

The Irish Catholic

**PEACE,
LOVE AND
ICE-CREAM**

Martina Purdy


Page 6



**MY FAITH IS
'A CONSTANT
CONNECTION TO
THE ALMIGHTY'**

Bear Grylls

Page 3



**TROUBLED
BOYS AND THE
MANOSPHERE**

Mary Kenny

Page 5



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‘Society wallowing in despair and meaninglessness’ - Bishop

Garry O’Sullivan

There is a real need for good news, because society is wallowing in despair and meaninglessness, the bishop of Derry Donal McKeown has said.

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic* in Derry, Dr McKeown said there is a need for Catholics to develop the confidence to engage as Catholics with our culture, to influence the culture which is one of the calls of Pope Benedict and Pope Francis as well and John Paul II – “get out there and engage in debates about creation, about human life, about AI, about all those things” he said.

To do this, Catholics need to embrace an intellectual faith that is different from a more pious faith in the past he said, adding that the Church is not just downsizing, “it is actually re-shaping for mission, we’re not downsizing for the sake of downsizing, we’re doing it in order to be better, fitter, leaner and better able to engage with our society at the intellectual level and all other sorts of levels.”

He said that for Derry, he hoped that the opening of the St Paul’s religious bookstore in Derry “will be able to help us develop a sense in Derry of people who want to engage at an intellectual level with the faith and also we want to engage as people of faith in discussions in a synodal church and discerning God’s way forward rather than being cowed or afraid to engage because Catholics feel inadequately prepared in their knowledge of scripture and so on.” He was keen to be clear he wasn’t playing down the importance of pious/ tangible faith. “I think both of those things (piety/sacramental and intellectualism) are important. It is physical things that have kept people going, such as in the 18th Century when there were no churches it was things such as holy wells and domestic pieties that kept the Church, kept the Faith alive, that applied in Japan and Korea as well after the martyrs in those countries. So the tangible, the sacramental remains an important part of how we experience the transcendent. We have that sense that creation is good and that oil and water and bread, all can be bearers of the divine message, that is the message of hope. So I don’t think the tangible should be downplayed, as if it is something that is only old fashioned, it’s important for everyone.”

» Continued on Page 2

The prayer of generations



At the recent National Eucharistic Procession, nearly 2,000 people gathered in Athlone. The event included Mass and Rosary prayer. Picture shows girl praying during the Children’s Rosary. Photo: Paul O’Shea.

See pages 20-21.

Knock Shrine to Launch €1.5m ‘Youth Village’ this summer

Chai Brady

Knock Shrine will officially launch its new €1.5m ‘Youth Village’ on June 14, providing a dedicated space for young people to gather, reflect, and take part in retreat programmes, the rector has said.

The village consists of ten accommodation pods, each designed for two people. According to Fr Richard Gibbons, Rector of Knock Shrine, the project aims to serve as a resource for young Catholics in Ireland. “We just want a space for young people here at the Shrine that they can call their own,” Fr Gibbons said.

The Youth Village will be used by various youth groups, including religious organisations and Knock Shrine’s own young volunteers who assist with activities during the summer months. “We used to use other places in Knock to keep them overnight from Friday to Sunday, but since those spaces were no longer available, we decided to move ahead with the Youth Village,” Fr Gibbons explained.

The facility will also be available for retreat groups and individuals seeking time for personal reflection. “We’re developing personal retreat programmes for people, whether individually or in groups,” Fr Gibbons said. “It’s simply a resource for the Church in Ireland.”

The official launch will take place in collaboration with the Irish Episcopal Conference and will be led by Bishop Fintan Gavin. “It’s a joint effort,” Fr Gibbons said. “The bishops are fully on board, and Bishop Gavin is bringing various youth groups together in Knock for the day. Some of them will be preparing to go to Rome for the Jubilee.”

The Youth Village has been developed on the site of Knock’s former caravan park, which Fr Gibbons said provided an ideal location due to its existing infrastructure. “We had the facilities there – water, electricity – so we just had to adapt it for the pods,” he said.

The project comes amid wider discussions about youth engagement with the Church in Ireland. The Youth Village is intended to provide a space for young people to come together in a faith-based environment. “They can find solidarity with one another and a sense of community,” Fr Gibbons said.

» Continued on Page 2

THE EPIDEMIC OF ANXIETY AMONG THE YOUNG

David Quinn

PAGE 10



A NEW SYNOD PHASE ANNOUNCED

Interview with Cardinal Grech

PAGES 22-23



CASTING OUT DEMONS THROUGH SILENCE

Fr Ron Rolheiser


PAGE 32



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'Society wallowing in despair and meaninglessness' - Bishop

» Continued from Page 1

Hope, he said, is based on the narrative of the past that says God has always been faithful to us in the past. "We've come through all sorts of times, the monastic flourishing in the early centuries, then the rediscovering of a suffering church during the Penal Times, then the whole resurgence of missionary activity in the 18th/19th and 20th Centuries. So I think the Church goes in cycles and this is an opportunity for us to say 'God has been faithful to us, always remaking us in the past, and we can face the future and all its problems, not because we are hopeful things will work out the way we want them to, but because we believe God is constantly at work in our society. That sort of liberating message which stops us from complaining about the past and blaming somebody else for things going wrong and saying how can we discern God's way forward because we believe God is at work, even on Calvary, even when everything looks bleak, the kingdom of God is close at hand is the message, so I hope this is a time of reshaping for mission rather than downsizing."

Bishops announce timeline for Ireland's 'Synodal Pathway'

Pedro Esteva

The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference has published a timeline laid out by the 'National Synodal Team', which will culminate in Ireland's first national Synodal assembly in October 2026. It noted the necessity of a "gradual process" built on dialogue and communal discernment, all of which it said is guided by the principles outlined in the Universal Synod's Final Document, *For a*

St Patrick's Day address: A missed opportunity?

Editorial

The final St Patrick's Day address from President Michael D. Higgins was, as expected, a thoughtful and deeply reflective meditation on justice, solidarity, and shared humanity. Over the past 14 years, President Higgins has been a voice for the marginalised, the vulnerable, and those who seek a more compassionate world. His latest address stayed true to these themes, calling for a world where human dignity is upheld, where economic policies reflect ethical concerns, and where the threats of climate change, exclusion, and self-interest are countered with cooperation and a vision for the collective good.

Yet, amid these stirring calls for justice and solidarity, something was conspicuously absent: any meaningful men-

tion of faith or Christianity. Given that St Patrick's Day is both a national and a religious occasion, this omission is worth examining.

St. Patrick was not merely a cultural figure or a symbol of Irish identity – he was a missionary whose legacy is deeply intertwined with Ireland's Christian heritage. His message was one of faith, redemption, and transformation. While President Higgins did make a passing reference to Patrick's "path of understanding" and "ethical courage," the absence of any direct acknowledgment of Christianity or faith-based values leaves an incomplete picture of both the saint and the day we celebrate in his honour.

This omission is particularly striking considering that many of the values the President so eloquently championed—compassion, justice, care for the

vulnerable—have deep roots in Christian teaching. The call to see "the other" as a friend, to build a world based on generosity and solidarity, echoes the Gospel message. Would it not have been fitting, on this particular day, to at least acknowledge that faith has been a significant source of these ideals?

Ireland has changed dramatically in recent decades. The nation has become more secular, and the influence of institutional religion has waned. The President, as head of state, represents all Irish people, including those of different faiths and none. However, acknowledging Ireland's Christian heritage—especially on a day dedicated to its most famous Christian figure—is not an endorsement of any particular religious doctrine, but rather a recognition of historical and cultural reality.

Faith continues to play an important role in the lives of many Irish people, both at home and abroad. For countless communities, religious institutions remain at the forefront of humanitarian efforts, providing aid, education, and a sense of belonging. By leaving faith out of his address, the President may have unintentionally distanced himself from an essential aspect of what has historically shaped Irish identity and global outreach.

None of this is to diminish the importance of the themes the President did address. His call for a more just and inclusive world, his reflections on the power of ideas, and his challenge to reject cynicism in favor of hope are inspiring and necessary. His leadership in advocating for climate justice, human rights, and global solidarity has been commendable and will be remembered as a

defining feature of his presidency.

However, in a farewell address on the feast day of our national saint, an acknowledgment of faith—not necessarily in a doctrinal sense, but as a historical and cultural force—would have enriched the speech. It would have provided a fuller, more comprehensive reflection on Irish identity, one that embraces both the past and the future.

President Higgins has given Ireland 14 years of dedicated service, and his legacy will endure. Yet, as we move forward, it is worth considering how we balance our evolving national identity with the historical forces that have shaped us. St. Patrick's Day is not just a celebration of Irishness; it is a day rooted in faith. To ignore that is to leave part of the story untold.

Knock Shrine to Launch €1.5m 'Youth Village' this summer

» Continued from Page 1

The launch event on June 14 will include youth groups from across Ireland, with Knock Shrine extending an invitation to those interested in attending or learning more about the new facility.

As Knock Shrine states: "Knock Youth village offers exceptional facilities – stylish, eco-friendly self-catering accommodation and communal meeting spaces, all presented in a modern aesthetic

"Knock Youth Village offers you a unique retreat destination, allowing you to have an unforgettable prayerful experience, regardless of your length of stay. This will be your home away from home during your retreat here at Knock Shrine."

New Irishman joins pilgrims to celebrate St Patrick

Martina Purdy

A new Irishman named Patrick from Nigeria was among a group of pilgrims who prayed at St Patrick's grave in Downpatrick, Co. Down, to mark his annual feast day.

Patrick Ahaotu said St Patrick is patron of Nigeria and he has always celebrated March 17 as he was taught by Irish priests and the feast was traditionally a free day from school.

He and his wife came from Imo, Nigeria, to Belfast in October, 2023, to work and he decided to go to Downpatrick after hearing about the special prayer service.

He said he did not realise that St Patrick was buried in Downpatrick until the priest at St Anthony's parish, Fr Henry McCann, mentioned the event.

Around 20 pilgrims gathered at the grave for the third



Patrick Ahaotu, originally from Nigeria and Eileen Boden from Newcastle, were among pilgrims who gathered to pray at dawn at St Patrick's Grave.

annual prayer service.

St Patrick's Pilgrim guide Elaine Kelly filmed the event this year after a request from the US Catholic TV network, EWTN.

Iva Berenek, originally from Croatia, but living in Dublin, was also among 20 pilgrims who gathered at dawn. A children's author, she said she was

not brought up as a Christian but when she came to faith, like Patrick, as a teenager, she began to pray for Ireland. "I had a huge desire to come to Ireland," she said.

Anyone interested in learning more about the prayer initiative can contact Siobhan Brennan on legacyofpatrick@gmail.com.

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My Faith is 'a constant connection to the Almighty' – Bear Grylls

Thomas Colsy

A record-breaking 10,800 attendees from across England and Wales gathered at the OVO Arena in London for 'Flame 2025' – a conference and concert for young Catholics and Christians of secondary-school age – on Saturday, March 15.

With a plethora of celebrity guests and performers and 20 bishops in attendance, television star and survival expert Bear Grylls was the headline speaker.

The growing initiative, which is collaboratively organised with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, is "the larg-

est ever event for Catholic young people in the UK."

In his talk, Mr Grylls recalled a pivotal moment in his youth when he climbed up a tree in grief following the death of a close family friend and attempted to pray.

"God, if you're there, just be with me for a while," he pleaded.

From this moment, Mr Grylls affirmed to the thousands of listening schoolchildren that belief followed him without departure for the rest of his life. He stated that his faith is "a constant connection to the Almighty" and a "knowledge" that he is loved.

Mr Grylls ensured that an exclusive copy of his latest book, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* – a narrative retelling the Gospel from the perspective of New Testament figures (releasing in May), was handed out to each attendee.

Brian Henriquez, one of the co-founders of the Hallow app – the most popular religious mobile and tablet application in the world, also spoke. In February 2024, Hallow even became the most downloaded app on Apple products altogether – ahead of Google and ChatGPT.

Mr Henriquez recalled how his own faith was

developed and deepened through discovering the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina* through his work – entailing reading passages of Scripture followed by meditative-contemplative prayer.

The event closed with Eucharistic Adoration led by Cardinal Vincent Nichols.

Speaking of Hallow's formidable popularity in an age of declining faith, Mr Henriquez later told *The Irish Catholic* that one of the most surprising successes of his work was to find users were particularly enthralled by spiritual challenges and disciplines.

Describing how a 54-day rosary novena was one of Hallow's most popular programmes, he said "I think people are craving something that's authentic. I think they're tired of things that are watered-down."

"It challenges people to live their life differently," he continued. "And I think that's where you get some of the spiritual fruit."



Bear Grylls

Parents should discuss vaping with children – Bishops' Drugs Initiative

Renata Steffens

The National Coordinator for the Irish Bishops' Drugs Initiative (IBDI) said that communication at a young age is key to prevent vaping and smoking and that awareness needs to be raised. Darren Butler told *The Irish Catholic* children believe vaping is safe, as differently from alcohol and cigarettes, it has not been a part of any curriculum.

"Regularly in classrooms I am asked why the Government allow drugs like this to be sold and the majority of young people at the young age of 12 years of age would say they think 'if it's for sale it has to be safe'."

Mr Butler said that "young people don't want a cool parent or a friend, they need and want structure and open communication. Prepare your kids for peer pressure. Discuss what they might say if a friend offers a cigarette or vape."

Parents should talk with their kids "about smoking and vaping as early as possible. Keeping that communication going as they get older and include other drugs as they enter teenage years, if this is normal for young people to be having these types of conversations it will be much easier for a parent going forward."

"The IBDI is a needs-based programme and has changed over time to meet the needs of parishes," Mr Butler said. The majority of the work at the moment is awareness programmes in schools from 6th class Confirmation to Transition Year.

"The IBDI are working on resources for schools and parents to support the young people and The Bishops Conference will be supporting the inclusion of smoking and vaping to be added to The Pledge as traditionally alcohol was the drug that was mentioned," the coordinator said.

'Church bicentenary is opportunity to revive faith', parish priest

Staff reporter

The parish of St Joseph, St Benildus and St Mary's in Co. Waterford will celebrate the bicentenary of St Mary's Church in Ballygunner with talks and events from March 26 to 30.

Fr Liam Power, PP told *The Irish Catholic* the church was built in 1825, just before the Catholic emancipation in 1829. Local historian, Joe Falvey, who is scheduled to give a talk on March 28 said the church was the focal point of the community for most of the past 200 years.

"It's a huge parish; it's over 70,000 in the parish. Not all church-going Catho-

lics, but still is a huge population," the priest said. For the whole parish it's only "a priest and a half," Fr Power said, just himself and a part-time priest. However, the 200 community volunteers help to keep the parish going.

Fr Power said he is "really excited" with the anniversary celebration. "It is generating a great sense of community involvement," he said. The priest said the preparation for the bicentenary is creating a greater integration in the community and different groups are beginning to connect to each other.

The priest believes this is a chance for the community

to "rediscover" the important role the church has played in the community for the past two hundred years. "I think connecting with that sense of community, will help people rediscover the faith dimension, how important it was for the people at that time. [They were] really, really poor ... but the faith has kept them going and kept their hope alive."

Fr Power hopes the celebration will generate an interest among the community, "retrieving the history. That people would be proud of it, and that it would be a renewal for us all. A renewal for the parish."

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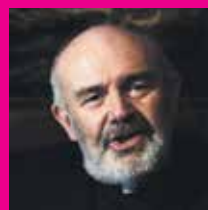
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A CALL
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Church's poverty of imagination needs new thinking – Archbishop

Garry O'Sullivan

If there is a poverty in our Church today, it is above all, a poverty of imagination, the Archbishop of Dublin has said. "Renewal in the faith is not going to come because we adopt some new management strategy that will address our current shortcomings in ministry and mission. Renewal in faith requires a new way of imagining what it means for us to follow Christ together."

Speaking at St Mary's Pro-Cathedral on St Patrick's Day, the Archbishop said St Patrick's "passion for the good news, and his desire to reach the Irish have shaped Pat-

rick's imagination. He has developed what we might call a "pastoral and spiritual" imagination."

That imagination he said was hard won. "Such imagination is not forged in the shallows; one has to put out into the deep for such a catch. In our own time, think of the pastoral imagination Pope John XXIII who to the amazement, even horror of the College of Cardinals called a Council. Or of St John Paul II, with his many initiatives, totally in tune with his long years of reflection on the character of human life, and his passion for the vibrancy of the faith of the young. The imagination of Patrick, and that of John XXIII, and

of Pope John Paul II are rooted in the hope that only the horizon of Christ can bring".

He said that the responsibility of ensuring the next generation knows Christ falls to us. "Offering Christ to new generations demands a re-imagining of how our communities work together, a re-imagining how we are nourished and resourced, how we "receive and offer the Bread of Life from the [one] table both of God's word and of Christ's body," as the Council teaches. What Patrick and his companions did, was only the beginning: the cultivation of the faith, living it so that the next generations may have the opportunity

to come to know Christ falls to us.

He added: "You may say that the Church is poor, that it has no people, that we are old and weak. But the living Church - the Church on the way to life - has never been afraid of poverty. The Church that is close to Christ knows all about weakness.

This is not the horizon of the strong, but it is the horizon of Patrick, and it is the horizon of Christ. It is a horizon which is not possible without a profound confidence in what God is doing among his people. It is a horizon which is not possible without the hope that comes from the conviction that God is close."

NEWS IN BRIEF

St Patrick's battle against paganism still hold lessons

St Patrick waged a spiritual battle against the paganism that once gripped Ireland, Dr Alexander O'Hara KM has said during the annual ecumenical service at St Patrick's Cathedral. He described the Irish people as being in darkness, held captive by "demonic forces".

Dr O'Hara highlighted the discovery of an ancient idol in Roscommon, a stark reminder of Ireland's former bondage to false gods. The sermon challenged modern Irish Christians to reclaim St Patrick's fearless faith and resist the creeping paganism in contemporary culture, just as St Patrick once stood against the idols of his time, calling the faithful to courageously defend their Christian heritage.

Irish Mercy Sister honoured in New York

Mercy Sister Christine Hennessey, a Catholic Charities Community Services social worker and Irish American who "grew up very close to my Irish culture," has been recognised for her sacrificial service and dedication to the New Yorkers for over 20 years on March 17.

Much of Sister Christine's work involves assisting immigrants without documentation to find health care and other services. She also works as a chaplain with the Irish Committee for Prisoners Overseas, an Irish government project that maintains contact with incarcerated Irish citizens.

"Some of the prisoners don't have many visitors," she said. "As a social worker, I am grateful to help people in need at different times in their lives."

Year-long celebration for Enniskillen church anniversary

The community of St Michael's Parish, Enniskillen-Lisbellaw, Co. Fermanagh will celebrate the 150th anniversary of St Michael's Church with a year-long celebration. Talking to *The Irish Catholic*, Fr Raymond Donnelly, CC said that the church opened on St Patrick's Day, 1875.

The start of the year-long celebration happened on the bank holiday weekend, and the next event will be a 24-hour Vigil of Adoration starting the evening of March 28 and ending on the evening of March 29.

The calendar of all the events was distributed to the parishioners after St Patrick's Mass on Monday and can be fully accessed on the parish website, saintmichaels-parish.com.

Deputy calls for action on Tusla failures to assign social workers to children

Renata Steffens

Aontú Leader Peadar Tóibín TD has called for urgent action following a judgment delivery on how Tusla

handled the cases in which children under their care have been left without a designated social worker.

Deputy Tóibín said that "there are some very con-

cerning revelations in this judgement. Tusla are supposed to 're-enter' a case in the courts every time a child in its care has no social worker. But the judgement notes that this wasn't happening, that Tusla was not complying with these orders or informing the courts that children were without social workers. We're talking here about a cohort of 250 or so children".

The Deputy continued: "The government is not listening to foster carers, social workers or the voluntary

care sector when they raise concerns, but to continue to ignore the situation even in the face of multiple judges expressing their feelings is embarrassing for the government".

He also said that "children in State care are being trafficked, murdered and abused at a colossal scale in this country, with high numbers also dying from drug overdoses and suicide... The State is the parent of these children, and it is utterly failing them.

"Aontú is calling on the

government to outline what steps they are taking to ensure staff retention in social work, better recruitment of foster carers and how they aim to reduce the rate of trafficking, death and missing persons among children in care. This scandal needs to be taken seriously, and there needs to be an investigation into the reasons why Tusla failed to inform the court that 250 children in their care are currently without a social worker. It's a very serious situation," he concluded.

First Mass in Portuguese takes place in Dundalk

Staff reporter

A group of around 50 Brazilians gathered in St Joseph's Redemptorist Church in Dundalk, Co. Louth for the first Mass in Portuguese in that parish. The Mass was presided over by Fr Richard Delahunty, who lived in Brazil for over 30 years, and co-celebrated by Fr Brendan Callanan.

During the traditional Brazilian Mass, the attendees sang Happy Birthday in Portuguese to Fr Callanan, who recently turned 80.

One of the local parishioners, Analine said she attends Mass in that parish since she moved to Dundalk, five years ago and her two sons were baptised in St Joseph's. She said the first Brazilian Mass in Portuguese was "a remarkable date for the Brazilian Community in Dundalk." She also said that "there was an excitement in everyone's faces" when inside the church and that people came from many other parishes to witness this important moment.

The next Portuguese Mass in Dundalk will take place on Easter Sunday, and it's expected Mass in Portuguese will be a monthly event in the parish.



Around 50 people attended the first Mass in Portuguese in St Joseph's Redemptorist Church in Dundalk.

Welcoming a new Catholic



Newtownstewart Parish, Co. Tyrone, welcomes a new Catholic, 10-year-old Taylor-Mai Doherty (Primary 7), who asked to be received into the Catholic Church. Taylor has made her First Confession and received First Holy Communion and is now preparing for Confirmation. She is also training as a parish reader. Picture shows Taylor-Mai at the left side of Fr Roland Colhoun with her classmates on her First Communion day, at the parish Oratory on Sunday March 16.

Of troubled boys and the 'Manosphere'

The modern trend in education is towards the co-ed school. Single-sex schools are in decline, and often regarded as archaic relics of a past time, unhealthily segregating boys and girls, Taliban-style.

But what strikes me as I watch schoolkids piling boisterously onto trains and buses is how uneven the physical development of boys and girls can be.

As they approach adolescence, schoolboys of 12 and 13 can still look like little boys – sometimes still quite small, not having yet had that spurt of growth. While girls embarking on the teenage years seem not only to be taller, but more poised, assured and self-confident. Boys and girls develop at a strikingly different pace. And boys seem slower to mature.

Adolescence

A new, sensational Netflix drama, "Adolescence" throws a more alarming light on the issue of mixed-sex schools in an age of internet porn, ubiquitous phones and the sexualisation of young people – as well as misogyny and the crisis in masculinity. And the chaos and turmoil of a mixed-sex school in the north of England where the swearing teachers exercise so little control.

The drama centres on a 13-year-old boy, Jamie, the son of a plumber, who is



Mary Kenny

accused of killing a girl in his school. Jamie, brilliantly played by Owen Cooper, is just a child – slight of frame, and weeping like the child he still is. His ordinary, nice family are appalled when the police break into their home at dawn to arrest the lad.

But then the back story emerges: evidence of adolescents sending pornified pictures on their phones, young boys taunted for being "incels" – that is to say, obligatory virgins, ("involuntary celibates") at the age of 13; yes, thirteen! And the misogynistic influence of a "manosphere" in which the mentors are the likes of the "influencer" Andrew Tate, aiming to get their revenge on women for feminism, or for humiliating men.

“It’s questionable in more gender-balanced societies; and in any case, is it something that should obsess young teenage boys?”

It turns out that Jamie – aged 13, I repeat – has been mocked for the murder victim as an "incel", or involuntary celibate.

Another pupil in this mixed-sex school explains to the police

detective, (who happens to be his own father): "80% of women are attracted to 20% of men." This means that the alpha-males of the species have their pick of sexual partners, while many more lesser males will be without the choice of a mate – and thus "incels".

Theories

I have seen these theories in connection with certain demographics – in China, where the one-child policy has produced more males, since female babies were rejected or aborted, resulting in many men with little chance of finding a wife. But it's questionable in more gender-balanced societies; and in any case, is it something that should obsess young teenage boys? Isn't it normal to be a virgin at this age anyway?

It's not that the mixed-sex school is to blame for this horrible situation: it's more the material available on the internet and the so-called "manosphere" that boys are now accessing.

Yet in this distressing drama, boys and girls together at a vulnerable, confused phase of their development, certainly seems a factor – or maybe an opportunity to act on some of the poisonous material now available to mere kids.



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Once up a time...

It was bound to happen – the fable of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* has been re-made in a 'woke' movie version. Snow White is no longer named for the whiteness of her skin – oh, fie! – but because she was born in a snowstorm. The actress portraying her – Rachel Zegler – describes Prince Charming as "a stalker", and says women should aim for leadership rather than true love.

Well, fables have always been updated to chime with the times. But it's mean to have eliminated the dwarfs, replacing them with Computer Generated Images (CGI). Actors born with achondroplasia (sometimes called dwarfism) are protesting vehemently, and rightly so. They are entitled to be employed. And valued for themselves, not replaced by CGI fakes.

The late Mary Banotti, MEP and sometime contender for the Presidency, was a grand-niece of Michael Collins; among her papers she left original letters from the "Lost Leader" to his fiancée Kitty Kiernan. These will be gifted to the Cork Public Museum.

The writer Leon Ó Broin

produced a lovely short book some years ago, "*In Great Haste – The Letters of Michael Collins and Kitty Kiernan*", and it's accessible in some libraries and of course in the National Library. It's also available to buy on-line at anything between £54 and £152 (prices cited in sterling).

Kitty's letters are anx-

ious, but normal too – she often refers to dancing. And very religious. Michael is keen to reassure her that he is keeping up his faith practices with visits to Brompton Oratory and Corpus Christi, Maiden Lane (near London's Strand). We have proof that he was telling the truth: British Intelligence followed his every step!

Peace, love and ice-cream: buyer beware



Martina Purdy

The American ice-cream company Ben and Jerry's has a beautiful motto: peace, love and ice-cream. But frankly, it has an ugly agenda when it comes to babies in the womb.



Photo by Hybrid Storytellers on Unsplash

And no matter how much sugar they pour into their ice-cream, it will never sweeten the bitter taste of abortion.

And as we approach the Solemnity of the Annunciation on March 25, when Jesus, the Divine Son of God,

became an unborn child in his Mother's womb, it's worth looking at this company's declaration: five reasons why it is standing with "abortion providers" throughout the United States who are "under threat". Honestly you could not write it: how is it we have come to a place where it is no longer the little child who is under threat.

It is hard to know where to start with this, yet another example of corporations selling their own brand of morality. Is this trend in business a consequence of the child abuse crisis which undermined the moral authority of Catholic leaders?

What happens when these corporations fail to live up to their own standards?

Stakeholder or woke capitalism is rife right now, despite memes that say, "go woke or go broke". Defenders of this type of capitalism say it works and that a sizable majority of consumers are in favour of "woke" causes such as abortion, transgender rights, or 'white privilege'.

"More and more consumers are not just buying things," Forbes business magazine has claimed. "They're buying into things."

Social justice

A percentage of Ben and Jerry's profits goes to "social justice" causes through their foundation. This includes gun control, which is indeed a noble cause because of the number of innocent lives lost every year. Another irony.

Ben and Jerry's is one of the 'poster children' for stakeholder capitalism: that is business with a purpose that is apparently beyond money-making. These nouveau capitalists want to change how you think about morality and reshape the world into their own vision of utopia.

The Vatican seems to see the benefits of this. In 2020 Pope Francis launched 'The Council for Inclusive Capitalism', a partnership with wealthy corporations to direct trillions of dollars towards fairness, equity, equal outcomes, and climate change values.

Sounds simple enough but capitalist power, like other types of power, can be rooted in self-interest, open to abuse

and lack a coherent moral framework.

“A case of human weakness, but what happens when a company's moral pantheon clashes with Catholic values?”

It can also be little more than virtue signalling. Remember "Dieselgate" when Volkswagen, a decade ago, issued a 'mea culpa' after it was discovered that it had installed software on its diesel-powered cars which allowed the company to cheat on its emissions tests while touting the low-emission green agenda. "We totally screwed up," said Volkswagen America boss Michael Horn.

A case of human weakness, but what happens when a company's moral pantheon clashes with Catholic values?

For example, Ben and Jerry's laments the overturning of Roe v Wade in the Supreme Court, as it paved the way for abortion bans in Texas, and other US states.

While ignoring the bloodshed of abortion, Ben and Jerry's also highlights the violence against abortion providers, which of course is unacceptable. But why is it okay to poison, dismember and dump future customers in the name of choice?

What is especially ironic is that Ben and Jerry's state that "women of colour" are disproportionately disadvantaged by abortion bans - while ignoring the fact that babies of colour are more likely to be killed off before birth. Indeed, there was a time in the past decade when more black infants were aborted than born in New York. I love ice-cream but frankly I find it nauseating that Ben and Jerry's promotes "the abortion care network" in its corporate message while touting a subscription to "Ben and Jerry's" fun flavours.

This company, founded by childhood friends Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, famously went from a single ice cream parlour in Vermont to a multinational brand. In line with their politics, they made head-

lines when they refused to sell their ice-cream in Israel due to the "occupation in Palestinian territories". But their concerns around abortion access have not stopped them selling their product in states with abortion bans. When asked about this, Mr Cohen said: "I don't know. By that reasoning, we should not sell ice cream anywhere."

Ironically, Mr Cohen has campaigned to reverse business influence on politics, which is actually something we should all be concerned about. Too many politicians are easily captured by the filthy lucre, as the bible calls it. The late SDLP deputy leader Seamus Mallon used to warn in Parliament: "If you can be bought, you can be sold."

Creed

One of the problems for the 'woke capitalists' who preach their own creed is that, like any religion, they are open to accusations of hypocrisy. Consumers can lose faith and go elsewhere when you do not practice what you preach, like the billionaires who fly around in private jets while lecturing the rest of us about clean air and climate change.

Personally, I really find it hard to reconcile peace and love and ice-cream with the destruction of innocent boys and girls in the womb, even when it is state sponsored by the Irish government. Selfish love is an illusion and abortion is extremely violent.

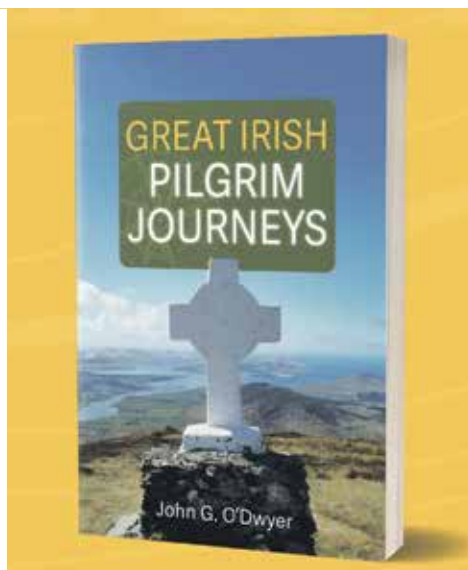
An American investment banker had the current - or currency - situation weighed up when he pointed to 'The Golden Rule' (which has nothing to do with loving God, and neighbour as yourself!): "He who makes the gold makes the rules."

Yes, money talks and money lies and the ultimate lie is that abortion is peace and love and justice.

Companies now fund and promote all kinds of ideas such as gender ideology that frankly are not in keeping with Christ's teaching which is unalterable.

Capitalist ideas of course can change depending on the marketplace and who's buying: traditional family values in one country and woke morality in another.

Let's remember, as Catholics, the old maxim: Caveat emptor, Buyer beware.



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As we prepare to celebrate the Solemnity of the Annunciation of Jesus' conception, it is good to remember that it was accompanied by two yeses: Mary first said yes, an affirmation echoed by Joseph, who supported mother and

child. Christians from Both Lives Matter have created a new resource called "God Unborn: Joseph said Yes" and is bible-based. What a great way to mark this wonderful occasion and remind men as well as women of their precious role in nurturing new life.

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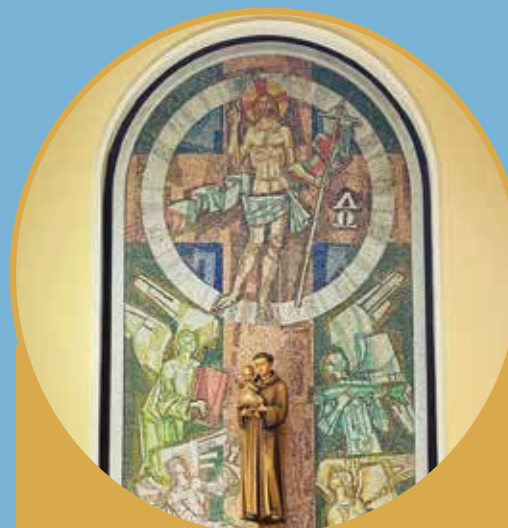
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The Friary Complex houses a small hall with kitchen and refreshment facilities on the Cook Street entrance to the Friary. This attractive space has been recently refurbished and blessed by the Minister General of the Franciscan Order, Br. Massimo Fusarelli when he visited us last October. The Friary Centre is currently used by various choirs for weekly rehearsals and by prayer groups for weekly meetings. There is still availability for similar groups looking to hire the hall.

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for more info visit www.franciscansdublin.ie

Cardinal George Pell: A fascinating Lenten companion



Breda O'Brien

Lent kind of crept up on me this year. I had barely adjusted to writing 2025 instead of 2024 and yet it was already Ash Wednesday. I was relieved when my nephew, Jason Conroy, asked if I wanted to be part of a WhatsApp group that would follow along with Cardinal Pell's prison journals for Lent.

Cardinal Pell was falsely convicted of having sexually abused two choirboys. Aged 77, he began 404 days in prison, many of them in solitary confinement in the notorious Barwon Maximum Security prison.

One of the neighbouring cells in Barwon was occupied

by the notorious James Gargasoulas, described by a coroner as "a violent, drug-fueled, psychotic and delusional perpetrator" who was sentenced to 46 years for killing six and injuring 27 when he ploughed into a crowd in Melbourne in a stolen car.

Overtured

Cardinal Pell's conviction was overturned by a unanimous decision of the Australian High Court, which concluded there was: "...a significant possibility that an innocent person has been convicted because the evidence did not establish guilt to the requisite standard of proof".

While 'a significant possibility' may not sound like a ringing endorsement to laypeople, in legal terms, it is tantamount to saying that if the convictions were not overturned, it would amount to a miscarriage of justice.

Cardinal Pell, who died in 2023, always had passionate supporters and detractors. Veteran religious affairs



Australian Cardinal George Pell is pictured at the Vatican when he was prefect of the Vatican Secretariat for the Economy on October 13, 2014. Photo: CNS/Paul Haring.

journalist, John L. Allen Jr of *Crux Now*, reported that people who worked for Pell described him as "equal parts a bull in a china shop and the most caring father figure you'd ever meet".

"I thought of how much better our infinite loving God is able to adapt his purposes as a consequence of our choices, good or sinful. Job never doubted God was in command, but he attributed the woes directly to God"

Pell's Catholic orthodoxy, often expressed in less than diplomatic terms, did not endear him to some commentators. Nonetheless, his appointment to a Vatican group charged with clearing up Vatican Bank corruption was a tribute to his hard-headed honesty.

Cardinal Pell started his Prison Journals on February 27, 2019, the day he was first sent to jail. In 2019, Ash Wednesday was on March 6 so his Lent aligns almost perfectly with ours.

"He reads the limited books permitted, prays, and paces in his cell. During his single daily hour of exercise outside his cell, he hones his basketball and table tennis skills, albeit without partners"

I had read his prison journals before. They are an eclectic mix, ranging from relatively mundane aspects of his life in prison, to reflections on breviary readings, to delight at the race victories of an Australian thoroughbred mare, Winx. Tough and without self-pity, he commented

that attending a boy's boarding school and a pre-Vatican II seminary were good preparation for solitary confinement. But it cannot have been easy. Not being allowed to celebrate the Eucharist was a particular privation.

Reading the journals as daily extracts, it is striking how he prioritises developing a routine, even though he is confined to a small room with an open toilet. He reads the limited books permitted, prays, and paces in his cell. During his single daily hour of exercise outside his cell, he hones his basketball and table tennis skills, albeit without partners.

Most of us allow life, particularly our work, to dictate our routine and tend to struggle without it. Pell's routine fits perfectly with a long tradition in the Church. From the time of the Desert Fathers and Mothers in the early Church, there has been an emphasis on a rule of life. At its simplest, it is *Ora et Labora* – work and prayer in a definite rhythm. Pell's work included writing many letters, focusing especially on replying to prisoners. He also prioritised forgiving those who had persecuted him.

At first, Cardinal Pell did not have the correct breviary for Lent, so he continued reading the Book of Job. He is conscious, however, that Job was not blessed with a Christian viewpoint where suffering can be redemptive, which makes

Job's acceptance of his suffering even more striking.

Tolkien

Charmingly, he reflects on how Tolkien's writings affected him. "I always believed in Christian providence, but when I saw how Tolkien brought all the characters and the narrative together at the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings*, I thought of how much better our infinite loving God is able to adapt his purposes as a consequence of our choices, good or sinful. Job never doubted God was in command, but he attributed the woes directly to God."

He also reflects on Job's friends who insist Job must have sinned grievously. Instead, suffering comes to many blameless people, even to the extent that "many evil people lead charmed lives, even if it is with deadened sensibilities rather than peace of mind; and many, too many, suffer through no moral fault of their own".

Few of us have to face prison, particularly for a crime we did not commit. We all have prisons, major or minor, of our own making. Whatever our metaphorical prison may consist of, George Pell makes a fascinating Lenten companion, forthright, unsentimental and inspiring by turns.

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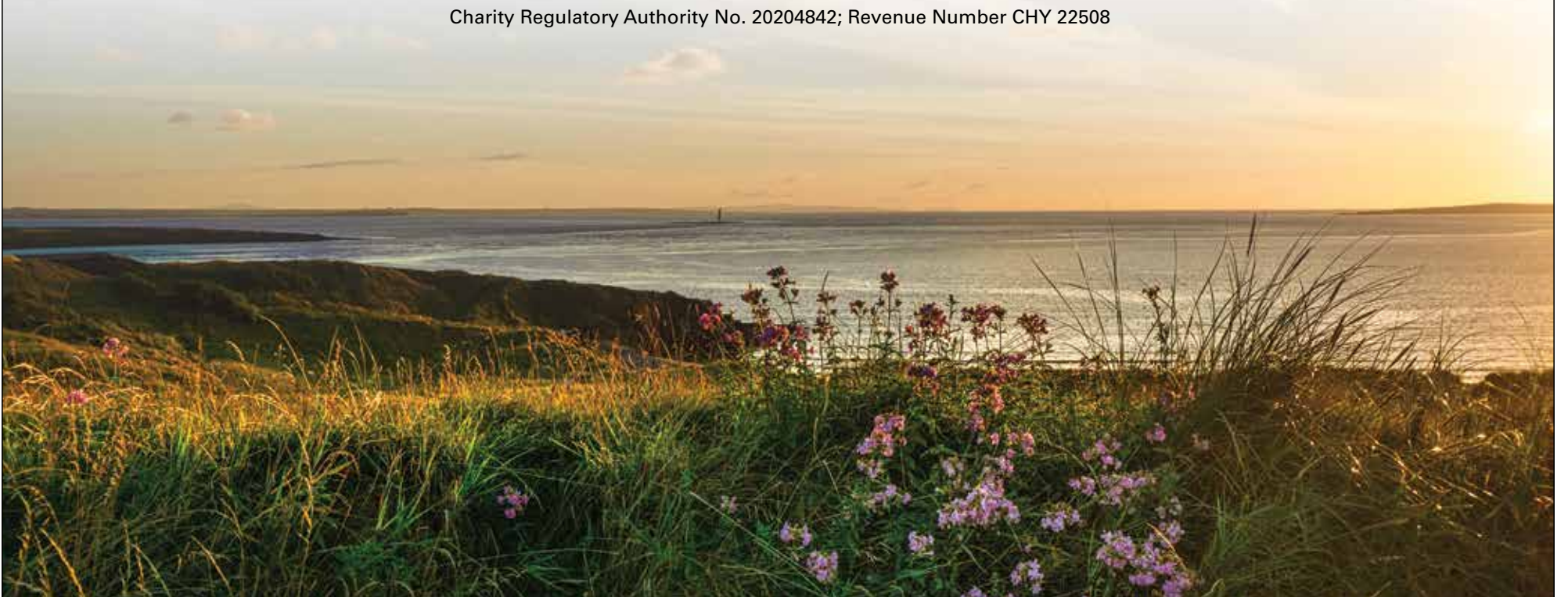
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What's driving the epidemic of anxiety among young people



David Quinn

In Leo Tolstoy's famed novel, *Anna Karenina*, one of the main characters, Kitty, is heartbroken when the man she thought she was going marry, Count Vronsky, has designs on Anna instead. Kitty becomes listless and melancholic.

Kitty's family bring her to a health spa in Germany to recover, which she finally does by befriending another young woman who is also at the spa with a sick companion. The spa is filled with the physically and mentally unwell.

In *War and Peace*, Natasha, the novel's heroine, is heartbroken after she falls for a cad and is prevented from eloping

with him. Her parents bring doctor after doctor to see her but none of them seem able to help. Finally, she recovers on her own. She throws off her listlessness and melancholy.

War and Peace was written in Russia in the 1860s and *Anna Karenina* in the 1870s but all the novels' themes are timeless because human nature is timeless. People always were and always will be subject to setbacks and periods of melancholy. Kitty and Natasha's parents are rich enough to seek professional help when their daughters suffer setbacks. Poor families had to make do.

Epidemic

Today, there seems to be an epidemic of depression and anxiety among young people, even school-children, and today a lot more parents are in a position to seek professional help for their children, and even when parents cannot afford it, perhaps they can turn to the public health system instead.

One way or another we

have seen a surge in diagnoses of anxiety, depression, ADHD, autism, and so on. The big question is whether there is a lot of over-diagnosis going on, or whether doctors and therapists are uncovering very widespread problems that have always been there but have previously been left undiagnosed and untreated.

“Dr O’Sullivan worries that labelling a child like this might then teach them to lower expectations for themselves”

A number of books have been published lately that address precisely this question. One is called *‘Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren’t Growing Up’* by Abigail Shrier. Another is *‘The Age of Diagnosis’* by Dr Suzanne O’Connor, and a third one is *‘Searching for Normal: A New Approach to Understanding Distress and Neurodiver-*



sity’ by Sami Timimi.

None of the authors deny the reality of mental health problems, but all of them think there is also a lot of over-diagnosis and over-medicating taking place as well.

When children are not doing well in school or in life, parents understandably worry, and want to do something. They might want their child to receive additional help in school. The school itself might advise the parents to bring their child along for professional help. The child is then diagnosed with a particular problem. They might be told they suffer from depression, or from anxiety, or that they have ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) or be mildly autistic and that is why they are very socially awkward and have few if any friends.

Dr O’Sullivan worries that labelling a child like this might then teach them to lower expectations for themselves.

Autism

In Britain the diagnosis of autism has surged by almost 800% between 1998 and 2018, that is, in only 20 years.

The child might then be put on some kind of medication and possibly remain on it for life, which is hugely profitable for the pharmaceutical companies.

O’Sullivan writes: “ADHD is a business as well as a medical disorder”. She says the continual medicalisation of the problems of life is part of an effort to find a “biological cause of human distress”.

No-one can deny, and these authors certainly do not, that is a genuine increase in the number of young people suffering from anxiety. The problem is particularly acute among teenage girls. Child psychologists report a huge rise in the number of girls who are self-harming.

Meanwhile, a lot of boys seem to be turning more

aggressive. Recently, we read about the stabbing of an 11-year-old boy at a primary school in Dublin. More than half of school teachers have experienced physical aggression, according to a poll from the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation.

Girls turning their aggression and anxiety against themselves, and boys turning them against others is classically male/female stereotypical behaviour.

“The rise of social media is obviously a contributory factor, as had been well catalogued by writers such as Jean Twenge and Jonathan Haidt”

There also seems to be a lot of social contagion going on, that is, anxiety is almost catching. You see anxious people all around you, and it makes you anxious. You almost think it is normal to be anxious. Young people begin to talk to each other about their mental health problems and the medications they are taking and the whole thing becomes more normalised and self-perpetuating.

The rise of social media is obviously a contributory factor, as had been well catalogued by writers such as Jean Twenge and Jonathan Haidt.

For example, social media encourages you to constantly compare yourself with other people. It ‘turns on’ your brain rather than relaxes it. Whereas reading is meditative and calming, scrolling through social media is addictive and anxiety-inducing. The two things could hardly be more different. Lots of young people don’t read anymore.

In other words, we are creating the social conditions that lead to rising anxiety and other disorders. There is also something paradoxical going on; the more we highlight mental health, the worse it seems to get, and yet we feel obliged to raise it. What else can we do?

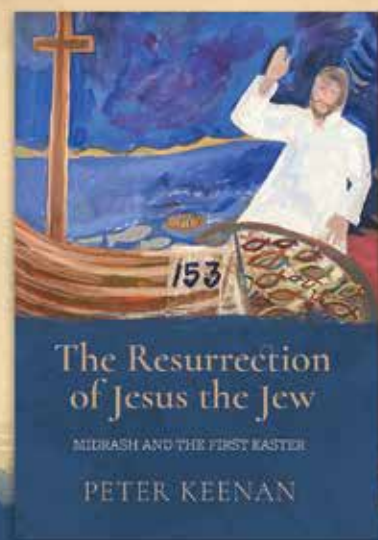
Does any of this have a spiritual dimension? It is very hard to believe it does not. Religion is the great provider of a sense of meaning and purpose. It gives life a transcendent focus by teaching that there is something above and beyond us. It gives us a strong sense of right and wrong. It encourages us to be other-focused, not self-focused. Prayer is meditative and it also encourages us to hand our problems over to God. Religion says that suffering and struggle are normal, not abnormal, and teaches us how to cope with them.

Religion

Religion has almost completely vanished from the lives of many young people. Sometimes it is replaced by ‘spirituality’ which can be good but can also be very vague and in its New Age forms too self-focused.

But a lot of the time religion is simply replaced by overly materialistic and individualistic life goals, and these are not bringing peace of mind. That is the crux of the matter; a failure to find peace of mind. Modern life is making us anxious instead. The right kind of religion (not the authoritarian, repressive kind), rightly lived, is the best remedy to what is ailing us. This side of Eternity, you can’t find total peace, but religion gives you the best chance of doing so in this life, or at least it helps you to cope better with the inevitable struggles. But how many therapists tell their patients this? How many young people ever hear anything remotely resembling such a message? This is part of the problem.

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The pressures of modern hurling: 'We expect so much from these young men'



Séamus Hickey of Limerick lifts the Liam MacCarthy Cup following the GAA Hurling All-Ireland Senior Championship Final match between Galway and Limerick at Croke Park in Dublin on August 19, 2018. Photo: Seb Daly/Sportsfile



Éanna Mackey

Séamus Hickey has seen hurling from nearly every angle – player, mentor, and now observer. A former Limerick hurler, he was a tenacious defender, winning Young Hurler of the Year in 2007 and representing his county for over a decade before becoming an eventual All-Ireland winner in 2018.

But his insights into the game extend beyond skill and success. For Hickey, one of the biggest challenges facing young players today is the immense pressure, both on and off the field, that has only intensified in recent years.

"We expect so much from these young men, and there's enormous expectation, particularly off the field. These are just regular young men who

live ordinary lives, and a lot is expected of them," he said. "You give up a lot, socially and professionally, to pursue the dream of playing the game."

Scrutiny

More than ever, players must manage the scrutiny that comes with competing at the highest level, and social media and the punditry industry, which Hickey is now a part of, have only magnified this challenge.

"There's so much more access to them now than there was when I started. The scrutiny is relentless. Learning to manage that, to separate who you are from what's being said about you, is crucial."

The feedback loop of social media can amplify doubts, criticism, and external expectations, making it harder for young athletes to focus on their own development. Hickey believes learning to disconnect is vital

for their mental well-being.

"I do have a sense that players could do themselves a lot of favours by switching off the phone and filtering out the commentary," he advises. "The ability to disconnect is something young athletes need to master."

"I think that these lads should do everything to filter out the nonsense and focus on what's actually important—yourself, your family, and your game"

"Some are better than others at tuning out the noise and just focusing on the game. That is the hardest thing, just stay-

ing balanced in the midst of all of this opinion and exposure. I think that these lads should do everything to filter out the nonsense and focus on what's actually important—yourself, your family, and your game."

Hickey's perspective comes from experience. Born in Murroe, Co. Limerick, he grew up in a household of nine, where work and sport were constants. If he wasn't helping on the family farm, he was honing his skills with a hurley in his hand.

His breakthrough came in 2006 when then Limerick manager Joe McKenna took a chance on him, bringing him into the senior setup as a teenager.

"From an athletic point of view, the most important thing is having someone believe in you. Having someone see something in you that you might not even see yourself. For me, that was Joe McKenna. He genuinely believed in me. That helped me believe in myself."

Hickey seized the opportunity, earning the Young Hurler of the Year award in 2007, but so too came setbacks. That year, Limerick reached the All-Ireland final, only to suffer a crushing defeat to Kilkenny. Hickey faced much of the post-game criticism for his performance on the day.

"I had the worst game on the biggest stage, and there was a loud cacophony of opinion afterward, reaffirming what I already knew," he admits. "You need a fairly good sense of discernment to know what's constructive and what's just opinion and nonsense."

Resilience

That resilience was tested again in 2013 when he tore his cruciate ligament in an All-Ireland semi-final. At the time, such an injury could have been a career ender, but Hickey took a different approach.

"The outlook even in 2013 wasn't straightforward. I suppose very early in the process, I realised that a lot of what was going to happen was completely out of my control, so I just had to let go and trust that it would all work out," he said. "If I wasn't to play hurling again, was that the end of the world? Was that what defined me, or was it just a part of me?"

"All I could really control was my outlook and my approach. The acceptance of that was based on my faith. I had a strong sense that if Jesus

is in control of this, then I am in good hands and He'll work things for my good."

Hickey also credits his support system for helping him navigate those difficult moments. "A lot of what helped me in my career was having people around me who kept me grounded—family, teammates, mentors. Having that perspective is important because it's easy to get caught up in the noise."

"I was very fortunate to meet her young and for us to grow up together, spiritually and as a man, husband, and father"

Faith has always been a guiding force in his life. Raised in a household where prayer and religious values were central, he credits his belief in God

as a foundation that kept him grounded.

Outlook

That outlook shaped not only his approach to sport but also to life. Hickey met his wife, Ellen, while in college. The two bonded over shared values, including their faith, and were married in 2013. They have since built a family together, raising their five children—Anna, Matthew, Patrick, Ben, and Noah.

"Meeting my wife changed my arc completely and made me a better person. I was very fortunate to meet her young and for us to grow up together, spiritually and as a man, husband, and father."

"Being remembered as isn't that important to me. But if I were to be, I'd want it to be for my dedication to my family and my faith. I wanted to be present and active in my children's lives, to help them become the best that they could be, and to keep the name of God first and foremost in their minds."



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Syria: the Christian paradise turned into a jihadist hell



Dr Declan Hayes

Although the situation in Syria remains volatile, Irish Catholic readers should be in no doubt what they should do to ameliorate the plight of those Syrians, who have so far survived the carnage. Besides informing themselves of the situation so they can lobby their political and religious leaders, they can donate to Aid to the Church in Need, SOS Chrétiens d'Orient and groups like the Salesian Sisters (tel 01-2985188), whose sister houses in Damascus and Aleppo do trojan work with young, impoverished mothers and their babies.

I have visited those houses on multiple occasions, where I gave very sizable donations to the late Sr Brigid Doody, a Limerick nun, who endured over ten years of mortar fire from those who now rule Syria. An interesting point, in the context of Syrian Christianity, was that one of her fellow nuns had been raised in the Syriac Orthodox faith but became a Salesian nun in the Roman (Latin) Catholic Church and, like Sr Doody and other nuns, like Sr Carolin Takhan Fachakh, cannot be praised highly enough by me or by anybody else. Sr Carolin is of note as she was personally honoured by Melania Trump with an International Women of Courage Award during Trump's first Presidency.

Deserve

Melkite (Greek Catholic) nun Mother Agnes Mariam, whom I brought to the British and Irish Parliaments, is one of countless other Syrian nuns, priests and bishops,

who deserve such awards. Currently, she is at Russia's Khmeimim air base in the heart of Alawite country trying to mediate between the Islamic jihadists, who have the base surrounded and the 10,000 Alawites who are holed up there and who the jihadists have been instructed to slaughter, just as they have slaughtered some 12,000 Alawites and Christians so far.

“The earliest war cries of these jihadists was to send Alawites to the grave and to exile Christians to Beirut”

There is nothing new in any of this. When Saladin finished with the Crusaders, he marched on Aleppo, where his forces slaughtered the Alawite tribes who had, until the 1918 French Occupation, historically been at the margins of Syrian society. To argue, as the jihadists' Irish apologists



People demonstrate in Marjeh Square in Damascus, Syria, March 9, 2025, to protest the killing of civilians and security forces linked to Syria's new rulers, following clashes between the forces loyal to the new administration and fighters from Bashar Assad's Alawite sect. Photo: OSV News/Khalil Ashawi, Reuters.

do, that those being slaughtered are members of some sort of Assadist sect or phantom Assadist army is not only wrong, but is an effort to camouflage their own culpability in this ongoing genocide.

The earliest war cries of these jihadists was to send Alawites to the grave and to exile Christians to Beirut. Although they have also slaughtered Christians and secular Sunnis on an industrial scale, they have, by and large, stayed on message. There is a carefully nurtured hatred that will not be assuaged until they achieve their objectives, which is to dismember Syria on behalf of their Gulf State and other paymasters and to obliterate any signs of the plurality that was the hallmark of modern Syria and that William Dalrymple's *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* so brilliantly extolled.

Crimson

Though I have travelled those same roads, the path beneath me was crimson with the blood of the innocents. On first arriving in Damascus for Easter 2014, three civilians were mortar bombed to death outside of the Dama Rose Hotel where I was sleeping, and avoiding the bombs and the drive-bys, which fell heaviest on the Christian and Druze sectors, was just a part of life's daily routine. I was in Maaloula when the Syrian Arab Army liberated it, and I viewed the wrecked churches and the priceless icons the jihadists, who had previously kidnapped the nuns, vandal-

ised. I saw children's pulsating flesh splattered on city walls, teenage Orthodox girls who had been gang raped, the relatives of children who had been baked alive and even far worse than all that. Trying to highlight that, as I did, in the Irish Parliament by bringing two Patriarchs here, as well as relatives of the victims, was a fool's errand as most politicians long ago hardened their hearts just as the Pharaoh did all those years ago. As regards them giving Syria's Salesians a grant, as they once did, forget about that; they have other priorities.

“You have to revert to the Spanish Civil War or Mexico's Cristero revolt to get even a flavour of what ordinary Syrians are suffering”

Though the monuments to those Maaloula residents who chose death rather than renounce their faith have probably been bulldozed by now, the jihadist death squads continue their silent persecutions there as well as in the (majority Christian) village of Al-Mazraa and all of rural Homs, Mazeb and Sator. You have to revert to the Spanish Civil War or Mexico's Cristero revolt to get even a flavour of what ordinary Syrians are suffering.

Still, as Paul, the great Syrian apostle tells us in Corinthians 4:10, we are better to

be fools for Christ than to be its converse. Patriarch John X of Antioch, Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem 11 of the Syriac Orthodox Church and countless other Syrian Christians exude such bravery in the face of unvarnished barbarity that we must not only be in awe of them but be prepared to help them before the last of Syria's Christians and those Alawites, who cheat the grave, are exiled to Beirut.

Jolani

New Syrian President Jolani, who first called for the massacre of Alawites in 2013 and who repeated those calls only a week ago when he urged his followers to march on Khmeimim air base, will be in Brussels this St Patrick's Day getting financial and diplomatic support from the EU's leaders and, no doubt, glowing write ups from their sycophantic media. Though that is not bad for a guy who had a \$10 million American bounty on his head up to a few days ago, the EU has no such largesse for Syria's Christians, who do God's work in the most challenging of circumstances. Their only hope is you. Please give what you can and get others to give what they can to the Salesians and the other groups adumbrated above.

i Dr Declan Hayes is a retired Professor of Finance, who has spent much of the last ten years raising money for Syria's beleaguered Christians. He was last in Syria on December 8, 2024, when the jihadists captured Damascus.

POPE FRANCIS

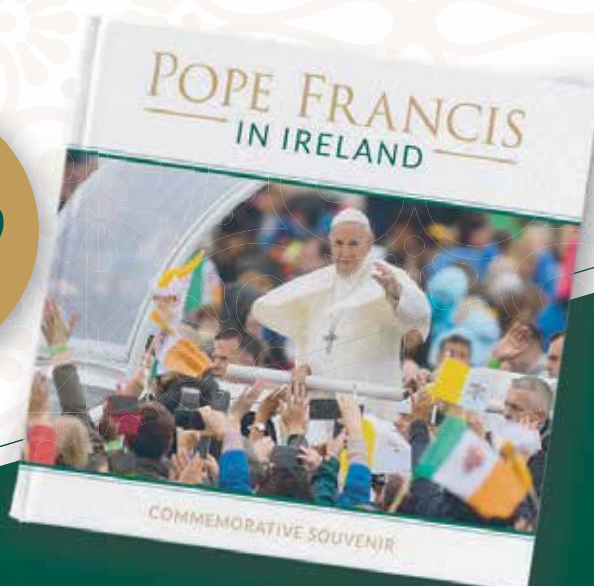
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United in the Spirit: parish partnership brings faith to life



Pedro Esteve

“I am hoping that the Spirit will be very busy here,” said Bishop Donal Roche as he opened the Life in the Spirit Seminar (LSS) in the Our Lady of Good Counsel parish hall. This initial meeting marked the beginning of a seven-week series, organised by the St Colmcille Parish Partnership in South Dublin, bringing together parishioners from Johnstown, Loughlinstown, Sallynoggin, Shankill, Cabinteely, and Ballybrack. The weekly meetings are open to anyone and are being run alongside a youth Alpha course, fun for the whole family. A chance for everyone to encounter Christ. “Personal encounter with Christ is what matters. Through prayer, scripture, and the LSS, I came to a deeper relationship with Christ,” Bishop Roche told the gathering of about 150 people.

In an interview with *The Irish Catholic*, Bishop Roche, who previously served as a priest in Cabinteely, said he was encouraged by the “life and the vibrance” he witnessed in the diocese through events like this. While acknowledging that overall church attendance has declined, the bishop emphasised that people who do attend now come out of a genuine desire rather than obligation noting that it speaks volumes that so many people would come to



The bishop with organisers from each of the parishes.

the church on a Friday night. Initially expecting around 20 participants, Bishop Roche said he was pleasantly surprised to see people queuing out the door—a testament to the dedication of the evangelization committee.

“The church I grew up in was a maintenance church; now it is more of a missionary/outreach church. To have a parish committee devoted to evangelization is a sign of hope.”

“The positive effect of consolidation is clear: combined congregations bring new life”

The bishop also reflected on the evolving nature of the Church in Ireland, noting that while the number of priests is declining the hope is to see lay involvement increase. “I think a lot of people in the pews have not fully understood the partnership project yet. They think, ‘This is my church...’ but the positive effect of consolidation is clear: combined congregations bring

new life. A full church rather than two half-full churches.”

The evening was marked by a warm and welcoming atmosphere, with the scent of freshly baked cookies and cakes mingling with the aroma of coffee. The parish hall hummed with conversation, fostering a sense of fellowship before the evening had even begun. Organisers expressed the importance of this hospitality, noting that tea and coffee and chats are integral parts of the experience.

Laity

Johnstown parish priest, Fr John Sinnott, spoke enthusiastically about the active role of the laity. “It’s so great to have an engaged laity. It reminds me of something a priest from California told me: ‘All I have to do is say yes, and if it works, it works. If it doesn’t, it doesn’t.’”

Both Fr John and Bishop Roche pointed to Paddy Monaghan as a key figure in organizing the event. Mr Monaghan, head of the six-parish evangelization team and a member of both the Johnstown Parish Council and the greater St Colmcille

Parish Partnership Council, played a crucial role in bringing the LSS to life for Lent. Having previously organised an Alpha Course in Cherrywood, he saw the seminar as an opportunity to continue fostering community and deepening faith.

“Share your teaching on the Baptism of the Spirit, because it is produced by the work of the Holy Spirit through a personal encounter with Jesus, which changes lives”

“What we are doing is trying to put flesh on the partnership,” Monaghan explained. “If we continue to work together as one body, we become stronger. We are not six separate parishes trying to survive—we are one Church, on one mission.” A mission explicitly given by Pope Francis, who encouraged Catholics to share their teaching on the Baptism of the Holy Spirit: “Share your teaching on the Baptism of the Spirit, because it is produced by the work of the Holy Spirit through a personal encounter with Jesus, which changes lives.” The LSS aims to facilitate that transformation by offering participants a deeper, personal encounter with Christ.

The evening featured a time of worship, a talk, and a testimony on experiencing the love of God. “It’s one thing to know that God loves you or that God is love,” one speaker shared, “but it’s another thing to experience it and have it change you.” Attendees ranged widely in age and background, each finding



Bishop Roche opens the event with his own story and experience with Life in the Spirit.

meaning in different aspects of the seminar.

made with other young people.

The message at the heart of everything said was the importance of an encounter with Christ—a moment of personal transformation that the LSS seeks to nurture in all who attend. Equally important is the opportunity the LSS provides for parishioners and participants from different parishes to meet, share their experiences, and build new relationships through faith.

Testimony

I spoke to a young man about his experience, and he said the talk and testimony resonated deeply with him, though he noticed that some of the older participants seemed to connect more with the worship. He had come on a whim after hearing a testimony at Mass the previous weekend and has continued to come through the connections he

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There are lots of vocations, but they are like a seed without watering. If you don't water the seed, it won't grow, hears **Renata Milán Morales**

“Who looks after the priests?” Asked Sr Briege McKenna speaking to *The Irish Catholic*. Sr Briege has been committed to the ministry of intercession for priests during the last 50 years. “The priest is called to minister to the people, but who ministers to him?” Fr Kevin Scallion CM, former spiritual director at All Hallows Seminary, asked the same question in the 1970s. Inspired by a programme he attended in the United States, where people gathered to pray for priests, “he brought the intercession for priests to the Irish scene,” explained Sr Briege.

In July 1976, the first intercession for priests was held at All Hallows. Initially, Fr Kevin expected a large gathering of priests, but only two arrived. Despite this, the Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin at the time encouraged him, saying, “It only takes two to intercede.” By the end of the month, over 100 priests had attended. “Nobody individually ministers to them. So that was the inspiration of Fr Kevin. We need to minister to the priests. To affirm your brothers.”

Calling

One of the main concerns of Sr Briege is the secularisation of the priesthood. “One

Sr Briege is pictured with clergy at the Intercession for Priests Retreat held in Maynooth in August 2024.



of the greatest needs in the priesthood is divine faith to believe in it,” she says. There is a growing danger of reducing the priesthood to a mere profession, “losing sight of its sacred nature.”

“This way, it is very easy to lose the sense of what the priest is. It’s not a title, it’s an honour”

“It’s not a job, and it’s not a profession,” she insists. “It’s a divine call.” Another trend she sees is the hesitation to use the title ‘Father’ when addressing priests. “To be called ‘Father’ is an honour given by God because you’re representing God the Father,” she explains. “Young people are not using the name Father. This way, it is very easy to lose the sense of what the priest is. It’s not a title, it’s an honour.”

Sr Briege told this paper about the importance of confession, an area where many priests feel discouraged. “Priests would say, not all but some, ‘Nobody’s going to confession,’ but nobody goes to confession because it is half an hour after Mass. It is not sufficient,” she explains.

Sacraments

She recalls an experience during a recent mission where a young woman who initially was not planning on being at the event felt a strong call to receive the sacrament of reconciliation. “She was about 23. She came over and said to me, ‘I really have been touched. I haven’t been coming to church, and I haven’t been in confession in years. I’d love to go to confession...’ Fr Pablo walked over, and I introduced him, and he said, ‘tomorrow is the big day for there are going to be a lot of priests.’ Think about what you want to talk to me about tomorrow. The next day that girl

came back, “I saw her going into confession. She came out absolutely radiant. She hugged us and said, ‘you have no idea. I came a little bit resistant of my mother telling me you should come to the mission... You have no idea what you’ve done,’ and those are the kind of things that you see that are needed,”

“In a world filled with challenges, some priests become overwhelmed by external pressures”

“I don’t think people truly understand the sacraments,” explained Sr Briege, who insisted on the importance of the sacraments, particularly confession. “So, they’re certainly not going to understand the priesthood.” Sr Briege points out

that in places like Medjugorje, the long queues for confession show the hunger for this sacrament. “I said to priests, they’re all coming to Medjugorje because you can get confession, but you have the same power back in Ireland.”

In a world filled with challenges, some priests become overwhelmed by external pressures. “Priests should not be activists,” Sr Briege said. “None of us could celebrate Mass or hear confessions or anoint the sick or preach the gospel without Christ.”

Success

A priest’s success, she said, is rooted in his love for his vocation and for God. “If you’re not happy in the priesthood and if you’re not in love with your call, it’s very hard to encourage others... If you’re upset about the Bishop, about the Pope, you will get people doubting what’s happening in the Catholic Church... You don’t have to worry about

all those things if you meet Jesus every day, and if you go out to those people... If you love them and you minister to them,” Sr Briege said.

“I was criticising the greatest gift He had given because I didn’t understand”

When asked how she could explain the role of the priest to those who could have lost the appreciation for it, Sr Briege’s explained that there is a need for renewal in the priesthood, which she believes can only come through a deep relationship with Christ. “I don’t think you can renew the love for the priesthood separate from the love for Christ,” she continued. “You can’t renew it if you don’t have a deep prayer life, if you don’t have a love for the Catholic faith.”

Ministry

Exploring the challenges of being a priest in Ireland today

sters



"The first thing I did was to fall in love with Jesus, and then my eyes were open to recognise that I was criticising the priesthood. I was criticising the greatest gift He has given because I didn't understand." Understanding the sacraments, she said, is crucial. "Once they start to understand them [the sacraments], the renewal will begin; the love for the priesthood."

Hope

Sr Briega McKenna is still hopeful about vocations. "We have men responding to the call to priesthood. Why? Because they fall in love with Jesus and the Catholic Church, and then they get the desire... I am a great believer that there are lots of vocations, but they are like a seed without watering. If you don't water the seed, it won't grow."

She also explained the main three factors that helps increasing the number in vocations among

religious orders: "One, they wear a habit, and the habit doesn't make the nun, but it's important. Second thing is they have community life. They live and pray and worship together. And the third thing is that they have a particular charisma."

"Priests are not simply friends to the people but spiritual fathers"

Sr Briega McKenna calls for greater support for priests from lay people and clergy, a renewed commitment to the sacraments, and a deeper understanding

"'Priests should not be activists,' Sr Briega said. 'None of us could celebrate Mass or hear confessions or anoint the sick or preach the gospel without Christ'"

of the priestly vocation as a divine calling rather than a profession.

Should we re-evaluate our perspective on the priesthood? Priests are not simply friends to the people but spiritual fathers, entrusted with a divine mission, as Sr Briega explained.

i The mission of the Intercession for Priests is to pray for the spiritual and pastoral renewal of the ordained ministry in the Catholic Church. It is inspired by two words from scripture:

Simon, behold Satan desired to have you that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you

that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren. (Luke 22:31-32)

In the days of his flesh... offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears (Heb. 5:7) and is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Heb. 7:25).

Sr Briega McKenna, OSC came on the very first day, July 16. Her love for the Church and for the priesthood was then, and now, unconditional. Her gift of ministering to priests is quite unique.

Sr Briega McKenna pictured with the late Fr Kevin Scallan CM.



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"There is a growing danger of reducing the priesthood to a mere profession, 'losing sight of its sacred nature'"

St Pauls opens bookstores in Letterkenny and Derry

An answered prayer for local communities



Renata Milán Morales

The recent launch of two new St Pauls' stores in Letterkenny and Derry is an exciting event for the local communities. These openings come at a time when many people in Donegal and Northern Ireland were feeling the loss of the Veritas stores. "There is a need for spiritual and faith-based" spaces where people can have access to resources and gifts.

This fact was highlighted at the Letterkenny launch.

As Sheila McMacken, manager of St Pauls' Letterkenny and Derry branches said at the Letterkenny launch, the opening of St Pauls is an answer to the requests of many. With a focus on spreading the Gospel and offering spiritual nourishment, St Pauls aims to fill the space left behind by Veritas, which had been so important to the people of Donegal. The presence of St Pauls, founded by Blessed James Alberione in 1914, brings hope to the region. The new stores will be "places where the Word can be shared and the faithful can gather."

Sheila McMacken continued thanking God for this opportunity, emphasising how important faith is to

the people of Donegal. The shop, while small, has been an important tool for supporting the spiritual needs of the local community. "It's not just about providing religious items." It's about creating a space where people can feel free to ask and talk about their faith. The community's strong faith was acknowledged during the manager's address to those present.

The launch of the new St Pauls stores in Letterkenny and Derry is a moment of joy for all involved. It's clear that these stores will play an essential role in the spiritual life of Ireland.

i The Society of St Paul is a congregation of Catholic priests and brothers whose mission is to proclaim the message of the Gospel using

the means of modern communications.

Through books, magazines, journals, film, radio, television, video and the internet, the Society of St Paul continues the vision of its founder, Blessed James Alberione, to follow in the missionary footsteps of St Paul the Apostle in bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world.

The Pauline Family keeps alive Blessed James' vision with a presence in 32 countries as publishers, distributors and retailers, bringing the message of the Gospel to the world today. In the United Kingdom St Pauls have a Publishing House and a Distribution centre in London, Birmingham, York and Leeds.



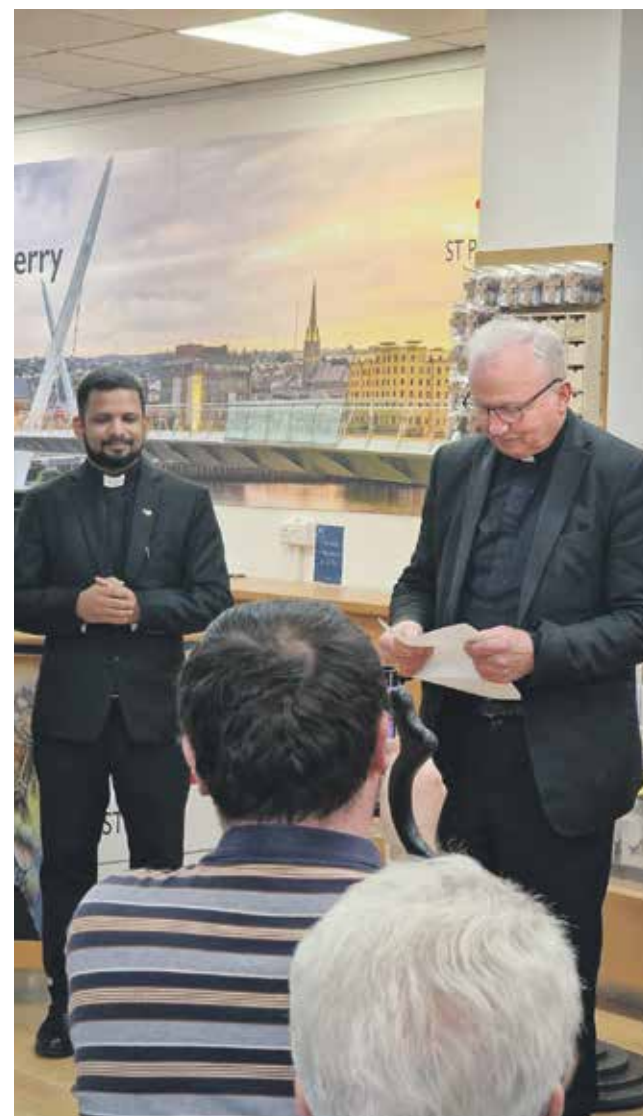
Sheila McMacken is pictured with well-wishers at St Pauls' launch in Letterkenny.



St Pauls' launch in Letterkenny. Pictured are members of the Society of St Paul, shop manager Sheila McMacken and Bishop Emeritus Philip Boyce.



St Pauls' launch in Letterkenny.



Bishop Donal McKeown addressing those present at St Pauls' launch in Derry. Left of picture, Fr Thomas Shinto



Fr Thomas and other members of the Society of St Paul who travelled for the opening.



St Pauls' shop in Derry.




Facade of St Pauls, Derry.

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Out&About

Irish community gathered for Gaza



TYRONE: Michael Kelly of Aid to the Church in Need with volunteers and supporters at the recent coffee morning for Gaza in the Cappagh Parish Centre, Killyclogher.



DONEGAL: Fr Philip Kemmy of Newtown & Killea Parish hosted a Pre-Lent Coffee Morning on March 4 in Seomra Phadraig at All Saints Parish Church, Newtown. The proceeds of this Coffee Morning will go towards the renovation of Killea Chapel.



CLARE: Knights of St Columbanus on duty in St Peter and St Paul's Cathedral, Ennis for the veneration of the relics of Matt Talbot. (L/R): Brendan O'Neill, Brian Mc Carthy, Larry Power, Michael Murphy and his wife, Gerry Buckley, Senan Ryan and Frank Madden. Mr Murphy is chairperson of the Venerable Matt Talbot centenary committee.

IN SHORT

Tyrone parishioners raise money for Gaza Parish

Over €14,000 euro raised in Co. Tyrone for Gaza parish. The parishioners of Cappagh raised the money which will support the work of Holy Family Parish in the heart of Gaza City.

The total of £11,759.49 (€14,015.49) raised by church gate collection at the invitation of parish priest Fr Kevin McElhennon, and a coffee morning organised by parish volunteers will be channelled through Aid to the Church in Need (ACN).

Michael Kelly, Director of Public Affairs for ACN said, "Cappagh is a long way from Gaza – but the sense of solidarity and the desire to support the vital humanitarian aid work going on there is truly incredible."

The Gaza parish has been providing thousands of cooked meals for people in the war-torn city since the war began after the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel. Mr Kelly said "This money will be a lifeline for the people of Gaza."

If you would like to organise a fundraiser in your parish, please email info@acnireland.org.

New Autism class opens in Coothill school

An Autism Special Class is opening in Co. Cavan school. St Aidan's Comprehensive School's new facilities will provide a structured learning environment to meet the needs of students with Autism.

The school located in Coothill, Co. Cavan is a second level school under the joint trusteeship of the Catholic Bishop of Kilmore Martin Hayes and the Minister for Education and Science.

The Principal Angela Flanagan told *The Anglo-Celt* the school was always committed to fostering an inclusive and supportive educational experience. "The need for greater access to Autism support within our community has been well recognised and we are grateful to now be in a position to offer this much-needed resource," she said.

"We firmly believe that every child deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential in a supportive and understanding setting," the Principal added. "With our highly skilled

and compassionate staff, we are confident that this new class will have a profoundly positive impact on the students and their families".

Convent closes after 166 years

The Sisters of St Louis closed their motherhouse convent in Monaghan town after 166 years. To mark the closure of the convent, Mass was said on March 2 in St Macartan's Cathedral and refreshments were enjoyed afterwards in the Hillgrove Hotel.

During the day, an exhibition in St Louis Secondary School with theme 'The Story of the St Louis Sisters in Monaghan' was available for visitation.

The Sisters of St Louis have contributed prominently to the provision of education and the community life in Monaghan.

The St Louis convent lands and buildings were recently acquired by Monaghan County Council. With the closure of the convent, six Sisters remain in the town, four of them still work and live in the area, and the remaining two live in a local nursing home.

Edited by Renata Steffens
Renata@irishcatholic.ie



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



ROSCOMMON: During Mass in St Brigid's Church, Drum on March 2 it was celebrated the 90th birthday of Michael Lennon and Mary Keogh was thanked for her services as a Sacristan in Drum Church as she retires. (L/R) Fr John Deignan PP, Mary Keogh and Michael Lennon.



SLIGO: Bishop Kevin Doran presented Sr Rita McGarty the Papal Award at a Mass in Our Lady of Mercy Convent on February 26. The *Benemerenti* medal is in recognition of her services to St Michael's Family Life Centre on Church Hill for over 30 years.



ROME: Deacon Julian Drapiewski and Deacon James Mcloughlin from Tuam Diocese recently carrying a special pilgrim cross on the pilgrim way to the Holy Door of St Peter's Basilica in Rome.



KILDARE: Prof. Christopher Bellitto, Kean University delivered ITQ lecture on 'Humility versus Clericalism: Juan de Avila and Pope Francis on Spiritual Formation and Reform' at St Patrick's Pontifical University Maynooth. Here, Prof. Bellitto is pictured with the ITQ Editorial Board.



DONEGAL: Fr Vincent Finnegan blessed students and staff of Finn Valley College on Ash Wednesday.



CAVAN: Bishop of Meath Tom Deenihan with Saoirse Dymblow and AJ Greene, pupils of Carricleck school with their school principal Jackie Ward and Fr Gerry MacCormack following Confirmation in Kingscourt.

ANTRIM

'Breaking Barrier Programme' is a free course for Vocational Studies and Self Improvement. It will run for seven weeks, three days a week from 9.30am to 1pm starting on March 25 in Glenravel Community Hub, Martinstown. Travel expenses paid for and refreshments served. To register contact 077 10854394.

DERRY

The 'Annual Sr Clare Retreat' in St Columba's Church, Long Tower takes place from March 31 to April 6. Theme is 'Reflecting on the eucharist with Sr Clare. A different guest will speak each evening. Come for Mass, anointing of the sick, healing and more.

DONEGAL

Buncrana Community Library are hosting a Digital Workshop to help with internet, emails, apps, smartphones, tablets and filling forms on March 25 from 2pm to 4pm. Free for all, just drop in. Refreshments provided.

DUBLIN

'Making Memories Café' provides a relaxed and informal place for people with memory difficulties and their carers to share a cup of tea and information. Meetings every last Tuesday of every month from 11am to 1pm in Whitehall Colmcilles GAA Club, Dublin 9. More information call 086 044 9627.

KILDARE

The Relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux and her parents St Louis and St Zélie Martin will come to the Church of St Peter and Paul, Monasterevin. Mass on March 22 at 6pm and on March 23 at 9am and at 11.30am. Veneration after all Masses. For more information contact 085 888 7549.

LEITRIM

Youth Club continues every Friday evening from 8pm to 10pm in Ballinaglera Hall for all teenagers in the area. Entry is €2 per evening and the gathering is supervised. For more information and to register contact the Ballinaglera Healthy Club facebook page.

LIMERICK

Join the Dominican Sisters of St Cecilia for a 'Come and See Retreat' from March 28 to 30. This is a retreat for those exploring the religious life. For more information or to register, email limerick@op-tn.org.

LOUTH

Oasis of Peace Retreat Centre: Catholic Young Adult Group (18-35 yrs) happens on the first Sunday of each month at 1pm at Mellifont Abbey, Collon. For more information contact John on 0035389 6152568.

MAYO

The next Latin Mass in Knock Shrine takes place on Sunday, April 13 at 6pm in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel.

MEATH

Young adults retreat for 18 to 40-year-olds takes place on March 22 in Dalgan Park Navan from 10am to 5pm. Suggested donation €20. Lunch and tea included. For more information contact Michael on 086 245 3123.

SLIGO

'Special Jubilee Year of Hope Nightfever' happens on March 28 at 7pm in the Holy Cross Dominicans Friary. Mass with Fr Joseph Mary Deane. Come for adoration, candlelight worship, confession and ministry.

TYRONE

'The Synodal Pathway - Dungannon Parish' gathering happens on March 29 from 11am to 1pm in The Scout Hall, Charlemont Street. Come along and have your say.

WATERFORD

St Mary's Church, Ballygunner is celebrating 200 years. To mark the bicentenary, a number of events is being organised. From March 26 to March 30, music, talks and Mass will be taking place. For more information contact the parish on parishofficejbm@gmail.com.

WEXFORD

Social Coffee Morning on April 2 at 10.45am at the Loch Garman Arms Hotel, Gorey. No entry charge. All welcome. Bring a friend!

Thousands attend Eucharistic Procession

The awakening of Ireland's Catholic identity



Renata Milán Morales

The flame of faith in Ireland was enkindled once more during the recent National Eucharistic Procession, which took place in Athlone on 16 March. Nearly 2,000 people gathered for the event, according to the organising team.

"Don't you feel a renewed hope and optimism within the faithful Catholic community in Ireland, as we begin to push back with confidence?" said Kathryn Anderson from Co. Donegal, emphasising the idea of 'confidence'.

The Eucharistic Procession displayed the deep devotion still present in the Irish people. Various apostolates and missions from across the country were in attendance, each bringing their own unique charisms to the occasion. The streets of Athlone were filled with people from all walks of life - priests, religious, families, and individuals of all ages. There was a great enthusiasm.

Luke McCan from Belfast said, "There's just something incredibly special happening with everyone all over the country coming together, getting to know each other more and more, and becoming one big, growing community with Christ at the centre. All the different charisms are coming together and supporting one another, putting their shoulders to the wheel for the greater glory of God."

This revival of confidence within the Church in Ireland is evident for many. Whether through small prayer groups, parish initiatives, or national gatherings, there is a sense of true commitment to the Faith.

"I am feeling so overwhelmed with it all, I truly have nothing to say but a big thank you to everyone, to our Blessed Mother Mary, to the Holy Spirit, our Father in Heaven, St Patrick and to Jesus Christ! The Derry folks gave this the spark it needed to launch it after months of praying, pondering and discerning. When the North and the South worked together in this, it took off like lightning," explained Karen, key organiser of the event.

"It was a dream team of nobody 'better than anyone else'. basically, we all used our God-given gifts, and the Holy Spirit was able to flow like clockwork. Praise God!" she concluded.



Photos: Paul O'Shea







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

Cardinal Grech: A new path to help the Church walk in a synodal style



The Secretary General of the Synod explains to Vatican Media that the 2028 Ecclesial Assembly will offer an opportunity to gather the fruits that have matured during the Synod on Synodality.

Andrea Torielli

Vatican Media spoke with Cardinal Mario Grech, the Secretary General of the Synod, about the objectives of the process that will accompany the implementation of the Synod on synodality approved by Pope Francis and which will culminate in the Ecclesial Assembly in 2028. “The goal of the journey that General Secretariat of the Synod is proposing to local Churches,” he explains, “is not to add work upon work but to help Churches walk in a synodal style.” Here is an extract of the interview.

The Synod on Synodality seemed to be concluded... and now it is starting again, at the will of Pope Francis, who from the Gemelli Hospital approved the work schedule for the next three years...

Cardinal Grech: It is true—many thought the Synod had concluded with the celebration of the second session of

the Assembly last October. As a matter of fact, the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* has «transformed» the Synod from an event into a process structured in three phases: preparatory, celebratory, and implementative (EC, art. 4).

This shift requires a true “conversion,” a change in mentality that takes time to take root in the Church’s practice. But this structure is fundamental: simply publishing a “document” is not enough for what emerged in the two phases of the synodal process to be implemented in the Church’s life. That “document” must be “received” as the fruit of ecclesial discernment and as a horizon for conversion.

“Many Churches have already responded generously and have set things in motion—so in fact, the work never stopped after the end of the Assembly”

And this is exactly what has happened: the Holy Father, who is the principle of unity in the Church and the guarantor of the synodal process, entrusts the local Churches and their groups with the task of applying the Assembly’s recommendations in their own local contexts, as he recommends in his Accompanying Notes to the Final Document. Many Churches have already responded generously and have set things in motion—so in fact, the work never stopped after the end of the Assembly.

What will happen between now and 2028?

What is now beginning is more of a process of accompaniment and evaluation of



Cardinal Grech speaks to journalists

the implementation phase that is already underway. The Holy Father arrived to this decision with the contribution of the Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod, composed largely of members elected during the Assembly.

This process does not diminish the role of each Church in receiving and applying the fruits of the Synod in its own unique way. Rather, it encourages the entire Church to take responsibility—indeed, a great co-responsibility—because by valuing local Churches, it also associates the episcopal college with the exercise of the Pope’s ministry.

So, what is the precise goal of this process?

It is a process aimed at fostering dialogue among Churches about the insights developed in the implementation phase. After a period of work at the local level (until 2026), the goal is to create, in a synodal style, spaces for dialogue and exchange of gifts among Churches.

This is one of the most valuable aspects that has emerged from the synodal journey so far. The aim is to ensure that implementation does not happen in isolation, as if each diocese or eparchy were

a separate entity, but that bonds between Churches at national, regional, and continental levels are strengthened. At the same time, these moments of dialogue will allow for an authentic walking together, offering the opportunity to evaluate, in a spirit of co-responsibility, the choices made.

“Implementation and evaluation must proceed together, intertwining in a dynamic and shared process”

The meetings planned for 2027 and early 2028 will naturally lead toward the Ecclesial Assembly of October 2028. This final Assembly will then be able to offer the Holy Father valuable insights—fruits of a real ecclesial experience—to aid his discernment as the Successor of Peter, with perspectives to propose to the entire Church. Implementation and evaluation must proceed together, intertwining in a dynamic and shared process—this is precisely the culture of accountability evoked in the Final Document.

2026 will be a year entirely devoted to the work of the various dioceses. What do you expect?

It is essential to restart from the work done in the listening phase, but it is equally essential not to

repeat it to the identical. In this phase, it is no longer just a matter of listening and gathering the listening of the People of God, but rather of allowing the Church leaders and synod teams to carry on a dialogue with the rest of the People of God on the contents that have emerged from the synod journey in their totality so that this journey is adapted to their own culture and tradition. This is also another possibility of appealing to the whole People of God as sharers in the prophetic function of Christ (cf. LG 12) and subjects of the *sensus fidei*. I hope that the principle of circularity within and between Churches will become operative in the ordinary practice of the Church.

How should the local churches operate?

We are invited not only to repeat but to make all members of the People of God active subjects of ecclesial life and to set the path of each Church by reason of this recognised capacity, which must be supported and formed. This first year and a half will also be an opportunity to involve those who had previously participated less actively. To have synodal experiences, to experience the conversation in the Spirit that has made our communities grow so much. Now that the picture is clearer and a more shared understanding of synodality has developed, together-no one excluded-we can find

tools to continue the journey with renewed energy.

What can we do to involve the People of God more, avoiding the risk that the synodal path remains confined among the subjects for “experts,” for people already involved in ecclesial structures? How to ensure that this new challenging step is not experienced as one more bureaucratic task added to the others?

The Preparatory Document, which initiated the whole synod process, begins precisely with this statement, “The Church of God is convoked in Synod.” There is nothing that can involve the whole Church and everyone in the Church more than the synod process. This was seen in the first phase, with the listening to the People of God in the local churches. The way forward now is the same. This implementation path is challenging not because it calls for adding more activity for “pastoral workers,” especially ordained, instituted or *de facto* ministers.

“I repeat the adjective, to emphasise how the issue is one of mentality”

The commitment is to live the ecclesial journey of each Church with a synodal mentality, within a synodal horizon, maturing a synodal style that is the prerequisite for a synodal form of Church. I repeat the adjective, to emphasise how the issue is one of mentality. The meaning of the path that the Synod Secretariat is proposing to the local churches is not to add work to work in response to demands coming from outside or above, but to help the churches to walk in a synodal style; in a word, to truly be Churches, where the *portio Populi Dei* entrusted to the bishop with the help of his presbytery and ministries is truly a Church of subjects in relationship, embodying the Gospel in the place where they are.

“The picture is clearer and a more shared understanding of synodality has developed, together-no one excluded-we can find tools to continue the journey with renewed energy”

When will this work be concluded?

It is still difficult to say when the Groups will conclude their work. As indicated a year ago when they were established, the Groups are asked to present their conclusions to the Holy Father “possibly by June 2025.” Some of the Groups should be able to meet this deadline. Others, on the contrary, may need additional time, but will still offer an interim report on their work by the end of June. Also at work at the same time are the Canonical Commission, established as early as 2023, which has made itself available to support the 10 Groups in matters within its purview, as well as a Group established within SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) for the pastoral care of those living in polygamy.

Can you explain what the 2028 Ecclesial Assembly is? In the letter, it is explicitly stated that it will not be a new Synod...

I would say that the 2021–2024 Synod was a “first” in many ways.

It was the first time that the regulations of Episcopalis Communio were fully applied.

It was the first time that the entire Church—and everyone within it—had the opportunity to participate in the synodal process.

It was the first time that non-bishop members participated in the Assembly.

It was the first time that a Final Document was immediately approved by the Holy Father, thus becoming part of his ordinary Magisterium.

Now, in the third phase of the synodal process, we have another first: an Ecclesial Assembly.

Since this is the first time an Ecclesial Assembly is being held at the level of the entire Church, many details still need to be defined. However, we can draw upon the experience of the Continental Stage Assemblies, which were all ecclesial in nature.

What characteristics will it have? How will it differ from the two sessions of the Synodal Assembly that we experienced in 2023 and 2024?

The goal of the Ecclesial Assembly, which is the final event of the process, is no other than that indicated by the Final Document for the third stage, namely to make concrete the prospect of the exchange of gifts among the Churches and in the whole Church (cf. nn. 120–121). If during the stages of the third

phase it will be possible to realize at the various levels of the groupings of Churches (Provinces, Bishops’ Conferences, International Meetings of Bishops’ Conferences) the exchange of gifts through the confrontation and sharing of the processes initiated in the local Churches, the Ecclesial Assembly will be the occasion to gather at the level of the whole Church the fruits that have matured.

“The fruit of that Assembly was the Final Document, which participates, as we have already said, in the ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of Peter”

The possibility of this Ecclesial Assembly is all contained in the Holy Father’s final greeting at the conclusion of the Second Synod Assembly. He clarified that “on some aspects of the life of the Church pointed out in the Document, as well as on the themes entrusted to the ten ‘Study Groups,’ which must work with freedom, in order to offer me proposals, there is a need for time, in order to arrive at choices that involve the whole Church. I, then, will continue to listen to the bishops and the Churches entrusted to them”. The third phase corresponds to this time of listening to how the Final Document operates in the life of the Churches, and the Final Assembly constitutes the moment of synthesis, capable of gathering the fruits of this listening.

This is why the Assembly is ecclesial, which is tantamount to emphasizing its different nature and function from the Synodal Assembly we have already celebrated, which is and remains essentially an Assembly of Bishops. The fruit of that Assembly was the Final Document, which participates, as we have already said, in the ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of Peter. In the light of that document, it is required of the whole Church – of every Church and every bishop as the principle of unity of his Church – to live the third phase, which will have its landing in the Ecclesial Assembly. This Assembly should be the visible manifestation of that truth that



Pope Francis at the opening of the Synod

opened the Preparatory Document: “The Church of God is convoked in Synod” to witness what the fruits of the Church’s synodal journey are.

In the calendar proposed by the letter, there is mention of a new jubilee appointment scheduled for next October, that of the synodal teams. What is it all about?

Jubilee is closely associated with pilgrimage. The synodal Church is pilgrim Church, which is made evident in the “walking together” of the People of God toward the fulfillment of the Kingdom. The jubilee of synodal teams and participatory bodies (because these structures also offer spaces for synodal life in the local Churches) is meant to be the celebratory moment in which this synodal dimension of the Church is made manifest in the journey of the People of God to the tomb of Peter, gathering at the same time around the Successor of Peter, the principle of the communion of all the baptized, of all the Churches, of all the bishops. Again, the whole Church should be on pilgrimage. We thought of convening the synodal teams because they are made up of people who have put their time and energy at the service of the synodal process. We have asked for their reactivation because they will be “spearhead” in this path of implementation.

What do you expect from this meeting?

With them, we intend to experience it not only as a cel-

ebratory moment, but as an “opportune” time of deepening synodality as a constitutive dimension of the Church, with all that this entails for the journey of the Church, which desires to implement a synodal conversion, as the Holy Father also reminds us in his Message for Lent that we are living. Considering that this synodal conversion will be able to help for the renewal of the Church and for a new missionary impetus, this is truly a reason for hope that does not disappoint.

Will this Letter to the Bishops and the People of God entrusted to them published today be accompanied by other aids?

At this time we are not providing material or further guidance than what is contained in the letter to the local churches. They already have everything they need to work on implementation: the Final Document. Also the various moments presented in the letter will be more defined with their help and, of course, with the Ordinary Council of our Secretariat. In recent years, we have had various online meetings, which have been very useful, with bishops and eparchs, with the Bishops’ Conferences and the equivalent Bodies of the Eastern Catholic Churches, with the International Meetings of the Bishops’ Conferences; therefore, we do not exclude holding similar meetings in this new phase as well to agree on the progress of the project.

On several occasions I have said that the service of the General Secretariat of the Synod is not to have directions lowered from above to be carried out, but is first and foremost a willingness to listen to the needs, insights and proposals that come to us from the local Churches. The subsi-

dies that we intend to offer during this journey, beginning with the one in May—as announced—will also be the fruit of this ecclesial listening exercise.

Can you say in a few words what is the heart of the message that came out of the two Synodal Assemblies dedicated to synodality?

Wanting to say in a few words even the “heart” of the message that came out of the Synodal Assembly, moreover in two sessions, risks being very reductive. I would certainly emphasize the dynamics of the process: the transition from the first to the second session showed how ecclesial discernment works, through prolonged listening that ripens consensus.

“It urges everyone to make it possible, in docility to the Holy Spirit who leads the Church in this direction”

The Final Document is the mature outcome of a patient process by stages, in which we learned a synodal style and method. The synodal process is telling everyone that synodality is possible; that a synodal style of the Church is possible; that the synodal form of the Church is possible. And it urges everyone to make it possible, in docility to the Holy Spirit who leads the Church in this direction, because it invites the Church to a renewed missionary witness to the joy of the Gospel.

What role will the Final Document approved in 2024 play?

The Final Document is the mature fruit of this process. Its contents are such that they constitute a map for the conversion and renewal of the Church in a synodal sense. All the

work that awaits us in these next three years is inspired by the contents of this Document, which must be experimented with, in order to verify the possibility of realizing them in the life of the Church. Let me make two points. The first: that the Final Document constitutes an authoritative act of reception of the Second Vatican Council “prolonging its inspiration and relaunching for today’s world its prophetic force” (DF 5). Indeed, the Document says that “the synodal journey is in fact putting into action what the Council taught about the Church as Mystery and People of God, called to holiness through a continuous conversion that comes from listening to the Gospel” (DF 5).

The second: that whichever way one enters—whether from the foundations of synodality, expressed in the first chapter, or from any other chapter—when one explores the themes that weave the Document together, one grasps the profound unity and harmony of the text. It is a document that lets one see the beauty of the Church and the possibility of its renewal: renewal that, when it sets out on the path of synodality as a way of being and acting, is realized in the richness of Tradition. In extreme synthesis one could say: heart of the message is that all of us baptised are all disciples and all of us missionaries, seriously committed to a conversion of relationships to facilitate the encounter of Jesus with the men and women of today. The Synod has offered and offers legs and perspectives to the pastoral and missionary conversion to which since the beginning of his pontificate Pope Francis has invited us.

“The synodal process is telling everyone that synodality is possible; that a synodal style of the Church is possible; that the synodal form of the Church is possible”



World Report

IN BRIEF

Cuba Releases 553 Prisoners in Vatican-Mediated Deal

● Cuba has granted early release to 553 prisoners following a Vatican-mediated agreement, fulfilling a deal struck in the final days of Joe Biden's presidency. On January 14, Biden removed Cuba from the U.S. terrorism blacklist in exchange for the prisoner release.

The US European Union, Catholic Church, and human rights groups had long urged Cuba to free protesters jailed after the July 2021 anti-government demonstrations, the largest since Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution.

Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel informed Pope Francis of the decision in the spirit of the 2025 Jubilee. Although the new US administration overturned the deal, releases have continued.

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin called the move "a sign of great hope" for the Holy Year. While some dissidents were freed, key opposition figures remain imprisoned. Rights groups estimate that over 500 protesters received lengthy sentences, with some facing up to 25 years.

Rodrigo Duterte Arrested for Alleged Crimes Against Humanity

● Former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, 79, has been arrested on an International Criminal Court (ICC) warrant for alleged crimes against humanity tied to his brutal drug war. Duterte, who oversaw thousands of extrajudicial killings, was detained upon landing in Manila from Hong Kong, NPR reported.

Elected in 2016 on a tough-on-crime platform, Duterte unleashed police 'death squads' to execute suspected drug dealers and users. The UN's 2020 investigation found

that young men in poor areas were routinely gunned down without due process, with police allegedly incentivised to kill. While the government acknowledges 6,248 deaths, the ICC prosecutor estimates up to 30,000.

Duterte, an outspoken critic of the Catholic Church, called God 'stupid' and urged citizens to 'kill' bishops. The nation's bishops condemned his drug war and welcomed his arrest, calling for justice for victims. Despite withdrawing from the ICC in 2019, Duterte remains under its jurisdiction.

Religious sisters in El Salvador join church's 'Yes to life, no to mining' campaign

● Catholic sisters in El Salvador are leading the charge against a new law allowing metal mining in the country, supporting the church's "Yes to Life, No to Mining" campaign. The law, passed in December 2024, permits exploration and extraction of gold and other minerals like lithium, despite a 2017 ban.

The church, inspired by Pope Francis and St Francis of Assisi, has urged unity in opposing the law, which critics argue threatens the environment and human health. On February 7, Catholic groups, including the Conference of Religious of El Salvador, organised fasting, prayers, and signature collection to present to lawmakers. The bishops, along with local activists, have rallied against mining, citing risks to water sources and public health.

President Nayib Bukele supports mining for economic reasons, but Catholics argue it threatens the poor and the environment. Despite threats and political persecution, the church remains resolute in its opposition, calling for a united effort to protect El Salvador's natural resources. Natividad Chicas Rivera, a Catholic from Osicala, El Salvador, told Global Sisters Report that all Salvadorans will be left with from mining is pollution.

How hundreds of religious sisters contributed to 'groundbreaking' 30-year Alzheimer's study

● Nearly 700 Catholic sisters contributed to a groundbreaking study on Alzheimer's and dementia, offering key insights into cognitive health. Launched in 1986 by neurologist David Snowdon, the 'Nun Study' produced seminal findings on cognitive decline.

Kyra Clarke, a researcher at UT Health San Antonio, explained that Snowdon chose Catholic sisters because their shared lifestyles—similar housing, nutrition, and social networks—eliminated many variables that complicate dementia research. The study followed 678 School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND), aged 75 to 102, tracking cognitive changes through annual assessments though the donation of their brains.

Findings showed that higher early-life cognitive ability, education, and strong language skills reduced dementia risk. The sisters' commitment to the study, with a 66% participation rate, made it uniquely valuable.

Though all participants have since passed, researchers continue analysing data and meeting with the SSND. Ms Clarke called the sisters' generosity an iconic contribution to dementia research, inspiring ongoing efforts.

Young Catholics in South Sudan make walking pilgrimage for peace

In 2023, young Catholics from the Diocese of Rumbek, South Sudan, organised a 240-mile walking pilgrimage to Juba for Pope Francis' visit. What began as a one-time journey has now become an annual tradition.

Sr Orla Treacy, an Irish religious of the Loreto Sisters, recalled the enthusiasm of the young South Sudanese eager to see the Pope. They walked more than 200 miles to the capital, but upon returning home, they asked, "What next? What more can we do?" In response, Sr Orla helped transform the pilgrimage into an annual event, allowing young people to spread messages of peace and visit parishes across the diocese.

Monica Thien Balila, a youth leader and pilgrimage organiser, described how the journey exposed the group to different places, cultures, and ways of life in South Sudan. Sharing these experiences, she noted, encouraged others to step beyond their own communities.

Since mid-February, tensions in South Sudan have escalated, with violent clashes threatening the young nation's fragile peace. In response, the group is planning additional pilgrimages. Monica believes these journeys foster unity, saying, "Through the pilgrimage, we discover different people,



Loreto Sister Orla Treacy, principal of Loreto Girls Secondary School in Rumbek, South Sudan, walks outside the school with children in 2017. Photo: CNS /Paul Jeffrey.

and from there, we learn to be together."

Along with fellow organiser Martin Mandela Mangar, she highlighted the importance of traveling to other parts of South Sudan. Conflict often arises when communities see each other as strangers or adversaries, but the pilgrimages challenge these perceptions. "If we move from one place to another and learn about each other, we'll have peace," Monica explained.

Martin added that while cultures may seem different at first, deeper understanding reveals shared traditions and values.

The pilgrimage is built on four key pillars. The first is walking, as pilgrims travel to new communities and villages. The second is prayer, strengthening participants' relationship with God. The third is peace, with pilgrims praying daily for harmony in the towns and villages they

pass. The final pillar is community, which grows naturally through the journey.

Sr Orla highlighted how these encounters dispel stereotypes. Upon returning home, pilgrims challenge preconceived notions, telling their communities, "I have met someone from that village, and they are not what you say." In breaking down barriers of suspicion, these young people are forging a path toward lasting peace.

French bishops publish major study to boost interest in faith, help save churches

Following the publication of the *General Estates on Religious Heritage* report, French bishops are spearheading efforts to restore historic churches, not only to preserve architectural treasures but also to renew interest in the faith.

Across France, from Marseille to rural Normandy, communities are celebrating the revival of their Catholic heritage. On February 2, restoration work began on the iconic gilded statue of the Virgin Mary atop the Basilica of Notre Dame de la Garde in Marseille, a landmark visited by millions annually. Funded through a campaign launched by Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline,

the \$2.6 million project reflects growing public support for safeguarding religious sites.

Under France's 1905 law separating church and state, most churches are state-owned, with municipalities responsible for upkeep. However, many rural churches face neglect as populations shift toward cities. Retired Bishop Alain Planet, who oversaw the *General Estates* survey, emphasised that while new churches are being built in urban areas, rural parishes struggle to maintain their historic structures.

The bishops' initiative produced two key documents: a guide to religious her-

itage patronage and a model agreement allowing for compatible "new uses" of churches—such as concerts, educational programs, and charitable activities—while ensuring they remain free to the public.

Beyond buildings, bishops are also reviving intangible religious heritage, including pilgrimages and traditional festivals. In 2024, over 12,000 adults and adolescents were baptised in France at Easter, many inspired by religious heritage. As Bishop Planet noted, "Religious heritage remains a place of encounter, sharing, and sometimes, a gateway to faith."

Shroud of Turin to be showcased online during Holy Year

The Shroud of Turin will be digitally showcased during the Holy Year 2025, allowing visitors to engage with the revered relic like never before.

The shroud, a linen cloth many believe is the burial shroud of Jesus Christ and bears his image, traditionally draws thousands of pilgrims during rare public displays.

While there will be no physical exposition of the shroud in 2025, the Archdiocese of Turin unveiled plans on March 15 for a multimedia initiative featuring a full-scale digital version of the cloth to offer the faithful a new way to explore its image and mystery.

"In this Jubilee Year, we have sought a new approach

to the shroud, focusing on new digital technologies," said Cardinal Roberto Repole of Turin at a news conference in Turin announcing the initiative while virtually linked to the Vatican press office.

"That cloth, the shroud, is an invitation to live life with hope, because it is also the imprint of the Resurrection – of someone

who is no longer in death," the cardinal said, connecting the shroud to the Jubilee theme of hope. Visitors to the northern Italian city can experience the "Tent of the Shroud" in Turin's main square, Piazza Castello from April 28-May 5, where the life-sized digital replica will be displayed on an interactive table.



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Embracing grief and justice



Fr Flavie Villanueva embraces Melinda Lafuente, as she holds an urn with the remains of her son, Angelo Lafuente, at the Shrine of Healing in Manila, Philippines, March 12, 2025, the day after the arrest of former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. The shrine held an interment ceremony for the victims of extrajudicial killings carried out during their country's deadly anti-drug campaign when Duterte was president 2016-2022. Photo: OSV/Lisa Marie David, Reuters.

Researchers: Boredom prevents people from attending church services

KNA

A recent study has shown that 'spiritual boredom' can deter people from religious practices. This study by the Universities of Vienna and Sussex, was first published in the specialist journal, Communications Psychology. Lead researcher, Thomas Götz advised church leaders to pay more attention to this phenomenon and to counteract it with more appealing sermons. "The Church should take the issue of boredom seriously," emphasised the Viennese educational researcher and psychologist in an interview with the Kathpress news agency.

Dr Götz and his team showed that boredom in sermons can significantly reduce motivation to attend church services. "When people are bored, their minds wander, they perceive the content as irrelevant and attend less often or not at all in future." People's

'spiritual development', which according to Dr Götz would be particularly desirable in times of global crisis, can be significantly inhibited as a result.

Spiritual boredom was analysed in various contexts such as church services, pilgrimages, silent retreats, yoga and meditation etc. And then rated on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being the most appealing and 5 being the least appealing. On the whole Sermons were perceived as the least appealing, with a score of 3.6, while pilgrimages achieved the best result with 1.3.

"Sermons are often too abstract and not very relevant to life. Many churchgoers can't make a personal connection to the content," Dr Götz reported on the survey of more than 1,200 adults, mainly from German-speaking countries. Problems also include being over- or under-challenged, combined with a lack of opportunity for

interaction due to the frontal presentation style - which can lead to boredom.

According to the questionnaire surveys conducted at church exits, the sermon is not one of the main reasons for attending a church service for most people. What was mentioned was rather "that you can experience peace and quiet there", or the reference to the tradition of Sunday mass in the family. Other elements of the service, such as the spiritual songs or the experience of the Eucharistic celebration, were also often emphasised. Nevertheless, a sermon that is perceived as boring is often "a reason to stop coming regularly," says Dr Götz.

To reduce boredom in church services, the director of studies recommended that preachers focus more on the realities of the audience's lives. They would do well to pick up on current topics, incorporate

interaction such as discussion rounds or reflection phases and involve the faithful in smaller congregations. Digital and visual elements, supplementary materials and videos could also contribute to a more intensive discussion and increase attention. For other elements of the church service, Dr Götz advised repeatedly reminding people of their significance and benefits "in order to maximise their positive effects".

Unlike the sermon, the pilgrimage is perceived as attractive. Dr Götz explained this mainly due to the variety: "You experience nature, exercise and social interaction as well as challenges due to the weather or the route, which makes the experience dynamic. In addition, everyone can set their own pace, take breaks or have conversations." This freedom prevents boredom, which can arise more easily in fixed formats such as sermons.

St John Paul II hailed as model for Catholics to fight rising scourge of antisemitism

St John Paul II's example as a strong bridge-builder between Catholicism and Judaism should be used against enduring antisemitism, especially in the wake of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel that killed 1,200 people, according to a theologian and papal biographer George Weigel. He gave a keynote address to 230 people closing a half-day conference March 10 on Catholics and antisemitism sponsored by the New

York-based Philos Project and the Catholic Information Centre in Washington.

Weigel noted that St John Paul, throughout his more than 26 years as pope, "saw himself, and he conducted himself, as an heir of the Second Vatican Council, and its teachings on the filial debt that Christianity owes its parent, Judaism." Weigel said St John Paul believed "a new springtime," following the 20th century - "a cen-

tury of tears" as the pope called it, with its Holocaust, two world wars and Cold War - would include the state of Israel, and hoped that recognition would intensify Catholic and Jewish theological dialogue. "If we would honour (St John Paul's) memory, let us commit our minds, hearts and souls to advancing that collaboration," he said, calling it "ever more urgent today than it was 40 years ago."

Vatican roundup

Vatican representative calls for debt relief at UN Human Rights Council

● At the 58th Session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, the Holy See's Permanent Observer, raised concerns over the growing global debt crisis, highlighting its devastating impact on developing nations. He noted that public debt had reached a staggering \$97 trillion by 2023, forcing many countries to cut essential services like healthcare and education.

Archbishop Balestrero also emphasised the disproportionate burden placed on developing nations, which spend 13 times more on external debt repayments than on combating climate change. He urged the international community to acknowledge not just financial debt but also "ecological debt," stressing the responsibility of wealthier nations in contributing to climate change.

Echoing Pope Francis' call for debt relief during the Jubilee Year, the Holy See recently co-hosted a dialogue with key stakeholders, aiming to address the crisis and push for meaningful reform.

In the hospital, Pope celebrates anniversary of election with cake

● Pope Francis spent the 12th anniversary of his election to the papacy undergoing physiotherapy at Rome's Gemelli hospital, but he was well enough to celebrate it in little ways. Along with the health care workers treating him, the pope - who has been hospitalised for nearly a month - had a small celebration to mark the anniversary of his election, complete with a cake and candles, the Vatican press office said March 13.

Hundreds of cards sent

from children all around the world also were delivered to Pope Francis, wishing him a happy anniversary as well as a speedy recovery, the press office added. The 88-year-old pope continued the therapies prescribed, including pharmacological treatment and physical therapy, it said. A chest X-ray had confirmed continued improvements in his condition, the Vatican said the previous day, though doctors did not state that his double pneumonia had fully cleared.

Vatican representatives meet with King Abdullah II of Jordan

● On March 11, King Abdullah II of Jordan welcomed church leaders, including Msgr William Shomali, General Vicar of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, to Al Husseinia Palace. Representing Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Mgr Shomali expressed deep appreciation for the King's role in protecting Christian and Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem and supporting the Palestinian people.

He reaffirmed the Catholic Church's rejection of claims that Palestine belongs solely to the Jewish people based on the Torah, as promoted by Christian Zionism in the United States. Instead, he emphasized that the Torah calls for justice, peace, and defending the oppressed.

Mgr Shomali also praised the King's support for Palestinian students, highlighting the success of the 'WISE' online platform, which has registered over one million students, including 500,000 in Gaza.

The meeting concluded with an Iftar banquet, attended by Mgr Iyad Twal, Patriarchal Vicar in Jordan.

Mass, Communion are sources of strength, papal preacher says

● Mass and Communion are signs of trusting God, who gives strength to live fully, no matter how little one has, said Capuchin Fr Roberto Pasolini in a Lenten meditation for the Roman Curia on March 13. Jesus, "the living bread," offers eternal life, Pasolini said, emphasising that missing Mass is a grave sin. However, he urged better explanations, not fear-based coercion. The faithful attend Mass not out of obligation but to nourish their eternal life in Christ. "You can multiply bread too," he said, urging believers to assimilate the Eucharist into daily life. The real question, he noted, is not about attendance but whether one transforms the rite into a life of service and sacrifice.

Creating a synodal way of being Church in service to our world



Noelle Fitzpatrick

Thursday, March 20, is designated as the International Day of Happiness. The American educationalist and author Nel Noddings suggests when parents are asked what they really want for their children in life, most respond they want them to be happy. Why then, she asks, is happiness not made an explicit aim in the approach to education? She suggests that if happiness were made an explicit aim, the whole architecture, character and substance of our teaching and learning would be different. If we aimed to teach poetry as a source of sensory delight, spiritual stimulus or historical insight, why bore students with technical analysis of how the poem is put together?

Noddings cites disappointment with her Christian upbringing as a motivating factor for writing her book *Happiness in Education*. She describes what she personally experienced as the glorification of suffering in Christian doctrine, the “fear-based admonitions to be good”, and “a habit of deferring happiness to some later date”. From all the evidence presented in the Gospels, the Christ of our faith does not intend us to glorify suffering, live in fear or defer happiness until the next life. If there is a dichotomy between what is intended by Christ and the message we sometimes internalise, what practical steps we can take to correct it? We are not called to worship the crucified Jesus, but to incarnate the joy of the risen Christ.

What could be more enticing and happiness inducing than religious education done with the aim of stoking curiosity, helping us browse rich spiritual and contemplative practices within our tradition, encouraging us to lean into what attracts and deepens our personal relationship with God? By inviting rather than insisting, being authoritative rather than authoritarian,



A scene from the 1939 film Wizard of Oz

painting pictures through use of parable and poetry, trusting how the Spirit moves in it all, we can evoke deep satisfaction in the journey of each to incarnate the risen Christ in tune with their own particular charism.

The Christian understanding of happiness as gift

If we truly believe that all is gift, then happiness is also gift, not to be confused with pleasure, not to be conjured up or forced in any way. A complex combination of genetics, circumstance, conditioning and choice impacts our disposition toward it. Part of the work of those in ministry may be to support the deepening of disposition to better attune to this gift of happiness.

The writers John O'Donoghue and Edna O'Brien were both attuned to the divine presence in the elemental world of nature evident in the achingly beautiful evocations of presence running through

their work. They support me in my effort to attune to the divine in the natural world. CS Lewis, author of the *'Chronicles of Narnia'* found his way back to faith having cast off his earlier 'soul destroying religious practice' through the natural world and the writings of others. We glimpse the utter transformation in his way of beholding the world in the magic of Narnia.

“Through our public liturgies we can deepen and savour love of place as a critical stepping stone to enhancing our environmental sensitivity”

Right now, in rural Ireland, the long gate of winter is opening, and cows are being released back into the fields. Lambs and calves

are being born, farmers are awake day and night, birds are busy nest building, signs of spring growth are all around. There is pain, loss and longing in it too, all part of the fabric of happiness. Through our public liturgies we can deepen and savour love of place as a critical stepping stone to enhancing our environmental sensitivity. We can find creative ways to marry the seasonal calendar with the liturgical, weaving a celebration of elemental beauty and industry into our prayers of the faithful and altar adornments. Jesus spoke to the hearts of people of the land using images, metaphor and parables that had meaning for them – the mustard seed, the fig leaf, the fishermen's nets. At Ash Wednesday Mass this year a gentle strain of classical music formed the backdrop throughout. It was beautifully evocative. Why not go a step further and weave some birdsong into our liturgies? What more stirring music is there? All free, God given.

Humanity of the saints

Keeping saints on pedestals with no bridge to their humanity can alienate rather than enliven. I enjoy and find encouragement in reading about their human lives

and foibles. St. John Henry Newman spent years being tossed by waves on the Irish sea, travelling over and back from the UK trying to establish the Catholic University of Ireland. He went at things with great gusto, experiencing repeated cycles of burn out then recuperation. Known to be a great spiritual writer and orator, he nevertheless also put his foot in his mouth on occasion and spent years battling a libel case that he also eventually lost. Through it all he remained humble and persistent. His writings are deepening an attract me to explore more.

“Catherine was a formidable woman, bursting forth from the confinement of her time to break the mould on what women could contribute to public life”

The fiery and tenacious St. Catherine of Siena wrote hundreds of letters lighting many a flame under kings and popes with her fiery 'tongue'! Her turn of phrase was very funny, her energy, courage and passion for mission leaps

off the page. To me, her list of shortcomings and blind spots seem even longer than those of Newman. Catherine was a formidable woman, bursting forth from the confinement of her time to break the mould on what women could contribute to public life. Some of her insights remain incredibly pertinent for this time of change in our Church. There is great happiness to be found in exploring the lives of the saints from every continent.

Deepening an attitude of gratitude

Even in the most difficult situations, cultivating gratitude for the glass half full helps us better attune to the gift of happiness present in every day. Gratitude is key to happiness perhaps especially in situations where the struggle for life and to meet basic needs is a daily grind. In the most awful situations of conflict and need I have personally witnessed this to be true. Figures like Etty Hillesum and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are a testament to it. Our Celtic-Christian ancestors attuned to God's presence in the reality of every day. Their prayer was embodied, exuberant and poetic, rooted in gratitude. It seems to me that living out of a mindset of gratitude rather than of entitlement gives birth to completely different thought processes, a completely different way of beholding the world.

Happiness on the road ahead

Jesus says, 'I have come that they may have life and have it to the full', but always asks us to cast off our cloaks, pick up our mats, and be clear about what it is we want him to do for us. We are urged not to languish in victimhood nor cling to life and love but, to savour their richness. Happiness is in the reverential savouring, not in the fearful clinging.

Pope Francis calls us to a renewed missionary impulse and asserts that fundamentally, our challenges are no more difficult now than they have been in the past. They are simply different. We must rise to the challenges differently.

In creating a Synodal way of being church in service to our world, can we be as Dorothy, the Tin Man, Scarecrow and Lion on their journey home in 'The Wizard of Oz'? Though they knew not what to expect with each twist in the road, their happiness was in their companionship and belief in their mission, tapping into the gifts of courage, intellect and love to propel them on.

“Pope Francis calls us to a renewed missionary impulse and asserts that fundamentally, our challenges are no more difficult now than they have been in the past. They are simply different. We must rise to the challenges differently”

Letters

Letter of the week

Applauding every report in The Irish Catholic

Dear Editor, So many excellent articles to comment on your issue of March 6 but I would like to begin with Maria Steen's outstanding report on the media's predictable take on the Trump/Zelenskyy meeting in the Oval Office.

I cannot say I am surprised but I was certainly shocked to learn that it lasted 50 minutes but only a snippet was reported on to further the anti-Trump coverage we have been subjected to since he was re-elected President.

Reading Maria Steen's incisive and balanced report throws a different slant on the meeting and her analysis is supported by an apology now offered by Zelensky. No mention in our media of President Trump's 'invitation to Zelenskyy to speak at considerable length' and 'his deferring to him a number of times during the conference'. As Ms. Steen pointed out 'it was 'not only rude and disrespectful to try to undermine the President on his own turf while asking for his sup-

port', but it made Trump's job in attempting to broker peace even more difficult.

Then there was Anthony Coughlan's letter to Kevin Bakhurst of RTÉ regarding the Ukraine war. Although he said that he had sent it to 200 local media and opinion formers, all members of the Oireachtas, etc I saw no reaction from the recipients. This was in connection with support for NATO. Well done Anthony Coughlan.

I am not into flattery but I could actually applaud

every report in your paper but would specifically like to mention Fr Martin Delaney's excellent take on the state of the Church in Ireland today with the scarcity of priests and the dwindling congregations. I must also mention the Relentless Ministry series.

Keep up the excellent work in informing us in a factual and unbiased manner of world and local issues.

Yours etc.,
Mary Stewart
Ardeskin, Donegal Town

Zelenskyy was right to rail against this outrage

Dear editor With reference to Maria Steen's article in the *Irish Catholic* of March 6, I am appalled that she has seen fit to criticise President Zelenskyy for the awful exchange between himself and President Trump and Vice President Vance in the Oval Office. Is it not obvious that Trump, allegedly in the interests of "peace", is prepared to acquiesce in the appropriation of Ukrainian territory by Putin – just as Chamberlain and Deladier conceded the Sudetenland to Hitler in 1938 in the hope that it would yield "peace for our time"? We all know how that worked out. Zelenskyy was right to rail against this outrage and to expose the crassness of it before the assembled press. The efforts of Trump and Vance to bully him are deserving of nothing but condemnation.

Yours etc.,
Felix M. Larkin
Cabinteely, Dublin 18



'Deeply moving' testimonies of catechumens

Dear Editor, I was overjoyed to read about the 80 catechumens in the Dublin Diocese preparing to receive the Easter sacraments. In a time when we often hear of declining faith, this remarkable growth – double last year's numbers, is a true sign of hope for the Church in Ireland. Archbishop Dermot Farrell's words capture it well: the Holy Spirit is at work, drawing people to Christ and His Church.

The testimonies of these

catechumens are deeply moving. Their enthusiasm, their struggles, and their unwavering desire to follow Christ remind us of the beauty of conversion. People like Alan Maizon, Thiago Santos Vinhas, and Ariane Martinez Gregorio are embracing the faith with open hearts, committing themselves to prayer, community, and charity. Their witness is an inspiration to all of us who sometimes take our faith for granted.

In a world filled with dis-

tractions and temptations, these new Catholics remind us of the importance of commitment. As Alan put it so well, faith is not just about a ceremony—it's about a daily decision to live for God, to stay connected to the Church, and to set our minds on things above. What a lesson for all of us!

The growth in catechumens should also challenge us as a Church. Are we providing the welcoming, faith-filled communities that seekers

need? Are we investing in adult faith formation and evangelisation? As Patricia Carroll noted, young adults want to know about the Catholic faith, they are searching. It is our responsibility to guide them and support them on their journey.

May this joyful news inspire all of us to deepen our own faith and to be true witnesses of Christ's love.

Yours etc.,
Deirdre White
Cork City, Cork

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

Letters to the Editor

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

We regret that we cannot give prior notice of a letter's publication

Faith must be nurtured beyond childhood

Dear Editor, I write to express my strong support for the national launch of the Ministry of Catechist, a significant and much-needed development in the Irish Church. As *The Irish Catholic* has reported, this formal lay ministry, established by Pope Francis in 2021, is now set to take proper root in Ireland.

For too long, catechesis in Ireland has been overly focused on sacramental preparation for children, often leaving adult faith formation neglected. Dr Alexander O'Hara rightly highlights that the future of the Church depends on a renewed emphasis on adult catechesis. Faith must be nurtured beyond childhood, allowing adults to deepen their relationship with Christ and confidently pass on the faith to the next generation.

The Ministry of Catechist is not simply about teaching the faith—it is a vocational calling, a lifelong commitment under the authority of the bishop. This mirrors the essential role catechists have played in the Church in Africa and Latin America, where they provide leadership and pastoral guidance in communities with few priests. In Ireland, where parishes are increasingly stretched, the presence of well-formed lay catechists could offer vital support in evangelisation and faith formation.

Now that national guidelines have been prepared, it is imperative that our bishops fully embrace and implement this ministry. A well-structured, spirit-led formation process for catechists could be transformative for the Irish Church. If we are serious about renewing our faith communities, we must invest in laypeople who are called to this ministry. I encourage our dioceses to seize this opportunity, trusting that the Holy Spirit is leading us toward a more vibrant and engaged Church.

Yours etc.,
Tony Kane
Dundrum, Dublin 16

Converting Ireland away from paganism

Dear Editor, I was disheartened to read about An Post's latest St Patrick's Day stamp design, which seems to trivialise the great saint's legacy by reintroducing the very symbol he is famed for banishing. As Fr Patrick Moore rightly points out, this is more than just a playful design choice, it reflects a growing secularisation in Ireland, where the deep Christian roots of our history are increasingly ignored or reshaped.

St Patrick is not simply a mythical figure to be reinterpreted for modern sensibilities. He was a real missionary who brought the Gospel to Ireland, laying the foundations of the Christian faith that shaped our nation for centuries. The legend of the snakes is understood as a metaphor for his role in converting Ireland away from paganism. To now celebrate his feast day with a symbol of that very pagan past is, at best, misguided and, at worst,

a deliberate attempt to diminish the religious significance of our patron saint.

Fr Moore's broader concern about the neglect of Catholic figures in An Post's commemorative stamps is also valid. While recent stamps have honoured various cultural figures, the likes of St Oliver Plunkett, Ven. Matt Talbot, and St Laurence O'Toole—who have played profound roles in our spiritual heritage—are overlooked. Surely, our national postal service should recognise the rich tapestry of Irish history in a way that respects the faith which has shaped it.

St Patrick's Day is not just a "festival" of Irish identity, it is a feast day of a great saint. Let us celebrate him accordingly, not by rewriting his story but by honouring his mission and the faith he brought to our shores.

Yours etc.,
Gary Brady
Firhouse, Dublin 24

Your Faith

The creative
gift of
repentance

Fr Dominik Domagala

Page 33

The Irish Catholic, March 20, 2025



A joyful religious life in the Modern World

Galway Franciscan friars pictured with a group of young adults on a pilgrimage to Clonmacnoise.

A Religious vocation is not only a gift for the person but also a gift to the Church. A gift is always given on a happy occasion, and when one is offering his/her life to God as a gift, the thought comes up: What's it like to be a happy religious in today's world? It's not just about smiling in pictures at church gatherings. Real happiness stems from a strong and steady bond with Christ—a happiness that shines even when things get tough, challenging, impossible, dark and beyond human power. This kind of happiness attracts people to individual religious and religious life. It is what is needed now in the Church because many young folks, especially in the Western world, feel cut off from it.

Joy

Pope Francis has frequently spoken about the necessity of joy among Christians. In his 2013 Angelus address on Gaudete Sunday, he remarked, "The Church is not a refuge for sad people, the Church is a house of joy." As religious people, we must be joyful and hope-



We can guide and inspire the youth, showing them that beyond fleeting pleasures, there is a love that truly satisfies, says Bro. Oman Ashraf OSA

ful because nobody wants to join a faith that's always gloomy and sad. Pope Francis called on monks and nuns to show off how great the Gospel is. A happy priest or nun is like a walking ad, proving that being religious isn't just about rules but about a love that sets you free.

“The Church doesn't have a vocation problem; it has a joy problem”

Happiness is the best way to get new members. Think about it—if a young person sees a priest who looks worn, overshadowed, or doesn't care, why would they want that life? But if they meet

a nun who's peaceful, warm, and funny, they might think, "What does she got that I don't?" Happiness spreads. It makes people wonder. And wondering can lead to meeting God. As religious individuals, our happiness is not just a personal state of being but a powerful tool to attract new members to the Church. Our joyful demeanour can spark curiosity and inspire others to consider a life of faith. Cardinal Timothy Dolan hits the nail on the head: "The Church doesn't have a vocation problem; it has a joy problem." Vocations thrive in places where joy shines through. A religious community full of happiness draws young hearts looking for purpose. They realise that despite the sacrifices,

serving Christ and others brings deep contentment. When we live our sacrifices joyfully, then we give an image of the beauty of religious life. We must not simply give up by saying, "The youth don't come to church" or "They lost interest after COVID-19 and never returned." Instead, we should ask ourselves: What steps have we taken to bring them back? How often have we organised youth seminars in our churches to understand their concerns? And if we have identified their challenges, have we worked toward meaningful solutions? As people of hope, let us remain hopeful. Rather than forcing young people to church, let us inspire and motivate them, creating an environment where they feel welcomed, heard, and valued in their faith journey.

Society

Connecting with today's world through happiness in our current society, young folks face constant messages that link success to money, pleasure, and personal wins. Dedicating one's life to Christ might seem old-

fashioned. But when they meet religious people who are happy, fulfilled, and even tech-savvy, they might see a new path. CS Lewis said, "Joy is the serious business of Heaven". If religious life leads to Heaven, those who live it should show that heavenly joy on Earth. This means reaching out to young people in their world—on social media, at coffee shops, during college events—and being real and open with them. In today's digital age, where social media dominates our lives, young people are not just seeking recognition—they are searching for meaning, purpose, and a way to make a difference. Instead of merely chasing likes and shares, they have the potential to use these platforms to inspire, lead, and bring positive change to the world. The challenge is not about being seen but about being impactful. Let's encourage our youth to rise above fleeting validation and embrace a deeper sense of purpose that truly defines their worth. They just want to be appreciated in forms of certain likes, views, comments and



Religious brothers and sisters based in Ireland.

“A joyful religious person makes others wonder, ‘What do they have that I lack?’ The answer is Christ. By radiating the Gospel’s joy, we invite others to seek true fulfilment”

subscribers on their social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat and so on.

“St Philip Neri, often called the ‘Apostle of Joy,’ attracted countless young people to Christ through his radiant enthusiasm and warm-hearted approach”

As religious, we need to recognise that there can sometimes be a communication gap between the youth and the Church—including religious, priests, nuns, and all those involved in church ministries. Understanding this gap allows us to better connect with and guide young people on their faith journey, motivating them towards the Church and allowing them to use their social media platforms to spread the faith and word of God. We must accept the change now and allow ourselves to be with people more, allowing them to share their faith experiences because in today’s world we also need a happy priest who cracks a good joke, a nun who enjoys kicking a soccer ball with kids in the school or missionary life, or a religious

brother who listens without judging can all make a big impact.

Appeal

Today’s youth seek joyful witnesses, not just words. They are drawn to authentic expressions of faith lived with joy and sincerity. St Philip Neri, often called the “Apostle of Joy,” attracted countless young people to Christ through his radiant enthusiasm and warm-hearted approach. His life reminds us that a joyful spirit can be a powerful invitation to faith. More young people will be drawn to religious life if it is full of happiness. Religious life is a beautiful journey, not free from trials but enriched by grace. It is a path of deep joy, yet one that also demands sacrifices, patience, and perseverance. Challenges and difficulties are not burdens but opportunities to trust in God’s providence, to surrender, and to grow in love. True witness is not in a life without struggles but in embracing them with hope, radiating the joy that comes from knowing Christ. When we carry our crosses with faith, we become living signs of God’s presence, His love shining through our perseverance. Through our experiences, we can guide and inspire the youth, showing them that beyond fleeting pleasures, there is a love that truly satisfies—a love found in Christ and His Church.

What, then, does it mean to be a happy religious person? It entails leading a life that inspires others to

remark, ‘I wish I had what they have.’ ‘I want something that they have’, and that ‘something’ is Christ. True happiness in religious life is more than personal fulfilment; it is a witness that draws others to Christ. It extends beyond obligations, reflecting a joy deeply rooted in faith, purpose, and service.

“Guiding souls, comforting the suffering, and being a beacon of hope bring unparalleled fulfilment”

In a world chasing fleeting pleasures, religious individuals embody a joy that endures through love and devotion. This joy stems from a profound understanding of faith and God’s plan. When religious men and women live with conviction, they inspire others. Happiness is also found in service—knowing one’s life is dedicated to a greater mission. Guiding souls, comforting the suffering, and being a beacon of hope bring unparalleled fulfilment. Ultimately, a joyful religious person makes others wonder, ‘What do they have that I lack?’ The answer is Christ. By radiating the Gospel’s joy, we invite others to seek true fulfilment. This joy not only transforms individuals but entire communities—and even the world.

Dear religious, do not hesitate to be recognisable



St John Paul II

My first words go to the priests, diocesan and religious. I say to you what St Paul said to Timothy. I ask you “to fan into a flame the gift that God gave you when (the Bishop) laid (his) hands on you” (2 Tim 1 :6).

[...] As priests, you are privileged to be pastors of a faithful people, who continue to respond generously to your ministry, and who are a strong support to your own priestly vocation through their faith and their prayer. If you keep striving to be the kind of priest your people expect and wish you to be, then you will be holy priests... Will the next generation of young Irishmen and Irish women still be as faithful as their fathers were? After my two days in Ireland, after my meeting with Ireland’s youth in Galway, I am confident that they will. But this will require both unremitting work and untiring prayer on your part. You must work for the Lord with a sense of urgency. [...] Let there be no complacency.

What the people expect from you, more than anything else, is faithfulness to the priesthood. This is what speaks to them of the faithfulness of God. This is what strengthens them to be faithful to Christ through all the difficulties of their lives, of their marriages. In a world so marked by instability as our world today, we need more signs and witnesses to God’s fidelity to us, and to the fidelity we owe to him. [...]

Mission

In Maynooth, in Ireland, to speak of priesthood is to speak of mission. In the ninth and tenth centuries, Irish monks rekindled the light of faith in regions where it had burnt low or been extinguished by the collapse of the Roman Empire, and evangelised new nations not yet evangelised, including areas of my own native Poland.

May that missionary spirit never decline in the hearts of

Irish priests, whether members of missionary institutes or of the diocesan clergy or of religious congregations devoted to other apostolates. May this spirit be actively fostered by all of you among the laity, already so devoted in their prayer, so generous in their support for the missions. May a spirit of partnership grow between the home dioceses and the home religious congregations in the total mission of the Church, until each local diocesan church and each religious congregation and community is fully seen to be “missionary of its very nature”, entering the eager missionary movement of the universal Church.

“Your call to holiness is a precious adornment of the Church. Believe in your vocation. Be faithful to it”

I wish to speak a special word to religious Brothers. The past decade has brought great changes, and with them problems and trials unprecedented in all your previous experience. I ask you not to be discouraged. Be men of great truth, of great and unbounded hope. [...] The Church in Ireland and on the missions owes much to all the Institutes of Brothers. Your call to holiness is a precious adornment of the Church. Believe in your vocation. Be faithful to it. “God has called you and he will not fail you” (1 Thess 5 :23).

The Sisters too have known years of searching, sometimes perhaps of uncertainty or of unrest. These have also been years of purification. I pray that we are now entering a period of consolidation and of construction. Many of you are engaged in the apostolate of education and the pastoral care of youth. Do not doubt the continuing relevance of

that apostolate, particularly in modern Ireland, where youth are such a large and important part of the population. [...]

To you and to priests, diocesan and religious, I say: Rejoice to be witnesses to Christ in the modern world. Do not hesitate to be recognisable, identifiable, in the streets as men and women who have consecrated their lives to God and who have given up everything worldly to follow Christ. Believe in the value for contemporary men and women of the visible signs of your consecrated lives. People need signs and reminders of God in the modern secular city, which has few reminders of God left. [...]

My special blessing and greeting goes to the cloistered Sisters and contemplatives, men as well as women. I express to you my gratitude for what you have done for me by your lives of prayer and sacrifice since my papal ministry began... Never was the contemplative vocation more precious or more relevant than in our modern restless world. [...]

Seminarians

Much of what I have been saying has been intended also for the seminarians. You are preparing for the total giving of yourselves to Christ and to the service of his Kingdom. You bring to Christ the gift of your youthful enthusiasm and vitality. In you Christ is eternally youthful; and through you he gives youth to the Church. Do not disappoint him. Do not disappoint the people who are waiting for you to bring Christ to them. Do not fail your generation of young Irish men and women. Bring Christ to the young people of your generation as the only answer to their longings. Christ looks on you and loves you.

Address of St John Paul II to priests, missionaries, religious brothers and sisters at St Patrick’s College, Maynooth on October 1, 1979, during his apostolic journey to Ireland.

The Catholic crisis in Ireland

Reasons to remain hopeful



Emily Nelson

In this series of articles, I summarise and reflect on current data which reveals where the Church in Ireland is today and importantly how this informs our step towards the future. Firstly, I will focus on where we are now.

Sociologists and anthropologists have taken to religious study across the world to explore secularisation and religiosity with some very useful findings. Secularisation theory was popular amongst academics in the 20th century, and suggests that as societies process and modernise, religion will inevitably be eradicated. Although some theorists still largely hold to this or a modified version, other researchers disagree. Some propose that religion will thrive but in a more personal individual way (as in Grace Davie's *Believing but not belonging*) or that religiosity is not tied to modernisation but specifically to wealth and security (as in Inglehart's *Religions Sudden Decline*). There is some truth in all these theories (the parallels between the latter and Matthew 19:23-24 have not gone unnoticed), and they contribute to our understanding of our current context. We need to get a true picture of our current situation while not losing sight of the hope out there and that we know of in Christ's gospel.

Findings

Both globally and in the West, there are some exciting findings. Pew Research Centre (2017) predicted that religiosity will increase globally by 2050. Christianity is anticipated to undergo a marginal increase, and Islam significant growth to the extent that their population comprises almost the same proportion of the world's population as Christians (31.8% in comparison to 31.1%). One reason for this global boom is that although those who do not identify as being part of any religion are due to increase, they are also significantly less likely to have children, and religious transmission to offspring is significantly more common than conversation (more on this in a later article). Essentially, this population are on average raising themselves short of resupply, whereas Christians and other religions aren't.

“There are more opportunities to develop faith in someone who comes to Church even if only for their wedding than one who the Church doesn't meet at all: so now is our chance!”



Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh blessing at Clonmacnoise Monastery. Photo: CNS/Clodagh Kilcoyne, Reuters.

Another mark of interest is that Christian growth is expected to take place in Africa. 4 in 10 Christians currently live in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 1900, 73% of Catholics were in the Global North (Europe and North America), and 27% in the Global South (Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania). A century later in 2020 these percentages have reversed. Catholic populations in Africa increased at 4.3% per year, more than double the continent's yearly population growth rate of 2%. This demonstrates that Christianity can boom in the 21st century.

“While secularisation is pervasive, it is not all-encompassing, and it is inaccurate to consider religion as ‘dying’”

Even in the West where religions are largely in decline there is reason for hope, and things we can learn to effectively move forward. In Britain, younger Catholics (18-44) are more likely than other generations of Catholics to attend Mass and confession

more regularly and display doctrinal orthodoxy. Clements and Bullivant proposes this is due to both a “survivorship bias”, i.e. they are no longer to identify as Catholic if they are not as “invested” and “creative minority effect” meaning that as these age groups swim against the tide of their peers, they form groups or become part of movements that fosters their commitment further. There are also plenty of examples of thriving parishes and conversions occurring. This demonstrates that while secularisation is pervasive, it is not all-encompassing, and it is inaccurate to consider religion as ‘dying’.

Ireland

Where are we in Ireland? Ireland was previously considered an exception amongst the prevailing secularisation of the western European world. However, according to the 2022 census, 69% identify as Catholic (down from 79% in 2016) and 14% identify as having no religion (up from 10% in 2016). Starting from a high bar, religious practice has declined sharply in Ireland. Weekly Mass attendance went from 90% in 1973 to 43% in 2008, a time span of 35 years. Generally, there is minimal agreement with Church moral stances and much institutional distrust. In Turpin's 2017 survey data 11 known factors for rejecting Catholicism were ranked. These were in order: moral conservatism, clerical abuse, authoritarianism, everyday hypocrisy, irrational beliefs, inauthentic practice, personal irrelevance, boredom with services, scientific knowledge, secu-

larist/atheist intellectual influence and knowledge of other religions. Derek Scalley's *The Best Catholics in the World* uncovered mixed perspectives on Catholicism in Ireland and the enduring legacy of Church scandals. Despite these changes, for now Ireland remains relatively highly religious with 16-29 year-olds ranking amongst the most religious youth in Europe showing that while there is a lot of work to be done there remains cause for hope.

“It is much more likely for individuals to become religiously non-affiliated than a Catholic to become Protestant and visa-versa”

When looking specifically at Northern Ireland, according to several measures, Northern Ireland is currently one of the most religious places in the West. Researchers propose that conflicts here contributed to religious trends through formation of ethnic identities and development of religious commitment. Almost everyone was raised as either a Catholic or Protestant and there remains very limited inter-sectarian religious mobility. It is much more likely for individuals to become religiously non-affiliated than a Catholic to become Protestant and visa-versa. 42.31% of the population identified as Catholics

in the most recent census; varying little since 1861 when data begins. Those affiliated with no religion has significantly increased since 1961 reaching its peak in 2021 at 19%. Census results also show us religious upbringing. From this we can determine that 3.39% of those brought up as Catholic in NI no longer identify as such. With many still practising or connecting with the Church (even for cultural or social reasons) this provides an avenue to reach out.

Religiosity

The fact that there remains a relatively high religiosity across the island of Ireland provides hope and a chance to do something when people do engage with their faith. There are more opportunities to develop faith in someone who comes to Church even if only for their wedding than one who the Church doesn't meet at all: so now is our chance!

In the coming weeks, I will share more research on influences on faith with a focus on how practically we can bring people back to Christ.

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

Two Irish Saints



Effie Caldarola

On a windy hill in the north of Ireland, I visited a grave claiming to be St Patrick's. A couple of other sites vie for that honour, but this hill is a deeply moving place.

During St Patrick's season, my thoughts turn to two other Irishmen on the road to sainthood.

There's Blessed John Sullivan, born in 1861, a handsome man, the scion of a prominent family. Someone once called him "the best dressed man in Dublin."

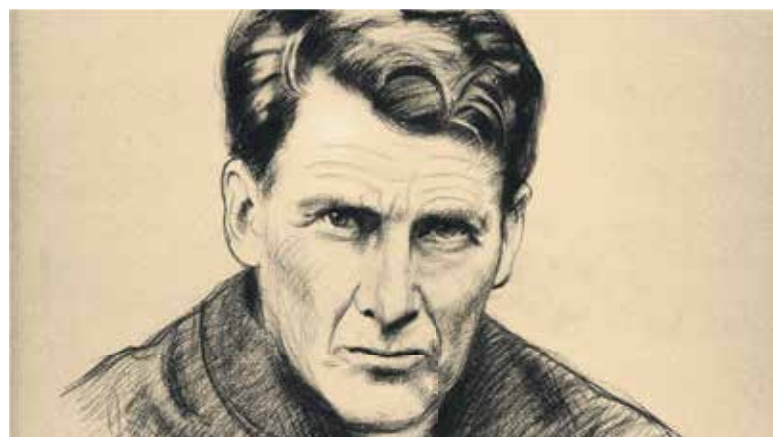
Then there's Venerable Matt Talbot, born in 1856, the child of an impoverished alcoholic, whose own chronic alcoholism brought him to his knees and now to the portal of sainthood.

I imagine these two Irishmen, contemporaries, passing each other unaware on the mean streets of Dublin sometime in the early 20th century. They remind me of that adage, "Every sinner has a future, and every saint has a past."

Destined

Sullivan's mother was Catholic; his father, destined to become the Lord Mayor of Dublin, was Protestant. In that era's tradition, girls were raised in the mother's faith, boys in their father's. Sullivan studied at Protestant schools, then Trinity College in Dublin. He studied law in London. Later, he acknowledged his Protestant upbringing with inspiring his early spirituality, and an Anglican bishop attended his beatification ceremony.

In 1896, Sullivan became a Catholic, and always credited his mother's prayers with his conversion, just as St Augustine credited St Monica. (Take heart, moms!) Sullivan became a Jesuit, and spent



Blessed John Sullivan SJ

years teaching at Clongowes Wood College in Co. Kildare, Ireland, where his stylish wardrobe was replaced by a worn black cassock. He earned a reputation as a healer, and went about the countryside on his bike visiting the sick.

Talbot increasingly turned to his faith and a life of penance, prayer, Mass and mysticism. A committed union man and building labourer, he joined the Secular Franciscan Order"

Until his dying day, he carried his mother's crucifix with him, and it is with him at Gardiner Street Parish in Dublin where he now lies in repose.

Matt Talbot had a much different life trajectory. We have only a grainy portrait of Talbot. After attending school very briefly, he went to work to help support his family. As a 12-year-old, he returned bottles for a Dublin liquor merchant and discovered the dregs at the bottom of those bottles.

Becoming a teenage alcoholic, Talbot often relied on friends to supplement his small wages with money for his growing habit. In his late twenties, he had an epiphany and took "the pledge," a promise of abstinence. But in those days before Alcoholics Anonymous, it was a

lonely struggle. Talbot increasingly turned to his faith and a life of penance, prayer, Mass and mysticism. A committed union man and building labourer, he joined the Secular Franciscan Order.

Talbot would have died in obscurity, but when he was found dead of a heart attack on his way to Mass in 1925, chains encircled his body under his clothing, at that time the mark of an ascetic and deeply penitent man.

Touching

One story I find particularly touching: As an active alcoholic, in his desperation for a drink, Talbot once stole the fiddle of a blind man who used music to beg for alms. After embracing sobriety, he searched futilely for the blind man to repay him. Maybe his deep regret makes those chains easier to understand.

People flock to the Gardiner Street Jesuit parish, where you can see Sullivan's tomb on the parish website's webcam. Alcoholics all over the world beg Talbot for prayers.

"Venerable" means Talbot's cause for sainthood has been accepted and awaits a miracle to move to the next level, "Blessed." Blessed John Sullivan's cause awaits a second miracle before canonisation. St Patrick, pray for them, and for us.

Effie Caldarola received her master's degree in pastoral studies from Seattle University.

Meditations on the interior life

Without prayer a nation collapse

One thing I notice. If prayer goes down, evil increases. If we give up on prayer, depression comes to the house. If prayer goes down, crime thrives. If I don't make the effort (and many efforts) to be right with God, I lose my happiness.

"Pray always and do not be discouraged," Jesus teaches. The old widow knocking on the gruff judges' door did not give up. He granted her request, even though he was hard and cold hearted. God is not hard and cold hearted. He cares a lot, and see what He will give you if you continue faithful: Heaven itself, and a much better quality of life, and through His word, wisdom.

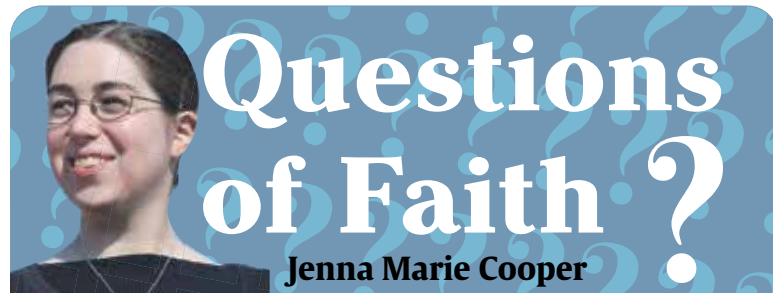
Through prayer I can love my difficult neighbours, or at least, be patient and smile, I can be tolerant of other's faults. I have plenty of faults of my own. Through prayer, God shows me who to help and how to give generously and cheerfully to the poor.

The family that does not pray becomes a mess. Jesus

is not invited. They do not ask Him to be a Sweet Guest and Visitor to the house. If a government does not pray, alas for the country. It will crash like a ship on the rocks. Only God can steer us to sail on clear waters. If a teacher does not pray, the classroom will be dead, if a farmer prays his fields will be blessed.

"Only in God is my soul at rest." No other way. In prayer-time peace fills my heart and hope is refreshed. I can get over every problem through prayer, through talking it through with God, heartfelt prayer, plenty of time given to it. If we spent as much time in prayer as we spend watching television we would be saints. If I don't pray my soul gets full of cobwebs. If a country is rich and prayer-less, it is empty.

The best prayer of all is a true prayer during the Eucharist. Jesus is there. If people only realised, churches would be full to overflowing. People are thirsting for Jesus and for the Holy Spirit, and don't realise, He is there.



Questions of Faith?

Jenna Marie Cooper

Does the Church grant annulments in cases of marital infidelity?

Q: I know the Church investigates divorces and grants a "Decree of Nullity" if there is sufficient evidence of some foundational issue with the marriage, such as deception, unwillingness to have children or emotional problems. But what about cases where there was an affair/adultery and where the cheating spouse admits it? Would this involve annulment too, or would/could the Church grant a divorce?

A: The quick way that I usually like to explain this is that while infidelity in and of itself is not a cause of marital nullity, it can be a 'symptom' of one of these causes.

As you correctly note, a declaration or decree of nullity - sometimes popularly but inaccurately called an "annulment" - can be issued by a Catholic marriage tribunal in situations where an apparent marriage was found to never have been valid and binding in the first place. While in the big picture truly null marriages (that is, as opposed to valid marriages that failed) are relatively rare, there are many reasons why a union may have been invalid. These reasons are technically called "grounds."

Grounds can range from the more dramatic, like kidnapping (see Canon 1089 of the Code of Canon Law) or marrying under threats of violence (Canon 1103); to the more common and mundane, like certain kinds of psychological issues (see Canon 1095).

Typically, when adultery is a relevant factor, the ground that is usually proposed is, in canonical terms, called: "partial simulation *contra bonum fidei* [against the good of fidelity]." This corresponds to Canon 1101, 2, which states: "If, however, either or both of the parties should by a positive act of will exclude marriage itself or any essential element of marriage or any essential property, such party contracts invalidly."

Marital fidelity is of course an 'essential element of marriage', and so 'excluding it by a positive act of the will' would render a marriage null. In practical terms, this means that a person would have to have entered the apparent union with a well-formed and distinct intention to cheat on their

spouse or to at least have it in their mind at the time of the wedding that acts of infidelity were something they would be unequivocally open to.

Proving partial simulation before a marriage tribunal can be tricky, since it's naturally difficult to demonstrate someone's interior state of mind in a fully objective way. The actual fact of having committed adultery is an important piece of the puzzle, but in order to prove simulation there must also be evidence that the alleged simulator had a motive both for reserving to themselves the possibility of infidelity and for entering into what they on at least some level understood to be a 'sham' marriage in the first place.

This is very different from a scenario where a person married with the presumptive usual intentions of remaining faithful to their spouse, and committing adultery only years afterward when their feelings had changed. This lack of fidelity 'after the fact', despite being gravely sinful, would not retroactively render the marriage bond invalid - although the Church's law does acknowledge infidelity as a legitimate reason, under certain conditions, for spouses to separate even while their marriage bond still remains (Canon 1152).

Less often, infidelity can also be pertinent to the question of a marriage's potential nullity if such acts were compulsive and part of a serious and diagnosable psychiatric disorder. Canon 1095, 3 tells us that those who "because of causes of a psychological nature, are unable to assume the essential obligations of marriage" are incapable of entering into marriage validly.

If a person truly cannot remain faithful despite their desire to do so, this means that they were incapable of marrying due to a fundamental incapacity to assume a core duty of the vocation of marriage. But here too, the infidelity itself would be only a sign that the actual invalidating problem - namely, the psychological disorder - was present.

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



The temptation of Christ by the Devil, Félix-Joseph Barrias

Casting out demons through silence



Fr Rolheiser

www.ronrolheiser.com

There is an incident in the Gospels where the disciples of Jesus were unable to cast out a particular demon. When they asked Jesus why, he replied that “some demons can only be cast out by prayer.” The demon he was referring in this instance had rendered a man deaf and mute.

I want to name another demon which seemingly cannot be cast out except by prayer, namely, the demon that forever fractures our personal relationships, families, communities, and churches through misunderstanding and division, making it forever difficult to be in life-giving community with each other.

What prayer is needed to cast out this demon? The

prayer of a shared silence, akin to a Quaker Silence.

Quaker silence

What is a Quaker Silence?

A tiny bit of history first: Quakers are a historically Protestant Christian set of denominations whose members refer to each other as Friends but are generally called Quakers because of a famous statement once made by their founder, George Fox (1624-1691). Legend has it that in the face of some authority figures who were trying to intimidate him, Fox held up his Bible and said: “This is the word of God, quake before it.”

For the Quakers, particularly early on, their common prayer consisted mainly in sitting together in community in silence, waiting for God to

speak to them. They would sit together in silence, waiting on God’s power to come and give them something that they could not give themselves, namely, real community with each other beyond the divisions that separated them. Though they sat individually, their prayer was radically communal. They were sitting as one body, waiting together for God to give them a unity they could not give themselves.

Might this be a practice that we, Christians of every denomination, could practice today in the light of the helplessness we feel in the face of division everywhere (in our families, in our churches, and in our countries)? Given that, as Christians, we are at root one community inside the Body of Christ, a single organic body where physical distance does not really separate us, might we begin as a regular prayer practice to sit with each other in a Quaker Silence, one community, sitting in silence, waiting together, waiting for God to come and give us community

that we are powerless to give ourselves?

Practically, how might this be done? Here’s a suggestion: each day set aside a time to sit in silence, alone or ideally with others, for a set period of time (fifteen to twenty minutes) where the intent, unlike in private meditation, is not first of all to nurture your personal intimacy with God, but rather to sit together in community with everyone inside the Body of Christ (and with all sincere persons everywhere) asking God to come and give us communion beyond division.

Powerful

This could also be a powerful ritual in marriage and in family life. Perhaps one of the most healing therapies inside of a marriage might be for a couple to sit together regularly in a silence, asking God to give them something that they cannot give themselves, namely, an understanding of each other beyond the tensions of everyday life. I

remember as a child, praying the rosary together as a family each evening and that ritual having the effect of a ‘Quaker Silence’. It calmed the tensions that had built up during the day and left us feeling more peaceful as a family.

“How can we be in community with each other across distance?”

I use the term ‘Quaker Silence’, but there are various forms of meditation and contemplation which have the same intentionality. For example, the founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (the religious order I belong to), St Eugene de Mazenod, left us a prayer practice he called Oraison. This is its intention: as Oblates we are meant to live together in community, but we are a worldwide congregation scattered over sixty countries around the world. How can we be in commu-

nity with each other across distance?

Through the practice of Oraison. St Eugene asked us to set aside a half hour each day to sit in a silence that is intended to be a time when we are not just in communion with God but are also intentionally in communion with all Oblates around the world. Akin to a Quaker Silence, it is a prayer wherein each person sits alone, in silence, but in community, asking God to form one community across all distances and differences.

Cast out

When Jesus says some demons are only cast out by prayer, he means it. And perhaps the demon to which this most particularly refers is the demon of misunderstanding and division. We all know how powerless we are to cast it out. Sitting in a communal silence, asking God to do something for us beyond our powerlessness, can exorcise the demon of misunderstanding and division.

Catechism of the Catholic Church



By Renata Milán Morales

The mysteries of Jesus’ public life

Jesus’ public life begins with his baptism by John in the Jordan. John preaches “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. “Then Jesus appears.” the Baptist hesitates, but Jesus insists and receives baptism. Then the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus and a voice from heaven proclaims, “This is my beloved Son.” This is the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah of Israel and Son of God.

The baptism of Jesus is on his part the acceptance and inauguration of his mission as God’s suffering Servant. He allows himself to be numbered among sinners; he is already “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”. Through Baptism the Christian is sacramentally assimilated to Jesus, who in his own baptism anticipates his death and resurrection.

Driven by the Spirit into the desert, Jesus remains there for forty days without eating; he lives among wild beasts, and angels minister to him. At the end of this time Satan tempts him three times, seeking to compromise his filial attitude toward God. By the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert. Christ stands at the heart of this gathering of men into

the “family of God”.

The kingdom of God

The kingdom belongs to the poor and lowly, which means those who have accepted it with humble hearts. Jesus invites sinners to the table of the kingdom. By freeing some individuals from the earthly evils of hunger, injustice, illness and death, Jesus performed messianic signs. He did not come to abolish all evils here below, but to free men from the gravest slavery, sin, which thwarts them in their vocation as God’s sons and causes all forms of human bondage.

From the beginning of his public life Jesus chose certain men, twelve in number, to be with him and to participate in his mission. Simon Peter holds the first place in the college of the Twelve; Jesus entrusted a unique mission to him. Through a revelation from the Father, Peter had confessed: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus entrusted a specific authority to Peter: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” The “power of the

keys” designates authority to govern the house of God, which is the Church. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, confirmed this mandate after his Resurrection.

The Transfiguration

The mysterious episode of Jesus’ Transfiguration takes place on a high mountain, before three witnesses chosen by himself: Peter, James and John. Jesus’ face and clothes become dazzling with light, and Moses and Elijah appear, speaking “of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem”. A cloud covers him and a voice from Heaven says: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

For a moment Jesus discloses his divine glory, confirming Peter’s confession. He also reveals that he will have to go by the way of the cross at Jerusalem in order to “enter into his glory”. The cloud indicates the presence of the Holy Spirit. “The whole Trinity appeared: the Father in the voice; the Son in the man; the Spirit in the shining cloud.”

On the threshold of the public life: the baptism; on the threshold of the Passover: the Transfiguration. Jesus’ baptism proclaimed, “the mystery of the first regeneration”, namely, our

Baptism; the Transfiguration “is the sacrament of the second regeneration”: our own Resurrection.

Jesus’ ascent to Jerusalem

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up [Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Jesus recalls the martyrdom of the prophets who had been put to death in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, he persists in calling Jerusalem to gather around him.

Although Jesus had always refused popular attempts to make him king, he chooses the time and prepares the details for his messianic entry into the city of “his father David”. Acclaimed as son of David, as the one who brings salvation (Hosanna means “Save!” or “Give salvation!”), the “King of glory” enters his City “riding on an ass”.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem manifested the coming of the kingdom that the King-Messiah was going to accomplish by the Passover of his Death and Resurrection. It is with the celebration of that entry on Palm Sunday that the Church’s liturgy solemnly opens Holy Week.

The creative gift of repentance

Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15
Ps 103: 1-2, 3-4, 6-7, 8, 11
1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12
Lk 13:1-9

The Sunday Gospel

Fr Dominik Domagala



An ancient Christian tradition recounts that the prefect of Rome, Chromatius, fell seriously ill during the reign of Emperor Diocletian (3rd-4th century). It quickly became known that his illness was incurable and deadly. However, upon learning that a close friend of his had miraculously been cured during his Baptism, the gravely ill prefect took the opportunity to reach out to the then-persecuted Christians. He invited two highly respected Christians of the time—Sebastian and Polycarp, who are now regarded as martyrs and saints—into his home. He asked the two priests to pray over him and cure him of his ailment.

According to tradition, St Sebastian laid out three conditions for Chromatius: he was to accept the Christian Faith, baptise himself, and rid his estate of all pagan idols, statues, and symbols. Although it proved difficult for someone of his stature and position, Chromatius destroyed approximately two hundred pagan idols. Despite this act, the prefect remained uncured. Perplexed, he questioned St Sebastian about the reason for his continued illness. The priest sought to ensure that the Roman official adhered precisely to his instructions, and after some thorough investigation, the truth came to light. Chromatius, despite his active compliance, had kept one idol's statue very close to his heart. This small statue was made of crystal and held great significance for him. Tradition states that Sebastian then destroyed this last statue, after which Chromatius regained his health.

Clarity

This old Christian story sheds some light on another, the beginning of which we read in today's First Reading. God spoke to Moses from the fiery bush: "I have

seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow" (Exodus 3:7-8).

“They needed this extensive time to relinquish their misguided yearning”

The story of Chromatius illustrates, in a manner, why the Israelites, despite being miraculously led out of Egypt (the land of slavery and oppression), had to wait for forty long years to reach the Promised Land. It clarifies why these People of God, although already on their journey, had to face challenges and moments of doubt. We read in the narrative of Exodus that despite experiencing God's care for them, they still grumbled and longed for the certainties they had in Egypt. We recall the Israelites complaining to Moses along the way: "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (Exodus 16:3).

The traditional story of the Roman Prefect reflects an experience similar to that found in the Old Testament. The Israelites, despite their departure from slavery, were still very much inclined to trust in and rely on their old ways of living—much like Chromatius with his small crystal idol! This

also explains why they wandered for forty long years in the desert: they needed this extensive time to relinquish their misguided yearning for the "pots of meat" they had in Egypt.

This story finally explains why we, the modern Christians, although we have received the great Sacrament of Baptism, also urgently need miraculous healing! Every one of us, without exception (!), carries within our hearts something that prevents us from fully entering the Land promised to us as well. Call it a small crystal statue of Chromatius or pots of meat from Egypt; it is always the same thing: the pagan idol from which we are reluctant to separate. It might be something that seems attractive, something that feeds our stomachs or egos, or something that makes us cling to our former selves—the people we were before.

Rejection

And what is the conversion of our hearts? What is my repentance about? It resembles what we learn about Moses and his encounter with God, as presented in today's First Reading. Moses ascends the Holy Mountain, Horeb. There, he is captivated by a bush that is blazing but not consumed. So he approaches, drawn towards the mysterious light. He must sense that he will discover something or someone waiting for him. Simultaneously, he realises that he cannot draw too close. Then he hears: "Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). This call to take off his sandals carries profound significance. Of course, the journey from removing his shoes to renouncing all the false idols in his life is still quite long. However, in both circumstances, the first action required is to reject, to "take off" something that has become closely attached to us. The idols to which we have clung so tightly that we cannot envision our lives without them, fearing that their absence would lead to pain or anxiety. Yet without



Moses and the Burning Bush, Sébastien Bourdon

that rejection, that "taking off," we are unable to draw close enough to God, which holds the potential and the power to truly transform our inner selves: to move our hearts and souls.

“To repent means to change direction: to convert from the old way to the new one”

That is what the Lord Jesus means when He eventually says in today's Gospel: "Look here, for three years now I have been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and finding none. Cut it down: why should it be tak-

“We read in the narrative of Exodus that despite experiencing God's care for them, they still grumbled and longed for the certainties they had in Egypt”

ing up the ground?" (Luke 13:8). When we reflect on ourselves, we can certainly see that we also still desperately need a miracle of healing. Although we have inherited and received the promise of Faith from our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and from so many others; although we have been baptised in the name of Jesus Christ; we can still feel, while listening to Jesus' parable about the fig tree, that He speaks of us as well: "but unless you repent you will all perish" (Luke 13:2). To repent means to change direction: to convert from

the old way to the new one. It is not enough to cease doing something; it requires doing what is right! True conversion is not merely stopping from doing something, but it is commencing to do what is good!

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

“It is always the same thing: the pagan idol from which we are reluctant to separate. It might be something that seems attractive, something that feeds our stomachs or egos, or something that makes us cling to our former selves”

Pilgrimage to Mount Athos

Maurice Kiely

The pull of Mount Athos had been there for a long time. Visiting monasteries and knowing Benedictines and Cistercians, it was likely that my sights might turn at some point in the direction of that other monasticism of the Byzantine type. After all, Latin west and Greek east were for so long one and the same Church. Even now, many would think that what separates us are just a few small sentimental things like the way the Eucharist is celebrated or the famous Filioque. Mind you, no one would ever be so eirenic as to think that the primacy of the Bishop of Rome is anything but a major ecumenical stumbling block between Rome and Constantinople. And then, there is an awful lot of history, much of it not good history, between Latins and Greeks.

“Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain, is a peninsula in Halkidiki, a province in north-eastern Greece. It is a small, monastic, self-governing area of the Greek Republic”

Having thought long about getting to Mount Athos, I finally reached it in September 2024. It seemed like a dream to walk on the Holy Mountain, as it is universally called by all Orthodox believers from Greece to Serbia and on the whole way to Holy Russia. Many will know, but some may not, that Mount Athos is the centre par excellence of Byzantine monasticism. Hermits, coenobites, saints, scholars, Orthodox bishops and patriarchs, have sung the Eastern liturgy in its *katholicon* (monastic chapels) for a thousand years. Golden braided Byzantine vestments, glimmering icons, shimmering beeswax candles, aroma of incense over many long centuries have made Athos a holy, numinous, unique place situated somewhere, you might say, between heaven and earth. On its laterite, unsurfaced roads, walk peripatetic monks, like ancient Patriarchs, in long, loose, black, belted garments, formidable beards, and hair that has

Mount Athos



never known the touch of a scissors.

Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain, is a peninsula in Halkidiki, a province in north-eastern Greece. It is a small, monastic, self-governing area of the Greek Republic. There are 20 governing monasteries, whose representatives rule the monastic peninsula, and 20 other monasteries and hermitages. Access is only by boat, which in these touristic times are reasonably frequent. Modern capitalism does its thing even on medieval Athos. Pilgrims can disembark at various concrete slipways, choosing one nearest the monastery they wish to visit. Women are not allowed to go onto Athos! I presume the monks feel, not I suppose without reason, that the native allure of the opposite sex would not help, and might even be a hindrance, in the none too easy living out of the Athonite vocation. Women have come up with a compromise – they take a boat trip, in the beau-

tiful Greek sunshine, along the coast of the peninsula. They see the monasteries, built as they are on cliffs, escarpments, outcrops, but do not stand in them, leaving undisturbed, as it were, the monastic equilibrium.

“I reached the other-worldly monastery, architecture mind-blowing, suspended on a cliff, one knows not how or why. The climb was worth it”

I had waited a while to get to Mount Athos but my arrival there was not at all holy or glorious. Talk about ignominy! Boat bobbing up and down at the slipway for Simonos Petras, probably the most famous monastery on Mount Athos, I resolved to leap from the bow on to the concrete below and

landed flat on my face. A fine introduction! Only a few small bruises and a lot of discomfiture. As we must in these sorts of situations, I tried to whitewash the indignity by rebranding it a John Paul II-like gesture of kissing the ground on arrival at the Holy Mountain.

I cracked on for Simonos Petras. I soon discovered that between me and my destination was a near vertical slope, climbable only by an obliging labyrinth of zig-zag pathways, like a queue in a bank. It was hot, but not very, and two-and-half hours later I reached the other-worldly monastery, architecture mind-blowing, suspended on a cliff, one knows not how or why. The climb was worth it.

Statuesque

I reach the Guest master – statuesque, Greek, British-educated, geneticist, post-doctoral at Cambridge, black from head to toe,

including the regulation Orthodox cylindrical hat. Standard pilgrim refreshment was produced – cold water, aniseed drink, two generous squares of Turkish delight! It went down well. Then a most interesting and informative conversation with the Guest master who as you would expect, was curious about the Latin western side of the Christian coin. Just as I was about the Greek eastern side!

“The monk, French, Catholic-born, philosophical, Sorbonne doctorate in Byzantine history, reminded me at many points of my study, admittedly all too meagre, of the Greek Fathers of the Church”

After evening prayers, the Guest master said to me that another monk wished to talk to me. My first thought: “What have I done now, could I as a Latin be somehow implicated in the never-forgotten 1204 Crusader sack of Constantinople and from which the second Rome never really recovered?” No such thing. Just another fascinating discussion about East and West and much in between. The monk, French, Catholic-born,

philosophical, Sorbonne doctorate in Byzantine history, reminded me at many points of my study, admittedly all too meagre, of the Greek Fathers of the Church. He seemed an Athanasius come back to life.

I went to Mount Athos as a pilgrim hoping for the human and spiritual benefits of a monastic visit. The monks are famously reclusive so in my wildest dreams I did not dare to expect to have any significant exchange with them, much as I desired it. After my conversations I said to myself: “Did that really happen, did I really have the privilege to talk at length to the monks, inheritors as they are of a thousand years of eastern monastic history and spirituality?” As I lay later in my dormitory bed, I thought to myself that the ways of God are indeed baffling. Why did he direct these men, not to Silicon Valley or to the Byzantine Institute of some university, but to be poor, simple, humble monks of the Holy Mountain. That question hovers on the ways of God and is not easily, if at all, amenable to human analysis. Such questions, as our Orthodox friends might say, are best left to mystery.

➊ Maurice Kiely is a retired civil servant and a Graduate of UCD (History), St Patrick's College Maynooth (Bachelor of Divinity), Gregorian University (STL), Trinity College (H.Dip, Graduate Dip. Statistics).

“After my conversations I said to myself: ‘Did that really happen, did I really have the privilege to talk at length to the monks, inheritors as they are of a thousand years of eastern monastic history and spirituality?’”

TVRadio

Brendan O'Regan



St Patrick and the celebration of priesthood

Understandably the North of Ireland gets in the limelight when programme makers turn their attention to St Patrick's Day.

Catherine Fulvio's St Patrick's Way (RTÉ One, Thursday and Friday) saw the well-known TV chef take the St Patrick's pilgrimage route from Navan Fort in Armagh to Downpatrick in Co. Down. She was a cheerful and enthusiastic presenter and her journey was a mixture of spiritual, cultural and culinary. We heard many of the familiar stories of the saint as well as the pagan customs that showed the cultural context in which Patrick pursued his missionary work. At Navan Fort she visited an interpretative centre where actors in costume captured ancient times. Two old lady characters spoke about Patrick and the revolutionary 'One God' idea he was promoting. They made oat biscuits that Patrick might well have encountered. She was impressed by the two cathedrals in Armagh, was introduced to facsimiles of the Book of Armagh and saw an Ogham stone from early Christian times. Her culinary interests were shown when she visited various close-to-the-Earth food and drink producers along the way, including a couple who grew the rare wasabi herb. 'Tis far from wasabi St Patrick was reared! On the Downpatrick end of the pilgrimage, she was



The Priests

guided expertly by Elaine Kelly and Martin Purdy of this parish.

Patrick - A Slave to Ireland (RTÉ One and BBC One NI, St Patrick's Day) was a new documentary on the saint directed by Ruán Magan. It was beautifully filmed, comprehensive and very much historically based, relying on St Patrick's own writings, especially the *Confessio*, which, we were told, is the oldest known writing in Ireland. Snakes got only a brief mention! Much of the story was familiar, but it was good to have it so well presented in one film. It was celebratory more than iconoclastic, which was welcome and the contributions from various academics enhanced

the presentation. Where there were uncertainties, these were acknowledged, but the familiar narrative seemed entirely credible. The contribution of another missionary, Palladius, was acknowledged, with the suggestion that later generations may have 'airbrushed' him out and given all the credit to Patrick.

Apart from the remarkable spiritual achievements of Patrick in spreading the Gospel to 'the ends of the Earth', and Ireland was then regarded literally as those ends, there was a focus on the significant changes in society, including in literacy, described as Patrick's 'superpower'. The latter part of the programme veered away somewhat from the saint

and concentrated on the legacy - with Irish missionaries spreading the Gospel back to Europe and re-Christianising it with the creation of monasteries and great seats of learning on the continent. I'm not a fan of docudrama-type re-enactments and there was quite a bit of that here, but though unnecessary I didn't find it too obtrusive - it was low-key and well-acted, not at all as cheesy as these can sometimes be. The aerial photography, especially of various monastic settlements was most impressive.

The Priests: Faith and Fame (BBC One NI, Sunday), also set in Northern Ireland, told the story of the Priests singing group, featuring Fathers Martin and Eugene

PICK OF THE WEEK

EVERYBODY LOVES RAYMOND

Channel 4 Saturday March 22, 7:50 am

The Angry Family: The whole family meets the local priest Fr Hubley, to uncover what is to blame for the constant family bickering between.

A MOST UNUSUAL MAN

EWTN Sunday March 23, 4pm, also Thursday March 27, 9am

A look at the life of Fr Patrick Peyton, through the eyes of show business personalities who knew him, with radio and television clips, and photos from his Family Theatre production company.

THE SIMPSONS

RTE 2 Monday March 24, 4:30pm

Warrin' Priests: Pete Holmes guest stars as a charismatic new preacher. Lovejoy investigates his mysterious past.

O'Hagan, along with Fr David Delargy. In 2008 they signed a recording contract with Sony Epic Records for £1.4 million, while their debut album sold over 1.6 million copies. They spoke of how they balanced their music careers with parish duties, and how they are now bringing that chapter to a close.

Originally, they specified in their contract that parish and diocesan would come first before any recording or performance engagements, and that clause had to be invoked on occasion. We also learned how various charities benefited from the profits of the music.

It was an engaging documentary, with the priests never losing their infectious

sense of humour, while the day-to-day parish work kept them well grounded. Cheerful throughout, they also had their reflective moments, and there was a sadness at their farewell concert in the Ulster Hall. When one of the albums came out the Ryan Report was published and on talk shows the topic tended to surface. On one talk show, we saw them expressing their shock and sadness at the ugly revelations. I thought they handled it well.

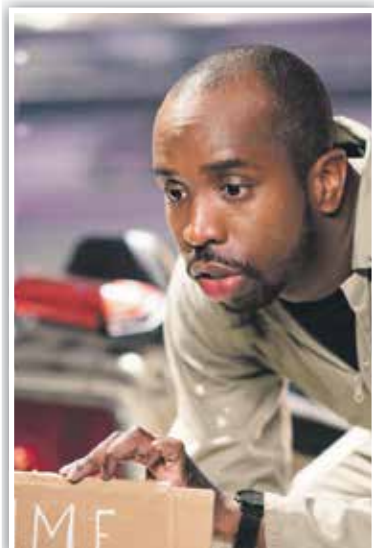
Apart from the millions of album sales and the many fans around the world they obviously had the warm admiration of their colleagues in the music business - not always a hotbed of spirituality.

Film

Aubrey Malone



Diverse crop of pre-Summer offerings



A scene from *Time Travel is Dangerous*

An Taibhse (*The Ghost*, 15A)

Is this Ireland's answer to *The Shining*? An attempt to reprise the success of *Kneecap*? An imaginative horror film it has a man and his daughter working as caretakers in a spooky Georgian mansion during a harsh post-Famine winter. What's next on the national landscape - a gaeligeoir version of *Gone with the Wind*?

Time Travel is Dangerous (15A)

Two best friends run a shop stocked with old curiosities. One day they find a time machine and use it to go back to the past. Well, if you're into vintage thingies you've got to keep adding to them, right? And what better way to do so than to find the items when they were actually in use? But, as always, there's a catch.

A Working Man (15A)

The idea of a character leaving a dan-

gerous life to settle down before being dragged back to his former world is essentially a cowboy trope. Here, from Sylvester Stallone's pen, it has former counter-terrorist agent Jason Statham leaving his job on a construction site to rescue his bosses' kidnapped daughter. (Was Liam Neeson busy that week?) It's Statham's second time in a Stallone-scripted film, the last one being *Homefront* in 2013.

Snow White (G)

Yet another re-imagining of Disney's 1937 classic, this time a live action one. Rachel Zegler is the princess, Gal Gadot the wicked queen. They can never make this enough times, the secret being to tweak the format ever so slightly.

In the Lost Lands (15A)

The marriage of Paul WS Anderson and Milla Jovovich has lasted. The

fact that they work together so often is another Hollywood surprise. Here's another collaborative effort, Anderson directing his wife as a feisty sorceress up against an evil demon.

The End (12A)

"First grub," said Brecht, "then art." But if you have enough art - and music - maybe you can forget the grub - and everything else outside your hermetically sealed domain. Tilda Swinton and her *Royal Tenenbaums*-style family fiddle while the world burns in this Kubrickesque extravaganza from Joshua Oppenheimer. Masterpiece or master dud? *La La Land* meets *The Village*? Check it out if you feel up to the 148-minute challenge.

The Alto Knights (15A)

Indefatigable workhorse Robert De Niro on familiar ground as a 1950s Italian-American mobster anxious

to control a crime empire. Deja vu? Of course. But hopefully the comfort zone will help reverse the legendary star's decade-long slide into slop.

Novocaine (16)

Timid bank manager Jack Quaid can't feel physical pain. The condition comes in handy when he tests himself against some nasty dudes in an effort to rescue his kidnapped girlfriend. Slapstick nonsense played for laughs. Our next superhero? Tom Cruise won't be losing any sleep.

Y2K (16)

One of those comedy-horror monstrosities churned out by the barrel-load by greedy moguls anxious to commodify the film industry and appropriate the disposable income of gullible teen audiences who seem to enjoy being terrified and amused at the same time.



The unchristian politics of President

Jesus and the Powers. Christian political witness in a age of totalitarian terror and dysfunctional democracies, by Tom Wright & Michael F. Bird (SPCK, £12.99 / €15.50)

Frank Litton

Politics are changing. In this imperfect world change is inevitable. There is the normal change that comes with the adjustments we make as circumstances shift, new problems appear, priorities change. Then there are the moments of radical, epochal, change, when the framework is abandoned, the script torn up, a new map drawn.

Are we at such a moment? Certainly the design for democracy that served the West so well buckles. Populisms, with their hard right and hard left, manifests its failure to devise and implement policies that reflect the views and needs of sections of electorates.

How should Christians respond? Is it an opportunity to remake politics closer to the Christian message? Or is a threat to whatever Christian influences remain? Perhaps both. This excellent book guides us in finding answers and shaping a Christian response.

Certainly, the United States presents the clearest example of radical change. Trump upturns the old order. There is talk of 'post-liberalism' among intellectuals, Catholics prominent among them, who welcome and support Trump as a harbinger of a new politics. JD Vance and Marc Rubio, both Catholic, hold powerful positions under Trump.

Challenge

The intellectuals and the politicians are surely correct in recognising the challenge; they are grievously in error in supposing Trump and Trumpism are a way forward to a politics better informed by Catholic Social Teaching [CST].

The German Philosopher Hegel tells us 'the owl of minerva spreads its wing only in the gathering dusk when



President Donald Trump holds a press photo opportunity outside St John's Episcopal Church, near the White House, Washington DC, which had been damaged in local protests, June 22, 2020. He was unable to identify the edition of the Bible that he held; he said it was "just a Bible".

philosophy paints its grey on grey'. The true character of an epoch becomes clear only at the moment of its demise.

Political traditions are a complicated weave of different threads- religious beliefs, philosophy, economics, myths. They answer the demands of reason as well as the promptings of the heart. They embody conflicts. The 'colours' clash even as they combine in a beguiling picture.

“Walking along a dark path, a stranger emerges out of the gloom. Do you welcome a decent human being or fear a potential assailant?”

As the liberal weave comes apart, the importance of one thread, best understood through the writings of the 17th century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, becomes clear. Trump's politics are the politics of Hobbes. And the politics of the atheist Hobbes are profoundly unchristian. They explicitly reject the Aristotelean foun-

dations of CST. Trump is not post-liberal; he epitomises liberalism or, at least, a dominant component thereof.

Hobbes political philosophy builds on a sad truth. Walking along a dark path, a stranger emerges out of the gloom. Do you welcome a decent human being or fear a potential assailant?

The good we can do for each other is diffuse, the evil clear. So we protect ourselves from the evil while downplaying the good. We seek security in power. When the balance of power is in our favour, a preemptive strike against our enemy is our best defence. In the absence of trust there can be no contracts that would sustain divisions of labour and enable trade.

Condemns

Our human nature condemns us to a life that is 'nasty, brutish and short'. Hobbes explains how we can escape this state of nature. In his solution, individuals are the atoms out of which society is composed. His plan allows the enjoy the benefits of society, where contracts are enforced, interdependencies multiply, and commerce thrives.

But there is a cost. Auton-

omy must be surrendered to a sovereign political power. The pursuit of 'power after power that ceaseth only in death' remains the basic motivation' as individuals strive to expand their autonomy in commercial and social life competing for the power to dominate.

“Putin is championed, Zelenskyy who represents the victims of his oppression is humiliated. The Catholics Vance and Rubio standby and cheer”

This is Trump's world. He shows this in his conduct and makes it explicit in *The Art of the Deal* published under his name. As with Hobbes, contracts or deals take centre of the stage. For Trump, all deals are competitive. There is always a winner and a loser. The loser is derided, the winner admired. The player with many cards is respected, the player with few cards despised.

So Putin is championed,

Zelenskyy who represents the victims of his oppression is humiliated. The Catholics Vance and Rubio standby and cheer.

The contrast between this world and that of Aristotle and Aquinas is clear. They suppose that society is prior to the individual. We should cultivate the virtues and devise institutions that enable children to grow into autonomous individuals equipped to cooperate freely with their fellows.

Contrast

The contrast between it and the Christian vision is stark and profound. There is, of course, an overlap. Hobbes would not be an important political thinker of considerable influence if had not succeeded in representing something of reality of the human condition. The difference is in how that reality is framed.

For Hobbes, human nature with its will to dominate is what it is. It cannot be reformed, only contained. For Christians human nature is fallen, entangled in sin. Their task is to cooperate in the work of its redemption.

The Old Testament tells of the many ways in which the chosen people betrayed, under-

mined, walked away from the ideals of justice, mercy and truth promised in God's covenant. They repeatedly succumbed to idolatry pursuing the promises of power of false gods. Yet God did not desert them. In the New Testament we learn how the promise of the covenant was fulfilled.

“With his resurrection the powers were confounded, the kingdom of god inaugurate”

The phrase the 'kingdom of God' appears eighty times in the Gospels. Its importance as a theme allows us to say that it is what the Gospels are 'about'. Christ, the incarnate God, suffered the ultimate humiliation that the powers of the world could inflict-death by crucifixion. With his resurrection the powers were confounded, the kingdom of god inaugurated.

Tom Wright is a renowned biblical scholar, Michael F. Bird a New Testament scholar and theologian. Both are Anglican priests. Tom Wright served as Bishop of Durham.

This important book draws on their scholarship and displays their skill in communicating complex truths to 'people in the pews'. They elucidate the relationships between the old and new testaments. They explain how we can speak of the kingdom being present while we pray 'thy kingdom come'.

In these dark, Hobbesian, times the temptation to retreat from the world, declaring 'its God's broth, let him stir it' is strong. We must, they make clear, resist the temptation. The message of the Gospel is clear: we are saved as citizens of the kingdom, cooperating in its realisation.

Wright and Bird provide us with an inspiring account of the 'City of God' rooted in deep learning. It gives us hope while motivating us to challenge the 'City of men' as it threatens to slide into the evil of Trumpism.

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.

Across the years of Revolutionary Ireland

Mike Cronin and Mark Duncan,
Revolutionary Times: Ireland 1913-23: Forging of a Nation
(Merrion Press 2024)

J. Anthony Gaughan

This book will be a delightful read for professional historians, amateur historians and members of the reading public who are interested in our recent history.

At the outset the authors explain how it came to be published. It has its origins in an online project, *Century Ireland*, a historical newspaper that told the story of the events of Irish life throughout the period covered by the Irish Decade of Centenaries.

The website ran for more than a decade and is still accessible on-line. It was enhanced with the fruits of fresh scholarship and newly released archives. Thus its publication in book form seemed to be eminently worthwhile.

The most intense period of the Irish Revolution was from 1918 to 1921. The authors wisely and expertly present the political developments throughout those years as they were evinced in the newspaper headlines. 1918 opened with Edward Carson warning that Ulster would not agree to the settlement then being proposed to the 'Irish Question'. A few weeks later Southern Unionists issued a manifesto in defence of the integrity of the UK.

Failure

The failure of the Irish Convention to reach an agreement was reported in mid-April. Then the attempts to impose conscription had the effect of uniting all Irish political parties, save the unionists, as never before. In July, Sinn Féin, the Irish volunteers, Cumann na mBan and the Gaelic League were banned. In the autumn a recruitment drive to shore up British forces in France fell far short of the target amid public hostility. The general election in December showed that Irish voters favoured an Irish Republic.

Most of the headlines in 1919 concerned the campaign of the Sinn Féin activists against the crown forces. But the recording of political developments also continued. Following their landslide victory in the general election Sinn Féin demanded the release of Irish Republican prisoners. Dáil Éireann met in



A painting of the First Dáil in session, January 21, 1919, by artist Norman Teeling. Photo: The Oriel Gallery, Dublin

Dublin on January 23. Seán T O'Kelly delivered Ireland's plea for Independence to the Peace Conference in Paris on February 24. Dáil Éireann met again on April 7 and Éamon de Valera was elected president of Sinn Féin. Dáil Éireann was suppressed by the British government on September 11.

“On the morning of 22 November 1920 twelve army officers of the British Intelligence Service were killed in their lodgings in Dublin”

Next, partition loomed as a committee was established in London to find an 'Irish Solution'. At the end of the year the newspapers announced that 'Ireland to get two Home Rule Parliaments'. *The Irish Independent* described the proposal as a 'freakish constitution suitable only for exhibition in the museums of the world – an arrangement which nobody wants'.

The newspaper headlines in 1920 and 1921 were dominated by the mayhem

which raged across Ireland, north and south. During these fateful years there were a number of notorious incidents. These were the anti-Catholic pogroms in Belfast and Portadown. Then on the morning of November 22 1920 twelve army officers of the British Intelligence Service were killed in their lodgings in Dublin.

Reprisal

That afternoon, in an obvious reprisal, a large force of military, RIC and Auxiliaries entered Croke Park where a match was being played and opened fire on the crowd, causing the death of 12 people and injuring more than sixty.

In a nod to the Decade of Remembrance the authors note how the sitting of the 1st Dáil Éireann and Bloody Sunday in Croke Park were remembered a hundred years on. In their study they also feature the National Day of Commemoration which is held annually at Collins barracks, Dublin. It commemorates all the Irishmen and Irishwomen who died in past wars or on service with the UN. Mike Cronin and Mark Duncan are to be congratulated for this worthy addition to the Irish Revolution canon.

Some 'off-centre' views of the world

Irish Eccentrics,
by Aubrey Malone
(Penniless Press, £7.99)

Daft as Brush: Eccentricities of the famous and infamous,
by Aubrey Malone
(Penniless Press, £7.99)

Peter Costello

In the days of gloom and doom we all need something light-hearted to relieve the depressing ambience around us. In these two books, Aubrey Malone, the film critic of *The Irish Catholic*, provides two good doses of an antidote. The names will be familiar, Brendan Behan, Samuel Beckett, Alban Berg, Noel Coward . . . and so on.

But we have to be careful here not to laugh too much. It is worth keeping in mind that eccentrics are not actually mad, they are merely giving full effect to their abundant personalities.

Remember too that many that we now count among the great and the good were once seen by *bien pensant* folk as eccentric. A good example might be St Francis himself preaching to the birds. He was not mad or wrong, he was simply a clear-sighted man who was well ahead of his time.

We need, as so many of us recognise, to cherish our eccentrics for the mental health of our over organised societies. Of course eccentrics can be, as the more settled of us find, very difficult to live with at times.

I think of the writer Lord Dunsany who always took out to dinner parties a supply of his own special salt, as all other commercial brands were, he felt, a danger to our health. Only those on a low sodium diet by our doc-



The irrepressible G. K. Chesterton, seen by a contemporary English caricaturist.

tor's advice will appreciate the full force of that. Not mad, but actually deeply true.

These are two amusing books, which are ideal for giving as gifts. In that way a little of their essential truth of many "off-centre views" can be appreciated by others. Their views are not being forced upon us, but merely offered for our consideration. G. K. Chesterton would have fully agreed with this.

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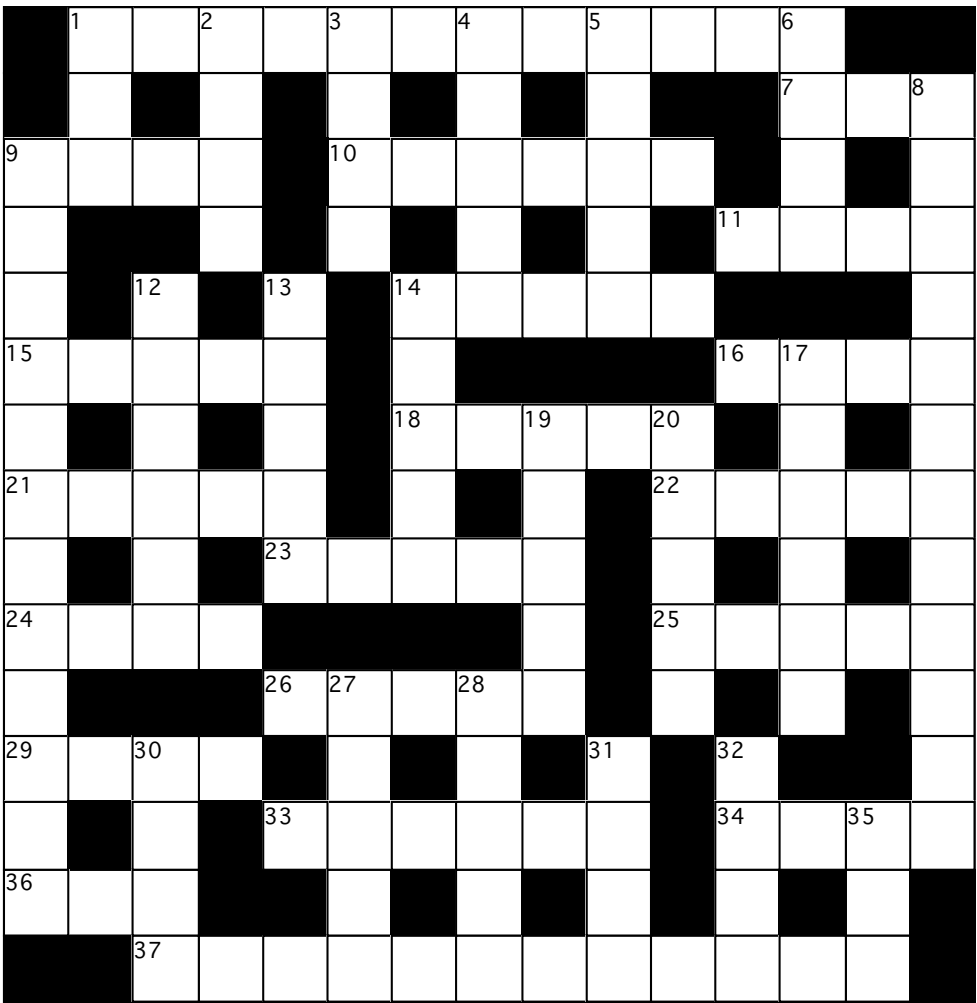
Gordius 707

Across

- 1 & 14a Extreme signs of penitence (9,3,5)
- 7 Nocturnal bird of prey (3)
- 9 Repair (4)
- 10 Paper hankie (6)
- 11 Recognise or understand (4)
- 14 See 1 across
- 15 Ketchup (5)
- 16 On your own (4)
- 18 Infantile paralysis (5)
- 21 Head of a monastery (5)
- 22 Pretend (5)
- 23 Useful, convenient (5)
- 24 Female child (4)
- 25 The French word for love (5)
- 26 Relating to the Arctic or Antarctic (5)
- 29 On-course betting service (4)
- 33 Facility where yachts dock (6)
- 34 The Eucharist (4)
- 36 Uncooked (3)
- 37 Myopic (5-7)

Down

- 1 Diocese (3)
- 2 Cipher (4)
- 3 Metropolis (4)
- 4 Fertile spot in a desert (5)
- 5 Dwelling (5)
- 6 Fluffy feathers (4)
- 8 Benelux nations (3,9)



- 9 Deadly crime (12)
- 12 Mathematical digit (6)
- 13 Name shared by cities in Scotland and Australia (5)
- 14 Quivering tree (5)
- 17 Prayer (6)
- 19 Stratum (5)
- 20 Animal innards (5)
- 27 Broadcasting live (2,3)
- 28 Sign of the zodiac, the
- Ram (5)
- 30 Pulls - a broken-down car, perhaps (4)
- 31 Tolloed a bell (4)
- 32 Radiate (4)
- 35 Unhappy (3)

SOLUTIONS, MARCH 13

GORDIUS No. 706

Across

- 1 Fee 3 Clear the air 8 Reeled 9 Ointment 10 Heart 11 Hades 13 Piste 15 Restore 16 Younger 20 Hurry 21 Twill 23 Wedge 24. Handsome 25 Punnet 26. Surrendered 27 Ail

Down

- 1 Fire hydrant 2 Emeralds 3 Cheat 4 Abolish 5 Hitch 6 Agenda 7 Rot 12 Sacramental 13 Porch 14 Ebony 17 Gardenia 18 Precede 19 Winner 22 Lisle 23 Wound 24 Has

Sudoku Corner

575

Easy

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

Hard

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		3					5	
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Last week's Easy 574

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

Last week's Hard 574

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

Notebook

Fr Billy Swan



The basics of evangelisation...

Having celebrated the feast of St Patrick, now is a good time to consider our call to evangelise in our day as St Patrick did successfully in his. Explored here are four basic components of evangelisation: the personal, inter-personal, liturgical and cultural.

First, the personal. Karl Barth, the Swiss Protestant theologian from the last century, was once asked by a journalist towards the end of his life: "Dr Barth, what was the most profound of your many theological insights?". The journalist was expecting a long and complex answer. Instead, Barth answered simply: "Jesus loves me". Here is where evangelisation begins and the truth to which we return time and time again. Only when we know in our bones that "Jesus loves me" are we ready to evangelise. It is a truth that grabs us, giving our lives purpose and meaning. It is the gift of God's love and life that upholds us, renews us and changes us. What is essential is that we are convinced of God's love towards us, that Jesus Christ has saved us and that He is our final hope.

The second component of evangelisation is the inter-personal. We



are not content just to be a disciple of Christ but want to make disciples as well. The conviction that "Jesus loves me" means that "Jesus loves you too". In the words of the late Pope Benedict XVI: "There is nothing more beautiful than to know Christ and speak to others of our friendship with him" (April 24, 2005). Interpersonal evangelisation also has to do with how we engage with those we encounter. The common experience of being human is the bridge that unites us with those we seek to evangelise. In this light, interpersonal evangelisation communicates a deep respect for those we encounter as

we share the Gospel with warmth, tenderness and love.

The third dimension of evangelisation is the liturgical. During the Rite of Baptism, the ears and mouth of the newly baptised are blessed so that the Lord Jesus "may soon touch your ears to receive his word and your mouth to proclaim his faith to the praise and glory of God the Father". Here at the very beginning of the Christian life is a forward impulse to go out from oneself to proclaim the Gospel. At the end of the Eucharist, one of the dismissal formulae announced by the priest, deacon or bishop is: "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord". In other words, let your whole life declare what is true - namely that Christ is alive, his kingdom is at hand and his love is the most powerful force in the world.

The fourth component of evangelisation is cultural. In modern times, Western culture in particular is in a state of flux leading to confusion and the de-stabilization of society. The Catholic response must always be to evangelise the culture, to participate in public affairs and re-lay the foundations of a just and stable civilization.

Every generation of Christians needs to return to the basics of evangelisation - to be touched, moved and transformed by a personal encounter with Jesus Christ crucified and risen; to move out beyond ourselves to encounter others in Jesus' name; to celebrate our common life with others through prayer, especially at the Eucharist; finally, to share our faith publicly in ways that transforms the culture in which live.

24 hours for the Lord

On March 28-29, 24 hours of continuous Confession will be provided in designated churches around the country. This '24 hours for the Lord' is a prayer initiative of Pope Francis to help us experience to experience again the Lord's loving mercy in the

Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession), and for the opportunity to pray in a sacred space for the needs of those who suffer. For this Jubilee Year, the Holy Father has chosen the motto from the words of the Psalmist, 'You are my hope' (Ps. 71:5). It beautifully links the hope that flows from being forgiven.

Re-arming Europe and a defeat of diplomacy

Andrea Tornielli's article in last week's *The Irish Catholic* (March 13) was timely and necessary. I have been troubled in recent weeks by unqualified welcomes by politicians for the 'Re-arm Europe' campaign that plans to spend up to 800 billion Euros on arms for security. Such a development represents the defeat of diplomacy, creating a culture of mistrust and the building of walls between nations. That such a colossal sum of money be used on arms instead of education, housing, food and health care is grotesque.

If the Church exists to evangelise then prayerful attention to these basics is essential.



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

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

THE SITUATION IS DIRE AND WE HAVE RUN OUT OF FUNDS

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

PLEASE WILL YOU HELP SR HELLEN?

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

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



LENT WITH ST THERESE

In 1893, St Therese of Lisieux wrote to her sister Celine:

"Jesus wills that we give alms to him as to one poor and needy. He puts Himself as it were at our mercy; He will take nothing but what we give to Him from our heart, and the very least trifle is precious in His sight."

The three pillars of Lent are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The Catechism says: "Giving alms to the poor is a witness to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God."

In Lent, we can serve Christ and help the destitute with our almsgiving

The Little Way Association uses the world's network of missionaries to help those in direst need. Priests, Sisters and Brothers work in some of the world's poorest areas and in political trouble-spots. Our policy is never to deduct anything from donations earmarked for the relief of poverty or for missionary work.

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

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

I enclose €..... to be allocated to:

- €..... **HUNGRY AND SICK IN KENYA**
- €..... **MISSION CHAPELS**
- €..... **WELLS / CLEAN WATER**
- €..... **MASS OFFERINGS** (please state no.)
- €..... **LITTLEWAY ADMIN. EXPENSES**

We ask for a minimum of €7 or more for each Mass

To donate online go to
www.littlewaysassociation.com

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

☐ Please tick if you would like an acknowledgement

Name (Rev. Mr. Mrs. Miss)

(Block letters please)

Address

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