

The Irish Catholic

THE 'O' ANTIPHONS

A final burst of Advent before Christmas

Page 31 and 33



BREDA O'BRIEN

There is still so much to be grateful for Page 7



CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Stimulating young minds

Page 36 and 37



Thursday, December 17, 2020

€2.00 (Stg £1.70)

The-Irish-Catholic-Newspaper

@IrishCathNews

www.irishcatholic.com

Parishes hailed for 'trojan work' as priests ready for busy Christmas

Ruadhán Jones

With just a week to go to Christmas, many parishes have pulled out all the stops to ensure that as many people as is safely possible can attend Mass. Many areas reported large socially-distanced queues of parishioners applying for tickets to attend one of the many extra Christmas liturgies.

A lot of priests have decided to hold additional Masses due to restrictions on attendance and some priests have even come out of retirement to assist.

Church leaders have praised what they have described as the "tremendous" work of priests and parishes in what they say has been an "intense" period of preparations for Christmas. However, they also pleaded with parishioners to be reasonable and patient as parishes are doing their very best to accommodate people. Bishop Fintan Monahan of Killaloe said that priests and parish councils must be "commended" for their "trojan work" at a difficult time. "It's very hard to predict, of the people who don't normally go, who will turn up on the day," he said. "If you have a ticketing system in place, as a lot of the parishes have, the challenge will be what happens if extras turn up and you're

» Continued on Page 2

Even from a social distance...God is very near



Pupils from Long Tower Primary School in Derry pray during a virtual Mass celebrated by Bishop Donal McKeown in the nearby Church of St Columba. Pupils joined via large screens from their classrooms in the liturgy which launched a year-long celebration to mark the 1,500th anniversary of the birth of St Columba. Photo: Stephen Latimer. See page 12.

DAVID QUINN

The Church, the nation state and the EU

PAGE 8



CHRISTMAS ON THE BOX

All the picks of the season for all the family

PAGE 35



MARY KENNY

Should we feel guilty about the Famine?

PAGE 5



YOUTH 2000

CHRISTMAS eRETREAT 2020

18th-20th December

Register for free at www.youth2000.ie



Inside this week

Fr Rolheiser

We can't take for granted the previous gifts of health, family and work [Page 30](#)



Medical Matters

Welcome Christmas news on the Covid-19 vaccine [Page 32](#)



Dad's Diary

Our childhood Christmases are too few

[Page 33](#)



Managing Editor: Michael Kelly, editor@irishcatholic.ie

Northern Correspondent: Martin O'Brien, martin@irishcatholic.ie

Multimedia Journalists: Chai Brady, chai@irishcatholic.ie

Ruadhán Jones, ruadhan@irishcatholic.ie

Jason Osborne, jason@irishcatholic.ie

Newsroom: news@irishcatholic.ie 01 6874026

Books Editor: Peter Costello, books@irishcatholic.ie

Advertising: advertising@irishcatholic.ie 01 6874094

Accounts: accounts@irishcatholic.ie 01 6874020

Magnificat: magnificat@irishcatholic.ie

Shop: shop@irishcatholic.ie

Managing Director: Garry O'Sullivan

Annual Subscription Rates: Ireland €145. Airmail €250. Six months – €75.

ISSN 1393 - 6832 - Published by The Irish Catholic,

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

Dublin 18, D18 K277.

Printed by Webprint, Cork.

Place an Advert

Phone 01 687 4094 or advertising@irishcatholic.ie

Our involuntary simplicity this Christmas could be a reset

Normally at this time of year our parishes and churches would be abuzz with preparations for carol services.

Christmas has the ability to turn the heart of even the most devoted cynic. Who can fail to be moved by the sight of wide-eyed children dressed as Mary and Joseph carrying a doll to a makeshift manger?

“Presence, for example, is irreplaceable – as anyone missing a loved one at this time of year will tell you”

There's something powerfully simple about Christmas – and this year we're experiencing that simplicity acutely. The frenetic toing and froing of previous years is not a feature that we can risk this year.

There's nothing good about this pandemic, but it is in times of crisis that we can grow. Next Christmas, please God, things will be better. But do we need the stress of stockpiling and distributing presents to people we don't see from one end of the year to the next? Is the credit card bill in January really the price we have to pay to have a cheery December?

Pope Francis

Back in March, Pope Francis said that the coronavirus is a call “to seize this time of trial as a time of choosing.

“It is not the time of your judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not.

“It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and

to others,” the Pope said in his March *urbi et orbi* address.

“There's nothing good about this pandemic, but it is in times of crisis that we can grow”

Nine months later that remains true and the light of Christmas this year is an ideal opportunity to look at the child in the manger and re-commit ourselves to a more simple way of living and being in the world.

Presence, for example, is irreplaceable – as anyone missing a loved one at this time of year will tell you. It means more than a bottle of cheap wine or another box of Christmas biscuits.

The first Christmas in Bethlehem was a very simple affair and I can't help but think that part of God's plan in confounding worldly notions of kingship and power is a plea for simplicity.

Simplicity has been thrust upon us, but we don't have to become puritans or reject pleasures like good food and good wine with great (socially distanced!) company this Christmas, but we can give thanks for all that we have and make good out of a dreadful year by seeing simplicity as both good for us and good for the planet.

i To join Friends of The Irish Catholic and support Catholic journalism, please phone the office on 01 6874094 for more information or to make a contribution.



Editor's Comment
Michael Kelly

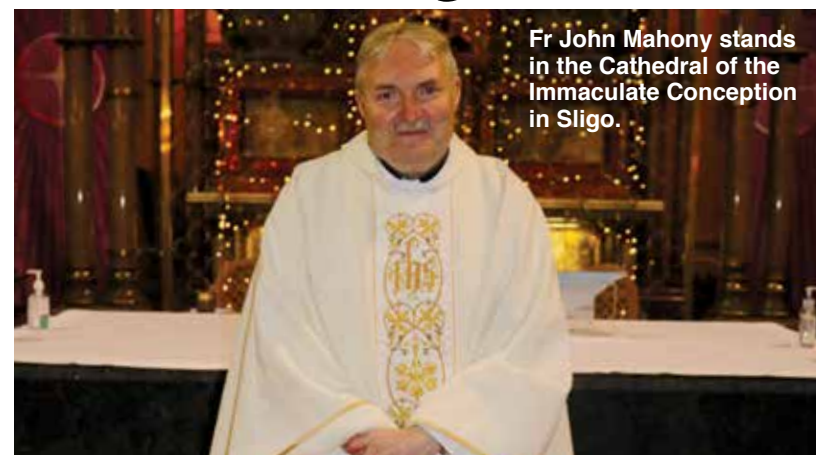
Fr John Mahony ordained in Sligo Cathedral

Jason Osborne

Fr John Mahony is the newest priest to be ordained to the priesthood for the Diocese of Elphin, with the ordination taking place in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Co. Sligo on December 8.

At the ordination, Bishop Kevin Doran noted that this was the first ordination to the diocese since Fr John Coughlan was ordained 12 years ago, but commended Fr Mahony to the Holy Spirit, that his ministry might “allow space for the Spirit to work in you” and in the community.

Fr Mahony now takes his place as the Administrator of Ballintubber-Ballymoe Parish.



Fr John Mahony stands in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Sligo.

Parishes hailed for 'trojan work' over Christmas

» Continued from Page 1

beyond the capacity. All of those fears are there. “But priests, pastoral councils and Covid committees have done Trojan work,” he added. “They're to be commended on that because it's been a difficult and challenging time, for everybody but particularly for parishes.” Bishop Monahan continued, saying that, though it will be an intense few days, he's confident it will be “a great time... it's what we live for, Christmas and Easter”. Dr Monahan concluded, saying he hoped the “innovation and energy” of the

Covid-period will be carried on after it has passed. Bishop Phonsie Cullinan said it was “heartening” to see the hard work and innovation of parishes. He asked that people be reasonable in their expectations as parishes “are doing their very best”. “You will always get the unreasonable people, but we're just asking people to be reasonable and to realise that the priest and his parish teams are caught right in the middle of a difficult situation and they're doing their very best,” Bishop Cullinan said. The bishop of Waterford

and Lismore encouraged those who may be vulnerable to remember they can attend Mass online and that “the Lord is with them right there in their homes”. “Make the crib more central perhaps and to visit a church at times outside of the Mass times if they cannot get to Mass,” he said. “Also to consider going to a Mass at some other time rather than at the peak time.” Bishop Denis Nulty of Kildare and Leighlin said the priests and parishes have been “absolutely tremendous” during Christmas and throughout the year. “They're doing wonderful

work,” he said. “They have great parish Covid teams working around them, making sure there's stewarding, there's sanitisation, that people feel safe who wish to come.

“All that I can say is that people are delighted that our churches have gently reopened,” Bishop Nulty continued. “It's much more difficult when there's no contact at all. Even though its curtailed, we're all wearing masks and so on, at least we're seeing people,” he said.

The Church has urged people who cannot attend Mass – especially those who are vulnerable or may have an underlying condition – to participate online.



BE PART OF A WORLD WITHOUT HUNGER

Adukual* (18) and her seven-month-old baby, Elizabeth* live in South Sudan, a country torn by years of conflict.

Like millions of others, every day they depend on Concern Worldwide to survive the devastating effects of war, poverty and hunger.

Concern is able to help thanks to the support of people like you, who have left us a gift in their Will. Will you consider doing the same?

For more information, please request your free copy of Concern's legacy booklet. Contact Siobhan on 01 4178020, email siobhan.oconnor@concern.net or visit www.concern.net/bequest – finding out more does not, of course, oblige you to leave a gift.

Why not do it right now before you turn the page?

Concern Worldwide, a company limited by guarantee, Registered Company Number: 39647, Registered Revenue Number: CHY 5745, Registered Charity Number: 20009090, Registered in Ireland, Registered address is 52-55 Lower Camden St, Dublin 2

*Names changed to protect identities.

ENDING EXTREME POVERTY WHATEVER IT TAKES

‘Loneliness is killing me Father’ – priest tells of plight of lonely parishioners

Chai Brady

A Belfast-based priest has said he is “genuinely concerned” about loneliness among his parishioners and the future emotional impact Covid-19 restrictions could have.

Fr Martin McGill PP of St John’s said a parishioner told him “the loneliness is killing me”, a sentiment he says was echoed by others who approached him.

“I suppose I am aware of loneliness but I don’t think I was aware of it to the same degree that happened during the pandemic until I got that response,” he said.

“We need to make sure there’s a support system. I would be concerned the issue of loneliness has come more to the fore than it has been before the whole lockdown.” Fr McGill said the issue is “very important” and “something we need to be more aware of”.

“The reality is, I don’t think we’re going to really know until this is well over. I would be genuinely concerned about the emotional impact this has had on us, we’re living through

it at the moment and to some extent we get on with it but maybe it’s only really afterwards that for some of us we realise: that was really difficult.”

His comments come after Archbishop Eamon Martin and other Christian Church leaders welcomed an appeal made by the BBC who are offering resources to combat loneliness and have engaged charities.

“My first response to the BBC appeal was well ‘that sounds sort of interesting’ but I have to say as time has gone on and I heard some of their publicity around it, I’ve realised it is significant,” said Fr McGill.

The Christian leaders said that “reaching out to those who are feeling lonely and isolated is an important part of the Christmas preparations for local churches”.

“This year, we have had to think even more creatively about how we do that while protecting public health, but we are conscious that this pastoral and community outreach will be more important than ever.”

Away in a shopping centre



Clergy from across several Christian denominations attended the annual blessing of Dundrum Town Centre’s crib in Co. Dublin, last week. Pictured are Rev. Stephen Taylor, Methodist Church, Fr John Bracken PP Holy Cross, Don Nugent General Manager of Dundrum Town Centre, Fr Liam Belton PP Ballinteer/Meadowbrook parishes, Rev. Nigel Pierpoint, Curate, Taney parish, Church of Ireland, Rev. Christopher West, Curate, Taney parish, Church of Ireland. Photo: Chai Brady

Give the Gift of **MAGNIFICAT**

Share the joy of the liturgy with friends and family this Christmas season.

Complete with the daily Mass readings, prayers to start and end the day, essays on the saints and commentary on religious art, Magnificat focuses faith beyond Sunday Mass.



Magnificat subscriptions are a gift your loved one will treasure throughout the year.

Annual Gift Subscription } **€53**

6 Month Gift Subscription **€30**

TO ORDER YOUR GIFT SUBSCRIPTION TODAY,

Phone: 01 6874024 | Email: magnificat@irishcatholic.ie

Visit: www.irishcatholic.com/shop

Post a cheque to: The Irish Catholic, Block 3b, Bracken Business Park, Bracken Road, Sandyford, Dublin 18, D18 K277

Who will pass on the flame of faith?

For over 130 years, *The Irish Catholic* has been a voice of hope and inspiration for Catholics in Ireland. Help up pass on the flame of faith, by remembering us in your Will.

Phone 01 6874028 in strictest confidence



Follow *The Irish Catholic* on Twitter
IrishCathNews

Support is the key to Gianna Care success

Jason Osborne

Crisis pregnancy organisation Gianna Care has told of “a really good year” for their services, despite the obvious challenges presented by Covid-19.

Challenges

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, Gianna Care director Carolyn O’Meara told of the challenges the year posed for everybody, and how it affected their often hands-on, in-person work.

“We’d a lot of challenges and we had to adapt, and luckily, we’ve just fantastic volunteers and everybody adapted to the situ-

ation and we did the best that we could by, you know, posting out things to women, doing Zoom chats and chats on the phone,” Mrs O’Meara said.

Gianna Care receives on average between 40-50 contacts a month from women for a variety of reasons.

“It might be just a question related to a result of a pregnancy test, it could be a crisis pregnancy but not abortion-minded, an abortion-minded woman in crisis, post-abortion women looking for counselling...a lot of them have had challenges due to Covid as well.” Those difficulties include financial pressures, job instability, and crisis pregnancies.

In spite of the increased demand for their help, Gianna Care has managed to expand its operation, with Mrs O’Meara referencing the new locations the non-profit has opened this year alone.

New locations

“We’ve opened in three new locations this year as well, which has been super busy to organise. Obviously it was in the background before 2020 that these things would be happening but they’ve all opened up. So we had Kerry in April, we had in July, Offaly, and then just most recently, we’ll be launching Limerick.”

The expanded scope of their operation has allowed Gianna Care to reach more women

this year than they previously would have – with 75 women who were “extremely” abortion-minded choosing to keep their babies.

“(They had) not necessarily wanted to have an abortion but felt that they had no choice, contacted Gianna Care and luckily, they felt empowered and supported enough to be able to choose life for their babies. We’d a lot of births, and we’ve a lot of pending births, and yeah, really, really exciting year. It’s been great overall to be honest.”

Mrs O’Meara was quick to attribute the success of their work throughout 2020 to their supporters and volunteers, saying the work cannot “happen without them”.

Drive-in to receive the Lord in Antrim

Hundreds have been taking part in drive-in Masses celebrated by Fr John Forsythe each week in Randalstown, Co. Antrim. With the help of volunteers, Fr Forsythe of St MacNissis parish was able to accommodate 137 cars with approximately 300 people whereas with social distancing only 100 could attend Mass in their 800-seat church.

Attendee and photographer Michael McKay said: “It was a very historic and enjoyable happening in our community and it was a privilege to be there with our very enthusiastic congregation.”



A young parishioner receives the Eucharist after drive-in Mass in Randalstown, Co. Antrim.



Fr John Forsythe celebrates drive-in Mass.

Parishes working hard to cater for big Mass demand over Christmas

Ruadhán Jones

Parishes have had to innovate to meet the demand for Mass, setting up booking systems, putting on extra Masses and appealing for charity in response.

St Eunan’s Cathedral

St Eunan’s Cathedral Letterkenny told *The Irish Catholic* that they usually have 4,000 attendees over Christmas Eve and Christmas day. They know they can’t cater for all and have set up a booking system to manage numbers.

“We’ve added a number of Masses to our schedule for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day,” Fr Kevin Gillespie said. “But there’s a huge demand and it’s almost booked out at this stage.”

Safety

“For everybody’s safety, it’s important to have a book-

ing system in place that’s as fair as possible and to give those who can’t come the opportunity of coming.”

Meanwhile, Dundrum parish in Co Dublin has asked parishioners to nominate people for seats at Christmas Masses as restrictions mean reduced attendance.

Masses

Fr John Bracken explained that “at Christmas we normally have 3000 people coming to Mass. This year, we have 300 spots over six Masses.”

“I’m asking people over the next few weeks to view Christmas through the lens of the Good Samaritan,” he explained. “With 300 places, rather than rushing in to get my place sorted is there somebody who you know you could nominate. What a great gift we could give to someone this Christmas!”

Pope Francis’ year of St Joseph hailed as ‘hugely significant’ by Knock Shrine

Staff reporter

Pope Francis’ “hugely significant” declaration of 2021 as ‘The Year of St Joseph’ has been “warmly welcomed” by Fr Richard Gibbons of Knock Shrine.

Fr Gibbons said that the announcement is especially significant in the context of the pandemic.

Fr Gibbons said that St Joseph “invites us to place all our prayers and intercessions in her Our Lady’s care, as she intercedes for us with her Son”.

“In these unprecedented and challenging times, that message is as relevant to us today as it was in 1879,” he continued.

“As we face 2021 with hope, we look forward to welcoming pilgrims back to Knock Shrine for a wonderful year of celebrations as we come together to honour St Joseph, Patron of the Catholic Church, the quiet, supportive presence who appeared here at Knock. St Joseph, in his own quiet way, points each of us in the direction of our Blessed Mother.”

The Famine – are we all guilty?



Mary Kenny

The *Hunger* – RTÉ's documentary on the Famine – certainly was a landmark achievement in television history, using resources with great skill. It was unsparing in some of its distressing detail – not flinching from mentioning incidents of cannibalism – and in attributing shocking behaviour to ordinary Irish people as well as to the British authorities, and the heartless evicting landlords. Lord Lucan sure was a stinker – evicting three hundred homesteads from his 60,000 acres in Co. Mayo.

“People whose families benefited from slavery are asked to acknowledge their historical guilt, and make amends”

But Irish Catholics who survived, the experts claim, often grew ‘hard-hearted’, and denied others the charity and compassion they should have extended. It has long been a theme of that fine historian, Prof. Joe Lee, that the middleclass Irish benefited from the Famine, since the poor ‘spalpeens’ were cleared from the land.

● I interviewed the late Conrad Russell, direct descendent of Lord John Russell, the Whig Prime Minister between 1846 and 1852, and responsible for policies in Ireland. Conrad, last child of philosopher Bertrand Russell, was an academic historian and he admitted to me that his ancestor had been, regrettably (he said), profoundly anti-Catholic. And that this had played a part in his approach to Ireland.

People whose families benefited from slavery are asked to acknowledge their historical guilt, and make amends. Will those of us who are descendants of Famine survivors also be asked to account for our family's record?

“The Hunger made it clear that the poor were indeed the victims, and they carried their bitterness with them when they emigrated”

My maternal grandfather came from a farming family in east Co. Galway. These ‘yeomen farmers’ were exactly the people who Joe Lee has in mind as profiting from the land clearances.

When my mother asked her father about family memories of the Famine, he apparently replied: “Yes, it was very sad about the poor people.” The ‘poor people’ were the victims, but it was as if they weren't really connected to respectable farmers.

The Hunger made it clear that the poor were indeed



An 1849 depiction of Bridget O'Donnell and her two children during the Famine.

the victims, and they carried their bitterness with them when they emigrated. Understandably.

Judgements

And yet, I wonder if it's fair to generalise about entire groups, and to pronounce judgements on whole classes. Prof. Kevin Whelan, who I greatly admire – his book *Religion, Landscape and Settlement in Ireland* is terrific – said that after the Famine “we became a very pious but not a religious people”. We changed, he said, from a natural spirituality into a

nation of ‘craw-thumpers’ – a performative form of piety for the sake of display.

But most of us can also look back on family history and see sincere religious traditions. Even Gay Byrne's interviews with various celebrities for his series *The Meaning of Life* illuminate a genuine religious tradition, often inherited through mothers and grandmothers. From Imelda May to Ronan Keating, younger people still held on to that thread.

The Hunger is brilliant, but it's still not the last word on this terrible time, and its aftermath.

A genius whose music rose above deaf ears

December 2020 was marked as 250th anniversary of Ludwig van Beethoven's birth, considered to be the greatest of all musical composers.

Fifth Symphony

Everyone, surely, knows Beethoven's famous Fifth Symphony. But when I was a rookie reporter, our News Editor used to say to us: “Remember, when Beethoven's Fifth is played, somebody is hearing it for the first time.” This was a reminder to us not to assume that everything is familiar to everyone: but it was also a tribute to the symphony's universal renown.

Beethoven had a difficult life: his father beat him brutally, and his mother died young, as did four of his siblings, in a family of seven. (He was baptised a Catholic.) He began to grow deaf in his late twenties – a dreadful blow for a musician.

The Fifth Symphony was disparaged when it was first played. The famous

four-note introduction – ‘dah-dah-dah-dah’ – was considered an unacceptable innovation. Yet, once heard, it is unforgettable, and has proved adaptable to many variations and interpretations, including morse code.

Genius

Beethoven was blessed with genius, but he also worked ceaselessly – discarding draft after draft of compositions. Perhaps the disability of his deafness made him even more of a perfectionist.

In the 1960s, there was a celebrated debate on BBC between the formidable intellectual, Marghanita Laski, and a couple of doctors who were advocating abortion rights. “Would you permit an abortion to a woman in poor health, who had too many children, married to a cruel husband, living in reduced circumstances?” she asked. An ideal candidate, they agreed. “Then,” said



this left-wing bluestocking, “you would just have killed Beethoven.”

Beethoven had a hard life and his late string quartets reflect that melancholy. But it was a life which left an imperishable legacy.

THE ENCHANTED LAKE

BEAUTIFULLY REIMAGINED



Step back in time with Sinéad de Valera's collection of classic Irish fairy tales, now with beautiful illustrations to enrich the reading experience of adults and children alike.

Written in a simple yet imaginative manner, these timeless stories of age-old morals hailing from the land of Erin are sure to strike a chord with young readers and entrance a whole new generation. Beyond a set of stories, this book is a piece of art, a keepsake to be passed from parent to child and makes for a wonderful gift to share at Christmas.

€22.99 + FREE P&P*

*EXCLUSIVE FOR THE IRISH CATHOLIC READERS. VALID UNTIL DECEMBER 15

TO ORDER:

Phone 01 6874096

www.currachbooks.com

or post a cheque payable to Tarsus Media
Unit 3b, Bracken Business Park, Bracken
Road, Sandyford, Dublin 18, D18 K277

 CURRACHBOOKS

Cloyne Diocese hope youth will 'grow in faith' through new Bl. Acutis project

Ruadhán Jones

The project leaders believe the example of Italian teen Bl. Carlo Acutis will inspire the youth of Cork through a new online course.

The diocese of Cloyne launched their four-month online project aimed at 13-18-year olds on December 8. Fr Eamonn Roache, one of the project's organisers, told *The Irish Catholic* that the project was developed to combat the curtailment of Church activities during the pandemic.

"The idea here is to engage teenagers and their families in Church life and activity in pandemic times," Fr

Roache said. "The focus of it is for the teenagers to get an appreciation for the life and spirituality of Blessed Carlo, especially his love of the Eucharist."

"For a young person we'll say aged 13/14, to be without Mass for a few months is not a good situation. It's a big chunk out of their lives, especially at a time where they're developing – it's very regrettable."

Fr Roache hopes those who take part will "grow in faith", whether they be practising Catholics or new to the Faith.

"Every Catholic needs to develop in their Faith, to learn in their Faith so there's a catechesis component for this

project," Fr Roache said. "For someone who's only partially practising the Faith, it's a chance for them to know more."

Fr Roache said they don't want the course to be solely virtual, that the ultimate focus is on God's presence in the Eucharist.

"There's one teaching video a week and one Zoom chat a week," he said. "One of the things in the project is that they have to visit their own church twice a week to pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament in the church."

For more information on the project, visit <http://blessed-carlo-project-cloyne.com/mywordpress/>.

Almost €25,000 raised for Syrian refugees in Lebanon

Chai Brady

An Irish singer and a faith-based community group have raised almost €25,000 in separate appeals for Syrian refugees who fled to Lebanon due to conflict.

Róisín O'Reilly, from Cavan but now living in Dublin recorded her interpretation of the Christmas classic 'O Holy Night' with the aim of raising funds for refugee schoolchildren in Tyre, Lebanon.

She says on her 'gofundme' online fundraising page: "Several years ago I was introduced to Fr William Stuart's work in Tyre, south Lebanon when he founded this school for Syrian refugee children displaced by the Syrian war.

"These children are known as 'street children' – they work on the streets, from 8am every day selling anything from hair clips to chewing gum to anyone who will buy. "This song choice, O Holy

Night, seemed most appropriate as the holy family themselves were refugees at the time Jesus was born. They fled Bethlehem in what's known as 'The Flight into Egypt' after King Herod ordered the slaughter of every boy under the age of two on hearing of the birth of Jesus."

In a separate appeal, faith-group Creideamh, with the help of the people of the greater Ballinasloe area, raised almost €12,000 in a Syrian Refugee Winter Blanket, Clothing and Necessities Appeal, with the proceeds going to Trócaire.

Secretary of Creideamh, Justin Harkin said of the refugees: "I am fearful for them. In the course of our fundraising this hit some of us on the committee quite strongly at a personal level and we began to realise, actually this is bigger than we recognised."

Christmas prayer resources for hospices and nursing homes welcomed by Bishop

Jason Osborne

An initiative which sees spiritual support brought to those living in care facilities has been hailed as "much in demand" by Bishop Michael Router.

The effort is being led by the Northern Pastoral Network (NPN), a cross-boarder group of pastoral care workers from Catholic dioceses, and sees prayer resources provided via PowerPoint for use during Advent and Christmas.

Bishop Router said that the current pandemic has impacted heavily on the ability of the most vulnerable to practice their faith, and that this initiative will help those in a residential setting "safely celebrate this special time of year in as a traditional way as possible".

Bishop Router concluded by thanking the NPN for offering the resource for use by managers in nursing homes, hospices and hospitals on both sides of the border.



The Carlingford Pipe Band plays before Cooley parish's new Advent/Christmas banner. The banner was part of the Parish Pastoral Council's outreach of hope, and saw a person from each of the parish's townlands insert a tile in the construction of the image.

Antrim GAA 'smashes' goal for SVP appeal

Staff reporter

Antrim GAA kicked off St Vincent de Paul's Christmas fundraising appeal with a traditional music evening raising €8,307.38 from an original target of €5,000. In previous years their Christmas #SaffronAid Appeal has been supported by clubs across the county providing St Vincent de Paul with 5,000 shoeboxes but, due to the pandemic, the traditional form of donating gifts for Christmas was not possible this year. The event was hosted live on the county's Facebook page with music from Sean McCorry and family.

Sean Kelly, Antrim PRO, said: "We are thrilled to have been able to kick off St Vincent de Paul's annual Christmas fundraising appeal by smashing our €5,000 target and raising more than €8,000 with donations from across the county. Mary Waide, Regional President of St Vincent de Paul, said: "We are absolutely overwhelmed by the generosity of the people who donated online while enjoying a great night's entertainment with Antrim GAA's unique online fundraiser. For families faced with impossible choices this Christmas, this donation will go a long way to offering some hope during what will be for many, a very different kind of Christmas."

NEWS IN BRIEF

Bishop Larry Duffy and Archdeacon Brian Harper release joint Christmas message

Bishop of Clogher, Larry Duffy, and Church of Ireland Archbishop's Commissary for the Diocese of Clogher,

Brian Harper have issued a joint statement for Christmas 2020.

In it, the Church leaders reminded their respective congregations that the season is a reminder that God is Immanuel, 'God with us'. This has been particularly important this year when the question, "Where is God in the midst of this crisis?" has reared its head at the worst of times, they say.

"There have been many 'plagues' that have affected us through history and throughout the world but this has been the first in a world which is so interconnected and interdependent," the statement said.

Despite this, Christmas provides the opportunity to "know the presence of Immanuel in our lives and in our homes".

Breda O'Brien

The View



Even in the dark days of 2020, there is still so much for which to be grateful

Recently, I was straightening a framed photograph of my mother which sits on my cluttered office desk at home. I noticed that the photo had slipped down in the frame and that something was visible behind it.

Intrigued, I removed the backing and found an undated letter from my mother. I had absolutely no recollection of placing it there. I must have thought at the time that I would never forget but I did. Coming across it was like a bittersweet blessing.

It is more like a note than a letter and is obviously written in haste, although my mother's handwriting was always better than mine.

“I hope and believe that my mother forgives me for my self-centredness but I still wish that she had slightly less to forgive”

It reads: “Breda, I am writing this in Waterford. Just thought a postal order would be better than a cheque. I was very upset last night to think that you had no money. I know the feeling. When we got married first, it was awful. We hadn't a penny but still survived. Mum.”

I can see her writing the note in the car, probably the same car that she died in three years later on the feast of the Holy Rosary, as she and my father were saying the Angelus while crossing the bridge across the Suir from Ferrybank.

As far as I can make out, I received the letter in 1996, 24 years ago, along with the postal order, which probably paid a bill that I had no idea how we were going to pay. I had one child and was pregnant with another and like many young couples, we were struggling financially.

My mother died in October 1999. It may well have been the last letter



As we light the Advent candles one by one, we are not pretending that the dark does not exist. We are just saying that it does not have the last word. Photo: CNS

which I received from her. It certainly is the last letter I still possess. The swift, empathetic generosity was typical of my mother. Her favourite saying was that you never miss what you give. She had a hard life in many ways and sometimes I bitterly regret that I did not appreciate her more when she was alive. I presumed that I would have years more with her.

“Even in the dark days of 2020, there is still so much for which to be grateful”

In these dark December days, in an Advent like no other that I can remember, my mother's letter is a reminder to be grateful and to let people know that we are grateful while we still have the chance to do so in the flesh. I hope and believe that my mother forgives me for my

self-centredness but I still wish that she had slightly less to forgive.

Even in the dark days of 2020, there is still so much for which to be grateful. As we light the Advent candles one by one, we are not pretending that the dark does not exist. We are just saying that it does not have the last word.

Unbearable

This year has brought unbearable suffering to some, financial ruin to others, and some degree of loneliness and inconvenience to everyone.

It has swiftly dispatched the notion that we human beings are ever in control. And while the darkness and suffering are real, so too, are the blessings.

In one way, I think of the first lockdown as bonus time. My children, all now adults, were scattering in the normal fashion when the lockdown gave us extra months together in the same

house. Precious time to be savoured, made all the more precious by knowing that it would end.

“I understand why I love him but it is a daily miracle to me that he loves me”

My own health took a battering as stress and working in far from ideal conditions re-activated a chronic pain illness that I have had for years. A pain-free day became something to savour. A night's sleep became an event worthy of celebrating by a diary entry. Why does it take something like pain to make us appreciate being pain-free? Should we not be dancing every day that is a normal, ordinary, blessed day?

Friends

Close friends have lost spouses in recent years. I still have my best friend,

the one who knows me inside out and somehow, unlikely as it seems, manages to love me to pieces. I understand why I love him but it is a daily miracle to me that he loves me. And not just my husband but other friends who mock me, mind me and make me laugh. Such riches, such immense riches, so much for which to be grateful.

The expression to 'count your blessings' reminds us of the ultimate source of

all that we so often take for granted. Some Jews believe that one should try to find 100 blessings in the day, while gratitude researchers give us the more modest goal of recording three things a day. Either way, this Advent, may we grow ever more grateful to God for his many gifts. As Christmas draws near, in the words of the psalm: May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

“Either way, this Advent, may we grow ever more grateful to God for his many gifts”

Love's Doorway to Life

Scripted and Narrated by Úna Agnew and Art Agnew

An unique compilation of Patrick Kavanagh's work, which traces the story of his life from the drumlin hills of Monaghan to the Grand Canal in Dublin.

Utilising more than 50 excerpts that cover three stages of his life, Kavanagh is celebrated as the people's poet who captures the spirit of a people and immortalises cameos of Irish life in a lyrical language that is unsurpassed.



SPECIAL OFFER
BUY ONE SET FOR
€25 WITH FREE P&P
AND GET ANOTHER SET FOR
HALF PRICE

Can be posted out immediately as a Christmas gift
**GO ON, REACH OUT TO
SOMEBODY SPECIAL**

Call now on 087 2789390
or email Paul.daly@eist.ie
www.eist.ie

PLEASE SUPPORT

Catholics and the process of European integration



The Church looks benignly at international organisations, but cannot do so uncritically writes David Quinn

Is there a Catholic position on the European Union? By that I don't mean does the Catholic Church believe in the EU or not. I mean is there a position all Catholics must adhere to like we must adhere to what it teaches about abortion, or about loving our neighbours as ourselves, to name but two?

The answer to the second question is no. Catholicism is often depicted as a dogmatic religion, and on certain issues it is, and must be. The Apostles' Creed for example, is a dogmatic statement. It is not a prayer as such. When we read it at Mass every week (occasionally we read the Nicene Creed instead), we are declaring what we believe about Jesus, the Trinity, and the nature of the Church. These have always been extremely fraught questions and could easily have destroyed the early Church if broad agreement could not be found.

For example, the question of the divinity of Christ was, and is, absolutely crucial. If Jesus is not divine, then he is not worthy of worship.

Politics

On questions of politics, however, the Church is, and always has been, vastly more flexible. Down the centuries the Church has accommodated itself to monarchy, to feudalism, to empires, to nation-states, to fascism, to liberal democracy and even to communism to greater or lesser degrees.

In an age of monarchy, it taught about the Divine Right of Kings. In the age of the nation-state, it wanted to be patriotic. Under communism, when its rights were not completely taken away, it emphasised Christian teaching on equality. Under fascism, like under the nation-state, it emphasised patriotism.

Under liberal democracy it has accommodated itself to the separation of Church and State (an

invention of Christianity by the way, dating back to Christ's injunction to separate the things of Caesar from the things of God).

In an age of globalisation, when bodies like the EU and the UN have become important, the Church can easily re-emphasise Christianity's universalist outlook and its teaching that we are all equally the children of God with equal rights, not group rights.

But likewise, there will always be tension between the Church and any particular political regime. Under monarchy, the Church often had to fight kings and nobles for its independence. Sometimes, the reverse had to happen.

“We can see the strength of what we'll call a politically correct agenda within the EU in the attacks by Brussels on Poland and Hungary”

Under the nation-state, especially in its most virulent form from the Nineteenth Century until 1945, Catholics were often suspected of disloyalty to the state and of a lack of patriotism because their ultimate loyalty was not to the nation or the state, and because the Church is a vast, international organisation not easily controlled by one state.

Under fascism, it opposed the idea that the state is all. Under its Nazi variation it opposed racism and the doctrine of survival of the fittest.

Under communism, it had to oppose its philosophical materialism, its atheism and its intent to either crush Christianity through violence or else relegate it to the private sphere in the hope it would wither on the vine.

In liberal democracies, the Church must draw attention to an exaggerated individualism (which leads easily to moral relativism), and a strong, secularising tendency that also seeks to drive religion to the margins.

Modern era

In the modern era, Christian Democracy is the political tendency the Catholic Church has felt most comfortable with, and in fact, the

“There will always be tension between the Church and any particular political regime”

founders of what has become the European Union were mainly Christian Democrats. To a large extent, the EU, or at least the EEC, is a Christian Democrat invention.

Christian Democrats also had a big say in the development of the UN, and Christian democracy massively influenced both the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

So, it is no wonder the Church tends to look benignly at international organisations like these. They fit with the Church's belief in universal values and an historical nervousness towards the nation-state.

But this is not to say the Church should be uncritical towards either the EU or the UN. Pope John Paul II, for example, was well aware of the very strong drive by UN organisations and some member-states to recognise abortion as a 'universal right' (even though it is mentioned in no UN document), and he fought back hard against

this push, which still continues and gains momentum.

Tendencies

Within the EU these same strong tendencies exist, as they do at national level, and they become stronger as Christian democracy fades as a political force.

We can see the strength of what we'll call a politically correct agenda within the EU in the attacks by Brussels on Poland and Hungary. In part, these attacks focus on Poland and Hungary's undermining of judicial independence, but they also focus on the pro-life and pro-family policies of those countries. These should not be the business of the EU because they are member-state prerogatives, but the EU makes it its business all the same. In other words, we can see what ideology is dominant in Brussels, and it is no longer Christian democracy.

Therefore, a country that is still pro-life and still believes strongly in the family of mother, father and child

as the fundamental group unit of society, has every reason to be wary of certain tendencies within the EU.

On the other hand, these tendencies are at least as strong in Ireland. We seem determined now to be the most 'modern' country in the EU. We might soon have euthanasia ahead of the vast majority of EU countries.

“This is not to say the Church should be uncritical towards either the EU or the UN”

What, then, is the 'right' Catholic attitude towards the EU? There isn't really one. We bring our principles to bear and then decide whether, on the whole, the EU is doing more good than harm or vice versa, whether the nation-state does more good than harm or vice versa, and what the right balance is between the EU and member-state sovereignty.

Christians are sojourners in the world. Politically, we should be willing to commit, but also to travel light, because politics is not ultimate. The nation-state isn't ultimate, and neither is the EU. We commit to them insofar as they serve the common good, and no further.



Pope Francis addressing the European Parliament. Every Pontiff has addressed the assembly since its members were first directly elected in 1979. Photo: CNS

This Christmas, give a gift that speaks volumes

For over 130 years, *The Irish Catholic* has been highlighting parish communities and defending the Faith in Ireland.

Share this award-winning paper with your loved ones and give them the tools they need to strengthen their faith and defend their beliefs in today's society.

**Knowledge is power.
Empower them today.**

**3 MONTH
SPECIAL
OFFER** **€35**
was €45

*Valid for new subscribers only, until December 31st



To subscribe to *The Irish Catholic*, or to gift a subscription, please fill in the form below and post it to us:

Name: _____ Surname: _____ Email: _____
Phone: _____ Address: _____ Eircode: _____

Subscription type: Personal Gift

Print Subscription

- 3 Months for €35
- 1 Year for €145

Digital Subscription

- 3 Months for €15
- 1 Year for €49

Credit Card payment details

Name on the card: _____
Credit card number: ____ / ____ / ____ / ____
Expiration date: __ / __ / __ CVV: ____

You can also send us a cheque/postal order to **The Irish Catholic**:
Unit 3b, Bracken Business Park, Bracken Road, Sandyford, Dublin 18, D18 K277

For more information, please visit
www.irishcatholic.com/shop
or call on 01 687 4028

The Irish Catholic

MAKE 2021 A YEAR TO GO TO THE HOLY LAND

This September and October will see two groups of pilgrims depart on an unforgettable trip to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. In recent years, these trips have become an integral part of The Irish Catholic year with hundreds of pilgrims making the journey from every corner of Ireland to take part in a unique opportunity to visit the sites associated with the earthly life of Christ. The pilgrimage also helps the Bible come alive for people as they visit Nazareth, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Here are some highlights of this year's itinerary:



The Sea of Galilee.

Day One: Ireland to the Holy Land

Depart Dublin Airport in the evening for an overnight flight direct to Tel Aviv on El Al.

Day Two: Nazareth

Upon arrival in Ben-Gurion Airport, pilgrims will be met by a Marian Pilgrimages representative and guide before boarding our tour coach to Nazareth. En route we will see stunning views of the sun rising over the Galilee region – site of much of the ministry of Jesus. After breakfast, check-in to the four-star Legacy Hotel for five nights with dinner and breakfast.

After time to rest and freshen up, we will walk the short distance to the nearby Basilica of the Annunciation to celebrate Mass. On the lower level of the basilica we see the remains of Mary's house and where the Archangel Gabriel visited her.

Adjacent to the basilica is St Joseph's Church, where we will visit the site of Joseph's workshop and the house of the Holy Family. A short walk from the basilica is Mary's Well here you have the opportunity to draw water from the same well as the Virgin Mary followed by free time in Nazareth before dinner at the hotel.

Day Three: Mount Tabor and Cana in Galilee

After breakfast, we have a short drive to Mount Tabor to ascend by taxi for Mass at the Church of the Transfiguration where Jesus is transfigured and speaks to Moses and Elijah. There is time to enjoy the view of the Valley of Armageddon and the Jezreel Valley – bread basket of the Holy Land.

After time for lunch we take the short coach journey to Cana in Galilee. Here we visit the Wedding Church, the site of the first miracle of Jesus. Couples on the pilgrimage can take part in the special ceremony to renew their wedding vows and there is also prayers and blessings for spouses at home and deceased husbands and wives. In the lower level of the church, we will see artifacts from the site before having an opportunity to taste and purchase some of the famous wine from this sacred site before returning to Nazareth for dinner in the hotel.

Optional Eucharistic Adoration at the Basilica of the Annunciation at 8.30pm.

Day Four: The Sea of Galilee

This morning we make our way to the Mount of Beatitudes overlooking the Sea of Galilee where Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, Capernaum and Tabgha. Visit the site of the multiplication of the Loaves and Fish at Tabgha, and the Church of the Primacy of St Peter.

After lunch on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, continue to Capernaum and see the old synagogue and the excavations of St Peter's house before taking a boat trip on the lake, with relevant Bible readings. Before returning to the hotel we visit Magdala, the home of Mary Magdalene, a prosperous fishing village at the time of Jesus.

Optional rosary at the Irish icon at the Basilica of the Annunciation at 8.30pm.

Day Five: Acre – the Crusader capital

We take the short coach ride to the coastal city of Akko, famed throughout history as the Crusader capital of the Holy Land. After Mass, we return to Nazareth for free time in the town of the Holy Family before dinner at the hotel.

Optional candlelit procession at the Basilica of the Annunciation at 8.30pm.

Day Six: Jericho and Bethany

We leave Nazareth and drive south along the Jordan Valley into Jericho. Here we can see the Mount of Temptation and the Sycamore tree of Zachaeus. Continue to the Dead Sea and enjoy a 'dip' near Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Drive by the Inn of the Good Samaritan, to Bethany to celebrate Mass at 16.00 and visit the Tomb of Lazarus. Continue to Qasr el Yahud, the baptismal site of Jesus on the River Jordan, here we can renew our baptismal vows.

After we drive to Bethlehem and check-in to the four-star Manger Square Hotel, located just a stone's throw from the Church of the Nativity for four nights, with breakfast and dinner.

Day Seven: Jerusalem

We drive to Jerusalem and enter the Old City to the Church of St Anne and nearby, see the Pool of Bethesda. Close by we begin the Via Dolorosa and follow the stations of the cross through the markets and narrow streets of the Old City to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the site of

Calvary where Jesus was crucified and His tomb. Here we will celebrate Mass at 11.00 and take some time to reflect at this sacred site. Enjoy some free time in Jerusalem for lunch before visiting the Western Wall.

We will then drive to Taybeh – a town where Jesus stayed before going to Jerusalem to endure the Passion. It is the last all-Christian town in the West Bank and here we will hear about efforts to keep the local Christian community vibrant, including local wine-making before returning to the hotel in Bethlehem for dinner.

Day Eight: Mount of Olives

Drive to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem where we take our group photo and enjoy the view of the Old City below. We make our way to the highest point on the Mount of Olives to the Ascension Dome. Continue to visit the Pater Noster Church, Dominus Flevit, the Church of the Assumption and grotto and the Garden of Gethsemane.

In the afternoon we celebrate Mass at 15.00 in the Church of St Peter in Gallicantu or 'cock's crow', where St Peter denied Jesus

three times and see the dungeon where Jesus was held the night of Holy Thursday. We walk around Mount Zion and visit the church of the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Tomb of King David and the Room of the Last Supper. Return to the hotel for dinner.

Day Nine: Bethlehem

After breakfast we take the short walk to the Church of the Nativity and celebrate Mass at 10.00. Here you can visit the birthplace of Jesus, and the Holy Manger as well as the chapels of St Joseph, St Jerome, the Holy Innocents and the Church of St Catherine.

Visit the Milk Grotto before lunch and meeting with members of the local Christian community in Bethlehem. Afterwards, we take the short drive to the Shepherds' Field and Ein Karem to the Church of the Visitation before returning to the hotel for dinner.

Day Ten: Emmaus

After breakfast at the hotel, we have some free time in Bethlehem before boarding the coach for the journey to Emmaus where we will have Mass and lunch before proceeding to the airport for the direct flight back to Dublin.

PRICING NOTES FOR THE PILGRIMAGE

The package on offer is all inclusive of the following:

Travel and accommodation

- Flight from Dublin to Tel Aviv;
- Transfer on arrival from Tel Aviv airport to the hotel in Nazareth with guide assistance;
- Five nights in the four-star Legacy Hotel in Nazareth
- Four nights in the four-star Manger Square Hotel in Bethlehem;
- Breakfast and evening meal served each day at hotels;

- Transfer to Tel Aviv airport for return flight;
- Flight from Tel Aviv to Dublin;
- Luxury air-conditioned coach throughout the itinerary;
- Guiding audio system (earphones for listening to the guide).

Tours and religious programme

- Full religious programme with a spiritual director including daily Mass;
- Services of Marian Pilgrimages representative.

- English-speaking guides throughout the pilgrimage;

- Full day guided tour of Jerusalem including visits to the Western Wall, Dome of the Rock, Church of St Anne, Via Dolorosa, Holy Sepulchre and Shrine of the Book;

- Complete programme of sightseeing and visits to sites of interest in the Holy Land;
- Boat ride on Sea of Galilee;
- Return taxi transfers to Mount Tabor.

Entrance fees included

- Dominus Flevit;
- Capernaum;
- Mount of Beatitudes;
- Muhrakha;
- Qumran.

Optional

- Travel insurance €25 for passengers up to 85 years. Please note that an additional insurance premium of €25 is charged for persons aged 86 to 94 years;

passengers 95 years and over should secure private travel insurance.

● Price per person sharing twin/double/treble rooms with private facilities. Passengers are entitled to check in one standard piece of luggage subject to airline's conditions. Single rooms are subject to availability at a supplement.

- Taxes, charges and government levies are included.
- Portage at hotels are included in the package price.
- All tips and gratuities everywhere are included.

WALK IN THE FOOTSTEPS
OF CHRIST IN...

THE HOLY LAND



28 SEP - 7 OCT 2021

Visit Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jerusalem
and other sites in the Holy Land
associated with Christ.

AND
3-12 OCT 2021

PRICE: **€1685** INCLUDING
TAXES AND TIPS

NOW WITH DIRECT FLIGHTS

Nine-night pilgrimage in four-star hotels

- Luxury air-conditioned coach throughout the itinerary
- Breakfast and evening meal served each day at hotels
- Full religious programme organised by Marian Pilgrimages
- Services of Marian Pilgrimages representative and professional English-speaking guide throughout the pilgrimage
- Full-day guided tour of Jerusalem including visits to the Western Wall, Dome of the Rock, Church of St Anne, Via Dolorosa, Holy Sepulchre and Shrine of the Book
- Complete programme of sightseeing and visits to sites of interest in the Holy Land
- Boat trip on Sea of Galilee
- Return taxi transfers to Mount Tabor

To reserve your place:

Call Dublin (01) 878 8159 or Belfast (028) 95680005 or email info@marian.ie



MARIAN PILGRIMAGES
RENEW OUR SPIRIT OF LOVE, FORGIVENESS & PEACE

The Irish Catholic

Marian Pilgrimages is a fully licensed and bonded tour operator TO142 - ATOL 10206

Derry launches Columban year



Photos: Stephen Latimer



Staff reporter

Bishop Donal McKeown has launched a year-long celebration to mark St Columba's 1500th birthday with Mass at the church named for the saint in Long Tower, Derry. Children from local schools joined remotely.

In his homily, Bishop McKeown urged people to see St Columba as a role model. He pointed out that the main Christian traditions in Derry and Donegal are "working together so that we can remember one who is part of our shared history."

"Our past contains more than wars, death and division. It also contains stories of great saints and wonderful people of

learning. And it is a civic celebration involving both those who are believers and those for whom faith means comparatively little. Columba is part of the history of this city and its surrounding areas.

"A community that is honest about the faults and proud of the good things in its past is a place able to move forward. We have many stories of pain and loss from the past. But we also have memories of great people who created beauty and offered great example. Some of them are remembered. Many are forgotten but their legacy lives on in our faith communities and other institutions," Bishop McKeown said.



FRIENDS OF The Irish Catholic



I am convinced that The Irish Catholic newspaper offers spiritual sustenance and thoughtful news, opinion and commentary on the current issues that affect all of us. Many of you have been kind enough to share with us what you see as the vital role of the newspaper in your own Faith development; in enriching your spiritual life. Could you help to ensure that more people have this resource to help build up their Faith by contributing to support our Catholic journalism?"

Baroness Nuala O'Loan



Along with supporting the newspaper, Friends receive exclusive access to:

From the Editor's Desk

our premium video series which sees Michael Kelly in conversation with distinguished guests.

25% off in books

from The Irish Catholic shop, including the best-selling *Freedom from Evil Spirits*, David Quinn's *How we Killed God*, and more.

Monthly e-Newsletter

with featured highlights and special features.

CONTACT ☎ 01 6874094 ✉ info@irishcatholic.ie

Or send us the order form below

MONTHLY CONTRIBUTION AMOUNT - €10 €20 €30 €_____

Monthly contributions are billed each month. You can cancel your contributions at any time.

METHOD OF PAYMENT

PAY BY CREDIT CARD: Visa MasterCard Laser

Card No: _____

Exp date: _____ / _____ CWV No: _____

MY DETAILS

Name _____

Address _____ City _____

Phone Number _____ Email _____

POST IT TO :

THE IRISH CATHOLIC

Block 3b, Bracken Business
Park, Bracken Road, Sandyford,
Dublin 18, D18 K277.

Alternatively, if you would simply like to make a contribution to support Catholic journalism, you can send a cheque to The Irish Catholic.

Finding the light of faith in



Living with uncertainty is key for Christians, Alister McGrath tells Jason Osborne

In his latest book, *Through a Glass Darkly: Journeys through Science, Faith & Doubt*, famed theologian and author Alister McGrath recalls a quote attributed to the mastermind behind the Manhattan Project – the American quest to create the atomic bomb during the Second World War – Robert J. Oppenheimer. He tells of how he came across a phrase attributed to Oppenheimer in a newspaper interview, in which he said the best way to communicate something is to “wrap it up in a person”.

A short few decades later, Mr McGrath himself has come to be wrapped up with the ideas he has spent his life trying to communicate – the notion that science, reason and faith are not only compatible, they naturally hold together.

“Having identified the modern malaise of thinking that science and faith are incompatible, Mr McGrath has sought to reframe this conversation”

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, Mr McGrath told of the reaction his latest offering on the apologetics front has garnered:

“Well it’s very interesting. I actually was in one of these online lectures, presenting this book and I think about four thousand people tuned in

to talk about it, and they were very receptive to this because they felt that they were fed up being bombarded with what seemed to be certainties and yet, when you look at them a bit more closely, they weren’t certainties.

“And I thought, it’s so honest to say, ‘Look, you can believe things without being absolutely able to prove them. That’s just the way things are’. And that doesn’t mean you believe anything you like, it means you have to ask, ‘What are the reasons for this?’ But nevertheless, you do not need to be able to offer absolute proof because you get that only in mathematics, so a lot of people find this hugely refreshing. Someone last night said it was ‘liberating.’”

“Ireland’s last census in 2016 saw an increase of 73.6% in the number of people identifying by their lack of religion”

The central thrust of his book, and much of his career, can be summed up by the title – a journey through science, faith and doubt, and the relationship between the three. Having identified the modern malaise of thinking that science and faith are incompatible, Mr McGrath has sought to reframe this conversation.

Christianity

A strong proponent of the idea that the various sciences help us to examine different aspects of reality, Mr McGrath takes the rare position in the public forum that Christianity is the “golden thread” running through the world – a thread which helps us to make sense of the “great blooming, buzzing confusion” of the world. He described his understanding of this by saying:

“Well, not everyone would agree with me on this, so this is me and a few other people as well, but I think it’s very important because what you’re really saying is that despite the world appearing fragmented and disconnected, actually when you see it in the right way, it all hangs together.

“And if you like, there’s a thread linking everything, and that imagery is quite



Alister McGrath.

helpful because people I think very often feel that they are lost in a, sort of, incoherent, complete mess of a world, and finding something that says, ‘Look, actually although it looks fragmented, although it looks completely chaotic, actually you can see meaning and order there and you know you can fit into this and live meaningfully in it.’ And that’s so important I think, just for people to be able to feel that they can exist in the middle of a chaotic world because they can sense that there is something deeper behind it and they’ve found it and they’re hanging onto it.”

“There has been a seven-fold increase in this category since 1991, when the figure stood at 67,413”

If there’s any doubt as to whether people really do see

the world as a messy, haphazard place, census data from both our own shores and around the world assures us that there has never been such a swell in the numbers of people professing atheism, agnosticism, and “no religion”. Ireland’s last census in 2016 saw an increase of 73.6% in the number of people identifying by their lack of religion, a rise from 277,237 in 2011 to 481,388 in 2016. There has been a seven-fold increase in this category since 1991, when the figure stood at 67,413.

Business of living

At times, the asking and answering of philosophical questions can seem detached from the business of living in the world, but if the rise of atheism and agnosticism are to be remedied, intellectually rigorous answers must be given to questions which see science and faith clashing.

Mr McGrath sees real opportunity for those questions to arise during the unorthodox times through which we find ourselves living:

“People feel, ‘What’s going on? I just don’t know what’s happening.’ And actually, there’s been an

“In the end, I reduced it to a very helpful way of looking at things but nothing more than that, but it was helpful in some ways”

erosion of so many cultural certainties by the coronavirus episode, for example, people say, ‘Oh, we’ll be able to get on top of this, we can master this,’ and we haven’t been able to. I mean, you’ve got a lockdown in Ireland, we’ve got very much the same thing happening here (England) and we’re just realising we’re confronted with something we can’t control. And, you know, that tells us something about ourselves. What I’m saying is I think that, really, you need a worldview to be able to help you cope with that and I think that the book tries to explain how this actually helps you do that.”

His youth

The necessity of having a “bigger picture” or a coherent

worldview was highlighted to Mr McGrath by his youthful interactions with Marxism – in his book, he details his fascination with it initially as a college student, before finding it lacking in some crucial ways. However, there were some elements which he found incredibly useful, and which convinced him that anything less than a grand theory of the world, such as Christianity, was not to be bothered with.

“I mean I think one of the reasons I was drawn to it (Marxism) was it did give me this bigger way of looking at things, this connectedness of things, and also, if I could put it like this, it gave me a sense of my role as an agent. In other words: here’s the way things are going, here’s what I can do to move them

the fog of doubt

along. I think that that's one of the tests I think I would apply to any worldview: 'Does it actually help you position yourself and figure out what you can do?' And so Marxism, I think, I found very engaging. In the end, I reduced it to a very helpful way of looking at things but nothing more than that, but it was helpful in some ways.

He continued, "It created an appetite within me. I felt, 'Look, I can't go back to something that's trivial or very, very local – I want something bigger than that'. And discovering this bigger view of Christianity really, really excited me intellectually, so it was really quite liberating to use that word again."

Liberation

The liberation he spoke of was not just intellectual, but spiritual and emotional. When asked what practical changes seeing the world through eyes of faith effects, he responded, "Well let me tell you the big change which I noticed: I stopped feeling the need to justify myself. I stopped feeling the need to prove myself. I just said, 'If Christianity is right, I'm accepted as I am.' And actually, I said, 'I can live with myself'. And so, in effect, although academically obviously I have to achieve certain things,

there's not this intense feeling, 'I have to perform, I have to deliver,' – a sort of narcissistic introversion. A much more, just you know, I am who I am, God loves me, and now let's see what I can do to help things along."

“The increasing polarisation of political discourse is a direct result of an inability to comfortably live with uncertainty”

While Mr McGrath's latest book examines the interplay of faith and science, it also explores the role of doubt. He sees doubt as being an essential part of the human condition, acknowledging the fact that we can know very little for certain. On occasion in the book, St Paul's maxim from 1 Corinthians 13:12 is quoted, which describes our vision in this world as seeing through a glass darkly. The quote from which the title

of the book is taken, learning to live with unanswered questions and developing a capacity for mystery has proven a large part of Mr McGrath's struggle.

"I think it manifests itself in the fact that I'm very happy to live with unanswered questions. In other words, questions that are good questions that I'm thinking about, I haven't yet sorted them out, but I say, 'I can live with this degree of uncertainty'. And so, as an academic, I think it's very healthy because it means I don't need to close down discussions prematurely, I can keep them open, I can say, 'I'm still not sure about this, I think it might be this, it might be that,' but I don't feel under pressure to, kind of, close things down and become dogmatic. I, kind of, keep things open.

A degree of fluidity

"If you like, I think I've sorted out the things that really matter and I can enjoy a degree of fluidity or uncertainty about other things as well. So I think actually, if you're an academic, it's quite good for you because it means that you are open to people who have enquiring minds to explore things with them. And of course, if you're an academic teaching as I am at Oxford, then

students really like that because it means they go to you and they talk things through with you."

“Christmas might be a time just for reflecting; how can we learn from this? How can we grow through this?”

Again, Mr McGrath sees the issue of comfortability with uncertainty not only as an academic concern, but as one with which everyone must come to terms. The increasing polarisation of political discourse is a direct result of an inability to comfortably live with uncertainty.

"I think it's part of the human condition, but I always worry that when you have uncertainty, when you have polarisation, then people begin to adopt very dogmatic worldviews. Sometimes religious, but usually political I have to say. And, you know, it's like 1930's when really these very

aggressive ideologies began to take root and, you know, people bought into them because they gave them certainty. And of course that's what worries me, that actually, the certainty may be something that's imposed on you – not generated by the ideas themselves."

The antidote to the incessant ratcheting up of tensions may be right under our noses however – relationship. Asked about how the Christmas season speaks to the year we've endured, Mr McGrath admitted that it was an issue he'd been reflecting on himself.

Celebration of God

"It is something that I've been thinking about because, you know, I understand my wife and I, we have grandchildren, we probably won't be seeing them at Christmas so I think it's one of those things – Christmas has become not simply a celebration of God entering into the world, but (it's about) the importance of relationality in the world. In other words, how important our relationships with other people are. Our family, our friends and God. And how actually we need those relationships to survive.

"And what I've been thinking myself is, in this difficult time when my wife and I are on our own a lot, actually, it's very important to be able to say that our relationship with God has not been disrupted by this virus. If you like, it's almost like it's

a period of exile. You know, we're cut off from the buildings people used to know, and yet we're able to deepen our relationship with God so, for me it's a time of reflection, to say, 'Look, this is a difficult time but here's what my thinking is. It's a difficult time from which we can learn and through which we can grow. And so what I'm hoping is that at the end of this, I and many, many others will emerge from this stronger and wiser. That's what I'm hoping. Christmas might be a time just for reflecting; how can we learn from this? How can we grow through this? Because otherwise we see this simply as something negative. It might be something which we can learn through."

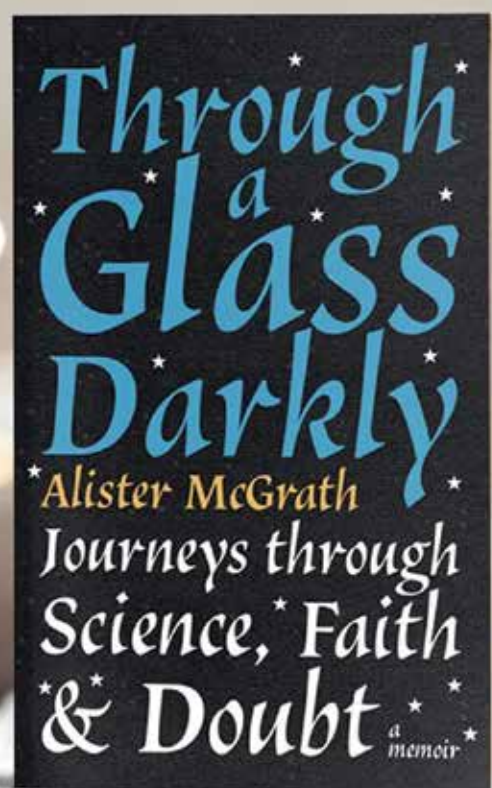
As is in keeping with his worldview – knowing that all roads lead to God, he has taken the opportunity to grow in love of God and his created order in what ways he can during lockdown.

“And actually, it means that when normality returns, we'll be able to appreciate it all the more”

"I've been forced to, in effect, not be able to go to church. I'm able to go to church online, but it's not the same. But what it's forced me to do is to say, 'Right, what am I going to do?' Well, the answer is I'm going to read some books on spirituality and so on that I've been longing to read for ages. And interestingly, one thing I'm doing is I'm reading through Mark's Gospel in the company of somebody I knew, he wrote a commentary on Mark and he's now dead, but actually it's very, very good to feel there was somebody accompanying me as I read the text. And so what I think we have to do is say, 'This isn't a normal time, but we have to adapt to it'.

Normality

"And actually, it means that when normality returns, we'll be able to appreciate it all the more. Maybe we just took things for granted. We've realised they aren't as secure as we thought so when they come back, we'll appreciate them even more. It's a bit like the people of Jerusalem in Babylon. Longing to go home and realising how important it was, and maybe they didn't realise that at the time when they were there."



Becoming closer to God with Catholic initiation



Kurtis Hemphill receives the Sacraments after completing the RCIA programme this year.



For many young people, a journey of doubt leads them to the Church, writes Chai Brady

Despite the decrease in Mass attendance across western Europe and fewer young people engaging with religion, there are still those who feel the call of the Church in later life and decide to wholeheartedly engage with the Catholic Faith.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is a process that allows people to learn about and potentially convert to Catholicism. Kurtis Hemphill (23) and Jack Smith (20) took part in the process in Belfast, they completed it this year and received the sacraments.

Both come from very different backgrounds but, like many others, went on the same journey, discovering more about their faith and what it means to be Catholic.

Kurtis, brought up Presbyterian in Antrim, was actively engaged in his Protestant faith, even studying

to become a minister. Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, he says: "I was planning to go into the ministry so I was reading up on theology and scriptural studies more because if I was preaching things it was more important that I had a better grasp of what I was talking about.

“Kurtis raised his doubts to authorities in the Presbyterian church and had several meetings, but none changed how he was feeling”

"So essentially by going down the road of trying to have a better grasp and a better understanding of Presbyterian, or Protestant, doctrine, I started to have a few little niggles in my brain about various aspects of the doctrine which I had previously thought was very solid but then was beginning to have second thoughts."

The second thoughts he was having about his faith "alarmed" him, over a period of a few weeks Kurtis began thinking about his doubts daily. These revolved around some fundamental doctrinal differences between Catholicism and Protestantism.

He says: "It made me feel, if we're wrong, if Protestants are wrong on these things, this changes everything. There are so many

other doctrines that are built upon these really fundamental ones. So I essentially was moved over to Catholicism through trying to have a better understanding of Protestant doctrine."

Doubts

Kurtis raised his doubts to authorities in the Presbyterian church and had several meetings, but none changed how he was feeling. It came down to one day, when he went to a minister's house to "give it one last go". After that meeting his mind was made up and he felt he had to change his faith.

"There were maybe three major things in particular," he explains, "the very first one that started to niggle at me was the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*, the Bible alone being the ultimate authority on the faith and that was the very first one because I remember thinking I felt personally that I could give stronger scriptural proofs and things and arguments for sort of more secondary Protestant doctrines, things like predestination or whatever, than I could for things like *sola scriptura*, and it really occurred to me: I thought that we're wrong about *sola scriptura*, it's not solely the Bible that has the ultimate authority on faith and practice and there's so many other things we believe in because we believe *sola scriptura*.

"That was the first one, after that I'd probably say it was *sola*



Kurtis Hemphill

fide, or justification by grace through faith alone. Looking more into what the Bible had to say about that I began to feel that maybe you're not justified by grace through faith alone, but through faith and works.

“Both come from very different backgrounds but, like many others, went on the same journey”

"Even with those two I kind of thought well, you could not believe those two and don't necessarily have to be a Catholic, you could be an orthodox Christian. But then the real nail in the coffin there that

made me think it must be Catholicism is the primacy of Peter and that Christ instituted the Church of Rome and that is the one true Church.

"Therefore with those three things together I came to the conclusion it's not possible for me to be a Protestant anymore because I've actually unravelled so many things that I believed, so many things that I have preached myself in sermons."

Kurtis went to see Fr James O'Reilly in Antrim parish, who told him about the RCIA which put him on the road to conversion. During his time in the RCIA programme, Kurtis says he never felt any pressure to become Catholic during the discernment process, but everyone

who did it with him ended up receiving the sacraments.

"There's no pressure on someone that once you start the programme you must follow it through to completion and you must get Confirmed," Kurtis says, "it was a very friendly and helpful environment in that sense because there's no pressure on you.

"It was the same in the classes themselves, you were perfectly welcome to ask questions and to contribute, but you were not expected to, no one was forcing you to give answers or no one was forcing you to say things if you didn't feel comfortable giving your opinion or whatever.

“The very first one that started to niggle at me was the Protestant doctrine of sola scriptura”

"We came from a lot of different backgrounds, different ages, we came from different churches or maybe no churches beforehand and we did all get on quite well together and you sort of became a nice little family group whilst you're all moving through the process together."

From Kurtis's experience, there are still a lot of young people interested and involved in religious practices, both when he was Presbyterian and now in Catholicism. There were many people his age that went to church, although not all of them would have been Presbyterian, they were actively engaged in their faith.

Speaking of his friends he said: "All were active in different activities the Church had then. Now that I have converted to Catholicism, I've been to a few of the different events run by Youth 2000 and I see in Youth 2000 there are loads of people my age, in their 20s and early 30s, that are still very actively involved in their faith so I would say it does seem like there are lots of young people that are willing to express their faith and want to follow and glorify God."

Although Kurtis is from Antrim, he spent four years in Cork studying for his degree. He noticed there was a significant difference in the number of people who had active faith lives compared to his class in school. He says there was only one other person who would attend church regularly, "so that was a bit surprising".

Schools

From his times in schools, he says: "I'd gone from all Christian and we all went to church and we all did various activities and we all had a strong faith, to then in university it being far fewer people that were of that mindset".

The need for Christian Churches to work together is more important than ever, according to Kurtis, who says: "We definitely need to be working together because certainly in western Europe we are on the decline, Mass attendance is going down, service attendance is going down... the general influence of Christian thought is on the decline in the political and social spectrum.

"More than ever I think we need to work together, yes we may have



Jack Smith receives the sacraments after his RCIA formation.

differences, but we have many commonalities." Despite the change in faith Kurtis's parents were very supportive, although they were initially quite shocked. Now, he says, he's got use to Mass as well as many other differences in worship and would feel comfortable in any Catholic Church.

For Jack Smith, who had been baptised when he was younger but had never received the other sacraments, it is an entirely different story.

Raised in England and born in Donegal, Jack now goes to university in Belfast. In England, he says, Communion and Confirmation preparation didn't happen in his school and it was only when he returned to Ireland that he felt it was something he needed to rectify.

Growing up

He says: "It was something growing up that I was aware I hadn't done, but obviously again being over in England it was something I was aware I hadn't done but I also wasn't really in a position or a place where I would carry out with it.

"Then when I came back to Ireland the opportunity was there, the environment was there. Again growing up, whenever we were in Ireland going to Mass was just a regular normal thing but that same practice wasn't in England so it was more time and place all fell into one category."

The RCIA process for him was "fantastic", with Jack saying he got a real insight into what his faith and the Church.

Young people are still interested in religion, he attests, "a lot of my friends of my friends would regularly attend Mass, a lot of my friends who are Catholic do regularly attend Mass and I have a few that come with me every now and then".

"Your parents are no longer telling you to go or not, it's really down to you. So the people that are up in Belfast, at Queens, those that are going are going by choice, my mother and father never told me to start going when I came back. It was something I did myself and I know a lot of my friends they do it themselves, they're at that stage now that if they do go home they don't have to go with their parents but they still do. Because I think it part of the family day, for a lot of families it is a family morning."

“From Kurtis's experience, there are still a lot of young people interested and involved in religious practices”

Jack received his First Communion and Confirmation in September of this year, after engaging in a more informal RCIA process with Fr Martin Graham, the administrator of St Peter's Cathedral in Belfast.

In the last five years 77 people have gone through the official RCIA process in the cathedral. So far in 2020, 12 people completed the process, compared to 16 in 2019, 18 in 2018 and 22 in 2017. Just six

completed it in 2016. The numbers dipped slightly this year compared the previous four years due to the coronavirus pandemic, but Fr Graham believes more people are opting to do the course in their parish instead.

"Those figures are literally just for those who went through the official RCIA it doesn't include all of those who were received over the year, it would definitely be twice that number," he tells this paper.

"There's probably almost as many again who would have been privately instructed in their parishes."

Fr Graham says that there are many other young people who decide to take on the RCIA as they are looking for answers to difficult questions, all of which he says he's been able to answer.

"Modern culture will try to dismiss religion full stop, that's the big thing. One of the issues that I've always seen is people talk about kids – kids don't like to be lectured they never did – so whenever they're learning RE in school, it's a subject, it's something to learn but as they get older maturity kicks in, plus they it might also be the case of where they see family members begin to die and it causes them to start re-evaluating things in their own lives and they begin to have a more mature understanding and they begin to start asking questions," he says.

Process

"That's the one thing I say to anyone I take through the process, never stop asking questions. One

thing that I've found is there's never been a question I've been asked that I haven't been able to find an answer to, I mightn't have the answer straight away but Catholicism is a reasonable faith. We can find a reason for what we believe."

While there's much to learn within the teaching of the Church, many young people are looking to discuss and get to the heart of issues that they are currently grappling with.

“When I came back to Ireland the opportunity was there, the environment was there”

Fr Graham says: "I suppose in the different circumstances that I've come across with young people in RCIA they will ask questions that are relevant to them whereas there's a lot of the Faith that probably doesn't, if we're discussing the Immaculate Conception – well that doesn't really impact on the day to day life of a person.

"Whenever we start talking about death, or another one that has come up with me with people I know is abortion, divorce, remarriage, there are so many things. They are questions that are personal to them at that time and they're looking for an answer."

Discerning whether to become part of a faith that may be alien and seem strange to those who have no past experience – even within the other Christian traditions – is a big step but to this day men and women, young and old, of all ethnicities, sexualities and more decide it is the right one. Although people decide to go on the RCIA journey for a plethora of reasons and from a host of different backgrounds, in the end, they are welcomed into the Catholic family with open arms.

“There are many other young people who decide to take on the RCIA as they are looking for answers to difficult questions”



Ruadhán Jones explores a little-known Christmas treasure by JRR Tolkien

JRR Tolkien exists in the minds of many as the creator of the 20th century's great epic, *The Lord of the Rings*. Epic in the breadth of its world building, epic also in the span of its action and, finally, epic in the scope of its moral vision, Tolkien's work has enchanted the world – to use his own language – for decades.

As a result of his fame and the interest in his works, a number of treasures that would otherwise have gone unnoticed have been unearthed and published. Among these is his delightful, whimsical collection of *Letters from Father Christmas*.

Beginning in 1920 with a letter to his first child, John, and concluding in 1943 with a final, poignant letter to his youngest daughter, Priscilla, Tolkien's letters became a part of his children's Christmases. They even took to sending letters to Santa, enquiring as to his health and furnishing him with their Christmas lists.

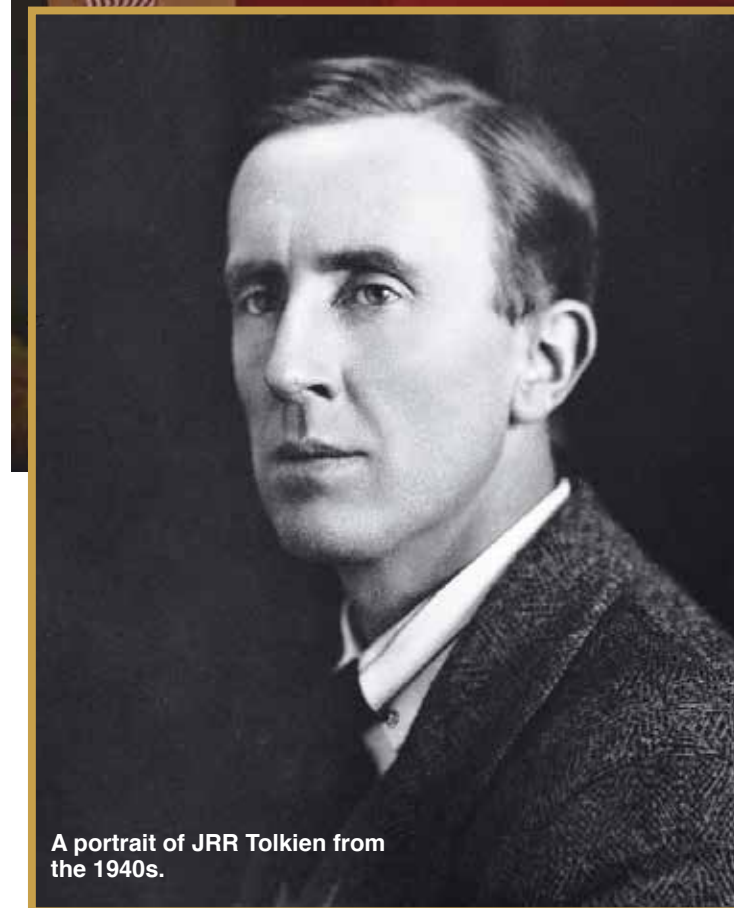
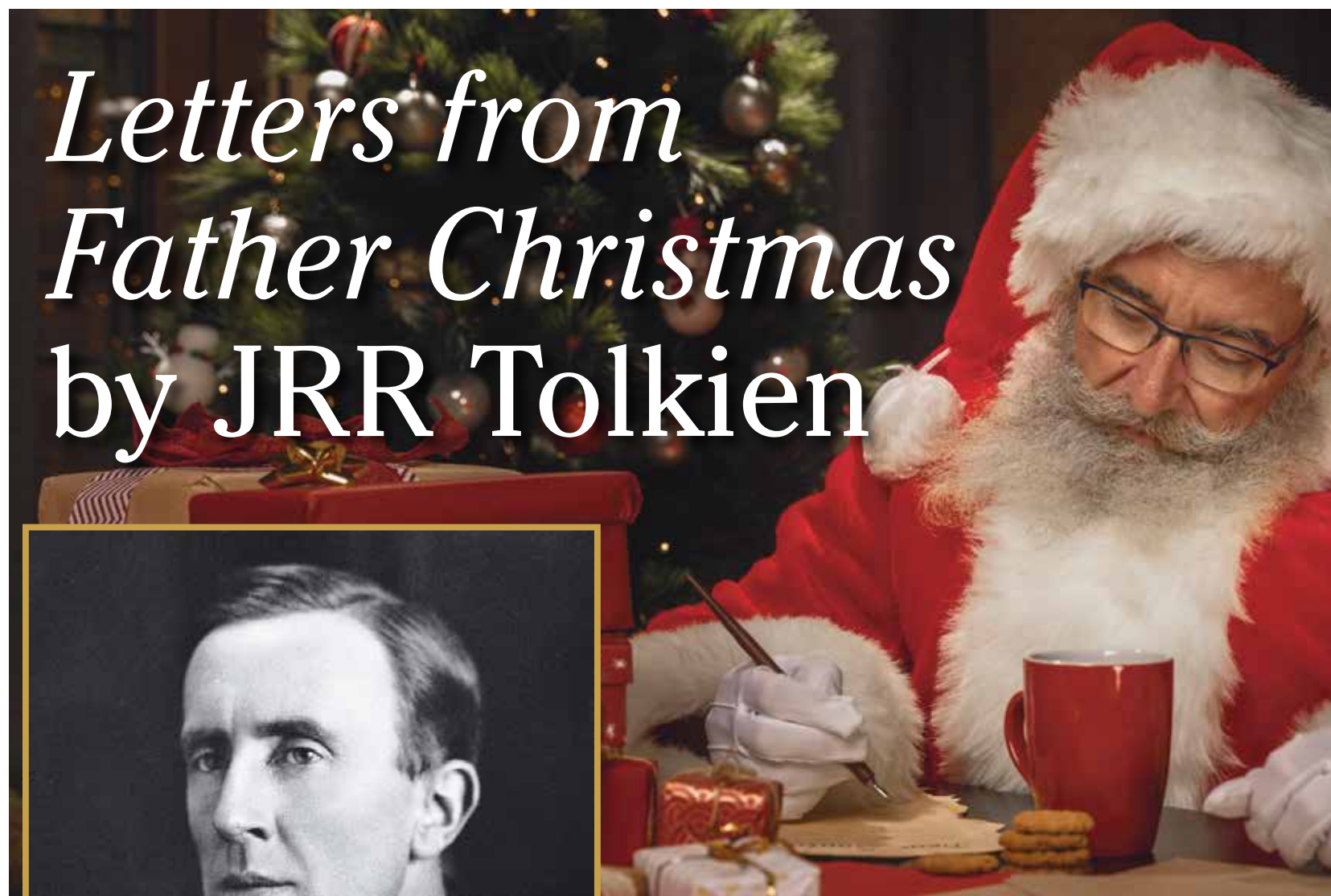
The letters, enjoyable in themselves, also provide invaluable insight into Tolkien's seemingly irrepressible creative energy. Each letter and the accompanying drawings and sketches serve to create the world and character of Father Nicholas Christmas, his clumsy and endearing Polar Bear and the goblins, elves and other beasts that inhabit Tolkien's North Pole.

Tolkien the father

The immediate impression you get in reading this collection is of Tolkien, the devoted father. For the near-25-year span of his four children's childhood, he continued writing the letters and creating many beautiful drawings to accompany them, through some of the busiest times of his academic career. As his children grew older, the letters became more complex and playful, as he continued to develop them.

Tolkien's marriage to his beloved Edith was not without its issues, as his biographer Humphrey Carpenter notes. Their interests differed greatly and Edith struggled to adjust to the life of an Oxford don's wife. But where they were wholly united was in their love for their children.

"A principal source of happiness to them was their shared love for their family," Carpenter wrote in *JRR Tolkien: A Biography*. "This bound them together until the end of their



A portrait of JRR Tolkien from the 1940s.

lives and it was perhaps the strongest force in their marriage. They delighted to discuss and mull over every detail of the lives of their children and later their grandchildren.

"Tolkien was immensely kind and understanding as a father, never shy of kissing his sons in public even when they were grown men, and never reserved in his display of warmth and love."

Storyteller

One of the ways Tolkien expressed this love was through telling stories to his children. As so often happens, it began quite simply – John, his eldest son, often found difficulty getting to sleep. So, Tolkien began to tell him stories about Carrots, a boy with red hair who climbed into a cuckoo clock and went off on a series of strange adventures.

Later, Michael was troubled with nightmares as a young boy and Tolkien created the character Bill Stickers for him. In fact, the famous Tom Bombadil of *The Lord of the Rings* originated in one of the many childhood stories Tolkien created. It was within the context

of this storytelling habit that the letters from Father Nicholas Christmas developed, Carpenter tells us.

"Every Christmas, often at the last minute, Tolkien would write out an account of recent events at the North Pole in the shaky handwriting of Father Christmas, the rune-like capitals used by the Polar Bear, or the flowing script of Ilbereth [his elf-secretary]," Carpenter writes.

"Then he would add drawings, write the address on the envelope (labelling it with such superscriptions as 'By gnome-carrier. Immediate haste!') and paint and cut out a highly realistic North Polar postage stamp."

Carpenter then describes the great lengths Tolkien went to in order to maintain the illusion that the letters were from

Father Christmas. In fact the children kept on believing until they reached adolescence and discovered by accident – or were told – of the true origin.

"Finally he would deliver the letter," Carpenter writes. "This was done in a variety of ways. The simplest was to leave it in the fireplace as if it had been brought down the chimney, and to cause strange noises to be heard in the early morning, which together with a snowy footprint on the carpet indicated that Father Christmas himself had called. Later the local postman became an accomplice and used to deliver the letters himself, so how could the children not believe in them?"

Artist

The length's Tolkien went to please his children is deeply endearing. As Carpenter notes, his attention to detail went right down to designing the charming 'North Pole' postage stamps. Tolkien's skill as an artist can be easily overlooked, particularly in the Father Christmas collection – the paintings and sketches are often intended to be humorous, but that doesn't detract from Tolkien's skill.

His interest in drawing and painting began as a childhood hobby, and he illustrated his own poems when studying as an undergraduate. He experimented with a number

of different materials, including watercolours, coloured inks or pencils. Carpenter describes his style as being indebted to an affection for Japanese prints, but it's also clear that he developed a style of his own.

In the Fr Christmas letters, his talents as a storyteller and illustrator were combined. From the very first letter, which was accompanied by a colourful image of Fr Christmas dressed in red and marching through the snow, they combine painted works, pencil sketches and even the occasional runic script.

What stands out in all the paintings is their vibrancy, appealing colours and variety of style. The more ornate are a mix of watercolours and pencil drawings, such as an image of the multicoloured sun setting over the North Pole. A later example most obviously highlights the debt he owes to Japanese print – it's like a postcard for the North Pole, created by transplanting a symbol from the Land of the Rising sun.

My favourite depicts Fr Christmas and his reindeer riding above the winds of the earth, over the sea, with the curling waves beneath them and clouds scudding across the sky. Though rudimentary, it's not hard to imagine the effect this little painting might have had on a child – magic.

“Father Christmas’ many misadventures enliven the pages and become increasingly convoluted. Much of the humour resides in the interplay between Father Christmas and Polar Bear, whom he blames for most delays”



Nicholas Hoult and Lily Collins star in a scene from the movie *Tolkien*. Photo: CNS.

Northmoor Road, one of Tolkien and his family's former homes in Oxford.



“Extending the story of Father Christmas and fuelling his children’s imaginations, he is preparing their minds for the “true harbour”, a true myth or story about ourselves, a true gift given to the world on Christmas – Jesus Christ”

Playful humour

Another aspect of Tolkien's personality which makes these letters such an enjoyable read is his quirky humour. It easily gels with the sensibility of a child, being silly and melodramatic. Carpenter quotes Tolkien's own verdict on his sense of humour in his biography: "I have," he [Tolkien] once wrote, "a very simple sense of humour, which even my appreciative critics find tiresome."

Carpenter furnishes us with two examples of this humour at work: "At a New Year's Eve party in the nineteen-thirties he would don an Icelandic sheepskin hearthrug and paint his face white to impersonate a polar bear, or he would dress up as an Anglo-Saxon warrior complete with axe and chase an astonished neighbour down the road."

Tiresome and anarchic though it may have been in

real life, on the page it makes for colourful reading. Father Christmas' many misadventures – aided and abetted by the clumsy, danger prone Polar Bear – enliven the pages and become increasingly convoluted. Much of the humour resides in the interplay between Father Christmas and Polar Bear, whom he blames for most delays.

Tolkien dramatises this cleverly – Polar Bear's angular, clumsy script intersperses the erratic, spindly scrawl of Father Christmas, commenting "Cheek!" when he feels his honour besmirched. One of the humorous happenings described by Father Christmas is reminiscent of the firework scene in Peter Jackson's adaption of *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

"I am more shaky than usual this year," writes Father Christmas in his 1926 letter. "The North Polar Bear's fault! It was

the biggest bang in the world, and the most monstrous firework there ever has been. It turned the North Pole BLACK and shook all the stars out of place, broke the moon into four – and the Man in it fell into my back garden... Then I found out that the reindeer had broken loose. They were running all over the country, breaking reins and ropes and tossing presents up in the air."

Polar Bear annotates the story, with his own cheery version of events: "Father Christmas had to hurry away and leave me to finish. He is old and gets worried when funny things happen. You would have laughed too! I think it is good of me laughing. It was a lovely firework. The reindeer will run quick to England this year. They are still frightened!"

It's just the kind of story children love, and one in keeping with Tolkien's anarchic humour.

Irrepressible imagination

For those who have read *The Lord of the Rings*, it may seem hard to reconcile the serious tone and material with the flippancy of the Father Christmas letters. Carpenter muses on the self-same concern in Tolkien's biography. Carpenter diagnoses an initial divide between Tolkien's 'serious' works, such as his long poem 'The Gest of Beren and Luthien' (which Tolkien buffs may recognise from *The Silmarillion*), and his lighter children's stories.

During the 20s and 30s, Carpenter suggests, there were two sides to Tolkien's storytelling, the one epic, medieval and deeply serious, the other light and childish. "Something was lacking, something that would bind the two sides of his imagination together and produce a story that was at once heroic and mythical and at the same time tuned to the popular imagination." This only came to fruition with Tolkien's fateful 'discovery' of a hole in the ground in which there lived a hobbit.

However, there is one clear connection between these fledgling works and his later mature ones – Tolkien's active and irrepressible imagination, and his love of world building. As the children grew older and were able to comprehend more, the letters became more dramatic and varied.

New characters were introduced: snow-elves, red gnomes, snow-men, cave-bears and the Polar Bear's nephews, Paksu and Valkotukka. He began to create a history for the world, one infused with goblins and ancient caves, battles of history and the present.

Father Christmas letter to his daughter Priscilla, his youngest child, is a vivid and dramatic account of a battle in the North Pole. Hordes of goblins descend on Father Christmas' home while he and Polar Bear are sleeping for the summer, surrounding them and blocking them in.

"I have not time to tell you all the story," Father Christmas explains. "I had to blow three blasts on the great Horn (Windbeam). It hangs over the

fireplace in the hall, and if I have not told you about it before it is because I have not had to blow it for over four hundred years: its sound carries as far as the North Wind blows..."

"There was a big battle down in the plain near the North Pole in November, in which the Goblins brought hundreds of new companies out of their tunnels. We were driven back to the Cliff, and it was not until Polar Bear and a party of his younger relatives crept out by night, and blew up the entrance to the new tunnels with 1001lbs of gunpowder that we got the better of them – for the present."

Myth-making

For Catholics, there can be a sense of unease about Santa Claus and his increasing commercialisation. What is the focus of Christmas, a mythical figure and presents, or Christ? Santa can become an exploitative figure, as with the Elf on the Shelf who spies on children in order to report back. Children are taught to believe that good behaviour equals gifts. Equally, sceptical theorists argue about that it clouds logical reasoning and is merely an effort to prolong magical thinking.

However, I think Tolkien's *Father Christmas Letters* highlights the more positive possibilities of Father Christmas. In fact, it ties into Tolkien's own belief in the importance of storytelling and myths.

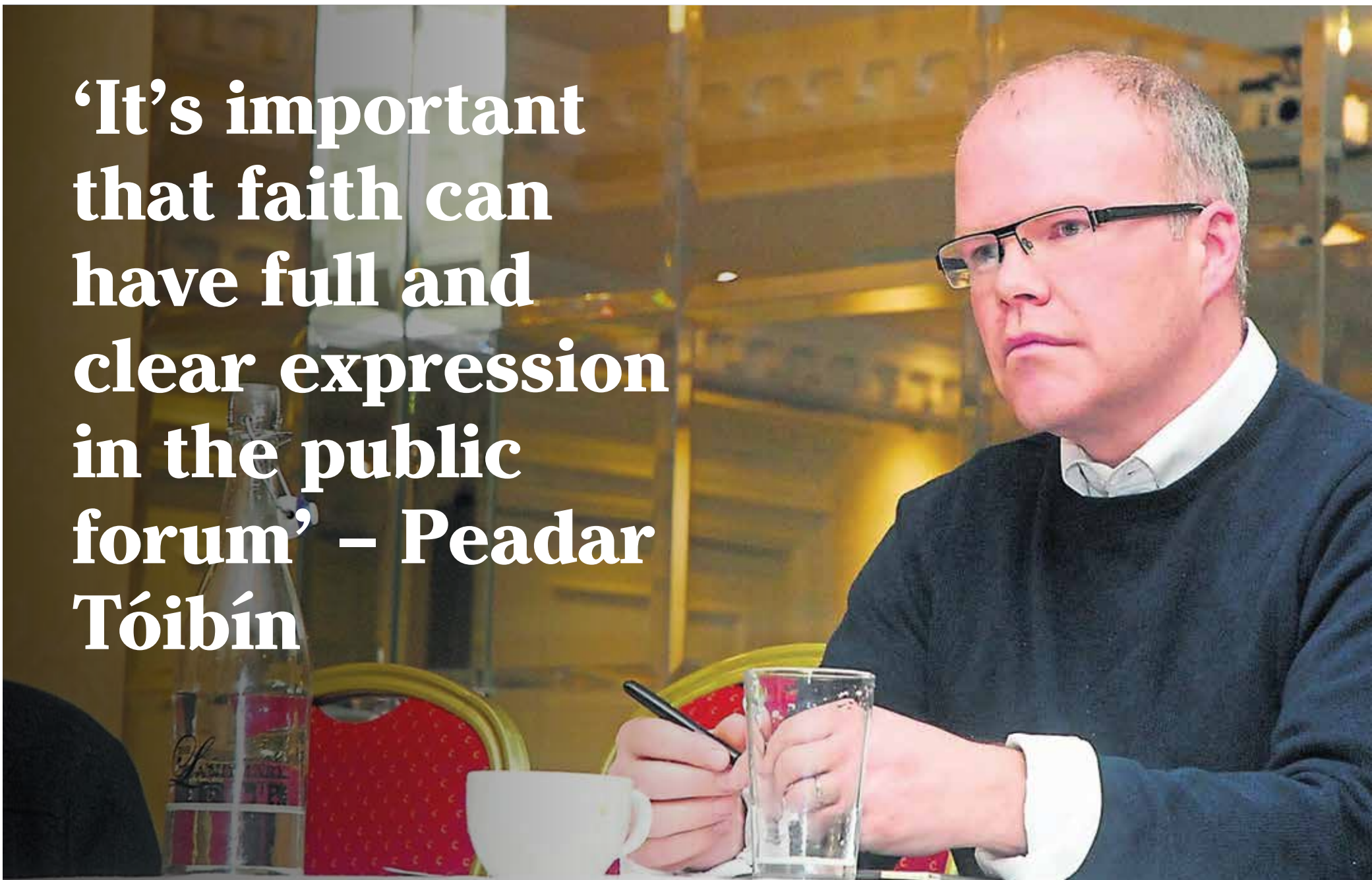
"Indeed, only by myth-making, only by becoming a 'sub-creator' and inventing stories, can Man aspire to the state of perfection that he knew before the fall," Carpenter writes, paraphrasing a conversation Tolkien had with C.S. Lewis. "Our myths may be misguided, but they steer however shakily towards the true harbour, while materialistic 'progress' leads only to a yawning abyss and the Iron Crown of the power of evil."

While Santa Claus or Father Christmas is not a myth in the way that Tolkien meant, he playfully creates a myth, extending the story of Father Christmas and fuelling his children's imaginations, enchanting them. In other words, he is preparing their minds for the "true harbour", a true myth or story about ourselves, a true gift given to the world on Christmas – Jesus Christ.

"You mean, asked Lewis, that the story of Christ is simply a true myth, a myth that works on us in the same way as the others, but a myth that *really happened*?" Yes, is the simple answer. The pagans told myths about spiritual warfare between good and chaos, or about the dead returning to visit them, or about brave men who sacrificed themselves for man or God. Christianity does not reject these because they are myths, but because they are not true.

So, when reading these stories, either to yourself or to your children, consider how the myth of Father Christmas might fuel the minds of our children. The issue is not that we tell the story of Father Christmas, but that we often tell it badly – Tolkien's work, enjoyable in its own right, is an example of the story told well.

‘It’s important that faith can have full and clear expression in the public forum’ – Peadar Tóibín



Aontú leader and TD Peadar Tóibín opens up about faith, cancer and the future of the Church, writes Ruadhán Jones

Aontú leader and Meath TD Peadar Tóibín made a name for himself in 2018 when he and one other Sinn Féin TD refused to toe the party line over the question of abortion. He was suspended for six months for voting against the Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy Bill 2018 and subsequently left the party to form the republican party Aontú.

Since then, Tóibín has been an outspoken critic of the major parties on a number of pro-life issues and many others, including education and the provision of cancer treatment services. Most recently, however, he made headlines when he opened up about a shock cancer diagnosis. The

Meath West TD recently underwent surgery to remove a melanoma – a tumorous skin growth – on his head and is awaiting a Pet Scan to ensure the disease hasn’t spread.

The cancer diagnosis forced Peadar to reorder his priorities, he explains – but one of the things that remained constant through the scare was his faith. This, he tells me, helped him to maintain his peace despite the trying circumstances.

“I do believe we’re living in a society which has become extremely intolerant to the faith”

“I remember when I was a kid doing exams, my mother always used to say, ‘do your best and God will do the rest,’” he says. “And I think that kind of philosophy is a very positive one because it settles the mind – we realise that there’s only so much we can do and also it’s very comforting to know that there’s help there as well.

“So when I’ve gone through this particular challenge of the cancer, I’ve prayed and I’m very thankful for the nice people who have

prayed for me and the Mass cards I’ve received. It has helped me to settle my mind and there’s a peace that results from the knowledge that I am being helped.”

Family

Peadar grew up in Navan, Co. Meath, the youngest of seven children. His father was a business man who owned a couple of garages in Navan, while his mother was a teacher. Both of his parents were practicing Catholics, and they instilled a great belief in God in Peadar and his siblings.

“We went to Mass every Sunday,” Peadar says. “When we were children, we were taught to pray in the mornings and at night before we went to bed, and you know there was a great belief in God in the house.”

The household was a very lively one, and the dinner table was often the sight of heated, but healthy debates. All of the Tóibín children had a natural instinct to take the opposite position to their parents, in a way “testing the veracity of their views”, Peadar says.

“At Sunday dinners and even during the week, there would have

been big debates about the big issues of the time, whether it be the cultural wars of the day around divorce and abortion, or whether it was around the North of Ireland – obviously the troubles were raging at the time – or whether it was about economic situations, there were big political debates around the dinner table at home,” Peadar explains.

“I’m a great believer in history and I would have read a lot around the history of the Jews”

“My parents were definitely practising Catholics, but they weren’t dogmatic – ideas had to be reasoned, they had to be evidenced based. You know, your opinions on any particular issue had to have a foundation also in the sciences or human life as well. Definitely it was a practicing Catholic family, but it wasn’t a dogmatic family, if you understand.”

Peadar laughs when he thinks back on those times as a child and teenager. Married 10 years to his wife, Deirdre, hasv four kids of

his own: “I think they’re noisy, I imagine what my parents must have felt like with seven of us arguing around the table,” he says.

Faith

But however noisy or chaotic it might have been, these early jousts whet his appetite for political life. After school, he went to University College Dublin, where he studied economics and politics. While he was there, he joined the Kevin Barry Cumann, the university branch of Ógra Fianna Fáil. However, in 1998, he changed his political affiliation and joined Sinn Féin.

“I felt that Fianna Fáil had good people within them, but a lot of the people in Fianna Fáil were career ambitious for themselves and the ideology and the objectives were secondary or weren’t as important,” he explains.

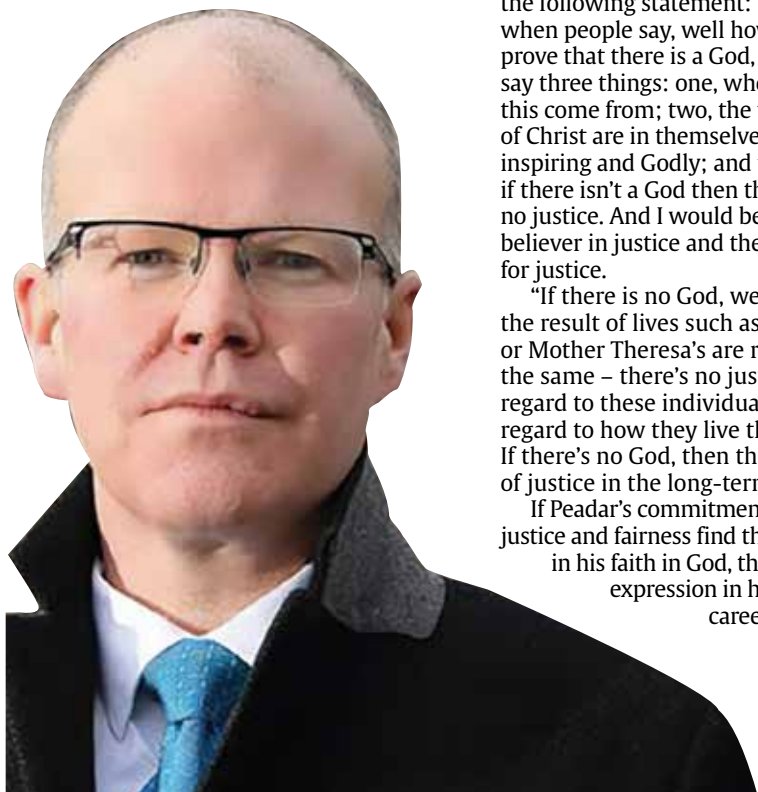
In all this time, his faith continued to be central to his life. One of the reasons for this is the positive contribution it makes to his health and well-being.

“In attending Mass on a Sunday,” he explains, “it takes an hour out of the rat race, out of the milieu of everything going on and it settles the mind on some level of understanding about how the week has gone, what’s important and it does that in the framework of really positive messages about life.”

“This evidence from experience, as it might be called, makes up only half of the rational foundation for his faith”



But the main reason he remained a faithful Catholic was that it provided answers to what he considers the most important questions, such as why we are here and how can there be justice without God? Well-read in philosophy and history, he hasn't found any other faith or philosophy which provides the answers.



"I don't think there's every been a time in my life now where I've left and haven't practiced my faith," he says. "I think there's a couple of elements to it for me. For one, there's the philosophy of what we are, where we come from, why we're here, how does all this exist if it came from nothing.

"And I would have read a lot around philosophy, I would have read a lot around Stephen Hawkins just to understand his view, which would be that all of this exists by cosmic accident and it comes from zero. My understanding was that you can't have an effect without a cause and y'know, there had to be some kind of creator to all of this that we live in.

“I don't think there's every been a time in my life now where I've left and haven't practiced my faith”

"I would be very much an environmentalist, I do a lot of hiking and gardening so I think we live in a very, very beautiful planet and all the diversity and richness has to come from somewhere in my view."

Evidence

This evidence from experience, as it might be called, makes up only half of the rational foundation for his faith. The other is the evidence from history and philosophy. Raised as he was to put a premium on supporting claims with evidence, he deliberately sought out the teachings and histories of the major faiths and philosophies to test Christianity's veracity, much as he tested his own parents' views.

"I'm a great believer in history and I would have read a lot around the history of the Jews, the history of the Islamic faith, the history of Christianity and I have probably found very few philosophies or ideas that are so outstanding in their positivity and beneficial in their direction as to how humanity can live peacefully and honestly in harmony with each other outside of the teachings of Jesus Christ."

Ultimately, Peadar's commitment to the faith can be summed up by the following statement: "For me when people say, well how do you prove that there is a God, I would say three things: one, where does all this come from; two, the teachings of Christ are in themselves uniquely inspiring and Godly; and three, if there isn't a God then there's no justice. And I would be a big believer in justice and the necessity for justice.

"If there is no God, well then, the result of lives such as Hitler's or Mother Theresa's are roughly the same – there's no justice with regard to these individuals, with regard to how they live their lives. If there's no God, then there's a lack of justice in the long-term."

If Peadar's commitment to justice and fairness find their roots in his faith in God, they find expression in his political career. He has

already proven himself to be a man unwavering in his commitment to deeply-rooted ideals – it was this which led him to form his own party. He believes it's important for people to have "an ideological compass". But he also believes that, while many people confess the influence of philosophers and theoreticians, to do so for the faith is considered taboo.

"I always find it interesting that you have a lot of TDs who will be massively by Marx or by Engels or Hayek or many other economic philosophers and be open about it," he says. "I think that it is completely natural and logical that people would be influenced by their faith as well in how they make judgements with regard to the day to day politics.

"I think that people have to have an ideological compass. I think when you delete an ideological compass from a politician, an individual can literally go down any cul-de-sac, any route and that can be very, very dangerous. But I also believe that, and this goes back to my upbringing, that your views have to have a foundation in science, in evidence, in facts."

Commitment

Along with his personal commitment to his faith, Peadar is staunchly in favour of a pluralistic society in which all faiths, cultures and distinctive characters can be expressed without fear or especial favour. This current society comes nowhere near achieving this, in Peadar's view, because it tends to exclude faith from the public forum.

"I do believe we're living in a society which has become extremely intolerant to the faith," he says. "I do believe that many people of faith feel that they nearly have to live in the closet. I think it's a shocking part of the rigidity and uniformity of modern society that we've taken some people out of the closet only to put another group of people into the closet.

"I do think it's important that faith can have full and clear expression in the public forum. Aontú is very much a pluralist's party – we believe a republic of Wolfe Tone, a republic of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, atheists – that everybody should be able to live without fear or favour to their full potential in the public forum.

“This evidence from experience, as it might be called, makes up only half of the rational foundation for his faith”

"The richness of that type of society is far more beneficial to people's lives than the uniformity of a society that pushes faith and culture and characteristics of those into the shadows and into the closet. I think it's important for people to be able to open about these things."

Pluralism

This is an approach which Peadar carries into his own life, as well as his political party, Aontú.

"To be honest I find it easy to live with differences of opinion," he says. "I would have people who are very good friends, but would have radically different views from



“My parents were definitely practising Catholics, but they weren't dogmatic – ideas had to be reasoned, they had to be evidenced based”

myself. And we would have, you know, hearty robust, but respectful debate and I think that's absolutely necessary within an organisation."

In some areas, this extends to his faith life as well. Peadar is up-front about the fact that he has differences of opinion with the Church, such as on the question of married priests and the ordination of women. He feels that differences of opinion are natural.

But he also believes that there are limitations to the extent one can disagree with your organisation, whether it be a Church or a political party, while still maintaining that difference of opinion is natural.

"You can exist within an organisation and have differences of opinion," says Peadar. "Now, I do think that organisations have to have rules and absolute values and you know, I don't think it can be the case where you just call yourself a member of Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin or Aontú and then pick and choose completely, totally different views.

"I believe it works similarly for the Catholic Church, or the Protestant church or being Jewish or Muslim – but if your greater understanding of the world is aligned to those

religions or philosophies, I think it's natural that there will be differences of opinions."

Peadar Tóibín concludes the interview with final reflection specifically relating to the Church and its future. He is of Pope Francis' view that the future of the Church must be in reaching out to the marginal in society.

"I think that for the Church in the future, if it wants to find role models and it wants to find ways back into the hearts of people, I think that they need look no further than the Capuchin day centre in Dublin, than Fr Peter McVerry and Sr Stanislaus," he says. "There are very good people out there who are on the cutting edge of helping people who in the most difficult situations.

"I do believe that the Church of Jesus Christ should be about the marginal – It should be about making sure the marginalised, the poor, those who are suffering, are helped in the best way we can. Many people may feel that the younger people have parted ways with the Church, but that if the Church sought to reinvigorate their relationship with the younger generation, those three individuals hold the key."

Out&About

Light of charity cutting through the fog of indifference



ANTRIM: The team from Catholics Caring in Kenban on a cold December morning collect vouchers for families in need.



CLARE: Members of Killaloe Youth Ministry with youth officer Joanne O'Brien prepare for an online series of events to raise funds for charity.



DONEGAL: Church leaders in the northwest gathered at St Colmille's Abbey near Church Hill in Donegal for a service marking the beginning of a year of celebrations of St Columba, his life and legacy.

INSHORT

Irish bishops seek support for Trócaire's Christmas appeal for Central America

During their Winter General Meeting bishops asked the public to contribute towards Trócaire's Christmas Appeal, which addresses the humanitarian crises as a result of hurricanes in Central America and supports people left hungry by the impacts of Covid-19.

Trócaire's Christmas Appeal will deliver food, shelter and medicine to women, men and children who have been left without income or food due to the pandemic.

Support to Trócaire this Christmas will also fund the charity's response to crises around the world. Last month, over a three week period, Central America was hit by two hurricanes. Four million people have been directly affected in Honduras,

1.2 million in Guatemala and 140,000 in Nicaragua by the resulting devastation.

A proud day for Fr Deveraux

Fr Sean Deveraux presented his nephew Cillian Doyle with his John Paul II Gold Award.

Fr Deveraux, parish priest of Cushinstown, Terrerath and Rathagarogue in the Diocese of Ferns felt that it was appropriate that he should be the one to present Cillian with his award as he had been instrumental in the completion of the tasks involved in the award.

In January of this year, before the lockdown, Fr Deveraux brought Cillian to Gambia where they both rolled up their sleeves and helped paint one of the schools where Fr Deveraux had previously spent 18 years working as a priest.

"It was great to have Cillian witness what it is like to live in Gambia and for him to contribute his time and energies to such a worthwhile project," says Fr Deveraux. "I am

very proud of Cillian and of all those who have put themselves forward to achieve the award this year."

Cillian also felt the experience was valuable. Cillian explains that even though he saw many differences between his age group in Gambia and his age group here in Wexford he felt that the one difference that stood out for him was the lack of opportunities that his peers in Gambia had open to them.

"Here we have loads of opportunities that will help us prepare for life after schools and hopefully aid us in getting the job we want to get, but it is different in Gambia, the opportunities are very limited there for those who complete school and that really struck a chord with me."

Cillian completed the rest of his award activities through work at the National Opera House and through membership of the Wexford-based Spirit Youth Group.

NI minister announces £11.7 million support for charities

Communities Minister Carál Ní Chuilín has announced a second phase of the Covid-19 Charities Fund.

The Minister is urging charities to start making application preparations ahead of the opening of the £11.7million fund on 6 January 2021.

She explained: "Organisational support will be available between mid-December and the opening date to give applicants time to prepare their applications. This will provide charities with time to collect the necessary information and consider their application with the help of experts."

"We have more than 8,000 charities that do invaluable work and provide essential support to people when they need it most. This funding will help those charities facing extreme financial pressures."

Edited by Jason Osborne
jason@irishcatholic.ie

Events deadline is a week in
advance of publication



ROSCOMMON: Bishop Paul Dempsey celebrates Mass for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception with transition year and 5th year students from St Nathy's College, Ballaghaderreen.



WEXFORD: Fr Sean Deveraux presents his nephew Cillian Doyle with his John Paul II Gold Award.



◀ **KERRY:** The official blessing of the Tree of Light on the Grounds of St Mary's Cathedral. At the blessing was Fr Kieran O'Brien, Cllr Niall Kelleher, Cllr Brendan Cronin, Terrence Mulcahy and Bishop Ray Browne, Bishop of Kerry. Photo: Valerie O'Sullivan.

▼ **DUBLIN:** A protest against late-term abortion takes place outside Leinster house.



LIMERICK: Mary Kenny and Godelieve As stand with Gianna Care information leaflets as part of Gianna Care's first ever Limerick outreach.



Events

● In the current Covid-19 crisis, it is clear that most (and perhaps all) Church events, other than some Masses, are suspended. Consequently, we are withholding the popular Events Listing column until normal activities can resume in our parishes. However, please do email us if you know of any parish event planned and we will publish details.

Letter from Rome

Frankincense's future: An ancient gift endangered



Guy Erlich, an Israeli entrepreneur, checks a frankincense tree at a plantation in Kibbutz Almog in the West Bank. Photo CNS.



Carol Glatz

The Gospel of Matthew never details how many Magi came from “the East,” but it makes it clear they travelled to pay homage to “the newborn king of the Jews” and “offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh”.

Beyond their great monetary value, scholars say, the gifts had deep symbolic significance: gold for the Christ child’s nobility as king of the Jews; frankincense, which was burned in religious ceremonies, for his divinity; and myrrh, which was used on cuts or wounds and in the anointing of corpses, to prefigure his role as healer and foretell of his death.

Both myrrh and frankincense have exceptional medicinal qualities, which would have made them a very useful and thoughtful gift for the Holy Family, said Anjanette DeCarlo, chief sustainability scientist for the US-based Aromatic Plant Research Center.

“At that time, infant mortality was high,” and frankincense and myrrh were “two of the most potent anti-microbial substances in the ancient medicine cabinet,” Ms DeCarlo told *Catholic News Service* in a

video call from Vermont, where she teaches at St Michael’s College in Colchester.

“From a Christian perspective, he’s the most important baby ever born and, of course, wouldn’t you bring that baby something to ensure” he could stay healthy, she said.

What is not healthy, however, is the future of frankincense.

“I always felt that if he knew really what was happening with frankincense, he would get involved”

Highly sought after for its religious, medicinal and household purposes, it is one of the oldest traded commodities in the world, spanning at least 5,000 years.

An aromatic resin, frankincense is harvested from the “tears” that seep from cuts made to a variety of *boswellia* tree species, which grow in the harsh, dry climates of Yemen and Oman in the Arabian Peninsula, of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan in East Africa, and in north-western India.

These trees are in severe decline and one species in particular – the *boswellia*

papyrifera, which grows in conflict-rife regions of Ethiopia and Sudan – risks going extinct in the next 50 years, said Ms DeCarlo, who also heads the Save Frankincense project. A study published last year in the journal, *Nature Sustainability*, predicted frankincense resin production will be halved in the next 20 years.

Consumer

The Catholic Church is a major consumer of frankincense since incense has an important place in its liturgies.

Dried gum grains are burned over hot coals in a censer or thurible to incense the altar, the book of Gospels, offertory gifts, sacred images and the people participating in the Mass, with the smoke symbolising sanctification, purification and the prayers of the Faithful rising up toward God.

Billowing upward, the smoke draws people’s gaze with it to remind them of heaven, and the incense aroma is a reminder of the transcendence of the Mass.

Burning frankincense also activates different channels in the brain to alleviate anxiety or depression, according to researchers from Johns Hopkins University and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

“It promotes a feeling of connection and spiritual enlightenment,” which is why burning frankincense has been an integral part of many different religious rites and rituals for millennia, said Stephen Johnson, an organismal biologist and frankincense researcher.

“Religions have a very important role to play” in helping not just to preserve, but to regenerate frankincense sources and support harvesters, he told CNS in a video call from Seattle.

“It is absolutely possible for us to take care of trees, take care of harvesters, take care of their communities and take care of ourselves,” he said. “Everybody involved in the supply chain should benefit.”

After years of working in Somalia and developing ethical and sustainable harvesting standards, Mr Johnson said he decided to establish his own business and projects that show what regenerative supply chains look like.

Regeneration tries to leave ecosystems, communities and plants better off by using profits to support research, conservation and community development and by making sure harvesting communities have access to fair prices and greater opportunities, he said.

This new way of doing

business has to happen now, Ms DeCarlo said. “Ten years from now will be too late.”

Most existing trees are “the last of their generation,” with no young trees taking their place, she said, and over-tapping trees hurts their ability to regenerate, stay healthy and survive.

“Mr Johnson said he decided to establish his own business and projects that show what regenerative supply chains look like”

Conflicts and climate change worsen already harsh conditions, and local communities are under great pressure to clear the land to grow crops for survival, she added. Also, grazing cattle love to chew on the tender baby leaves of new growth.

Mr Johnson and Ms DeCarlo both insisted that frankincense buyers, including Catholic churches and the essential oil industry, must demand transparency and traceability in the source of the resins and accountability in making sure harvesters are paid fairly.

“Today, we have the ability to go directly to the source, to talk to the actual harvesters and to employ technologies that allow us to track products all along the supply chain and make sure that that is all being done ethically” and in a way that allows the trees and the communities to flourish, Mr Johnson said.

Controls

Without such controls the industry is “very open to corruption and/or decline,” and “it’s not helping the people on the ground, it’s not helping the companies that want to do the right thing” and it doesn’t help the consumers who “don’t want to be killing trees or hurting communities or being complicit in something that isn’t sustainable,” Ms DeCarlo said.

“We desperately need the Catholic Church to step in,” she said, for example, by promoting regenerative supply chains and tree growing with programs to adopt trees and help struggling nurseries, even on a parish, school or individual level.

It is a direction that aligns with Pope Francis’ call for caring for creation, said Ms DeCarlo.

As a Catholic, she said, “I always felt that if he knew really what was happening with frankincense, he would get involved. That this is something so near and dear to us. The fact that it was brought to baby Jesus is not a small matter.”

“The Catholic Church is a major consumer of frankincense since incense has an important place in its liturgies”

Catholic aid agencies work to help Christians return to Iraq



Inés San Martín

With months to go still until his March 5-8 trip to Iraq, Pope Francis began shaping his message, urging a network of Catholic charities to help Christians who have fled the region to return home if they want to do so.

In a video message sent to a Vatican-organised summit focused on the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq, Francis lamented the plight of so many Christians who fled the place of their birth, where their faith first blossomed.

"We must work to ensure that the Christian presence in these lands continue to be what it has always been: a sign of peace, progress, development, and reconciliation between peoples," he said.

“According to the World Food Program, 9.3 million Syrians don’t know where they will get their next meal and more than 80 percent of Syrians live below the poverty line”

Close to 50 people, between Vatican officials and representatives of local Catholic Churches took part in the December 10 virtual summit organised by the Vatican’s Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Though the Zoom dialogue focused mostly on Syria and Iraq, the cases of neighbouring Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan – all hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees – were also considered.

"This is the 10th year of the bloody violence in Syria, where the bloodshed has continued," Aloysius John, president of the pontifical Caritas Internationalis charitable organisation told *Crux* after the meeting. "This is also a symbolic moment to the say: Stop the suffering of the



Volunteers in Mosul, Iraq, clean the Syrian Catholic Church of St Thomas on October 28, 2020. Photo CNS.

people. Suggestions were put on the table to this end, and it was also made clear that the unilateral sanctions do not serve their purpose, and they need to be removed. All of us need to contribute so that these sanctions are removed."

During its decade-long civil war, much of Syria's infrastructure was destroyed by the bombing perpetrated by several governments – including Russia, the US, Turkey and Syria itself.

According to the World Food Program, 9.3 million Syrians don't know where they will get their next meal and more than 80% of Syrians live below the poverty line.

Caritas Internationalis

Caritas Internationalis is trying to get US-imposed sanctions against Syria lifted, arguing that they are hurting civilians more than the government.

Mr John told *Crux* they've already presented their case to the UN offices in Geneva.

"I believe Francis will speak about the sanctions and other problems when he's in Iraq," he said. "Rich societies should stop dominating others through violence, and we need to stop living in war.

Human fraternity is possible."

"Every effort—be it small or great—carried out to promote the path of peace," Francis said in the video with which the conference opened, "is like adding a brick to the structure of a just society, which is open and welcoming, and where everyone can find a place to dwell in peace."

“But precautions need to be taken, and we’re helping those who want to go back to prepare them for what they’ll find”

Mr John said that the need for refugees to go back home was also discussed during the meeting, particularly from the perspective of what aid agencies can do to make things easier for those who attempt to do so.

"In some places people want to go back, so Caritas is helping them, sensitising them, giving them the right information, so that people can fulfil their aspiration to go back home and reconstruct, which I would say, is

a normal aspiration to have," he said. "But precautions need to be taken, and we're helping those who want to go back to prepare them for what they'll find."

Support

Francis also voiced his support to charitable agencies and volunteers who "following the example of the Good Samaritan, work tirelessly to welcome, care for, and accompany the migrants and displaced persons of these lands, without distinction of creed."

"Our charitable work must be inspired by and in the Gospel," he noted. "Our assistance must be a tangible sign of a local Church which helps another Church that is suffering, through the wonderful means of Catholic agencies of humanitarian and developmental aid."

Though the summit was not open to the media, the Vatican dicastery that organised it released a statement in which several of those who took part were quoted, including Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's Secretary of State, whose speech was read by the second in command in his office, Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher.

Cardinal Parolin acknowledged that the situation in

the entire region is characterised by "the economic crisis, aggravated by the political blockade or even by the institutional crisis and, more recently, by the Covid-19 pandemic."

“What will happen to the people in these violence-torn countries if the coronavirus outbreak continues?”

"Today more than ever we must not turn off attention to the needs of the population, we must renew as a Church our charitable commitment alongside the most fragile and needy, also by promoting innovative actions, without forgetting the training of our operators, both professional and spiritual," Cardinal Parolin said.

In their statement, the Vatican dicastery noted that through the Church's vast network of aid agencies, over \$1 billion has been allocated to help Syria and Iraq since 2014, offering concrete assistance to over four million people each year.

"The situation is changing every day, but the biggest problem today, in this long-lasting crisis, is that people have been suffering for many years and they have gotten used to it: suffering is becoming a way of life," Mr John said over the phone. "And then there's the Covid-19 element. What will happen to the people in these violence-torn countries if the coronavirus outbreak continues?"

"But what I ask is, how long will this be their way of living? Will they suffer continuously, without end? It's made people completely and totally indifferent, with children who are 10-years-old and who've only known violence," he said.

Violence-free

"The war came from outside, and it has to stop, so we can start reconstructing Syria and people can actually have a violence-free life," he said, but "due to the sin of indifference, the whole world has become indifferent to the suffering of these populations. This has to change also".

i Inés San Martín is a correspondent with *CruxNow.com*

Calamities unmask our shared vulnerability and our false securities

When we no longer see the natural world as something to be nurtured; the powerful seize and extract all they can from it while putting nothing back, writes **Pope Francis**



In times of crisis and tribulation, when we are shaken out of our sclerotic habits, the love of God comes out to purify us, to remind us that we are a people. Once we were not a people; but now we are God's people (1 Peter 2:10).

At the beginning of the story of every people is a quest for dignity and freedom, a history of solidarity and struggle. For the people of Israel, it was the exodus from their slavery in Egypt. For the Romans, it was the foundation of a city. For the nations of the American continent, it was the struggle for independence.

Just as a people comes to an awareness of its shared dignity in times of struggle, in war and hardship, so, too, a people can forget that awareness. A people can become oblivious to its own history. In times of peace and prosperity, there is always the risk that the people might dissolve into a mere mass, with no unifying principle to bind them.

When this happens, the centre lives at the expense of the margins, people divide into competing tribes, and the exploited and disrespected might burn with resentment at the injustices. Rather than thinking of ourselves as members of a people, we have competition for dominance, turning contrapositions into contradictions. Because, in these circumstances, the people no

longer see the natural world as their inheritance to be nurtured; the powerful seize and extract all they can from it, while putting nothing back. Indifference, egotism, a culture of complacent well-being, and deep divisions within society, spilling out into violence — all these are signs that a people has lost awareness of its dignity. It has ceased to believe in itself.

“Let it not be said, in years to come, that in response to the coronavirus crisis we failed to act to restore the dignity of our peoples”

A people thus weakened and divided easily falls prey to very different kinds of colonisation. But even when not occupied by a foreign power, the people has, in a larger sense, already surrendered its dignity. It has ceased to be a protagonist of its own history.

Calamities

Every now and then, however, great calamities awaken the memory of that original liberation and unity. Prophets who have sought to recall the people to what really matters, to its first love, suddenly find eager audiences. Times of tribulation



Pope Francis meets author Austen Ivereigh at the Vatican in October 2019. Photos: CNS

offer the possibility that what oppresses the people — both internally and externally — can be overthrown, and a new age of freedom begin.

Such calamities for a time throw us off balance, yet, paradoxically, they can allow a people to recover its memory, and therefore its capacity for action, its hope. Crisis has shown that our peoples are not subject to blind forces but in adversity are capable of acting. Calamities unmask our shared vulnerability and expose those false, superfluous securities around which we had organised our plans, routines, and priorities. They reveal our neglect

of what nourishes and strengthens the life of the community, how we had shriveled within our bubbles of indifference and well-being. We learn that in our restlessness and frustration, in our fascination with new things, in craving recognition in manic busyness, we had failed to pay attention to the suffering all around us.

In their response to that suffering is measured the authentic character of our peoples.

Memory

As we awaken to the memory of our people's dignity, we start

to grasp the insufficiency of the pragmatic categories which have replaced the mythical category that gave us our true way of life. The people of Israel in the desert preferred the pure pragmatism of a golden calf to the freedom to which the Lord called them. In the same way we had been told that society is just an amalgam of individuals each pursuing their own best interests; that the unity of the people is mere fable; that we are powerless before the might of the market and the state; and that life's purpose is profit and power.

But now, come the storm, we see that it is not so.

Pope Francis kisses Peter Lombardi, 12, of Columbus, Ohio, who has Down syndrome, after the boy rode in the popemobile during his general audience in St. Peter's Square.



We must not let the current clarifying moment pass us by. Let it not be said, in years to come, that in response to the coronavirus crisis we failed to act to restore the dignity of our peoples, to recover our memory and to remember our roots.

The feeling of being part of a people can only be recovered in the same way as it was forged: in shared struggle and hardship. The people is always the fruit of a synthesis, of an encounter, of a fusion of disparate elements that generates a whole which is greater than its parts. A people may have profound disagreements and differences, but they can walk together inspired by shared goals, and so create a future. Classically, a people gathers itself in assemblies and organises. It

shares experiences and hopes, and it hears the call of a common destiny.

“It may seem strange to say it, but it's true: the people has a soul”

Soul

It may seem strange to say it, but it's true: the people has a soul. And because we can speak of the soul of a people, we can speak of a way of viewing the world, an awareness. Such an awareness is the result not of an economic system or political theory but of a personality shaped in key moments of a people's history.

These milestones have imprinted on the people a powerful sense of solidarity, of justice, and of the importance of labour.

When the people prays, what does it ask for? For health, work, family, school; for a decent place to live; for enough money to get by; for peace between neighbours, and a fresh chance for the poor. These aims may not seem revolutionary or high-minded. But the people itself knows all too well that they are the fruit of justice.

A people, then, is not merely the sum of individuals. It is neither a logical nor a legal category, but a living reality that is the fruit of a shared integrating principle. You can try to describe the people as a concept, in terms of a paradigm,

“We start to grasp the insufficiency of the pragmatic categories which have replaced the mythical category that gave us our true way of life”

to try to define where it begins or ends, or to impose some legal or rational definition of it. And you can analyse a particular people in terms of its culture or characteristics, to try to name what defines, say, the French or the American people. But ultimately the exercise is futile. To make the people a topic of research is to put yourself outside it, and in so doing, to lose sight of what it is. Because 'the people' is not a logical concept, it can really only be approached through intuition, by entering into its spirit, its heart, its history and traditions.

“When the people prays, what does it ask for? For health, work, family, school; for a decent place to live”

The people is a category capable of generating symphony out of disconnection, of harmonising difference while preserving distinctiveness. To speak of the people is to offer an antidote to the perennial temptation of creating elites, whether intellectual, moral, religious, political, economic, or cultural. Elitism reduces and restricts the riches that the Lord placed on the earth, turning them into possessions to be exploited by some rather than gifts to be shared. Enlightened elites always end the same way, imposing their criteria, and in the process scorning and excluding all those

who do not conform to their social status, moral stature, or ideology. We have suffered for too long from these reductionisms.

To speak of a people is to appeal to unity in diversity: *e pluribus unum*. For example, the 12 tribes of Israel were gathered into one people, harmonised around a common axis (Deuteronomy 26:5) yet without giving up the distinctive characteristics of each one. The People of God, in this case, takes up the tensions which are normal in any human grouping, but without needing to resolve them by one element prevailing over the others.

Explaining

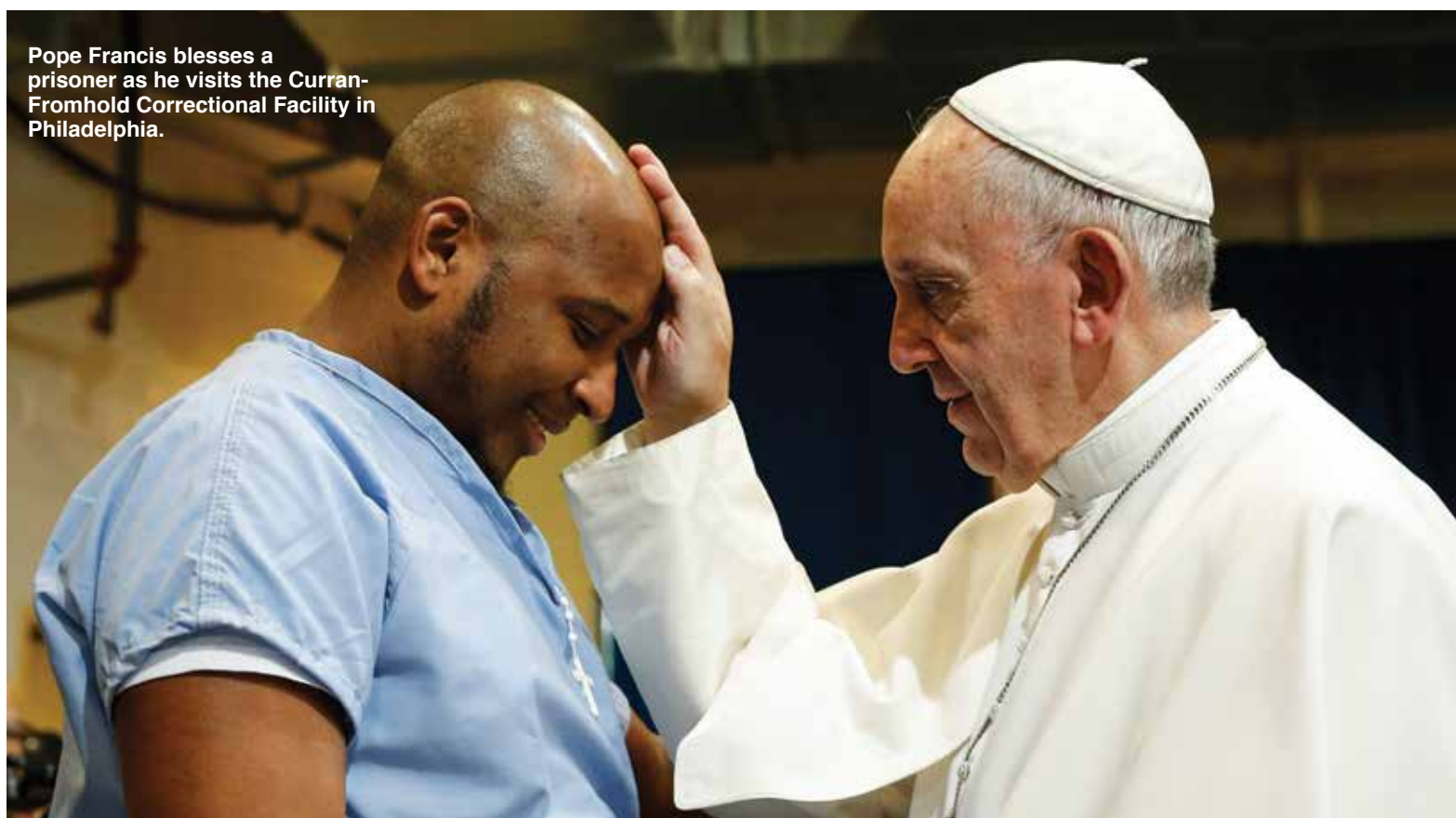
I realise that explaining this thought category is not easy, not least because we have become so used to speaking of identity in categories of exclusion and differentiation. That is why I prefer to use the archetypal term 'mythical category,' for it opens up a different way of describing reality, one that allows us to forge an identity that is not determined by exclusion and differentiation and dialectical opposition, but through the synthesis of potentialities that I call overflow.

“The feeling of being part of a people can only be recovered in the same way as it was forged”

If, faced with the challenge not just of this pandemic but of all the ills that afflict us at this time, we can act as a single people, life and society will change for the better. This is not just an idea but a call to each of us, an invitation to abandon the self-defeating isolation of individualism, to flow out from my own 'little lagoon' into the broad river of a reality and destiny of which I am part yet which at the same time lie beyond me.

.....
This is an extract from *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* by Pope Francis which was published on December 1.

Pope Francis blesses a prisoner as he visits the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia.



LET US
DREAM

THE PATH TO
A BETTER FUTURE

POPE
FRANCIS



Letters

Letter of the week

We must bring young men to church

Dear Editor, It was sad to hear of the closing of Clonard Monastery Confraternity for Men who are now losing 'their sense of identity and belonging' as Catholics. Will this leave the Catholic Church with no outreach to men at all?

Men in our congregations have become almost an endangered species and as for young men they are pretty much extinct.

Our Church once was divided down the middle with men on one side and women on the other and the men's side was just as full on Sundays as the women's. There were men's sodalities, men's missions, they had special parts to play in Corpus Christi Processions and there were boy altar servers. Now our congregations have a ratio of about five

women to four men and we wonder at the shortage of vocations.

We should be doing everything possible and impossible to bring back young men, including proper catechesis in schools. God bless the work.

*Yours etc.,
Brid Ní Rinn
Naas, Co. Kildare*



Celebrating Christ's birth with prayer at home

Dear Editor, In these very difficult times, it is understandable that people want to attend Mass and especially at Christmas. There is a huge desire to worship on the feast of the birth of Our Lord, even by those who come to church occasionally or only on this day. However, it looks like this may not be possible for everyone this Christmas given the pandemic and our concerns for the safety of people who want to come to church and for those with whom they are in contact.

This Christmas, might we say that the Church is deployed, it is out there in the community bringing hope and care,

especially to the lonely, to older people who live by themselves and to the most vulnerable. Many people are already doing this everywhere of course – loving Jesus in the disguise of their fellow men and women. We remember his words: "Whatever you do to the least, you do to me."

May I suggest that this Christmas our pastors and Church-leaders deploy us officially to celebrate the birth of Christ with prayer at home because, He told us: "Where two or three of you are gathered together in my name there am I among you." We would put prayer into action

by seeking out and serving our sisters and brothers, particularly those who have nobody to spend Christmas with. We would do this carefully and safely using all the guidelines at our disposal. We could bring cards, gifts or something to eat to someone's door, to a stranger or a neighbour. We would pray with them also, if they would like that. What a witness to faith that would be! Connection, relationship, the sacrifice of love; all of which we celebrate in the Eucharist.

*Yours etc.,
Adrian Peelo OFM
Franciscan Abbey, Co. Galway*

A defence of JP II after McCarrick Report

Dear Editor, I must defend the memory of the late Pope John Paul II who was severely criticised in the recent 'McCarrick Report'. It is grossly unjust that so many are now attacking the person and character of the Pope without first examining all the facts.

Pope John Paul II did commission a secret inquiry into McCarrick via the apostolic nuncio at the time, Archbishop Gabriel Montalvo. According to the McCarrick Report this turned out to be inadequate because three US bishops

provided "inaccurate and incomplete information".

In August 2000 Cardinal McCarrick wrote to Bishop Stanislaw Dziwisz who was Pope John Paul II's private secretary, denying all the accusations made against him. He swore that "in the seventy years of my life, I have never had sexual relations with any person, male or female, young or old, cleric or lay, nor have I ever abused another person or treated them with disrespect". Bishop Dziwisz delivered McCarrick's letter to the Pope

who gave it to the Secretariat of State Archbishop Re. After reading the letter Pope John Paul II was convinced of McCarrick's innocence. During the years when he was an Archbishop in Poland, Pope John Paul II had witnessed the use of false accusations on the part of the regime to discredit priests and bishops.

From the sequence of dates and events in the McCarrick Report it is very obvious that Pope John Paul II was acting on the advice of his most trusted advisers to tell the

truth regarding McCarrick's disgraceful behaviour and past history, sadly many of them let him down.

As one of the many thousands of people who loved and supported Pope John Paul II, I treasure his memory and all the great work he did during his long papacy. Don't let the media tarnish the memories we have of this great Pope Saint John Paul II.

*Yours etc.,
Vera Connolly
Raheny, Co. Dublin*

Acknowledging the 'amazing' works of our religious

Dear Editor, congratulations to you and your staff for picking up on the interview on Liveline in which a young man paid homage to the amazing work of an Irish nun, speaking of how she deeply influenced his life. Ger Smith from Ballymun related how Sr Ann Thomas of the Little Sisters of the Assumption helped his family after his mother was taken into care after a Schizophrenia diagnosis.

He describes her as a being like Mother Theresa and it certainly seems to be an accurate description due to her dedication to helping him without looking for any publicity or congratulations in return.

This story makes me think of all the amazing work our Catholic religious have done to help people not just in Ireland but around the world. It really is incredible to think how much charitable and humanitarian work has been and is being done in the background, which will never be publicly recognised, in the name of Christ. There is no doubt in my mind that this story is just the smallest tip of the iceberg of the good works our religious have done – the Irish people have so much to be proud of and I think if more of these stories were highlighted rather than just the terrible things done by a minority of people, the public image of religious in Ireland would be very different. I'll also note a big difference I see between modern charities and the work of religious orders.

While much of the charitable works of religious sisters and brothers has not been splashed across the media, many charities are constantly blasting us with messaging about just how great they are and the number of people they help. Of course I accept they have to do this to continue to get funding and inform people of who they are so prospective donors can make informed choices about donating and why, there's some quite beautiful about the humility and quiet kindness of religious – they work for God and his people and that's all they need.

*Yours etc.,
Aisling Murphy
Cork City, Co. Cork*

PR campaign needed to welcome people back to church

Dear Editor, In looking towards a post pandemic opening up of society I feel that the Church is best placed to offer a burdened people some hope. Perhaps instead of hiding her light under a 'bushel' we could illuminate society again with the Good News. Could the powers that be (hierarchy or communications office) enlist a PR agency to highlight what being part of church can offer people. Maybe a nationwide campaign on mainstream media and social media. What a simple slogan like "would you think about coming back to Mass" could mean for people disillusioned with life, worries, illnesses and stresses of modern life. This holistic invitation might not have been a considered option for some in a long time. It might also open doors for people thinking about returning. Every parish would have to facilitate this welcome of course and while people returning may feel apprehension or out of practice above all they must not feel judgement for it to be successful.

*Yours etc.,
Sean Linehan
Bantry, Co. Cork*

Letters to the Editor

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

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

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

📷 Around the world



▲ **HOLY LAND:** Palestinian Catholic Issa Kassissieh, known as Jerusalem Santa, poses with Uri Tselicov, his wife, Natalya, and their 3-year-old daughter, Lily, inside Santa's House December 7. The house was created out of the Kassissieh family's 700-year-old home in the Old City of Jerusalem.

◀ **SYRIA:** People walk past damaged buildings at the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Damascus December 2.



GERMANY: People enjoy a snowy day on Feldberg Mountain in Schmitten December 9.



HONDURAS: A caravan of Honduran migrants walk along a road in San Pedro Sula December 9 as they head to the United States.



SUDAN: Ethiopian asylum seekers wait in line for food at the Um Rakuba refugee camp December 3.



USA: Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn and New York Mayor Bill de Blasio unveil 'Angels Unawares', a replica of the artwork that sits in St Peter's Square at the Vatican in front of the Diocese of Brooklyn's public Christmas tree at Grand Army Plaza.

The illusion of invulnerability



Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. That's a pious axiom that doesn't always hold up. Sometimes the bad time comes and we don't learn anything. Hopefully this present bad time, Covid-19, will teach us something and make us stronger. My hope is that Covid-19 will teach us something that previous generations didn't need to be taught but already knew through their lived experience; namely, that we're not invulnerable, that we aren't exempt from the threat of sickness, debilitation, and death. In short, all that our contemporary world can offer us in terms of technology, medicine, nutrition, and insurance of every kind, doesn't exempt us from fragility and vulnerability. Covid-19 has taught us that. Just like everyone else who has ever walked this earth, we're vulnerable.

“Despite much denial and protest, we've had to accept that we now live as did everyone before us, that is, as unable to guarantee own health and safety”

I'm old enough to have known a previous generation when most people lived with a lot of fear, not all of it healthy, but all of it real. Life was fragile. Giving birth to a child could mean your death. A flu or virus could kill you and you had little defense against it.



Fr Rolheiser

www.ronrolheiser.com

You could die young from heart disease, cancer, diabetes, bad sanitation, and dozens of other things. And nature itself could pose a threat. Storms, hurricanes, tornadoes, drought, pestilence, lightning, these were all to be feared because we were mostly helpless against them. People lived with a sense that life and health were fragile, not to be taken for granted.

Vaccinations

But then along came vaccinations, penicillin, better hospitals, better medicines, safer childbirth, better nutrition, better housing, better sanitation, better roads, better cars, and better insurance against everything from loss of work, to drought, to storms, to pestilence, to disasters of any kind. And along with that came an ever-increasing sense that we're safe, protected, secure, different than previous generations, able to take care of ourselves, no longer as vulnerable as were the generations before us.

And to a large extent that's true, at least in terms of our physical health and safety. In many ways, we're far less vulnerable than previous generations. But, as Covid-19 has made evident, this is not a fully safe harbour. Despite much denial and protest, we've had to accept that we now live as did everyone before us, that is, as unable to guarantee own health and safety. For all the dreadful things Covid-19 has done to us, it has helped dispel an illusion, the illusion of our own invulnerability. We're fragile, vulnerable, mortal.

Disillusionment

At first glance, this seems like a bad thing; it's not. Disillusionment is the dispelling of an illusion and we have for too long (and too glibly) been living an illusion, that is, living under a pall of false enchantment which has us believing that the threats of old no longer have power to touch us. And how wrong we are! As of the time of this writing there are 70.1

million Covid-19 cases reported worldwide and there have been more than 1.6 million reported deaths from this virus. Moreover the highest rates of infection and death have been in those countries we would think most invulnerable, countries that have the best hospitals and highest standards of medicine to protect us. That should be a wake-up call. For all the good things our modern and post-modern world can give us, in the end it can't protect us from everything, even as it gives us the sense that it can.

Game-changer

Covid-19 has been a game-changer; it has dispelled an illusion, that of our own invulnerability. What's to be learned? In short, that our generation must take its place with all other generations, recognising that we cannot take life, health, family, work, community, travel, recreation, freedom to gather, and freedom to go to church, for granted. Covid-19 has taught us that we're not the Lord of life and that fragility is still the lot of everyone, even in a modern and post-modern world.

Classical Christian theology and philosophy have always taught that as humans we are not self-sufficient. Only God

is. Only God is 'self-sufficient being' (*Ipsium Esse Subsistens*, in classical philosophy). The rest of us are contingent, dependent, interdependent... and mortal enough to fear the next appointment with our doctor. Former generations, because they lacked our medical knowledge, our doctors, our hospitals, our standards of hygiene, our medicines, our vaccines, and our antibiotics, existentially felt their contingency. They knew they weren't self-sufficient and that life and health could not be taken for granted. I don't envy them some of the false fear that came with that, but I do envy them not living under a pall of false security.

“For all the dreadful things Covid-19 has done to us, it has helped dispel an illusion, the illusion of our own invulnerability”

Our contemporary world, for all the good things it gives us, has lulled us asleep in terms of our fragility, vulnerability, and mortality. Covid-19 is a wake-up call, not just to the fact that we're vulnerable, but especially to the fact that we may not take for granted the precious gifts of health, family, work, community, travel, recreation, freedom to gather, and (yes) even of going to church.

“Covid-19 has been a game-changer; it has dispelled an illusion, that of our own invulnerability. What's to be learned?”

Family & Lifestyle

The Irish Catholic, December 17, 2020

Personal Profile

Caring for the sick in imitation of Christ

Page 34



The octave before Christmas



Today marks the beginning of the final octave of Advent, the last eight days before Christmas. Today also marks the beginning of the 'O Antiphons', a series of antiphons which lasts until December 23. These ancient antiphons have been sung in monasteries for more than a thousand years and their roots go deeper into history, into the Jewish past of Christianity.

We have spent three weeks preparing ourselves for Christ's birth, but there's still time for one last push and that's what the 'O Antiphons' are for. The antiphons derive their name from the "O" which begins each antiphon.



The 'O Antiphons' are one final burst of Advent before Christmas, writes Ruadhán Jones

They address Christ with seven evocative Messianic titles: *O Sapientia* (Wisdom), *O Adonai* (Lord and Ruler), *O Radix Jesse* (Root of Jesse), *O Clavis David* (Key of David), *O Oriens* (Dawn of the East), *O Rex Gentium* (King of the Gentiles), and *O Emmanuel* (God With Us). They are based on the Old Testament prophecies

and types of Christ.

If you remove the 'O' and put the titles in reverse order, the first letter of each will spell the Latin phrase ERO CRAS which means "Tomorrow, I will come". The antiphons sum up the longing we experience for our Creator, tying us back to the Jewish peoples of the Old Testament

as they begged the Messiah to "Come".

Focus

By this time, we can have lost our grip on the true meaning of Advent. The outward preparations for Christmas – cakes, puddings, decorations, trees, presents and so on – can take up all our attention. Alternatively, and this may be the case even more so this year, Advent never started for us as the rush of work or the absence of our annual traditions leaves us lost.

The 'O Antiphons' are a perfect opportunity to reset and refocus. They embody an almost child-like appreciation for Christmas.

Like children asking impatiently, "When will Santa come", the 'O Antiphons' are a repeated and urgent prayer for Christ to "Come".

However, though their message is somewhat child-like, they are not the easiest prayers to explain to children, and so integrating them fully into our 'domestic church' can take some work. Equally, because they arrive with little fanfare, they can easily pass us by. But they are worth the work and can really prepare for us for the Christmas season!

» Continued on Page 33

Family News

AND EVENTS

MINISTER FOR HEALTH ANNOUNCES THE ALLOCATION STRATEGY FOR COVID-19 VACCINES

The strategy prioritises those over the age of 65 living in long-term care facilities, frontline healthcare workers who are in direct patient contact and those aged 70 and over. Minister Stephen Donnelly also announced that there should be no barrier to people accessing a vaccine, and therefore the vaccine programme will be available free of charge to everyone in Ireland. Speaking after the announcement, Mr Donnelly said that, while we await news on whether these vaccines comply with all of the EMA's requirements of quality, safety and efficacy, the Government has been working ahead on plans for the roll-out of vaccines. "A key part of the roll-out will be ensuring that those most vulnerable to Covid-19 receive vaccinations first," he said. "Given the country's experience with Covid-19 to date and the risks that vulnerable people and those in frontline roles in the health and social care services continue to face, it is only right that they are prioritised in the allocation of vaccines."

RESEARCH FINDS THAT CONSUMERS DON'T TRUST SMART HOME TECHNOLOGIES

Researchers from Queen's University Belfast and the University of Warwick have found that consumers don't fully trust new smart home technologies due to fears over security breaches.

Smart home technologies are an emerging market, with some households installing voice-controlled appliances and smart security. The findings suggest consumers were anxious about the likelihood of a security incident, as overall the people surveyed were unconvinced that their privacy and security will not be at risk when they use smart home devices.

When asked to evaluate the impact of a privacy breach the respondents tended to disagree that its impact will be low, suggesting they expect the impact of a privacy breach to be significant.

The research was led by WMG, University of Warwick and the Department of Computer Science at the University of Warwick, and supported by Queen's Management School. The research team surveyed 2,101 participants aged 16-74 years old across the UK using an online questionnaire.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY CHRISTMAS DRIVE THRU EVENT AT GLUTEN FREE BAKERY

Set in a traditional 1700s thatched cottage, the Spinning Wheel Gluten Free bakery are hosting a free family friendly Christmas drive through. The bakery is inviting you to "come and taste our treats while taking in the Christmas atmosphere on 19th of December between 4 pm and 7 pm". Based in Co. Offaly, the Spinning wheel is offering a wide range of gluten free sweets and treats. To attend, book the number of tickets you'll want sweet treats for (the number of people in your car), while walk-in entries are allowed as long as current guidelines are followed.

Wear your favourite Christmas jumper and enjoy a sweet treat drive through style – something for the whole family!

For more information, visit https://www.eventbrite.ie/e/christmas-drive-thru-tickets-126386079165?aff=ebdssbdestsearch&k_eep_tld=1.

Welcome Christmas news of 'triumph' of science



The approval of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine by British authorities early this month truly marks a great triumph for science and not just in the battle against Covid-19. Scarcely could anyone have imagined that at the start of the year the hopes of the world would rest on the approval of a vaccine for the worst global pandemic in over a century. With over 2000 deaths from Covid-19 in Ireland and the hardships and toils suffered over the last year, it's most welcome news this Christmas.

“The level of protection provided is about 95% and there were no significant side effects in over 43,000 people vaccinated”

For the first time, this vaccine uses technology never applied before in that no actual virus is needed for its production. In short, part of the genetic code (mRNA) from the SARS-CoV-2 virus that encodes its spike protein can be manufactured meaning the rate at which the vaccine can be made is dramatically accelerated. Consequently, mRNA vaccines may offer a more rapid solution to new viral outbreaks in the future. Another important advantage is that they should be easy to modify in the event of viral mutations.

The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine requires two doses administered three weeks apart with full immunity likely to develop about seven days after the second shot – meaning it takes about one month for full effects. Importantly, data shows it also

Medical Matters

Dr Kevin McCarroll



works well in older people. The level of protection provided is about 95% and there were no significant side effects in over 43,000 people vaccinated. The company will however continue to monitor study participants for any adverse reactions over the next two years.

In practise when the vaccine is rolled out to millions of people there is a very small risk that rare side effects may emerge. But there is no reason to believe that this is any more likely to happen with this or other Covid vaccines. Indeed, the risk of any major adverse effects with any vaccine is extremely low. The government though has agreed to indemnify five of the pharmaceutical companies producing the vaccines in the event of any liabilities arising from complications.

The Moderna vaccine using the same technology is also 95% effective and appears to provide 100% protection against severe Covid. The Oxford vaccine is up to 90% effective too depending on the dosing regime used, but cost is much lower and it can be kept in a standard fridge.

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has been slower to analyse the vaccine trials but this was in part because they waited until all the information became available unlike in the UK where the data

had been looked at from an earlier stage as it came in.

“However, the mass vaccination of the majority of the population will be a logistical challenge made harder by the need for two jabs”

Vaccine uptake of course is crucial with about 70% of the population needing to be immunised to provide 'herd immunity'. Whether the vaccine actually stops people becoming infected with the virus as opposed to preventing Covid symptoms is unclear. But ultimately if not having



symptoms one's infectivity is likely to be less and so spread also curtailed. However, recent surveys suggest that about 40% of Irish people are reluctant about being vaccinated so reassurance will be important.

The Pfizer vaccine can be stored in a standard fridge for a few days after thawing while with the Moderna vaccine this can be extended for up to 30 days, making distribution to nursing homes, vaccination centres and even GP practices easier. However, the mass vaccination of the majority of the population will be a logistical challenge made harder by the need for two jabs.

And so, who should be vaccinated first? The most vulnerable and those in nursing homes should be the priority along with carers for older people. After that healthcare workers and other older adults and those with respiratory, cardiac and other long-term conditions.

But how long will immunity last? We simply don't know the answer. We know that seasonal coronaviruses that cause common colds provoke immunity that can last for up to one year but then wanes off. There are also rare reports of SARS-CoV-2 re-infection. For this reason, even those who have suffered with Covid-19 will be vaccinated. However, other vaccines are known to give longer immunity than is sometimes acquired with natural infection. It is very likely that there will be some cases of Covid-19 well into the end of next year and even after, given that no vaccine is 100% effective and the virus' high infectivity. However, vaccination can eliminate nearly all of the severe cases and effectively reduce spread.

But we are going to have to wait until January in the Republic for the vaccination programme to start. In the meantime, given the ease in restrictions, there will undoubtedly be an increase in Covid-19 cases after Christmas. Not surprisingly, the CSO estimates that one in five people admit they are 'very unlikely' or 'unlikely' to comply with restrictions that would prevent them seeing family and friends over the holiday. Hopefully by Spring of next year, Covid numbers will be low and a semblance of normal life will have returned.

Dr Kevin McCarroll is a Consultant Physician in Geriatric Medicine, St James's Hospital, Dublin.

» Continued from Page 31



Prayer

The simplest way to integrate the 'O Antiphons' into our home life is by praying them. There is one antiphon for each day and they are not especially long. If you already have family or individual prayer-time set aside, they will not be a trying addition, and if you are starting out, they are gentle to say but reward deep reflection.

For example, the antiphon for the first day, December 17, is as follows: "O Wisdom (*O Sapientia*) – At God's word, creation was formed; the Word issued from the mouth of God, the Son, came to earth; we ask prudence to keep on the paths of wisdom to come to His Kingdom."

It is just a short few sentences and can be said quite quickly. The following six days are of similar length. I would recommend using some time to reflect on them, perhaps reading them in a manner similar to *Lectio Divina*. If you would like to take it a step further, pray the antiphon in conjunction with the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). I won't reprint all of them here as they can be found easily online, but here are the titles for each day:

- December 17: *O Sapientia* (O Wisdom)
- December 18: *O Adonai* (O Lord and Ruler)
- December 19: *O Radix Jesse* (O Root of Jesse)
- December 20: *O Clavis David* (O Key of David)
- December 21: *O Oriens* (O Day-spring)
- December 22: *O Rex Gentium* (O King of Nations)
- December 23: *O Emmanuel* (O God with Us)

Get crafty

While the prayers are quite short, they are not necessarily the easiest to comprehend, especially for young children. In order to create a fuller appreciation of the antiphons, you may need to get crafty! There are many activities, recipes and crafts which relate to the antiphons. For a good collection of resources, I would recommend checking out Catholic-culture.org.

To make life a bit easier, here are a couple of suggestions which are fun and easy to do. You might notice that December 19 already has a tradition associated with it – the Jesse Tree. This tradition only became popular in the 1950s, but has remained so ever since. You can integrate it with your Christmas tree or using a simple cardboard cut out, give it a place on its own.

“The idea is to involve your children as best you can – there will be opportunity for more detailed reflection in time”

The Jesse Tree derives its title from the prophecy of Isaiah in which he describes Christ as the "root of Jesse". It also relates to Matthew's genealogy of Christ. The focus of the Jesse tree is, as a result, figures from the bible and representations of Christ's life. It can be linked to the O Antiphons by creating a decoration, as simple or complex as you like, for each day.

Of course, it is not straight forward to represent the likes of



wisdom. But some lateral thinking helps – you could make a salt dough figure of Mary, who ponders Christ's word and was considered by St John Henry Newman to be the exemplar for Christian study. Equally, for the dayspring, you could cut out a shape of the sun and paint it yellow. The idea is to involve your children as best you can – there will be opportunity for more detailed reflection in time.

Daily treats

Florence Berger writes in her *Cooking for Christ* (1949) about a common tradition in monasteries relating to the 'O Antiphons'.

"In the monasteries long years ago, the different monks furnished extra treats on these days before Christ's birthday. The gardener gave the community some of his finest dried or preserved fruits on December 19 when he called on Christ: 'O Root of Jesse, come to deliver us and tarry not.' The cellarer unlocked the best wine for his treat as he called: 'O Key of David, come, and come quickly.' Finally, on December 23, the abbot gave his extra gift to the brothers."

While we are not likely to have either a wine cellar or home grown dried fruits readily available, the tradition is one which can be incorporated into our family lives. Jennifer Gregory Miller, an expert on celebrating the liturgy at home, recommends a practice which her own family have – allowing each family member to prepare a surprise treat for each day.

These don't need to be themed for the day. If you have a young child who wants to get involved, it could be a plate of cookies – if they're older, you could encourage them to make dinner! "The best part is keeping the dishes a secret until dinner time (although sometimes mom and dad assist)," writes Ms Miller on Catholicculture.org. There are many, many more suggestions online so I encourage you to explore the fullness that our liturgical tradition has to offer and to enjoy the wait for Christ to come!

Dad's Diary

Rory Fitzgerald



Our childhood Christmases are too few. Before the age of three, children know too little to truly appreciate Christmas. After the age of 11, or so, they know too much, as they veer recklessly towards their teenage years. This means that we have perhaps eight pristinely innocent childhood Christmases. We parents must do what we can to fill these eight seasons with magic and love.

For children, Christmas begins with wide-eyed delight at their everyday world suddenly becoming enchanted. The grey winter streets become spangled with fairy lights. Their minds resonate with old Christmas stories retold. Their hearts grow warm as families gather by the fireside. And then there are, of course, the sparkling presents under the tree. This is all well and good, but filling them with the sort of Christmas spirit that endures long after childhood is perhaps our most important task. It is the oldest Christmas story of all which brings the deepest, and most lasting, spiritual warmth to these midwinter celebrations. There's no gift like the joy we receive when we give. Children know that too. Last year, the older kids spontaneously rummaged through their rooms and found little things to give the smaller children. I too remember the happiness at filling a pillow case with toys I'd outgrown and merrily giving them to my little brothers. I guess the reason Santa's always so happy is because he gives so much.

Our letters to Santa get sent by "fire post". They are carefully written and embellished with decorations. One evening, they are ceremoniously placed in the fire, where they are transformed into smoke, which drifts to the North Pole, where they rematerialise as letters. I was touched to see the humble requests made this year. One read: "Dear Santa, I have lots already. This Christmas all I want is a selection box, Lego, books and a surprise." Another list was very slightly more ambitious, but it contained the caveat, "Dear Santa, I do not expect everything on this list, but I would also like a surprise and a chocolate

orange in my stocking". It is the surprise – the magic – that children are really after.

In our house, Santa does bring plenty of fun, excitement and Christmas magic, but he is also gently, subtly and very politely, directed towards the periphery of things. We parents give the

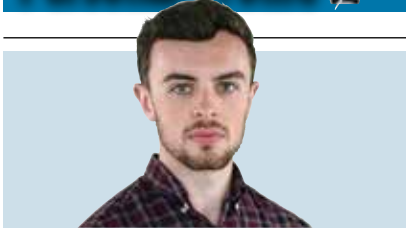


kids their main Christmas presents, while Santa plays more of a cameo role, arriving to fill the stockings and to deliver a few small extras. Diminishing the centrality of the theology of the jolly old elf in the children's thoughts may be best in the long run. After all, if you teach innocent minds that two important Christmas stories are equally true and important, you should not be surprised if any shifting perspectives as to one precipitates similar deconstructions as to the other. A substantial distinction as to the weight and importance of these two supernatural stories is wise.

The kids take turns lighting a candle in front of the crib each evening. This calls their minds to the innocence of a small, poor baby born in a stable. The least amongst us is the highest. I take the kids to gather holly and ivy in the woods – the original organic tinsel. We spread it along the mantlepieces, and place sprigs of holly above picture frames. These evergreens are symbols of things that live, even in the coldest winter. They are humble symbols of things which neither wither nor die. A reverence for eternal innocence lies at the heart of Christmas. Even the coldest hearts grow warm, as love bleeds light into deep winter.

Caring for the sick in imitation of Christ

Personal Profile



Jason Osborne

The Catholic Church and healthcare have a long history, with the Church being one of the largest patrons of healthcare efforts in the world. It is into this history that Peadar Hand has inserted himself, a young, practicing Catholic and a nurse.

Asked where the desire to enter healthcare came from, he cited involvement with hospitals from a young age, suffering from juvenile rheumatoid arthritis and being subjected to shingles and meningitis in rapid succession.

“A common story for young people engaged in their Faith today, his discovery of other people who thought as he did was a revelation”

“So, I think from that I was very comfortable in a healthcare setting, but I always wanted to do something where I was actually benefitting people. I didn’t want to just like, you know, be sitting at a desk all day or even something very productive like being a farmer – which was nearly the environment I grew up in, there’s just not enough interaction with other people. You’re on your own too much. Even though it’s something important and it benefits a



lot of people. It had to be something where I could actually see what I was doing and how it was affecting other people,” he tells *The Irish Catholic*.

If his desire to work in healthcare was real from a very young age, so too was his faith – although that’s not always the easiest road to walk in modern Ireland. Born and raised Catholic, the Faith was always present to him, but it wasn’t until he encountered other young people in it that he managed to open up properly about it to the world.

“I said my rosaries with the family every night and all this sort of thing, but I was kind of

alone in it, because there was no one my age. And then, at Mass one summer, someone got up at the end of Mass and talked about Youth 2000 so I decided to go along and saw there was a tonne of other people my age who actually believed that God was real. You know, I didn’t agree with all the things that they did, but that really helped me be more ok with letting people know that I was Catholic because all through school everyone knew I was religious and I got constant ridicule for it.”

A common story for young people engaged in their Faith today, his discovery of other people who thought as he did was a revelation.

“It was always equally real to me, I’d never had a point where I even doubted, you know, the existence of God or the divinity of Christ or anything like that, but it became easier to actually espouse it and to comfortably let people know that I was Catholic, rather than, if someone was saying, ‘Oh, are you free next Sunday?’ I’d be like, ‘Ah actually, I’m not going to be around in the morning’. Kind of dancing around it like, instead of ‘No, I’m going to get Mass on Sunday so I’ll meet you afterwards.’ You know, confidently telling them who I was.”

“So he chose a setting a Catholic can easily pursue their vocation to love in – a nursing home”

Regardless, the early clashes with others over faith did nothing to tamper down his support for unpopular causes. Working for the Pro-Life Campaign during the referendum, his course was set after the referendum was decided.

“I made a conscious decision after the referendum, because I’d worked with the PLC during it, so afterwards obviously I needed a job, and I was going to go back into nursing, but I didn’t know what was going to happen in Irish hospitals at that point – no one really knew – how things were going to work logistically. So I decided that I wasn’t going to look for a job in a hospital because I wasn’t taking the chance that I’d be even asked – even have it happen on the ward that I was on, even if I wasn’t involved. To have it happening 15-20 feet away from me, I wasn’t ok with that.”

So he chose a setting a Catholic can easily pursue their vocation to love in – a nursing home. It is here that he finds himself seeking to imitate Christ.

“I mean, you don’t consciously live out your faith when you’re working, you know, as a nurse, but you just act in such a way that the people you’re looking after – their day is better because you’re in it. And that’s, I mean, without doing month-long fasts or five hours of adoration a day, that’s the closest I can come to imitating Christ. It’s just taking people who need help and they’re in a better position because I was with them for 12 hours today than they would’ve been if I hadn’t been. And also just making sure that I separate that from my ego which is not always the easiest thing in the world,” he laughs. “You just have to keep in mind that you’re not doing it for feeling good about yourself, you’re doing it so you actually have a positive impact on them.”

It’s been a difficult year for everyone, but for healthcare workers, and particularly for those in residential settings, the stakes have been considerably higher.

“Suffice to say, their efforts will be rewarded”

“The actual big problem was that – I won’t say work is stressful, I don’t like stress and I tend to steer away from it where I can, but it’s pressure. You know, pressure’s good, it helps you perform, it makes sure you don’t make mistakes because you’re keeping on top of yourself, you’re not relaxing. You’re keeping your standards up so pressure is good. But you need to blow off steam when you’re not at work and this year you couldn’t do that. So, you just had all the pressure building up constantly without any outlet for it, so that definitely psychologically made things a lot more difficult.”

Suffice to say, their efforts will be rewarded.

Living Laudato Si’

Jane Mellet



Using Advent to strive for a healthier world after pandemic

Advent is one of my favourite seasons where we are encouraged to embrace waiting and hope. If 2020 has taught us nothing else, it has certainly shown us what it is like to wait!

Perhaps it has also reminded us of what it is like to hope, to hope for an end to the pandemic, to hope for the health of our loved ones, to hope for a vaccine. The Gospel message at the beginning of advent calls us to “keep awake”. Jesus urges us not to sleepwalk through life but to be awake to the realities around us.

This includes being awake to our dependence on God’s creation. In a recent TED Talk Pope Francis said: “Everything in the world is connected... As the pandemic made sure to remind us, we are interdependent on each other as well as our Mother Earth.”

We are dependent on God’s creation for our food, water, growth, nourishment, the air we breathe, the environment we live in. Everything is connected. Human beings cannot be healthy if our planet, our common home, is not healthy.

And so, we must “keep awake”, to look and to really listen to what is happening to our beautiful world. This Advent time is an opportunity to reflect on what type of world we want to return to when this crisis has passed. What world do we hope for?

During winter, nature is showing us what it is like to wait and to hope. Creatures hibernate, growth slows, the soil rests and our attention is drawn inwards, it is a time to look and to listen. The earth might appear a dark place as our common home turns away from the sun, but this darkness is necessary for the bulbs and seeds to ready themselves for the burst

of growth in spring. In the darkness of the soil, things are happening and so too in us.

So how can we cultivate hope in 2021? The young climate activist Greta Thunberg says: “When we start to act hope is everywhere.”

It is good advice. As faith communities we can be huge witnesses to caring for our common home, we can all do something. As we gather with families this Christmas let us spend more time in nature, noticing Christ present in all of it: “The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.” (Laudato Si’ 84).” And when Spring comes, can we ready the soil for planting? What would it be like for every parish, every family to rewild their world? Turning over green spaces to wildflowers is one way of cultivating hope in 2021. Learn more at <https://www.trocaire.org/documents/cultivating-hope-in-advent/>

Jane Mellett is the Laudato Si’ Officer with Trócaire

TV & Radio Pick of the Season

THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

BBC 2 Sat Dec 19, 9am
(1965) Max Von Sydow. From his lowly but venerated birth through his adult years as a teacher roving the Holy Land, Jesus attracts admirers and enemies unlike any man before. Sweeping cinematic retelling of the life of Jesus Christ.

IN CONCERT: THE KING'S SINGERS – CHRISTMAS

*EWTN Sat (night) Dec 19,
1.30am and St Stephen's Day
4.00pm*

One of the world's most celebrated ensembles performs traditional Christmas classics such as Stille Nacht, Veni veni Emmanuel and many others. No streaming, satellite only.

THE PROMISE

*EWTN Sat (night) Dec 19,
2.30am also Mon Dec 21,
5.30pm*

A touching and insightful dramatisation, looking inside Gospel events relating to the Annunciation and birth of Christ.

MASS

RTÉ 1 Sun Dec 20, 11.00am
On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Fr Michael Toomey celebrates Mass in the RTÉ Studios, Donnybrook, with musicians and parishioners from Holy Family Church, Ardfinnan, Clonmel, Co. Tipperary.

SONGS OF PRAISE

BBC One Sun Dec 20, 1.15pm
From St Paul's Cathedral in London, Aled Jones counts down the top ten carols, as voted for by viewers. With guests including Sir Cliff Richard, Katherine Jenkins, the Kingdom Choir, The Priests, the Choir of St Paul's and opera singer Andrea Bocelli.

THE TULLAMORE NATIVITY

*RTÉ News Now Sun Dec 20,
2.15pm*
The people and churches of Tullamore, Co. Offaly, come together for a uniquely Irish telling of the Nativity story.

ANGELA'S CHRISTMAS

RTÉ Sun Dec 20, 7.30pm
Set in Ireland in the early 1900s, this is a funny, heart-warming and poignant story



Brendan O'Regan

about the power of family and the innocent desire of a child to ensure everyone is safe, warm and loved at Christmas time.

SOUL NOEL: GOSPEL AND SOUL STARS SING CHRISTMAS

BBC 4 Sun Dec 20, 11pm

A Christmas concert of classic festive carols with a gospel and soul twist, featuring Beverley Knight, Carleen Anderson, Ola Onabule, Bryn Christopher and the Golden Gate Quartet.

NEW! RECLAIMING THE CAROL

*EWTN Sun (night) Dec 20,
2.30am, also Tues Dec 22,
9.30am, and Mon Dec 28,
9 pm*

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

A CHRISTMAS HISTORY OF SACRED MUSIC

*BBC 4 Wed Dec 23, 8pm and
Wed (night) 2.25am*

Simon Russell Beale takes a journey through Europe as he explores how the sound of Christmas has evolved in response to changing ideas about the Nativity. Music is performed by Harry Christophers and his choir, The Sixteen.

KATHERINE JENKINS CHRISTMAS SPECTACULAR

ITV Christmas Eve 2.15 pm

Classical music superstar Katherine Jenkins presents a magical and unique Christmas musical from the iconic Royal Albert Hall, bringing joy and festive celebrations to audiences around the world this holiday season.

CAROLS FROM KINGS

BBC 2 Christmas Eve 5.30pm

and Christmas Day 6.55am

The world-famous King's College Choir sing carols old and new, all filmed without a congregation and with the choir socially distanced to protect against coronavirus. With poems from Toni Morrison and Howard Thurman.

SOLEMN MASS OF CHRISTMAS EVE IN ROME

EWTN Christmas Eve 8.30pm

Pope Francis celebrates the Solemnity of the Birth of Our Lord from St Peter's Basilica.

THE CORK NATIVITY

*RTÉ 1 Christmas Eve 8.00pm,
and Christmas Day 9.55am*

The people of Cork give life and voice to the 2,000 year old Gospel Nativity story, in a hope-filled celebration of their diversity, culture and spirit.

CHRISTMAS AT HOME

*RTÉ 1 Christmas Eve 9.10pm
and Christmas Day 7.20am*

Mary Kennedy presents a celebration of Christmas with musicians and singers performing from across the country. Guests include the Maynooth University Chamber Orchestra, Schola Gregoriana, the National Seminary Choir, the RTÉ Concert Orchestra and Cor na nÓg.

MIDNIGHT MASS

RTÉ One Christmas Eve 11pm

Fr Tom Gilroy celebrates Mass from the Church of St Finian, Clonard, Co. Meath. With the Clonard Music Ensemble directed by Tally Claffey.



Christmas at the Vatican will be more somber this year, but the Pope will still deliver his traditional *Urbi et orbi* blessing. Photo: CNS



Mary Kennedy will present 'Christmas from Home'.

CAROLS AT CHRISTMAS

ITV Christmas Eve 11.15pm

The popular musical duo Michael Ball and Alfie Boe host a traditional Christmas Eve celebration from Manchester.

MIDNIGHT MASS

*BBC One Christmas Eve
11.45pm*

The traditional Christmas Eve service live from the architecturally stunning Catholic cathedral of St Peter and St Paul in Bristol. The liturgy is led by the Bishop of Clifton, Declan Lang, and the preacher is Canon Bosco MacDonald. The cathedral's Schola Cantorum, conducted by Richard Jeffrey-Gray, sing Christmas favourites.

A CHRISTMAS LEAP OF FAITH.

*RTÉ Radio One, Christmas
Day 8am*

Michael Comyn offers a festive mix of warmth, music, inspiration and humour in the company of a variety of duly socially distanced guests, including Alice Leahy, Ellen Coyne, the Rev. Chris Kennedy and members of The Mornington Singers.

MASS ON CHRISTMAS DAY

*RTÉ 1 Christmas Day
10.00am (also RTÉ Radio One
Extra and Longwave 252)*

Live Eurovision Mass from the chapel of St Dominique Savio in Morges in the French-speaking canton of Switzerland. The celebrant is Fr Charlemagne Malonga Diawara-Doré and the preacher is Abbot Jean Burin des Rozières, with commentary and translation by Mary Kennedy.

URBI ET ORBI

*EWTN Christmas Day 11am,
RTÉ One 11.45am*

Pope Francis offers 'to the city and the world' a message of prayer and hope, together with his

traditional blessing, from St Peter's Basilica, Rome, with commentary and translation by Fr Michael Collins.

THE ARCHBISHOPS' CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

*RTÉ One Christmas Day
12.10pm and RTÉ Radio One
1.05pm*

The Catholic and Church of Ireland Primates of All Ireland, Archbishop Eamon Martin and Archbishop John McDowell, offer a shared Christmas blessing, reflecting on a year in which faith has inspired many people to reach out to strangers and to discover hope and resilience during the pandemic.

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

EWTN St Stephen's Day 9am

A colourful, animated production, narrated by Christopher Plummer, that tells the traditional story of the birth of Jesus.

ANGELA'S CHRISTMAS



Angela's Christmas is set to be a firm favourite.

WISH

*RTÉ One St Stephen's Day
1.25pm*

Charming animation about a little girl, baby Jesus in the crib and her desire to have her father home for Christmas.

HIDDEN FIGURES

*Channel 4 St Stephen's Day
6.40pm*

(2016) Taraji P Henson, Octavia Spencer and Janelle Monáe. Fact-based drama about three extraordinary

women, whose genius in mathematics and engineering made a significant contribution to the US space race. They cope with racism and sexism. Positive towards religious faith.

SONGS OF PRAISE

BBC One Sun Dec 27, 1.20pm

Mark De-Lisser joins soul legend Mica Paris as she shares her journey of faith from her Pentecostal upbringing, through global fame, family tragedy and her return to gospel music.

THE SOUND OF MUSIC

*BBC One Sun Dec 29,
3.45pm, and BBC 4 Thurs Dec
31, 8pm*

Classic film version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical in which a novice nun (Julie Andrews) leaves her convent to accept a position as governess to a large family.

BLACK NARCISSUS

BBC One Sun Dec 27, 9pm

New drama series. Sr Clodagh and her group of Anglo-Catholic nuns travel from Darjeeling on a mission to the palace of Mopu in the Himalayas. With the help of Mr Dean, the agent of General Toda Rai, they start to repair the palace and open a school. But the unsettling atmosphere of their surroundings, the distracting presence of Mr Dean and stories of the palace's previous occupants weigh heavily on them all, reawakening memories in Clodagh that she thought she had suppressed.

DEMENTIA CHOIR AT CHRISTMAS

BBC 2 Wed Dec 30, 6.30am

Two years ago, Vicky McClure took to the stage with a choir of people living with dementia. In this heart-warming Christmas special, Vicky tells the story of the choir in lockdown.

QUEEN OF KATWE

*RTÉ 1 Wed Dec 30,
1.35pm (2016)*

Madina Nalwanga, David Oyelowo, Lupita Nyong'o. A Ugandan girl sees her world rapidly change after being introduced to the game of chess in a Christian mission.

GREGORIAN CHANT – THE MUSIC OF THE ANGELS

EWTN Thurs Dec 31, 6am

The rich history of the Gregorian Chant from Pope Gregory the Great in the Sixth Century to present day, featuring insights and a moving performance by the Cistercian monks of Vienna.



BookReviews



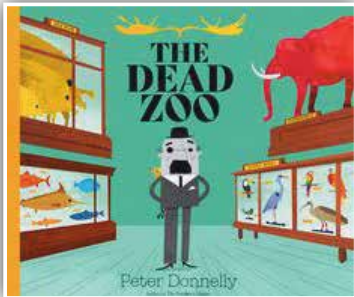
Peter Costello



Books for children and

The Christmas season has always been the time when families buy more books than they do at other times of the year. Here, arranged in something like order of age, are some suggestions from this year's new offerings.

The Dead Zoo
by Peter Donnelly
(Gill Books, €14.99)



This artist's most amusing books about the president up in the park seem to have run their course. But not to worry. Here is a new offering. Clearly inspired by the wonderful museum beside the Dáil, this tells the tale of Mr Gray who cares for all the stuffed animals. He does not care for people so much, or for small people either. But then his unchanging world is invaded by something even smaller, by a live mouse. How he deals with his little problem reveals a lot about Mr Gray... Wonderful stuff. (I am sure that Nigel Monaghan down on Merrion Square and his ever-patient staff all see the joke.)

The Haunted Lake
by P. J. Lynch
(Walker, €14.99)

The artist was born in Belfast and is currently our 'Laureate na nÓg'. This is a wonderful, folkloric tale (which will seem more real to those who live in Co. Wicklow near Poulaphouca). It is a story of loss and gain. Jacob and his father stay on when their valley is flooded, but then Jacob and Ellen fall in love. Jacob is wafted away by the spirits of the lake, but then one day from the watery depths he sees Ellen's boat floating above him... can he break out of the waters and reclaim her love? A haunting tale, beautifully imagined and drawn.

Mythical Irish Wonders
by Mark Joyce
(Currach Books, €23.99)

This is the second in a series derived

from Ireland's legendary past, retold in words and images for younger readers. The sources of these tales are from ancient texts, often well known to adult readers, but together they form a great introduction of the strange and fantastic ideas of ancient Ireland. Ideal material for the artist to work with, and a joy to read. Mark Joyce is very accomplished, but I had not realised before that he is the owner of Joyce's Craft Shop in Recess, Co. Galway - a landmark which I imagine many readers will have visited. (This makes him by the way, a very, very remote connection of a certain Mr J. Joyce.)



The Enchanted Lake. Classic Irish Fairy Tales

by Sinead de Valera, illustrated by Alexis Sierra
(Currach Books, €22.99)

Madame de Valera was a small gentle figure compared with the imposing personality of her husband. But her gentle nature came across in her tales inspired by Irish folklore, some 30 titles in all, in both Gaelic and English, between the 1940s and 1970s, from the idiom of the people. A veil of Celtic enchantment hangs over her imaginary world, a double gift from the past to a new generation.

What We'll Build

by Oliver Jeffers
(HarperCollins, €16.99)

Oliver Jeffers seems to have been part of Christmas for many years, with his poignant, beautifully created tales. His new book was inspired by the birth of his daughter, and tells of a father's efforts to build a life together. This is yet another of the artist's books that both children and parents will love. Need one really say more?

Where Snow-Angels Go

Maggie O'Farrell and Daniela Terrazzini
(Walker, €16.99)

This is a moving fable of a very sick little girl who in the middle of the night wakes up to encounter her snow-angel, who helps her through a difficult time. Later, when she is well again, she hopes to meet the snow-angel again and to ensure that those she loves have a snow-angels too. This story feeds off, as readers will realise, some of the oldest traditions of Christianity - curious to see them recycled in this way, but quite effective.

The Great Irish Farm Book
by Darragh McCullough and Sally Caulwell
(Gill Books, €22.99)

Ireland, before the techno age descended as a *deus ex machina*, was pre-eminently a farming country. Most children today have grandparents, or even parents who know all about farms because they lived on them. Nowadays most children are urbanised and know little about farms. Darragh McCullough - farmer, journalist and television presenter - set out to remedy this, with a fact-based account of farms, farming and the importance of the land to us all. Want to know where so much

of what we eat comes from? This is the books that answers nearly all the questions. I suspect it will teach some adults a thing or two about the respect due to the land we live on... and off.

Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright,
ed. Fiona Waters, illustrated by Britta Teckentrup
(Noisy Crow, €22.99)

This surely must be a book for every family: 365 poems about animals. The title of course comes from William Blake, but the other poems from the classical English poets, as well as a rich array of modern talents, including Ted Hughes, Dick King-Smith and Roger McGough, with earlier poets such as Lewis Carroll, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson. All these, along with wonderful illustrations and fine standards of book production.

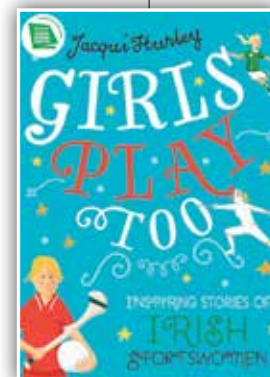
The Mysteries of the Universe
by Will Gater
(Dorling Kindersley Children's, €22.99)

Over 200 pages of superbly-illustrated cosmic scenes carries the

young reader on a journey through the universe in breath-taking glimpses of natural beauty. This is a book which truly provides an escape from daily round, and of this work-a-day world of ours. Over all excellent value with the well-informed text that we have come to expect from over the decades from the publisher. Some of us still yen, however, in our childish way, for Chesley Bonestell and Willy Ley.

Girl's Play Too: Inspiring Stories of Irish Sportswomen
by Jacqui Hurley
(Merrion Press, €14.99)

Not only do girls play, they also win, as these "inspiring tales" of Irish sportswomen reveal. Aimed at readers between 8-14, and illustrated by five women artists, this seems to be the complete thing. As for winning though, does any child these days still play just for the fun of the game? Or are they all now dedicated to being top, and beating the boys. Alas, for those who can't, or won't win, but as I say, might still enjoy playing the game.



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.

young adults

Young Adults

Me, Family and the Making of a Footballer
by Jamie Redknapp
(Headline, €16.99)

Jamie Redknapp suggests his name may be familiar, but his book is about more than football – it is about family life and the stories of three generations in London's East End. Most football memoirs are of little real literary value, but this has a real, reeky buzz about it. The glittering game and the famous skills are placed in a more human context. A good read across the family circle at a time when Covid-19 has so badly affected sports of all kinds.



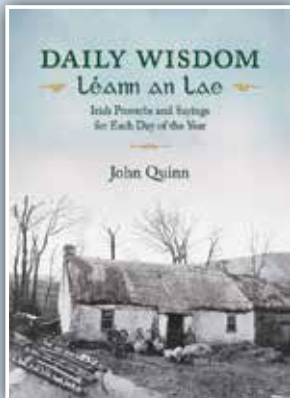
Daily Wisdom: Proverbs from the Irish language

by John Quinn
(Veritas, 13.99)

Hot from the press this very day, these proverbs from the Irish language - seanfhocail - hark back to a time when Ireland and its people were predominantly agricultural, poor and Catholic, writes John Quinn.

Though centuries old, they are integral to a sense of culture and are rich in wisdom that remains relevant to this day. The book, which includes a seanfhocal for each day of the year covers such wide-ranging topics as: the farming life, nature and weather, food and drink, wealth and poverty, pastimes and pleasures, health and happiness, the power of God and the Church.

Here is a book focused on faith, which will give pleasure to those who love and speak the Irish language, or are learning it. John Quinn's anthology is a perfect introduction to the untold riches of the Irish proverb tradition.



Growing Up with Ireland

by Valerie Cox
(Hachette Books Ireland, €21.00)

This coming year marks the centenary of the events that led to independence and Ireland taking its place among the nations of the world, according to many. In these 27 recollections gathered from centenarians, from those now old enough to remember, are recollection of that time and the long decades that followed, the good times and the hard times, the pleasures and the pains, the good life for some, 'American wakes' for others. This will bring history alive for young adults, showing what life was like when granny's mother was a little girl.



Two websites to visit

With much of our shopping now transferred to on-line searches, readers might like to think about two excellent sites. The first is the bookshop of the **National Gallery of Ireland** (shop@ngi.ie), which has an amazing range of materials and books on art from the scholarly down to art supplies for the young artist, and perhaps not so young artist. Here are truly books to meet every taste.

The other is for those tired of struggling with the websites of so many Irish books suppliers where the same items are on display. Instead try the real exciting and well-selected offerings on the site of **John Sandoe Books**, of London's Sloane Square (www.johnsandoe.com), an independent store, where the very knowledgeable staff have truly searched to find unusual, but excellently-written books of all kinds. Its delights have to be explored. Their catalogues will also be sent to you by post or email all the year round. Break out of your national boundaries and give it a trial.

The World of Books

By the books editor

Passing on a love of books



Literacy for both young and adult is an essential of social life. So these days teachers, politicians and booksellers are all agreed on the need to encourage reading. Easy enough with girls, it seems, but boys need more encouragement.

So at Christmas all the deluge of new books aimed at readers between birth and sixteen that face parents at this time of the year (in normal times at least). But I often wonder if new books, as such, are really a help in promoting true literacy.

What results, it seems to me, is the generation of today who think that 'history' is what happened so long ago as a decade. When one considers the millions-year-old story of mankind one wonders what they would call that period of time.

I suspect the answer may lie with the parents rather than the teachers. Mothers and fathers should introduce their children to the books they enjoyed as children - if they can get them. This rather goes against the current cult of relevancy, and it opens children to the horrid possibility of reading the actual language of yesterday which is not always as tidied-up or 'woke' as the cultural supervisors of our day would like.

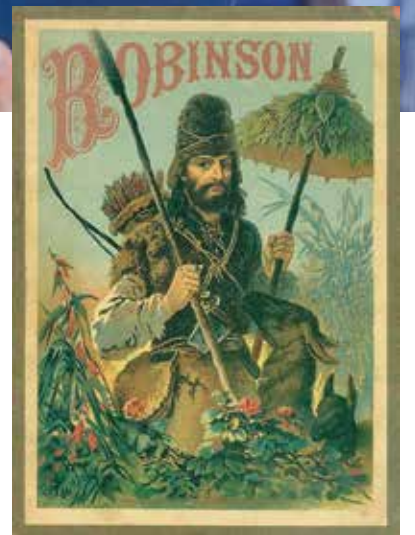
But these books of old can still be found and reveal important things about the world and the people in it who once lived in it.

Timeless Classics

My best example is *Robinson Crusoe*. There came down to me a Victorian edition of Defoe with illustration from 1840 by the French artist Jean-Jacques Grandville. These images imprinted on my imagination the 'correct' image of the castaway forever. This text included parts one and two, completing the further adventures of Crusoe, including the image of the death of Man Friday in a fracas in Siberia.

Crusoe's running away to sea, his misadventures, which included a clash with Muslim pirates of the coast of Morocco, and his time as a white slave on the estate of a Portuguese colonist in what Defoe calls 'the Brazils'. The story is far more than just the desert island, it is a world adventure, and Man Friday something more than the token man of colour.

Another Christmas I was given *Richard Jefferies Bevis* (1882) - pronounced bev-ess, not bee-vis. This was in a modern edition illustrated by another genius, E. H. Shephard (of Winnie-the-Pooh fame). By some unnoticed sleight of narration he manages to crowd several years of real life, from seven to 14, into a hectic Wiltshire summer or two.



But Jefferies was a naturalist; he introduced a new kind of nature writing into the English language. Some later writers, such as Henry Williamson, author of *Tarka the Otter*, regarded him as some sort of lay saint.

But more than that, Jefferies was one of that handful of writers over the last few centuries that gave rise to the ecological movement of today.

“A generation from now young parents will be glad they passed on today the books their parents enjoyed when they were small, which were perhaps the books their parents enjoyed.”

Then there was the nature lore that fills the pages of Captain Marryat's *Children of the New Forest*... But enough! You get the point. New books, whatever their qualities, do not fill the place of older book that deepen a real knowledge of the past and of the human adventure over time. This knowledge is also a part of literacy - perhaps the most important part. The young readers can not only learn about the past from the past, but enjoy it.

So, to adapt the words of the old Walton's Music slogan: "if you must read a book, read an old book". And not just at Christmas, but all the year round. A generation from now young parents will be glad they passed on today the books their parents enjoyed when they were small, which were perhaps the books their parents enjoyed.

Once upon a time this was called 'culture', and you can read all about it in St John Henry Newman's discourse on a liberal education. He is an example of the benefits of wide reading.

Notebook

Fr Vincent Sherlock



Santa, remind us of the meaning of Christmas

DEAR SANTA,

You were mentioned in the Dáil recently and I heard the Irish Ambassador to Finland say she had spoken to you and that you reassured her that you will be travelling this year. Good news, for sure. You are, as you told her, an “essential worker”. Locally I have heard children speak of you and their excitement reminds me that it is great to look forward, in hope, to something and someone special.

I don't know how you do it but, throughout time, you have worked this annual wonder and brought joy to countless millions. Even at my age, I can still remember some of those Christmas mornings when my hopes and dreams were exceeded beyond anything I could have wished for. Special memories of a Raleigh Chopper Bike and my first digital watch! Sadly, I am not so good on the bike now, still have one, but it has an easy life. I kept up to speed with the watches and digital age – have you and that Christmas morning to thank for that. I remember Lego and Meccano, trains and tracks and I remember a powerful rifle with the most realistic sound that, for some reason, you brought to my neighbour but I think you meant



for me! In fairness he let me play with it and I let him have a go on the Chopper! I think you would approve of that – sharing the gifts received.

Pressure

I am not sure what to ask for this year. I know that you must be under a lot of pressure and those who help you make toys and gifts must be working extremely

hard. There is part of me that would love to say, “I don't need anything”, “I don't want anything” but, to be honest, I think we all need and want – it is just a case of deciding what we most need and want and what can wait.

If you could bring some reassurance and peace where most needed, that would be great. If you could remind us that, at the heart of Christmas there is the

story of Our Saviour's birth and that because of that birth we are asked to be better people. If, this year, you could help us in parishes to be patient around numbers able to attend church and how best, as parishes, we can celebrate Christmas, that would be a priceless gift. It would be great if you could focus us on the ‘Twelve Days of Christmas’ and encourage us to spread out our worship over the twelve day so that more can worship in safety and at ease.

Wonders

Maybe that is asking a lot Santa but since you can work wonders and make it all the way around the world in the space of a night, I think you might be the man to help us work wonders too and to enjoy this Christmas in a prayerful and meaningful way. You might be the one to remind us that it is through working together, making room for each other and making those sacrifices that are asked of us, that the blessedness of the Bethlehem stable will rise to the surface.

And, of course, if you want to throw in a “surprise”, that is always welcome!

Safe travels and happy Christmas.

ONE OF MY FAVOURITES

I love Christmas Carols. Silent Night is up there with the best of them. So too, Adestes Fideles and O Holy Night, but a firm favourite of mine is ‘The Little Drummer Boy’. Anyone that knows me knows that. I love the story of it. A young boy wondering what he could possibly bring to Christmas. He looked at all he didn't have that he felt would be wanted. “I have no gifts to bring, that's fit to give a king” and, all the while he had around his neck all that was needed – the drum and his ability to play it. Sometimes we already have what it takes... and when we share that, what a difference it makes.



Sr Bernadu Mary offers vital assistance from the Little Way Association to a vulnerable lady in Pondicherry, India.



Please help leprosy victims hit especially hard by covid

Covid particularly afflicts people with conditions like leprosy, and Little Way donors have been asked to help such people through their kind donations. Sr Bernadu Mary of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Social Service Society, Pondicherry, India, writes “The pandemic situation here is so frightening. We have already lost five of our sisters to the virus. With the lockdown suspending all forms of work since March 25, our target people now face penury and deprivation. With very little savings and a poor social security net, families are having fewer meals, borrowing money and braving the threat of police violence in order to go out and work.”

Please give whatever you can

Sr Bernadu asked us for funding for soap, masks, food, school equipment, and special items for pregnant and lactating women. She and her sisters also counsel victims of domestic violence. She adds: “We have so far helped nearly 300 families with dry food materials enough for a month, but the needs persist, with four villages being identified for special help. People with leprosy often live as scavengers, salvaging what they can from refuse, and on their behalf we seek your kind support.”



“Do not fear. If you are faithful in pleasing Jesus in little things, He will be obliged to help you in the greater things.”

- St Therese

MISSIONARIES NEED YOUR MASS OFFERINGS

The Little Way Association regularly receives appeals from bishops and religious superiors on the Missions for Mass stipends and intentions for their poor priests. Such payments help them to meet basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. Also, the poor and deprived people, whom the clergy serve so faithfully, often turn to their priests for assistance. Thus, your stipends for the missions can benefit priests and people, and your intentions are faithfully honoured at Holy Mass.

We like to send a minimum of €5 or more for each Mass

HELP FEED THE HUNGRY

Please spare a thought for the thousands who die each year of hunger and disease in mission lands. Your donation will be forwarded to a missionary without deduction.

Your contributions to our fund for the hungry, sick and deprived will go intact to missionaries like Sr Bernadu, helping the most afflicted victims of the current epidemic. Please give whatever you can.

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

THE LITTLE WAY 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, SICK AND DEPRIVED**
 €..... **NEEDS OF MISSIONARIES**
 €..... **MASS OFFERINGS**
 (Please state no. of Masses _____)
 €..... **LITTLE WAY ADMIN EXPENSES**

Please tick if you would like an acknowledgement

Name (Rev. Mr. Mrs. Miss)

(Block letters please)

Address

To donate online go to
tinyurl.com/lwadonations

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