love for God, and so much good. You know Jesus best of all. You love Him more than any other. I see so much happens through you, so many miracles and healings, God doing them at your request. I see in my life you make things happen. If I am to be 'born again' it is a new birth with you as mother. It has taken me years to understand this. All the saints say it. How special you are and how glorious. The great favourite of God. For where God is, you are. I see that you also cause conversions, people change, becoming more God-centred, more reconciled, more at peace. Most of all You cause prayer, a great crusade of prayer worldwide, bringing us to God. I see you in the Book of Revelations, the last book of the Bible, 'a woman clothed with the sun, crowned with twelve stars, the moon beneath your feet'. You were the surprised girl of Nazareth, visited by the angel, who accepted and surrendered. "Be it done to me according to your word." I see you the first Receiver of the Holy Spirit, for whom Jesus did his first miracle at the wedding, the poorest newlywed who had no decent room to give birth, but in a stable, the richest in grace, the most highly favoured. It has taken me years to understand this. What must it have been like for you to hold in your arms the Saviors of the world. And know it... the great secret... a tiny Lord, surrendered to you, who loved you, spoke to you, smiled at you. What love! You saw the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. What joy in that! What a wonderful thing happened! A new birth for millions, a new creation. As God says, "See, I make new Heavens and new Earth." Remember us!



The Coronation of the Virgin, Diego Velazquez



Our evolution in admiration and imitation



Fr Rolheiser

www.ronrolheiser.com

When I was a young boy growing up in a Catholic community, the catechesis of the time tried to inspire the hearts of the young with stories of martyrs, saints, and other people who lived out high ideals in terms of virtue and faith. I remember one story in particular which inspired me, the story of a third-century Christian martyr, St Tarcisius.

As legend (or truth) has it, Tarcisius was a twelve-year-old acolyte during the time of the early Christian persecutions. At that time, Christians in Rome were celebrating the Eucharist in secret in the catacombs. After those secret Masses, a deacon or an acolyte would carry the Eucharistic species, the Blessed Sacrament, to the sick and to prisoners. One day, after one of those secret Masses, young Tarcisius was carrying the Blessed Sacrament enroute to a prison when he was accosted by a mob. He refused to hand over the Blessed Sacrament, protected it with his own body,

and was beaten to death as a result.

As a twelve-year-old boy, that story inflamed my romantic imagination. I yearned for that kind of ideal in my life. In my young imagination, Tarcisius was the kind of hero that I wanted to be.

Long way

We've come a long way since then, both in our culture and in our churches. We are no longer moved much romantically by either the saints of old or the saints of today. Yes, we still make an official place for them in our churches and in our abstract ideals, but we are now, in effect, moved much more by the lives of the rich, the famous, the beautiful, our pop stars, our professional athletes, the physically gifted, and the intellectually gifted. They now inflame our imaginations, draw our admiration, and it's them we want to be like.

In the early nineteenth century, Alban Butler, an English convert, collected stories

of the lives of the saints and eventually set them together in twelve volume set, famously known as *Butler's Lives of the Saints*. For nearly two hundred years, these books inspired Christians, young and old. No longer.

Today, *Butler's Lives of the Saints* has effectively been replaced by multiple magazines, podcasts, and websites which chronicle the lives of the rich and famous and stare out at us from our phones, our laptops, and from every newsstand and grocery store checkout line.

In effect, we have moved: from St Tarcisius to Justin Bieber; from Therese of Lisieux to Taylor Swift; from Thomas Aquinas to Tom Brady; from St Monica to Meryl Streep; from St Augustine to Mark Zuckerberg; from Julian of Norwich to Oprah; and from the first African American saint, St Martin

de Porres, to LeBron James. It's these people who now inflame our romantic imagination and whom we would most want to be like.

“From a saint's virtue to a movie star's physical beauty, to an athlete's grace, there's only one author at the origin of it all, God”

Don't get me wrong, it's not that these people are bad or that there's anything wrong with admiring them. Indeed, we owe them some admiration because all beauty and talent take their origin in God who is the author of all good things. From a saint's virtue to a movie

star's physical beauty, to an athlete's grace, there's only one author at the origin of it all, God.

Thomas Aquinas once rightly pointed out that to withhold a compliment from someone who deserves it is a sin because we are withholding food that someone else needs to live on. Beauty, talent, and grace need to be recognised and acknowledged. Admiration is not the issue. Rather, the issue is that while we need to admire and acknowledge talent, grace, and beauty, these do not in themselves radiate virtue and saintliness. We shouldn't automatically identify human grace with moral virtue, though that's the temptation today.

Weakness

As well, a weakness in our churches today is that while we have vastly refined and upgraded our intellectual

imagination and now have better and healthier theological and biblical studies, we struggle to touch hearts. While we have more power to satisfy the intellect, we struggle to touch the heart, that is, we struggle to get people to fall in love with their faith and especially with their churches. We struggle to inflame their romantic imagination, as we once did by invoking the lives of the saints.

Where might we go with all of this? Can we find saints again who inflame our ideals? Can the fine work on hagiography (on the lives of the saints and other moral giants) being done today by Robert Ellsberg become the new *Butler's Lives of the Saints*? Can secular biographies of some moral giants in our own age draw our imitation? Can the life of a Dag Hammarskjöld become for us a moral and faith inspiration? Is there a new Therese of Lisieux out there?

Today, more than ever, we need inspiring stories about women and men, young and old, who have lived out heroic virtue. We need moral exemplars, moral mentors. Otherwise, we cheat ourselves by simplistically identifying human grace with moral virtue.

“Thomas Aquinas once rightly pointed out that to withhold a compliment from someone who deserves it is a sin because we are withholding food that someone else needs to live on. Beauty, talent, and grace need to be recognised and acknowledged”

Catechism of the Catholic Church



By Renata Milan Morales

The Creeds

Whoever says, “I believe” says “I pledge myself to what we believe.” The syntheses of faith are called “professions of faith” since they summarise the faith that Christians profess, and it was gathered from all the Scriptures. They are called creeds, which comes from the word in Latin: credo (I believe). The first profession of faith is made during Baptism. The Creed is divided into three parts: the first part speaks of the first divine Person and the work of creation; the next speaks of the second divine Person and the mystery of his redemption of men; the final part speaks of the third divine Person, the origin and source of our sanctification.

These three parts are distinct although connected with one another. Through the centuries many professions or symbols of faith have been articulated in response to the needs of the different eras, the professions of faith of certain Councils, or the symbols of certain popes. None of the creeds from the different stages in the Church's life can be considered superseded or irrelevant. Among all the creeds The Apostles' Creed and The Nicene Creed occupy a special place in the Church.

I believe in God

Our profession of faith begins with God, for God is the First and the Last. Our Creed begins with the creation of Heaven and Earth, for creation is the

beginning and the foundation of all God's works. The whole Creed speaks of God. The faithful first profess their belief in God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; three persons indeed, but one essence.

God has a name. To disclose one's name is to make oneself known to others. God revealed himself progressively and under different names to his people. God says who he is to Moses and by what name he is to be called: “I AM.” God reveals himself as the God who is always there, present to his people in order to save them.

Faced with God's fascinating and mysterious presence, man discovers his own insignificance. But because God is holy, he can forgive the man who realises that he is a sinner before him, despite the faithlessness of men's sin, he keeps “steadfast love for thousands”. God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he

alone is his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is.

He who is

In all his works God displays, not only his kindness, goodness, grace and steadfast love, but also his trustworthiness, constancy, faithfulness and truth. God is Truth itself, whose words cannot deceive. This is why one can abandon oneself in full trust to the truth and faithfulness of his word in all things. God loves his people more than a bridegroom his beloved. God's very being is love.

Believing in God, the only One, and loving him with all our being has enormous consequences for our whole life. It means coming to know God's greatness and majesty, living in thanksgiving, knowing the unity and true dignity of all men and making good use of created things.

The Creeds are the spiritual seal. It is the treasure of our soul.

i This section will be back on January 2.

Rejoice! The Lord is near

Mt 5:1-4a
Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19
Heb 10:5-10
Lk 1:39-45

Ironically, as our Advent journey is drawing to a close, another journey is beginning.

It's right there in the first three words of this Sunday's Gospel: "Mary set out..."

This time of year, I think, a lot of us can appreciate the idea of taking a trip for the holidays. But what Mary does here is hardly a vacation (though, she does travel bearing a gift).

In fact, she is really beginning the greatest adventure of her life - one of the most important in salvation history, really - and it is a journey that underscores our own lives as disciples of Christ and people who, like Mary, are called to bring Jesus to others.

Perspective

Consider Mary's circumstances. She has just been told that she is to be the Mother of God. And rather than keeping this news to herself, or wondering how she will cope, she sets out to visit her cousin, Elizabeth - and we have this momentous scene that follows: The Visitation.

Mary is serving the Lord in this moment - and serving her cousin.

We tend to think of the Blessed Mother as a quiet, serene figure - a woman of few words, but blessed with tremendous faith, and boundless trust. This is true.

The Sunday Gospel

Deacon Greg Kandra



But with this episode, we realise something else: Mary is also a woman of action.

“Mary, as the first disciple, in many ways prefigures all the disciples who will follow”

She is a woman on a continual journey - constantly, by necessity, on the move. After this journey to see Elizabeth, we next find Mary embarking on an arduous trip, while pregnant, to Bethlehem. After giving birth, she and her small family are on the move again, fleeing to Egypt, to escape death.

We then see her traveling to Jerusalem, where her son goes missing - and we follow her as she goes in search of him. Finding him, she continues her travels, bringing him home to Nazareth.

“The road is long. The journey isn't easy. We pray to have the trust in God that we need to travel whatever road we must take, just as Mary did”

Mary, as the first disciple, in many ways prefigures all the disciples who will follow - those who traveled, mostly on foot, throughout the world to spread the Gospel and proclaim the Good News. Like those apostles, Mary was a missionary - the first missionary, on a mission to bring Jesus into the world.

Parallels

In today's reading, we see her literally bringing Jesus to another, as she carries him in her womb and goes to her cousin and speaks the words any missionary might pronounce - words which are the beginning of all belief: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord."

What follows, the Magnificat, is Mary's incomparable acclamation, one of Scripture's most beautiful prayers and one of the most recognisable and enduring statements of praise and hope.

We can only imagine what other travels Mary took during her life. But we can't forget one, the most difficult of all, as she followed her son on his journey to Calvary.

This Sunday, we realise anew how much Mary's life is closely entwined with

ours. All of us, like Mary, are on a journey. All of us are traveling to places we may not understand, to destinations we cannot see. But we ask Mary to help guide us on our way.

“In these last hours before Christmas, this Sunday reminds us that our mission in life is not that different from Mary's: to take Christ into a broken, wounded, waiting world”

The road is long. The journey isn't easy. We pray to have the trust in God that we need to travel whatever road we must take, just as Mary did.

And in these last hours before Christmas, this Sunday reminds us that our mission in life is not that different from Mary's: to take Christ into a broken, wounded, waiting world.

A familiar hymn over these last few weeks has been telling us how we "mourn in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear."

If we needed any reminder, here it is. He is coming. Rejoice! Rejoice! He is near.

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

“All of us, like Mary, are on a journey. All of us are traveling to places we may not understand, to destinations we cannot see. But we ask Mary to help guide us on our way”



The Visitation of the Virgin Mary to St Elizabeth, Raphael (1517)

Saint — of the — week

By Renata Milan Morales



St Peter Canisius

St Peter Canisius: A life of virtue

St Peter Canisius, born on May 8, 1521, in Nijmegen (now part of the Netherlands), shared his birthday with a significant event in Christian history. Martin Luther was placed under ban by the 'Edict of Worms', marking the formal start of the Protestant Reformation. Biographers often highlight this coincidence, noting how St Peter would become a key figure in the Catholic Counter-Reformation in Germany and Switzerland.

In his youth, Peter admitted to being troublesome but showed early signs of his vocation, often 'playing priest'. At fifteen, he began seeking spiritual direction from Fr Nicholas, confessing his daily faults with openness and a desire for guidance, a practice that laid the

foundation for his spiritual growth.

On his 22nd birthday, during a retreat led by Bl. Peter Faber, one of the first Jesuits, Peter vowed to join the newly founded Society of Jesus. He soon entered the novitiate and was ordained a priest on June 12, 1546, in Cologne.

In 1549, he embarked on a 30-year mission in Germany, the focus of his life's work. Pope Leo XIII, in his 1897 encyclical *Milantis Ecclesiae*, referred to St Peter Canisius as "the second apostle of Germany after St Boniface." Among his significant contributions was his influence on Pope Gregory XIII, known as "the Pope of the Seminaries." St Peter's efforts helped establish seminaries, a cornerstone of the Counter-Reformation, and shaped many pivotal events, such as preventing Emperor Ferdinand from derailing the Council of Trent.

At 59, considered elderly at the time, St Peter went to Fribourg, Switzerland, to found a college. He also played a leading role in establishing the University there, where he spent the last 17 years of his life. His work revitalised the Catholic faith in Switzerland, prompting Pope Benedict XV in 1921 to declare, "If the Swiss have kept the Catholic Faith, after God, it must be attributed especially to the watchfulness and wisdom of this holy man." Above his portrait in Fribourg's Church of St Nicholas are inscribed the words: *Patriarch of Catholic Switzerland*.

By the time he left Germany in 1580, he had helped grow the Jesuits in the region from three members to over 1100. St Peter's remarkable versatility saw him serve as teacher, preacher, legate, administrator, confessor, and visitor of the sick and poor. He was also a prolific writer, with his letters meticulously preserved. His devotional works include the *Manual for Catholics* and the renowned *Opus Marianum*, a testament to his deep devotion to the Virgin Mary.

His Catechisms, written for adults, children, and intermediate learners, became synonymous with Catholic teaching in parts of Germany. His large catechism, the *Summa of Christian Doctrine*, replaced an abandoned theological manual and became one of the most successful summaries of Christian teaching, noted for its simplicity and clarity. Within 130 years, it had been published in nearly 400 editions worldwide.

St Peter Canisius was deeply united to God through prayer and meditation, often moved to tears or ecstasy. He died on December 21, 1597, aged 77. Beatified by Pope Pius IX, he was canonised and declared a Doctor of the Universal Church by Pope Pius XI in 1925. His unwavering devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was a cornerstone of his success in combating heresy and strengthening the Church.

Catechisms

His Catechisms, written for adults, children, and intermediate learners, became synonymous with Catholic teaching in parts of Germany. His large catechism, the *Summa of Christian Doctrine*, replaced an abandoned

Why euthanasia is not an answer to suffering



Emily Nelson

The debate on assisted suicide has risen to prominence again, particularly with the recent vote in Westminster and calls for changes in legislation elsewhere. What can we do about this?

Through my work for *FaithVersed*, I was asked to organise a talk on this topic, aiming to both inform and equip people to speak effectively against this in the public square. This event was held in St Malachy's Church Belfast, generously funded by a donor and supported by volunteers. We had the privilege of Bishop Alan McGuckian giving opening remarks and prayer, with two fantastic speakers informing on assisted suicide and sharing how to communicate a compassionate, Catholic perspective effectively.

Bishop McGuckian spoke on the infinite meaning that every human person possesses which extends beyond their circumstance. The focus should be on how people might be helped to experience a good death. He quoted from St Paul's letter to the Romans "The life and death of each of us has its influence on others" demonstrating the powerful impact of the witness we have throughout our lives until the end, and we should support others to, throughout their life including the end.

Insight

Dr Whitehouse, a Catholic palliative care consultant, followed. He provided so much insight into palliative care and the realities of legalising assisted, it is impossible to include it all here! Something that struck me was how the founder of the modern hospice movement 'Cicely Saunders' summed up the ethos behind this discipline: "You matter because you are you, and you matter to the end of your life. We will do all we can, not only to help you die peacefully, but also to live until you die." Palliative care enhances quality of life,

provides relief from pain and distressing symptoms, helps families cope and supports patients to live as actively as possible until death. People often say 'you wouldn't let a dog suffer like that' but this is the opposite of the palliative care approach of being compassionate, sending a message that life is worth living and being "present" for the sufferer. Despite the recent vote by MPs in Westminster, many in the UK are not in favour of the legalisation of assisted suicide. A body that argues for its legalisation, 'Dignity in Dying' own poll recently showed only 43% of those in the UK wanted MPs to vote for this, with low rates amongst the 18-34 age category.

“Medication used for this is often experimental (as it is not tested for this in drug trials) and can result in slow and painful deaths”

Concerningly, where assisted dying has been legalised, there's evidence it's bad for end-of-life care, which is already underfunded in many places and relies on charities. Where assisted suicide has been legalised, palliative care governmental spending and quality lowers. In these places those who choose assisted dying often do so because of concerns on existential suffering, perceived loss of control and dignity showing the lack of awareness on how effective good palliative care is. It moved me that in Oregon nearly 50% report 'feeling a burden' as their reason for dying this way, and over 8% cite financial concern. These are red flags for coercion and inequality. Over time in these countries, the eligibility criteria widens and numbers dying this way increase each year, which is likely demonstrative of how it becomes normalised within a society. Medication used for this is often experimental (as it is not tested for this in drug trials) and can result in slow and painful deaths. Can we rely on already busy healthcare staff to enact legislation to the highest standards for every person? The Oregon 2023 report shows assisted dying doctors only know patients

for an average 6 weeks before death raising the question about how they could possibly assess safeguarding concerns properly. For those with terminal illness opting for this, people can also be misdiagnosed or given the wrong prognosis for their illness- and therefore could be choosing their death on misinformation. Lastly, legalisation raises issues for healthcare staff as in these countries conscience clauses are not always respected, they often must make an "effective referral" even if they do not perform the act itself, which can result in a loss of trust for the patient.

Discuss

Even with this important knowledge, it can be difficult to discuss these issues and know how to respond. Jack Valero, founder of 'Catholic Voices', our third speaker gave great tips! He shared that when a controversy arises, this is an opportunity for us to share a compelling message. On these topics, people often have a 'frame' or set of assumptions and prejudices about you/your beliefs when there is a news story involving you. We can either reinforce this frame or step out of it (reframing) changing their perspective. Often their frame is something along the lines of 'we are more concerned with our doctrine/reputation/possessions... than the well-being of people'. Every criticism appeals to a value, which almost always is a Christian value we share.

On assisted suicide, people will often say things such as 'if you are against assisted suicide, you don't care about the suffering of people' or 'pro-life people want to impose their teachings on everyone else making assisted suicide illegal everywhere'. If you respond using argumentation or referencing something they already disagree with (e.g. your Catholic faith) they are likely to become closed to changing their perspective, and perhaps irate. Instead, we can begin by focusing on the good in what they're saying, and shared values. Here, we share that everyone wants pain and suffering to stop, suffering should be alleviated as much as possible and that everyone wants to be loved and appreciated. From this we can share a few messages on this topic:

- Assisted suicide gives the green light to hopelessness



(L/R) Dr Dominic Whitehouse (palliative care consultant), Emily Nelson (FaithVersed), Bishop Alan McGuckian SJ (Bishop of the Diocese of Down and Connor), Jack Valero (Communications Expert) and Catherine Gribbon (event volunteer).

and despair. It sanctions suicide as a response to hardship

- The right to die becomes a duty to die

- Assisted suicide leaves the vulnerable more vulnerable – especially the disabled, whose lives may be judged less valuable in law

- Undermines the trust between doctors and patients
- Assisted suicide undermines palliative care

- These messages appeal to common values that we share, to which they can relate and respond. In sharing these, they open their mind to your perspective and hearing your messages.

“You can also oppose change in legislation by contacting political representatives and being involved in actions against this in your local area and nationally”

Throughout the evening, my conviction of the importance of this issue increased further. Thankfully, the speakers shared practical ideas for us to do. Firstly, praying for the terminally ill, their families and those considering assisted suicide. Supporting hospices and palliative care is also highly important through volunteering or charity. You can also oppose change in legislation by contacting political representatives and being involved in actions against this in your local area and nationally. Practice commu-



Dr Dominic Whitehouse speaking at 'Caring to the End' on the dangers of assisted suicide and his experience with palliative care.



Jack Valero speaking at 'Caring to the End' on effective communication techniques and how to apply these to the topic of assisted suicide.

nicating on these matters using the information and communication techniques shared here, the more you do it the better you'll become! You can do this in daily conversation with people you meet. Lastly, it's important that all views and perspectives are reflected in that media coverage.

If you feel you may have the skills for this and may be called to it, get in touch emily@faithversed.com. If you wish you had made the evening- not to worry! ETWN Ireland kindly recorded this, which you can find on their YouTube channel 'ETWN Ireland'.

TVRadio

Brendan O'Regan



Pick of the Season 2024

THE BISHOP'S WIFE

BBC 2 Saturday December 21, 9.15am

Family comedy drama about an angel who assumes human form to help a bishop repair his marriage and build his dream cathedral.

ANGELA'S CHRISTMAS WISH

RTÉ 2 Saturday December 21, 12.45pm

With her father working far away in Australia, a determined Angela plans to reunite her family. Charming Irish animation.

FILM: CHARIOTS OF FIRE

BBC 2 Sunday December 22, 12.30pm and RTÉ One Christmas Eve 8.10am

Oscar-winning drama. Two rival British runners push themselves to the limit in their quest to make the 1924 British Olympic team, but neither is prepared to compromise on his principles.

FILM: SISTER ACT

Film 4 Saturday December 21, 4.40pm and Christmas Day 2.40pm

(1992) Whoopi Goldberg stars in Emile Ardolino's comedy thriller as Deloris Van Cartier, a lounge singer in witness protection at a convent. Can the nuns protect her?

SUNDAY

BBC RADIO 4 SUNDAY DECEMBER 22, 7.10PM

Ethical and religious issues of the week.

SONGS OF PRAISE

BBC One Sunday December 22, 1.15pm

Aled Jones hosts an intimate candlelit celebration of favourite carols, with guests Katherine Jenkins and the BBC Young Choristers of the Year, from the village church of Croston.

CAROLS BY CANDLELIGHT FROM KNOCK SHRINE

EWTN Sunday December 22, 8pm and RTÉ News Channel Christmas Eve 8pm

Experience the sights and sounds of Christmas from the Marian Shrine in Knock, Ireland. This beautiful concert of Christmas carols, sung by candlelight, will lift your spirits and bring joy to this wonderful season.

FOWLER SISTERS:

CHRISTMAS GIFT EWTN Monday December 23, 11.30am



Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh and Church of Ireland Archbishop John McDowell of Armagh pictured during the recording of the Christmas message, 2023.

The Fowler Sisters present a musical gift celebrating the birth of Christ.

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

RTÉ One Monday December 23, 3.15pm

An angel is sent from Heaven to help a desperately frustrated businessman by showing him what life would have been like if he had never existed.

THE WAY WE WERE AT CHRISTMAS

RTÉ One Monday December 23, 10.15pm

The programmes casts a warm nostalgic eye over the themes of an Irish Christmas, asking how much has changed and how much has soothingly stayed the same.

G.K. CHESTERTON'S, 'THE SURPRISE'

EWTN Christmas Eve, 10am

EWTN's original production of the G.K. Chesterton play, *The Surprise*: A fascinating story spun around a traveling playwright who creates a set of puppets to perform one of his plays.

FILM: A CHRISTMAS HERO

RTÉ One Christmas Eve, 1.10pm

A guardian angel shows a disillusioned war veteran what he means to others and that his life makes a difference.

GIVE UP YER AUL SINS

RTÉ One Christmas Eve, 2.50pm

The Birth of Jesus: The Christmas story of how Jesus was born in a stable because there was no room at the inn, told by inner city Dublin children.

CAROLS FROM KINGS

BBC 2 Christmas Eve, 6pm and Christmas Day, 8am

A celebration of Christmas from the candlelit Chapel of King's College, Cambridge. The music includes Henry Walford Davies's setting of O Little Town of Bethlehem and Edvard Grieg's Ave Maris Stella.

THE KILKENNY NATIVITY

RTÉ One Christmas Eve, 9pm and Christmas Day, 4pm

St Luke's account of the Christmas story told through the voices of the people of the city and county of Kilkenny. A follow-up to the multi award-winning Cork Nativity of 2020.

MIDNIGHT MASS

RTÉ One Christmas Eve, 11pm

Midnight Mass from St Mary's Church, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, celebrated by the Very Rev Thomas Thomas Dalzell PP, with liturgical music from St Mary's Parish Choir.

OUR DIVINE SPARKS AT CHRISTMAS

RTÉ Radio 1 Christmas Day, 8am

Hear the most enchanting story in the world, as children share the wonder of a baby born in extraordinary circumstances. Dearbhail McDonald and guests also take us back over 2000 years, to offer an insight into life at that time, the reality of the events surrounding the nativity, and the timeless allure of the Christmas story.

THE CORK NATIVITY

RTÉ One Christmas Day, 9.55am

The people of Cork give contemporary life and voice to the 2000-year-old Gospel Nativity story, in a hope-filled journey, celebrating the

county's diversity, culture, and places.

CHRISTMAS DAY MASS

RTÉ One + Radio 1 Extra Christmas Day, 10am

Mass for Christmas Day from the newly restored Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, with commentary and translation by Lydia O'Kane.

CENTURIES OF CHRISTMAS

RTÉ Lyric fm Christmas Day, 10 am

Vlad Smishkewych's annual Christmas offering on RTÉ lyric fm with a millennium of music for this special festive day. He'll explore the roots and branches of the heartwarming musical traditions around the Christmas-celebrating world, with a magnificent musical accompaniment to your Christmas celebrations. New releases of seasonal music interweave with beloved favourites in a glorious garland of melodies.

URBI ET ORBI

EWTN Christmas Day 11 am, RTÉ One 11.45am

'To the City and the World' from St Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, with commentary and translation by Lydia O'Kane.

ARCHBISHOPS' CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

RTÉ One Christmas Day, 12.10pm

The Catholic Archbishop of Armagh, Eamon Martin, and his Church of Ireland counterpart, Dr John McDowell, deliver a message of peace in celebration of the birth of Christ.

RECLAIMING THE CAROL

EWTN Christmas Day, 9.30pm

The late Charles Dickens returns to find that A Christmas Carol, and the holiday it celebrates, has become overshadowed by glitz and commercialism in this touching story about the true meaning of Christmas.

LADY IN THE VAN

BBC 2 Christmas Day, 10.20pm

The true story of Miss Shepherd, an eccentric woman of uncertain origins, who 'temporarily' parked her broken-down van in writer Alan Bennett's London driveway for 15 years. Respectful attitude to religion.

ON CHRISTMAS NIGHT

BBC One Christmas Day, 11.55pm

As Christmas Day draws to a close, Kate Garraway tells the story of the first Christmas from Luke's Gospel, when angels appeared before shepherds, proclaiming the news of Jesus's birth.

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA'S CHRISTMAS CONCERT

EWTN Friday December 27, 6am

The annual Christmas concert presented by the Catholic University of America, featuring a brilliant blend of angelic voices and the wonderful sounds of the Christmas Season.

HEART AND SOUL – RISING FROM THE ASHES OF NOTRE DAME

BBC World Service Friday December 27, 1.30pm

In this Heart and Soul Christmas special, as the doors of Notre Dame reopen, Colm Flynn travels to Paris to meet five people who say the symbolism of this Cathedral's restoration has had a profound impact on their faith.

FILM: THE MISSION

RTÉ 2 Saturday December 28, 11.30pm

The missionary work of Jesuit priests in 18th-century Brazil is threatened by crooked merchants and rival Church factions. Historical drama, with Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons.

PURE IN HEART

EWTN Sunday December 29, 8am

The history and work of 'Pure of Heart': a Catholic apostolate that has since expanded from its foundation in Dublin, Ireland to spread the Catholic Church's teachings on love, purity, chastity, and human sexuality to four other countries.

A LIFE IN MINISTRY – WE DID IT OUR WAY

BBC Radio Ulster Sunday December 29, 9.03pm

From weddings to wakes, tragedies to triumphs - Presenter Audrey Carville hears from three very established members of the clergy about their lives in ministry. Would they do it all again? And, if so, would there be anything they'd do differently this time?

SONGS OF PRAISE

BBC One Sunday December 29, 1.15pm

Pam Rhodes and her fellow

Songs of Praise presenters take a moment to pause and reflect on some of their favourite hymns and inspiring stories of faith and hope from 2024.

FATHER BROWN

RTÉ One Monday December 30, 1.10pm

Fr Brown investigates when rivalries escalate to murderous heights at the Kembleston 'Olimpicks' (Ser 11, Ep 1). Series continues daily this week.

FILM: HIDDEN FIGURES

Channel 4 Monday

December 30, 5.10pm

(2016) Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer and Janelle Monáe star in director Theodore Melfi's Oscar-nominated fact-based drama about three extraordinary women, whose genius in mathematics and engineering made a significant contribution to the space race in the early 1960s. Religion portrayed positively.

TOMMY FLEMING: LIVE IN GALWAY CATHEDRAL

TG 4 Monday December 30, 7.15pm

This concert was recorded in Galway Cathedral filmed before a live audience. Tommy was joined by his band, a full orchestra on stage and each song was specially chosen to make this recording an inspirational and spiritual listening and viewing experience and one that can guarantee will have you going back for more time and time again.

QUEST FOR SHAKESPEARE

EWTN Tuesday December 31, 10pm

LIES, SPIES AND FISHMONGERS: Host Joseph Pearce discusses Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia, and examines the parallels between espionage in the play and the real life spy network by which England's Catholics were besieged.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MICA

BBC 4 Friday January 3, 11.20pm

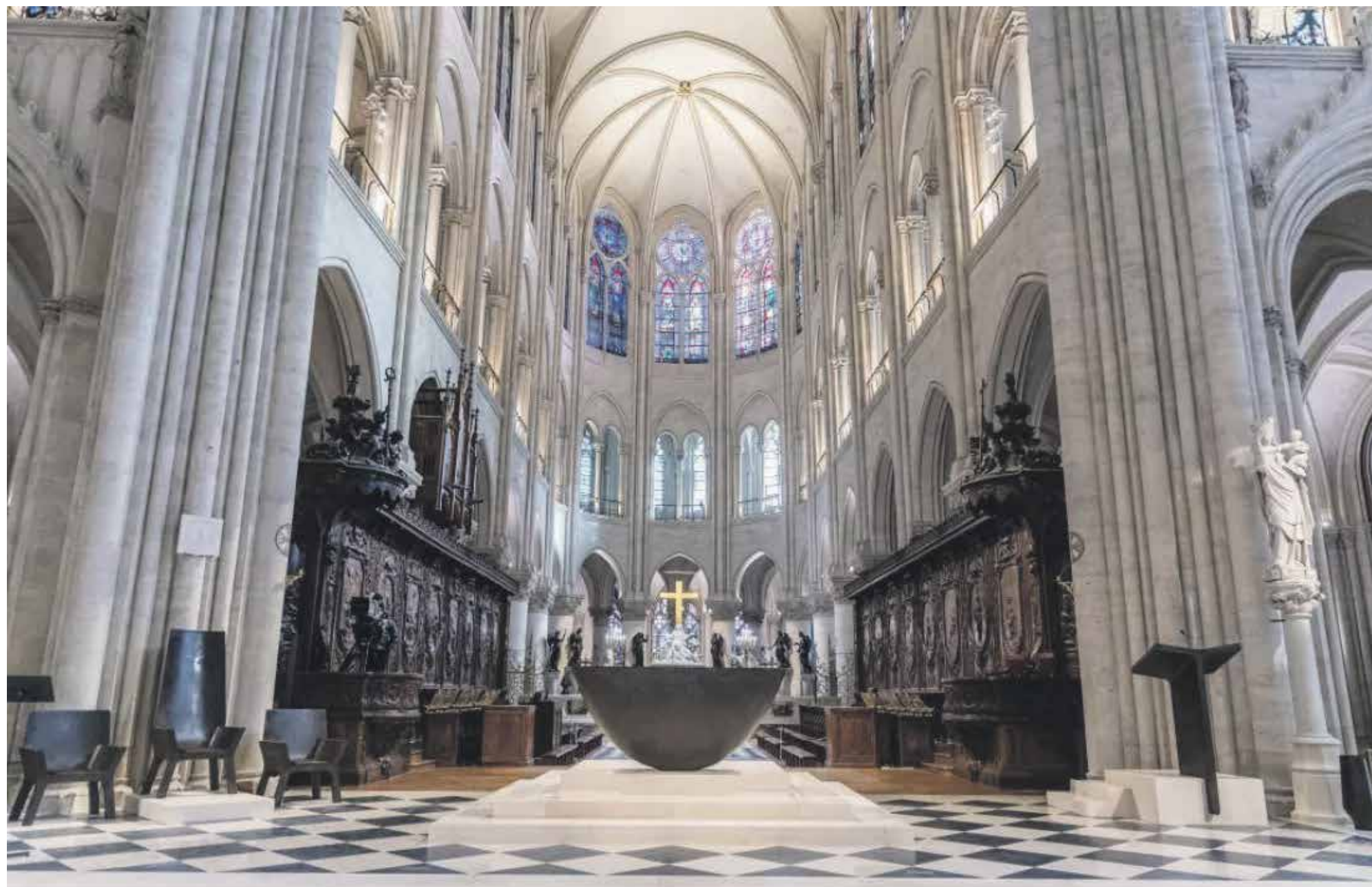
British soul singer Mica Paris traces the origins of six famous gospel songs and finds out why some of her contemporaries have returned to their gospel roots.

BookReviews

Peter Costello



The real meaning of Notre Dame



Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism: An Inquiry into the Analogy of the Arts, Philosophy and Religion in the Middle Ages, by Erwin Panofsky (Plume / Penguin; widely available on the internet through Abe Books and other outlets, approximately £10.50)

Peter Costello

The reopening of Notre Dame, which took place finally on December 8, is one of the great ecclesiastical events of the year, saved for the final days of 2024, giving the world something real to celebrate.

The restoration of the cathedral, as previous articles in these pages have noted, has been a task fraught with a great deal of debate and controversy. Much of this was of the moment. For President Macron and for the Church in France the reopening has been a special moment of glory.

For Macron it is at last an achievement by his contested regime which all will applaud, for the actual fabric is the property of the French state. For the Catholic Church, who have the use of it, it too has been a moment of achievement as well, one where the attention of the public is focused for a one joyful moment on an ecclesiastical edifice.

Manipulation

But what does the building actually mean today? It has become an object of political and social manipulation in which its 'real meaning' is lost.

This book by the great German-born art historian and philosopher, much of whose career was inevitably, after the rise of the National Socialist German Workers Party, passed in the United States of America, then a country which valued both academic and religious freedom, values which now seem under attack from various directions. He died in 1969.

This book was first published in 1951. It represents his response to an invitation to present the 'Wimmer Lectures', established in memory of the founder of the Benedictine Order in the US, Boniface Wimmer. The lectures are usually given under the auspices of Saint Vincent Archabbey, near Pittsburgh. This book has been in print ever since.

“Scholasticism which had its roots, of course, in Greek philosophy was a necessary development of the Middle Ages”

Quentin L. Schaut OSB, his foreword to the book, discusses what Wimmer saw as the duty of the Benedictines to promote religious art, and beyond that an understanding of religious art.

In his lectures Panofsky's

theme was “the profound co-relation between the development of Gothic architecture and the growth of scholastic philosophy. Panofsky demonstrated architectural style and structures “provided visible and tangible equivalents to the scholastic definitions of order and the form of thought”.

Scholasticism, which had its roots, of course, in Greek philosophy, was a necessary development of the Middle Ages.

Transformed

The Church's life and experience has been transformed since then. It has had to find new ways of responding to what we actually know about the world and about man today, knowledge that far exceeds what was available to the medieval monastic tradition.

Panofsky explained about the inner meaning of Gothic architecture in clear and forthright language. He opens

up to his readers the meaning of what can be seen in the very stones, decorations and painted glass of a cathedral such as Notre Dame (and its counterparts across Europe).

“The meaning of Notre Dame today cannot be quite as it was in the Middle Ages”

Those readers wanting a more straightforward exposition of the history of Gothic architecture will find it in *When the Cathedrals were Painted*, by Alain Erlande-Brandenburg (Thames & Hudson, €11.15), which underlines the fact that the pale grey and cream stone work and carvings we see today were once a polychromatic delight to the eye, and appeared gloriously different to what they are now.

But the meaning of Notre

Dame today cannot be quite as it was in the Middle Ages. Far from being a work of one moment or a statement of faith at a particular time merely, the renovated Notre Dame demands an intellectual response from Christians seeking to invigorate their faith today.

In this task they cannot afford to ignore any contribution. Erwin Panofsky was a German Jew who fled the advent of an intolerant regime set on destruction as an end itself. He, by contrast, celebrated manual and mental construction, recreation in all its meanings.

There are lessons to be learned by all of us in these pages first issued to the world under the auspices of the rule of St Benedict. We need to keep in mind that the reopening of Notre Dame is not an end itself, but merely a new start towards a truer understanding of humanity's spiritual dimensions.

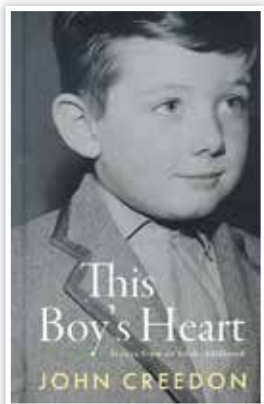
Readers should note that *The Irish Catholic* circulates throughout the island of Ireland and the book prices listed are the retail price recommended by the Irish or British publishers, in either euros or sterling, as a general indication of what purchasers may expect to pay.

Christmas books for all the family

By the Books
Editor and othes

Christmas and the New Year are the most important marketing periods for the book trade. The shops are filled, not only with their normal stock, but a flood of special seasonal "present" books, most of which will be of little real interest in a month or so.

To help readers navigate this swamp of printed matter, we are suggesting a selection of books for adults, young adults and children. These are books of real merit and interest, worth reading and also rereading (if that is not nowadays a lost pleasure), with so many demands being made on our time at all the hours of our days and nights). If this year there is a common theme it is to appreciate and help preserve our natural environment, what was once called "God's creation"...

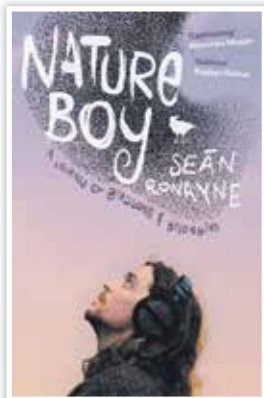


This Boy's Heart: Scenes from an Irish Childhood,
by John Creedon
(Gill Books, €24.99)

His television and radio work has made John Creedon a popular figure through his agreeable style. This book is in the same vein, describing his Cork upbringing, the people, scenes and events that made him the character he is. It evokes an almost timeless past, now vanished or vanishing, and will appeal to all who relish the seemingly simpler times of the old days in rural Ireland.

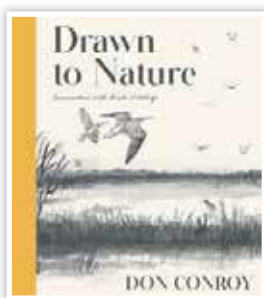
Nature Boy: a Journey of Birdsong and Belonging,
by Seán Ronayne
(Hachette Ireland, €24.99)

This is a book which takes the ornithologist author around the world to many wild places in search of birds and bird song. However behind it all lies a troubled childhood, only much later explained



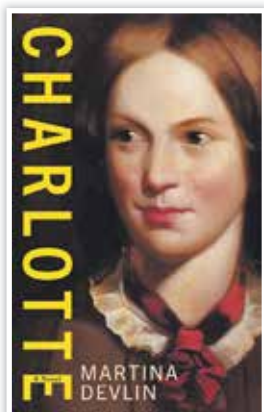
by a diagnosis of autism in his thirties. Again the childhood setting is rural Cork, but from a very unusual angle.

The author links the wonders of bird life with the need to cherish what we still have of all things wild. He brings his readers into a close connection with the very nature of creation.



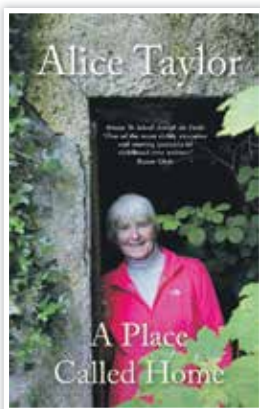
Drawn to Nature,
by Don Conroy
(Gill Books, €22.99)

On television Don Conroy was a delightful exponent of art for all, especially how to draw and paint the natural world. This book continues this style, for the hints about drawing are certainly here, but the theme of the book is really the author's own delight in the everyday aspects of nature which he sees around him, the animals, birds, trees and plants from which so many of us are sealed away from in our cars and quite blind to. It is a joy to turn the pages, and to savour the art work. Would suit any reader over the age of ten for many summers to come.



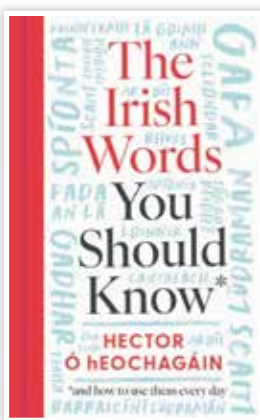
Charlotte,
by Martina Devlin
(Lilliput Press, €16.95)

The fascination with the creative and often stressed family at Haworth Rectory continues. Here writer Martina Devlin uses her skill as a writer and her expertise as a literary scholar to explore the perennial fascinating figure of Charlotte Brontë, her father and siblings. The wide spread of her own books reveals an unseal experience of life and society, which is brought to bear on exploring the psychology of a creative figure who had always attracted a wide range of very different readers. A book to put on the shelf beside Daphne du Maurier's alternative view of Haworth, *The Infernal World of Branwell Brontë*.



A Place called Home,
by Alice Taylor, with
photographs by Emma Byrne
(O'Brien Books, €19.99)

Christmas would not be Christmas without another helping of her continuing life by the delightful but also insightful Alice Taylor. She has charmed countless readers over the decades with her accounts of her life, mostly passed at Innishannon in Cork, now a greatly changed place since she first knew it. Her readers have in the past found her a heart warming read, and reminded that at the heart of things there is an essential goodness apparent to those who seek it.

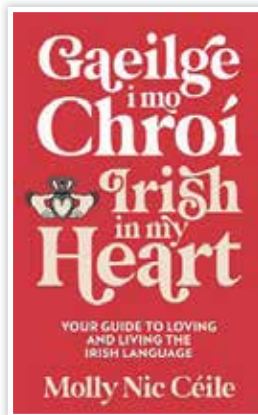


The Irish Words You Should Know: and how to start using them again,
by Hector Ó hEochagáin
(Gill Books, €22.99)

Though it was striking during the recent election campaign that Irish

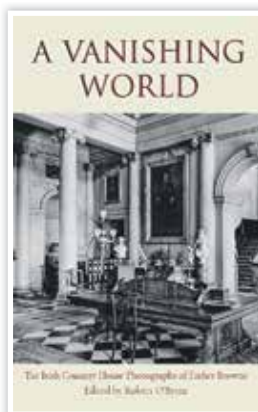
language posters were not much in evidence, there are still those who wish to encourage a greater knowledge and appreciation of the first language of the nation. Though millions have been poured into efforts at revival they have not carried the matter very far. And yet for anyone at all interested in Irish life and culture the appeal and the nature of Irish is an appealing one. This book, aimed at all lovers and potential lovers of the language, will have an immediate appeal. The character of the Irish language is certainly more essentially poetic than English all too often is. Here that appeal is explored for all.

To go with it there is also

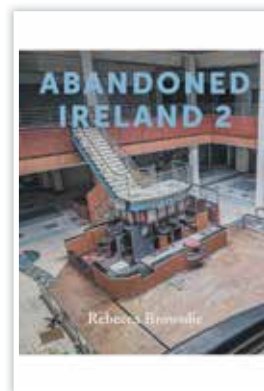


Gaeilge i Mo Chroí: Irish in My Heart, Your Guide to Loving and Living the Irish Language,
by Molly Nic Céile
(Hachette Books Ireland, €17.99)

The author is already a fixture in the social media universe - which seems increasingly to be the way to become that very old fashioned thing, the author of a book - and is hoping to encourage a daily use of Irish, whatever you may have felt about it at school. Indeed, it has often been observed that the worst enemies of the Irish language are the teachers and grammarians who have beset it for centuries. This book may even make the language seem fun.



A Vanishing World: The Irish Country House Photographs of Father Browne,
text by Robert O'Byrne
(Messenger Publications, €25.00)



Abandoned Ireland 2,
by Rebecca Brownlie
(Merrion Press, €24.99)

The two books represent the halves of the same story. The celebrated Jesuit photographer Fr Francis Browne was in his own day well known to his many friends as an adept and accomplished photographer, who had a special arrangement with Kodak to provide him with free film stock those days before everyone with a telephone was turned into a "citizen journalist".

Over the decades since his store of highly flammable negatives were rescued and safely archived by Davison Photography his photos have become familiar through a series of books, of which this is the latest. He records the country houses of Ireland, some of which were, of course, Catholic residences in their glorious heyday.

By contrast the equally atmospheric photographs of Rebecca Brownlie, a Co Down photographer who has been a passionate photographer since the age of twelve. This is her second book on the theme of Ireland's abandoned buildings, not just great mansions indeed, but any kind of edifice, cottages, and shops business. She captures extraordinary scenes of a world where people just vanished (as indeed they were claimed to have done from one of the mansions she records). Gothic, macabre and astonishing all at the same time.



Kevin and the Blackbirds,
by David Almond
and illustrated by P. J. Lynch
(Walker Books, €14.99)

A charming version of the traditional tales from early Christian Ireland, one of many touching animal tales involving Celtic

saints. These saints though they lived a difficult and often penitential life, cherish their relations with the natural world around them. They could see the hand of God in so much that we ignore today. In this tale the young monk Kevin, so absorbed in his own prayers, allows a blackbird to lay her eggs in a nest made in his cupped hands. The work of an established duo, this is a book to cherish.



The Great Irish Biodiversity Books,
by Eanna Ni Lamhna
and illustrated by Barry Falls
(Gill Books, €24.99)

The author, who has worked with An Taisce and the Tree Council of Ireland, is a skilled communicator of facts about Irish natural history as shown in several previous books. Here she covers a great deal of ground with her illustrations. This is a book for young people between nine and fifteen or so. It will lead them back to her earlier books, enlarging their knowledge at a time when the threat of climate change is ever growing.

Usually a sample of books from Veritas are included in these Christmas lists.

But this year Veritas, the long established Abbey Street book shop and publisher owned by the Irish bishops, will close at year's end. It will be missed by many. It also had shops elsewhere in the country: those in Derry and Letterkenny have already closed.

But in Dublin they are now holding a closing down sale where many books of great value and interest can be bought at discounted prices.

It may mark the end of an era, but for readers it may also start them on the way to a new life, through what they buy in the sale, which is not only of books and pamphlets, but also repository items, and even clerical clothes and vestments.

Classifieds

The deadline for advertising in the classifieds is 10.30am, the Friday before publication. Contact the Classified Team on 01 687 4028 or email advertising@irishcatholic.ie

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The Irish Catholic

Sudoku Corner 564

Easy Hard

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

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

Last week's Easy 563

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

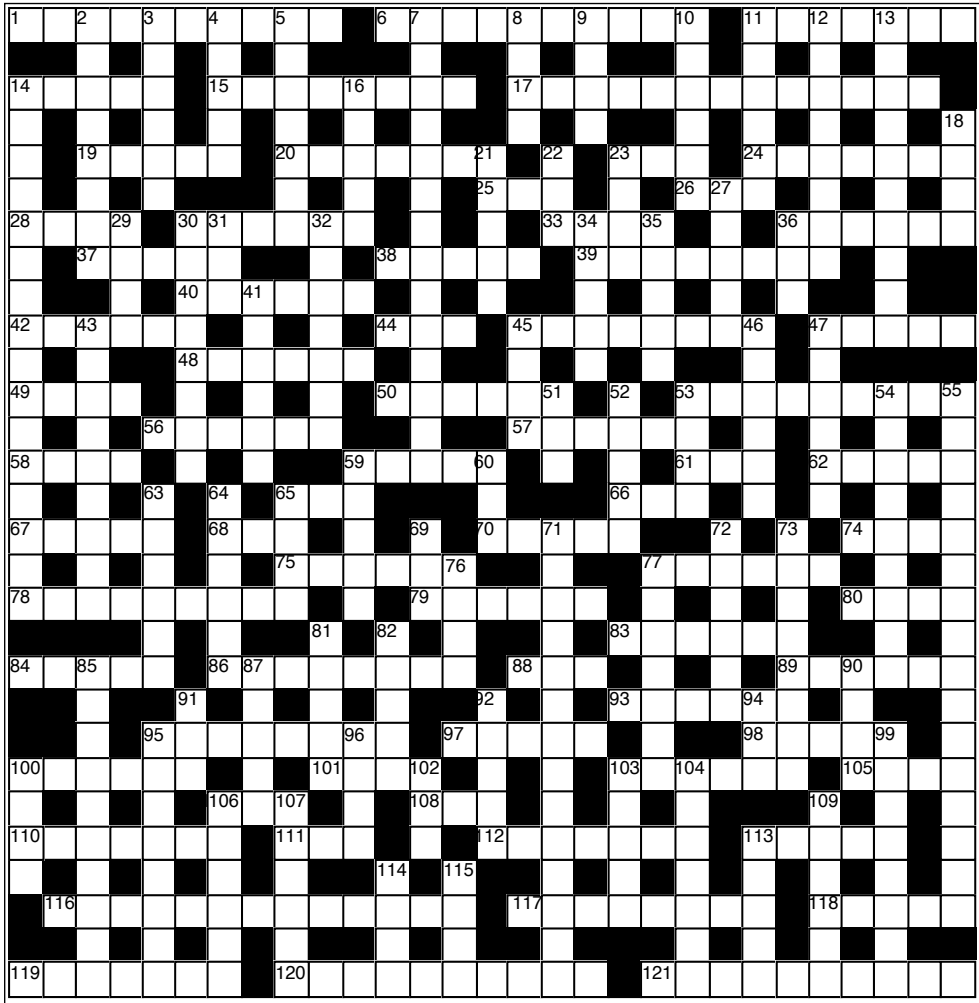
Last week's Hard 563

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

Leisure time

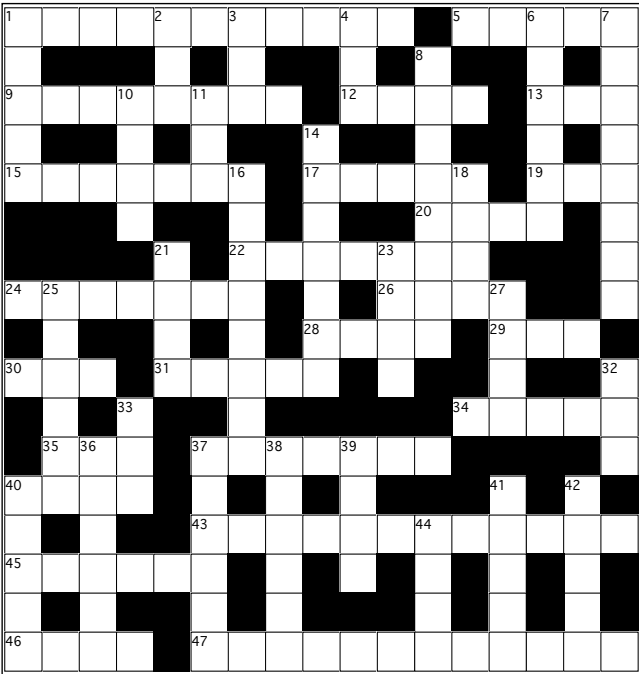
Christmas Crossword

- Across**
1, 32d & 45d My true love's first gift in a Christmas song (1,9,2,1,4,4)
6 Confectionary stores (10)
11 Room (7)
14 City in Northern Italy, the birthplace of Christopher Columbus (5)
15 Waste container, usually in a bathroom or kitchen (5,3)
17 This carol was a UK No 1 for both Harry Belafonte and Boney M (5,3,5)
19 In a state of preparedness (5)
20 Genius (7)
23 Golfers' average (3)
24 Betrayal of one's country (7)
25 Tear roughly (3)
26 A maker of honey (3)
28 Young horse (4)
30 Interference in a radio or TV signal (6)
33 Pace (4)
36 Domesticated polecat (6)
37 Raised riverbank (5)
38 Supporting structure, or the surround of a painting (5)
39 Holy - as said in the Lord's Prayer (8)
40 Rogue (6)
42 American State which includes Reno and Las Vegas (6)
44 Enquire (3)
45 Excavations, ditches (8)
47 Unit of land within a farm (5)
48 Package (6)
49 Small imperial unit of length (4)
50 Sauntered (6)
53 Severe economy (9)
56 The coldest season (6)
57 Message, chore (6)
58 Home of our earliest ancestors (4)
59 Call socially (5)
61 Owing (3)
62 Rich dairy product (5)
65 Snooker stick (3)
66 Variety of lettuce (3)
67 Healthcare employee (5)
68 In psychology, the Self (3)
70 Ingress (5)
74 Imputation (4)
75 Column (6)
77 South American blanket-like garment (6)
78 Very detailed, ornamented (9)
79 Paltry (6)
80 Glimpse (4)
83 Ravel's most famous piece of music (6)
84 Travel by bike (5)
86 This month gets its name from the Latin for Ten (8)
88 Substance used in making candles (3)
89 Paper hankie (6)
93 Breed of hound (6)
95 Incapable of leaking gases (8)
97 Concise (5)
98 Variety of antelope (5)
100 Pulling a vehicle or craft with a rope (6)
101 Take note (4)
103 You boil water in it (6)
105 A score in soccer (4)
106 Label (3)



- 108 Possess (3)
110 Percussion instrument similar to the xylophone (7)
111 Lubricant (3)
112 Heavy knife used by butchers (7)
113 Porcelain (5)
116 Bird historically trained to enable communication over distance (7,6)
117 Cut short in duration or extent (8)
118 Condescend (5)
119 Room where you cook (7)
120 Marine crustacean trap (7-3)
121 A snooze (5,5)
Down
2 Unusual in a worrying way (8)
3 Pop it in a pot or mug for a cuppa (6)
4 Suggest (5)
5 & 55d Traditional carol (3,4,2,5,9)
7 What Irving Berlin was dreaming of (5,9)
8 It can be measured in minutes (4)
9, 60d, 64d, 72d & 90d Carol referring to heavenly messengers (4,3,6,6,4)
10 Peripheral part of the city (6)
11 Prairie wolf (6)
12 Attained (8)
13 Rail beside a staircase (10)
14 & 95d The gifts presented by the Magi (4,12,3,5)
16 Reasoning (5)
18 Small, biting insect (4)
21 Percussion instruments (5)
22 With which to determine your exact location (1,1,1)
23 Entreaty (4)
27 Run away to get married (5)
29 In Greek mythology, the mother of Helen of Troy (4)
30 Angels of the highest rank (8)
31 Popular beverage (3)
32 See 1 across
34, 47d & 114d My true love's third gift in the Christmas song (5,6,4)
35 Remove feathers from a bird (5)
36 City in Morocco or hat native to Turkey (3)
41 Walks proudly (6)
43 The other way round (4,5)
45 See 1 across
46 Female sibling (6)
47 See 34 down
51 Arid (3)
52 Ornate (5)
53 Appends (4)
54 High-minded persons (9)
55 See 5 down
59 Face-covering garments (5)
60 See 9 down
63 Take away (6)
64 See 9 down
65 Religious vestment, a liturgical cloak (4)
69 Meat often served with turkey (3)
71 Refuse to listen to (4,1,4,3,2)
72 See 9 down
73 Strangle, grasp by the throat (8)
76 Back (4)
77 Irreverent, blasphemous (7)
81 Measure how heavy something is (5)
82 Lessen, ease off (5)
85 Meat cooked in the oven, arranged to look like regalia (5,5)
87 Actor with only a walk on part (5)
90 See 9 down
91 Hairpiece (3)
92 Unit of Swiss currency (5)
94 Snakelike fish (3)
95 See 14 down
96 Cure (4)
99 Charitable gift (8)
100 Domesticated (4)
102 Put on a garment (3)
103 Irish saint associated with Glendalough (5)
104 Violent wind (7)
106 Inn (6)
107 It was written by one of the four evangelists (6)
109 Fungal growth on plants, etc (6)
113 Play unfairly, hoodwink (5)
114 See 34 down
115 Joint in the leg (4)

Children's Christmas Crossword



- Across**
1 Christmas song about riding on a sleigh (6,5)
5 Put them on your feet before you put your shoes on (5)
9 When there's an extra day in February, like in 2024 (4,4)
12 Mix black and white to get this colour (4)
13 Santa's favourite colour (3)
15 Not as old (7)
17 How you usually cook the turkey (5)
19 Falsehood, fib (3)
20 You might say this if you make a small mistake (4)
22 Immediate - you might see this kind of coffee (7)
24 Where to get on a train (7)
26 You go to church to attend this (4)
28 His name means 'Christmas' in French (4)
29 Spinning toy (3)
30 Take part in a 43 across, for example (3)
31 Fantastic (5)
34 Meaty sauce you might pour over your Christmas dinner (5)
35 Australian bird that can't fly (3)
37 Cars, lorries, buses etc, all together (7)
40 Remain, don't go (4)
43 Drama about the very first Christmas (8,4)
45 Heavenly creatures who sang to the shepherds (6)
46 Meat that comes from a pig (4)
47 Carol about the animal that carried Mary to Bethlehem (6,6)
Down
1 Wobbly treat (5)
2 Put down, or produce an egg (3)
3 Huge snake that crushes its prey (3)
4 You might put a candle in a Yule ____ (3)
6 Holy Christmas songs (6)
7 All at once, without warning (8)
8 To do with Christmas and the New Year (8)
10 Tall tree that has cones (4)
11 A female sheep (3)
14 Gift (7)
16 Rudolph is the most famous one (8)
18 People sometimes call infants Tiny ____ (4)
21 Join in with a carol (4)
23 It's usually the last word of a prayer (4)
25 You get this to show you have paid in (6)
27 It guided the three Wise Men (4)
32 What you see with (3)
33 Get something by paying for it (3)
36 "Away in a ____" (6)
37 Shiny decoration (6)
38 Painter, or sculptor perhaps (6)
39 How many gold rings in the 'Twelve Days of Christmas' song? (4)
40 Make sure stick it on the envelope when posting a Christmas card (5)
41 Madrid and Barcelona are in this country (5)
42 Move to music (5)
44 Made a bow when wrapping a 14 down (4)

SOLUTIONS, DECEMBER 12

GORDIUS No. 693

Across

- 1 Good as gold 6 Limp 10 Bleep 11 Five to two 12 Caramel 15 Sheep 17 Ankh 18 Exit 19 Elver 21 Fast and abstinence 23 Loner 24 Scut 25 Iran 26 Weave 28 Gumshoe 33 Anecdotes 34 Thigh 35 Dose

Down

- 1 Gobi 2 Operation 3 Alpha 4 Gaffe 5 Love 7 Istle 8 Prosperity 9 Stashed 13 Maya 14 Lasting 16. Yellow card 20 Victorian 21 Friends 22 Norm 27 Avers 29 Upset 30 Satin 31 Stab 32 Ghee

Notebook

Fr John Harris OP



Keep it simple

I love the simplicity of Christmas. For all the excitement and fuss of the holiday, at the centre of our Christian Christmas is the baby in the manger. This most familiar scene remains the focal point of the great feast in the midst of all the parties, decorations, tinsel and evergreens. It's about the child with his mother.

In a way one can say that this is also true of our entire religion. Christ in his sacred humanity stands at the centre of our faith. He took our nature, becoming one of us in the womb of His Blessed Mother and so today in life of the Church the same man stands as our way, our truth and our life. The Christmas story is not a fairy tale at the beginning of the Gospels but it introduces us to the deep mysteries of our faith and invites us to be part of the story.

Bethlehem

To the stable in Bethlehem were invited the poor and uneducated shepherds together with the rich and highly educated Three Wise Men. One group came because of the inspiration of heavenly grace in



the message of the angels while the Magi came as a result of their own intellectual searching.

These two groups stand as book-ends of the procession of humanity which are invited to the meet the Lord. No one is excluded from this scene. All are welcome, rich and poor, educated or uneducated, through the promptings of interior grace or the searching of the human intellect. We can all find our ways to the manger, to meeting Christ, in different ways and at different time.

In many ways the shepherds and the Magi are very different but they also share much in common. They all go to see what is happening. They

allow themselves to be taken on a journey. They come to the stable curious and willing to discover what God is doing in their lives.

Changed

Also they go away changed. We are told in the Gospels that the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen while we are told the Magi went home a different way. This just doesn't mean by a different route but they go away new men, following a new path in their lives.

At the heart of our celebrating Christmas in the midst of all the fuss, keep it simple and focused. It

You never know when you might meet a saint

Recently the Vatican announced that during the Holy Year 2025 the Pope will canonize two young Italian Catholics, one was a member of the Dominican Laity, Pier Giorgio Frassati, the other a teenager Carlo Acutis who died at the age of 15.

At the end of November, I was in our Dominican church in Tralee when a relic of the heart of Blessed Carlo was present. Over the weekend thousands came to pray and to be blessed with the relic. It was amazing to see the draw of this young teenager.

Later in the week I was speaking to a fellow Dominican priest who told me he had met Carlo Acutis in Fatima. I was amazed and wanted to know how he had met him and how did he know who he was.

My fellow Dominican said that he was sitting on a wall by the shrine in Fatima and this young Italian kid came and sat with him. He had excellent English and they had a conversation about the Blessed Sacrament.

After the conversation they went their ways. The priest didn't think about the meeting again until a few years later he saw a picture of a young teenager in a Catholic paper and realised that the young fellow he had sat with and talked with about the faith was about to be beatified. The young man had been Carlo Acutis. So you never know when you might sit and talk with a saint.

is about meeting Jesus and allowing him to touch our lives, as he did the lives of the shepherds and the Magi. We must never lose sight of the friendly and familiar surroundings of our faith.

God can come to us in the most unassuming of ways, touches us quietly and as gently as the claps of a baby's hand. He never forces Himself on us but invites us to live in his love. When everything is said and done, we are definitely loved. The message of the scene from Bethle-

hem teaches us we are infinitely loved!

Every grace and blessing for this Christmas and the New Year



The Little Way Association

Medicines and medical aid are very urgently needed for thousands of Syrians, Palestinians and Bedouins

Sr Alessandra has contacted The Little Way from the Comboni Missionary Sisters' hospital at Karak in the south of Jordan. She is counting upon you, and other donors, to assist once more with the cost of providing the hospital with urgent medical supplies. In this part of Jordan are hundreds of thousands of Syrians, Palestinians, Bedouins and many others. Sister writes: "Our hospital is the only Christian institution doing medical work in southern Jordan and it has a capacity of 50 beds. The people receive no government or UN help at all and turn to us for medical treatment.

Mothers, babies, infants are in the greatest need of help

"We aim to care for as many refugees, and poor Jordanians as possible, especially mothers, children and adults in emergency situations. We provide milk and nappies for newborns, many of whose mothers came across the border to give birth. Some need emergency treatment. We wish to witness to the Gospel and also to be a bridge of trust and understanding with the local 97% Muslim population. We need, to name but a few, antibiotics, anti-haemorrhagic pills, painkillers, anti-allergic medicines, surgical materials and milk for newborns."

We implore you to give what you can this Christmas. Every euro helps and will be forwarded to the Sisters without deduction. The Sisters and hundreds of ordinary people will be very thankful to God and to you. May God bless you all.



"A word or a smile is often enough to put fresh life in a despondent soul."

- St Therese

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

May St Therese reward you in a special way for the sacrifices you make to support our work, and may she obtain many graces for all our benefactors during 2025.

In gratitude for your kindness a CHRISTMAS NOVENA OF MASSES is being offered for your intentions.

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