

The Irish Catholic

MARY KENNY

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Holy Land Christians make Christmas plea for support

Ruadhán Jones

Church leaders in the Holy Land are pleading for action to stop what they describe as a “systematic attempt to drive the Christian community out of Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land”.

In a pre-Christmas plea, the leaders – representing all the main Christian traditions in the Holy Land – call on local authorities to act against “fringe radical groups”. Many Christian residents in the city have complained about alleged intimidation from hard-line Israeli nationalists in the holy city in recent years.

The Church leaders said that over the last ten years, “there have been countless incidents of physical and verbal assaults against priests and other clergy, attacks on Christian churches, with holy sites regularly vandalised and desecrated, and ongoing intimidation of local Christians who simply seek to worship freely and go about their daily lives.

“These tactics are being used by such radical groups in a systematic attempt to drive the Christian community out of Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land,” the

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‘O Come All Ye Faithful...’



The children of the Shiels family, Veronica (15), Mary Anne (8), Angelina (11) and John Paul (14) visit the nativity scene at the Church of St John the Evangelist in Ballinteer parish, Dublin. Photo: Chai Brady.

JEREMY MCLELLAN

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NUALA O'LOAN

We can't allow Christ to be airbrushed from Christmas PAGE 8



JOHN RUTTER

Christmas carols make the season special PAGE 16



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Encountering God's loving invitation this Christmas

When he was first made a bishop in Argentina, Pope Francis took as his motto the Venerable Bede's account of Jesus recruiting the tax collector Matthew, *miserando atque eligendo*, which roughly translates "He saw him through the eyes of mercy and chose him".

Friends say that Bishop Bergoglio liked the way Latin had 'mercy' as a verb, *miserando*, and so created the Spanish *miserandando* – an activity of the divine, something God does to us.

“The challenge of Christmas is to allow ourselves to once again fall in love with the Christ child who must be constantly re-born in our hearts”

"Dejáte misericordiar," he often told people in Confession or those who felt over-burdened by guilt and sin. "Let yourself be 'mercy'd'."

It's a beautiful image in a world that too often lacks mercy, forgiveness and even, sometimes, kindness.

There's a stunning paradox in the Christmas story. The people of Israel – God's chosen people – had been expecting the longed-for Messiah, a king who would bring deliverance.

But, with the incarnation, God becoming man, our God of surprises turned human expectation on its head. For God came not in kingly robes or splendour, but in a little baby, laid in a manger with straw for his bed.

In the incarnation in Bethlehem God contrasts the noisy and ostentatious power of the world with the defenceless power of love in a little baby. And in so doing, radically transforms our understanding of power.

Re-born

The challenge of Christmas is to allow ourselves to once again fall in love with the Christ child who must be constantly re-born in our hearts if our faith is to mean anything. To allow ourselves to experience that authentic encounter by which we ourselves are 'mercy'd' and can, therefore, be messengers and envoys of hope and mercy in a broken world.

When you look to the Christ-child in the crib this Christmas, be it in a silent country chapel or a Roman basilica or the family sitting room; contemplate it with the eyes, not of sentiment, but of faith. And see in the outstretched arms of that child an invitation to deepen our encounter with Christ whose

Editor's Comment Michael Kelly



love is much greater than those who try to contain it. The poet George Herbert captures the spirit in his poem simply entitled Love:

“It's a beautiful image in a world that too often lacks mercy, forgiveness and even, sometimes, kindness”

*Love bade me welcome;
yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love,
observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me,
sweetly questioning
If I lack'd anything.
'A guest,' I answer'd,
'worthy to be here.'
Love said, 'You shall be he.'*

*'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on Thee.'
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
'Who made the eyes but I?'
'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.'
'And know you not,'
says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'
'My dear, then I will serve.'
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
So I did sit and eat.
A blessed and peaceful
Christmas.*

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Holy Land Christians make Christmas plea for support

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statement from the patriarchs and heads of local Churches adds.

"We acknowledge with gratitude the declared commitment of the Israeli government to uphold a safe and secure home for Christians in the Holy Land and to preserve the Christian community as an integral part of the tapestry of the local community," it says.

The leaders praise the Israeli authorities for the "facilitation of the visit of millions of Christian pilgrims to the holy sites of the Holy Land". However, the Churchmen add their "grave concern when this national commitment is betrayed by the failure of local politicians, officials and law enforcement agencies to curb the activities of radical groups who regularly intimidate local Christians, assault priests and clergy,

and desecrate Holy Sites and church properties".

The Church leaders complain that "radical groups" are working to acquire strategic property in the Christian Quarter of the Old City "with the aim of diminishing the Christian presence, often using underhanded dealings and intimidation tactics to evict residents from their homes, dramatically decreasing the Christian presence, and further disrupting the historic pilgrim routes between Bethlehem and Jerusalem".

Decreasing

The leaders also point out that "the local Christian community, while small and decreasing in number, provides a disproportionate amount of educational, health and humanitarian services in communities throughout Israel, Palestine, and Jordan".

The statement urges the Israeli authorities to begin a dialogue on the creation of a special Christian cultural and heritage zone "to safeguard the integrity of the Christian Quarter in Old City".

The Old City of Jerusalem is just 0.9 square kilometre and is made up of four quarters: Muslim, Jewish, Christian and Armenian. The total population is estimated to be around 37,000 around 75% of whom are Muslim, 15% are Christian, Jews around 9% with the tiny Armenian community making up about 1% of residents.

Israeli police have consistently accused some small Jewish extremists of inflaming tensions in a city that is already a flashpoint in the wider conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

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Were you involved in pro-life campaigning, activism, counselling or work in the 1980s or 1990s?

I would love to speak to you about your memories.

I am an historian researching the history of the pro-life movement in Ireland. The voices of men and women who took part in pro-life activism have been left out of the historical narrative and there is no balanced account of their work. It is really important that the experiences of people who took part in this work are recorded, especially for future generations.

If you are interested in taking part in an oral history interview with me or would like more information, please email

L.e.kelly@strath.ac.uk, or write to: Dr Laura Kelly, School of Humanities, University of Strathclyde, Level 4, Lord Hope Building, 141 St James Road, Glasgow G4 0LT, Scotland.

Interviews can be anonymous if you wish and your memories will be treated with the utmost sensitivity and respect.

'Jesus is the reason for the season' – Celine Byrne says keep Christ in Christmas

Brandon Scott

Soprano Celine Byrne has insisted that faith must be at the centre of Christmas celebrations, despite all the distractions.

Speaking on RTÉ Lyric FM's *Marty in the Morning*, Ms Byrne said that Mass is a huge part of her family Christmas.

"I go to the church and light candles," Ms Byrne told presenter Marty Whelean. "I'll be singing at three Masses on Christmas day. They'll all be in different parishes. It's lovely to bring the kids up towards the manger and sing *Away in a Manger* and to let them know the importance of Christmas is that Jesus is the reason for the season."

Reflecting on Ms Byrne's comments, Marty Whelean added that he agreed with



Jesus being at the forefront of the festive celebrations and voiced his chagrin at where the emphasis is cur-

rently placed during the Christmas period. "We all do it [light candles at church]; even if your faith is shaky as it is for some people, you still go and do that because you're remembering them.

"That's why I can't stand 'xmas,'" he said. "It does my head in. What's that about? If you're going to celebrate the reason for the event, that's the reason for the event," he insisted.

TD criticises lack of data over adverse abortion outcomes

Jason Osborne

The current state of national data collection with regards to abortion and its adverse outcomes are worse than "abysmal", according to Laois-Offaly TD Carol Nolan.

Deputy Nolan's comments come following a report that 12,000 women in England and Wales have been treated in hospital for complications arising from medical abortion treatment failure.

It is understood that medical abortion has an expected treatment failure rate of 6%, which means that as many as one in 17 pregnant women using abortion pills will need hospital treatment for complications arising afterwards.

Data collection procedures in Ireland for the same phenomenon are "far worse" than abysmal, Deputy Nolan told this paper, continuing, "They are totally absent.

"Even by the HSE's own admission such a process is needed to guide the 'quality review process' and to accurately assess how the implementation of the abortion Act is impacting women and girls," she said.

"What could not be clearer at this point is the fact that there is just no institutional appetite to create mechanisms of genuine transparency around the provision of abortion," Deputy Nolan said.

New RE programme launched for Catholic schools

Ruadhán Jones

The Irish bishops' council for catechetics has launched a new religious education programme to "foster religious literacy" in Catholic secondary schools.

The 'Credible Catholic' programme is aimed at senior-cycle non-exam RE, having been designed in line with feedback from teachers and theological advisors in Ireland, a press statement from the council said.

Drawing on an earlier version by Fr Robert Spitzer SJ and the Magis Centre in the United States, Credible Catholic is a "a support to the wider mission of the Catholic school which lies ultimately in helping students know how much they are loved by God", the council added.

The optional programme is designed "to stimulate dialogue, encourage reflection and critical reasoning, foster religious literacy, build community, and nurture faith, and in doing all of these things, to promote student wellbeing".

It is important that RE shows "that there are credible answers to the vitally important questions students have about faith", the release finished.

The programme is free and the multi-media materials can be downloaded here: www.catholicschools.ie/credible-catholic/.

Share and share alike



Nora (5) and Ruby (3) Kidney from Donnybrook, Douglas, pictured at the blessing of the Share (Students Harness Aid for the Relief of the Elderly) crib on Patrick St. Cork, as the organisation launched its traditional Fast and Fundraising campaign, Cork, December 15. To donate online, visit www.sharecork.org. Photo: Gerard McCarthy

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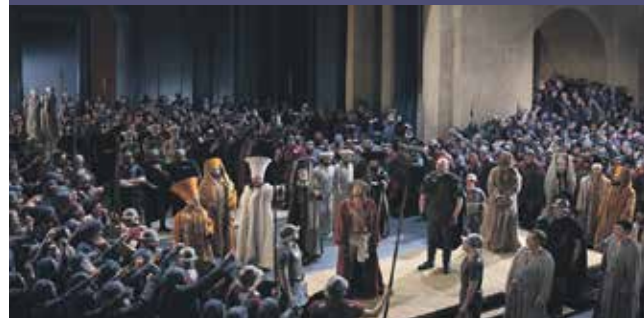
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The Holy Family comes to Derry

Ruadhán Jones

St Eithne's Primary School Derry rang in the Christmas season with nativity plays starring classes P1 to P3.

The three wise men, a host of angels and of course the Holy Family itself were all brought to life for friends, parents and siblings, ahead of their arrival on Christmas Day.



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A quiet Christmas may yet be a happy one...

Yes, for some people it looks as though it might be an austere, even a lonely and isolating Christmas. I'm not a fan of some of these State-imposed restrictions occasioned by what seems to me an over-interpretation of health measures; but, as realists say nowadays, it is what it is. And you can never beat City Hall. Our Christmases this year are unlikely to be the gregarious gathering of family and friends that we have often cherished.

Quietest

My own Christmas Day will probably be one of the quietest ever. My eldest son broke his femur – the longest bone in the human body – in October and has been immobile ever since, so I've been bringing him meals and generally caring for him as he very gradually recovers.

Because of the pandemic, we seldom have



Mary Kenny

visitors, so it's just an enclosed little household of two. On top of that, Patrick is a vegetarian – well, a pescatarian, since he eats fish – so no Christmas turkey, or other fowl, either. And there's a bit of trouble with the household boiler, too.

“A very quiet Christmas gives us just as many opportunities to say ‘Happy Christmas’”

And yet – so what? We're not in Kabul, starving and terrified. We're not persecuted Christians in the Middle East. We're not refugees trying to cross the English Channel in a frail inflatable.

We're not the homeless and the mentally afflicted seen on the streets now of so many cities.

Blessings

A very quiet Christmas may still bring many blessings, and reasons to be grateful. A very quiet Christmas may shed some of the frantic nonsense and raucous hallelaloo that the commercial festive season entails. A very quiet Christmas may mean more time for reflection on the meaning of the Nativity, and that beautiful account of it in St Luke's Gospel.

A very quiet Christmas gives us just as many opportunities to say “Happy Christmas” as all the ostensible merrymaking of former times.

“My own Christmas Day will probably be one of the quietest ever”



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Gloria, 4, at Kianibi Health Centre, Manono Territory, DRC. Photo: Hugh Kinsella Cunningham/Concern Worldwide

No silk hats or morning dress

Towards the end of a calendar year, there's a tradition – and an enjoyable one – for people to nominate their favourite books published during the past year. Yet I often read books which have been published 30, 40, 50 or more years previously, and they're often just as rewarding.

An impressive memoir I read this year is C.S. Andrews' *Man of No Property*, being a renowned autobiography by a leading public figure in Irish life from the 1920s to the latter part of the 20th century (it was first published in 1982). It gives a dazzlingly informative picture of social life in

Dublin in the 1920s, as well as the political atmosphere after the Civil War.

In one passage, Andrews (broadcaster Ryan Tubridy's grandfather) describes the values held by young Irishmen of a republican cast of mind in the 1920s: “We didn't drink. We respected women and...knew nothing about them. We disapproved of any kind of ostentation. We disapproved of wearing formal clothes – tuxedos, evening or morning dress, and above all silk hats. We disapproved of horse racing and... everyone associated with it. We disapproved of any form of gambling. We disapproved of golf and

tennis... We disapproved of anyone who took an interest in food... We disapproved of elaborate wedding ceremonies requiring bouquets and buttonholes, red carpets and train-bearers. We disapproved of women ‘making up’ [using cosmetics] or wearing jewellery.”

It's sometimes said the Irish bishops back in the day were puritanical, but they were almost frivolous by the standards of these young republicans!

The memoir was republished in paperback in 2001 and is available at a reasonable price via the Internet – and also in most good libraries. It's a terrific read.

● Most of the travelling I've done during this year has been in my head – imagining the high seas, sandy deserts and great European cathedrals I'd love to explore.

One of the travel experiences for my 2022 daydreams is a train journey, recently scheduled, from Portugal to Singapore. Here's the trajectory: Lisbon to Hendaye on the French-Spanish border (499 miles): Hendaye to Paris (428 miles): Paris to Moscow (2,164 miles): Moscow to Beijing via Mongolia (4,735 miles) and thereafter through Laos, Thailand, Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. The full distance is 11,650 miles, and the time needed is about

three weeks.

Actually, I'd be quite content just to take the sleeper train, which goes once a week, from Paris to Moscow. I remember being so amazed, when I was a young student in Paris, to realise you could catch a train at the Gare de l'Est which took you all the way to Russia. This brought home to me that a continent was so geographically different from an island. Obvious, yet striking.

The Lisbon-Singapore train journey calls to mind the great days of railway travel in Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days* – the new TV version starts on the BBC on St Stephen's Day.

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Safeguarding the Christian heritage



A new initiative aims to bring the Holy Land to life in the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem, writes **Michael Kelly**

The followers of St Francis of Assisi – Franciscans – first arrived in the Holy Land in the year 1217, inspired by the presence of the holy places associated with the earthly life of Christ. Ever since, they have served as the custodians of those sites – a living presence which remains to this day.

St Francis himself passed through part of the Holy Land in 1219 and 1220, and it was his great love and devotion to the holy sites that inspired him to create the first nativity scene in the little Italian town of Greccio about the year 1223. He arranged with a nobleman of the town to have an ox and an ass brought to a stable. The manger was supplied with hay and the animals were led inside, taking their places in the nativity scene.

Tradition records that on that Christmas night, the people of the countryside and the local villages came holding candles and torches. A con-



Eyad Handal, a Palestinian Catholic guide from Bethlehem, speaks to students from the Jerusalem Hitech Foundry outside the Terra Sancta Museum in Jerusalem's Old City. Photos: CNS.



Students from the Jerusalem Hitech Foundry look at archaeological discoveries from the time of Jesus.

temporary account paints the picture: "There simplicity was honoured, poverty was exalted, humility was commended and Greccio was made, as it were, a new Bethlehem!"

"The night was lighted up like the day, and it delighted men and beasts...the woods rang with the voices of the crowd and the rocks made answer to their jubilation. The brothers sang, paying their debt of praise to the Lord, and the whole night resounded with their rejoicing."

Ubiquitous

It soon caught on, and cribs are now a ubiquitous part of the celebration of Christmas. Whether in a Roman basilica, or a modest country church, the nativity scene still has the power to move and captivate.

Pilgrimage to the Holy Land has become much more accessible than in the Middle Ages,

and even if the Covid-19 pandemic kept people away – the local Christian community there is waiting in expectation for a return of pilgrims in 2022.

As well as the holy sites themselves – such as the Church of the Nativity, the Via Dolorosa and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre – the local Franciscan friars saw a need for a museum both to aid pilgrims' understanding and to tell something of the story of Jesus to local Jews and Muslims who make up the overwhelming majority of the residents of the Holy Land today.

Thus the project of the Terra Sancta (Holy Land) Museum was born. Its ambitions are grand: to exhibit – in the heart of Jerusalem's old city – the spiritual, archaeological, and artistic heritage of Christianity, preciously conserved by the Franciscans over the last eight centuries.

The museum is divided into three sections:

- A multimedia 'Via Dolorosa' (way of the cross);
- An archaeological section with objects recovered from the holy sites;

• An historical section with the gifts of Europe's royalty to the Holy Land.

Two Franciscan compounds of the Custody of the Holy Land – the Convent of the Flagellation and the Convent of St Saviour – have been chosen to house these sections. These compounds are themselves historic sites, of which some of the most ancient parts – Roman, Byzantine, Crusader – are near the principal destinations for pilgrims and tourists in Jerusalem

“Pilgrimage to the Holy Land has become much more accessible than in the Middle Ages”

When 15-year-old Ahmad Mutaseb visited the Terra Sancta Museum in the Old City, it was the first time he had ever seen any archaeological relics from the area.

"I've seen archaeological ruins in Turkey, but this gave me a good feeling. These

things are originally from here. I feel connected to them," said Mutaseb, who is Muslim. He visited the museum with a group of high school students participating in a Palestinian programme aimed at raising awareness of high-tech and entrepreneurial careers.

Tour for the group

Monica Valley, head of education and engagement, arranged a tour for the group. Ms Valley, an American, came to Terra Sancta Museum after 12 years in museum education in New York, in museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Frick Collection.

"That is what Terra Sancta Museum is all about" – community engagement – bringing in the neighbours and residents of the city to enjoy and learn from the museum's collection of centuries-old treasures, many excavated by the friar-archaeologists of the Franciscan Biblical Institute, she said.

Ms Valley created a special programme for the group, first focusing on nearly 2,000-year-

old artifacts from different jobs and professions – fishing hooks, slingshot ammunition and spearheads, and moulds for casting coins. She then presented an art activity in which each participant visually shared what he or she wished to become.

The art was created on a paper that was first folded and cut into a pattern reminiscent of the symmetry of traditional Palestinian embroidery. Then their works were put onto a visitor art collage in an archway of the museum, reflecting the way layers of history and archaeology are found in the Holy Land.

"Students should be able to come to the museum to think, to be creative, and to feel safe – especially when considering their future careers," said Ms Valley

Terra Sancta Museum opened in 2018 and was created inside a more than 2,000-year-old archaeological site containing relics of Herod the Great's Antonia Fortress, an inscription honouring Roman Emperor Hadrian, as well as the bedrock of Jerusalem.



Monica Valley, head of education and engagement of the Terra Sancta Museum in Jerusalem's Old City, leads students from the Jerusalem Hitech Foundry in the museum.



Students from the Jerusalem Hitech Foundry look at archaeological discoveries from the time of Jesus.



Israeli-American tour guide Eric Kleinman shows Brad Grob the Terra Sancta Museum

of the land God chose as his own



As the student group arrived, Ms Valley told them, as she does with all groups visiting the museum: "There are old things here; there are beautiful things here; there are important things here in this museum. The museum protects these things because they are from this land, and you should know about them. This is your heritage."

Training

In addition to creating a two-year training course in cultural heritage management for a select group of young Palestinians interested in a career in the field, Ms Valley has worked to develop relationships between the museum and various cultural and neighbourhood organisations, to raise awareness about local cultural heritage.

"The museum is a place where anybody can come to feel inspired, to be creative. It should transcend politics," she said. "At Terra Sancta Museum, we have an incredible opportunity, because of where we

are located, to really show everyone what a museum should be in the community: a safe place for expression and empowerment."

Eyad Handal, a Catholic from Bethlehem studying in the cultural heritage management course, said it is important for him to be able to learn how to tell the story of his ancestors through the artifacts at the museum.

“Terra Sancta Museum opened in 2018 and was created inside a more than 2,000-year-old archaeological site”

"The Franciscans have protected and saved our heritage and history, and that is so great because now we can learn it and share it," he said. "Christians are not so many here, and we are grateful to the friars for having done this job."

Israeli-American Brad Grob said he visits the museum to learn about Jerusalem history. "If you are tied to this land, you know there are many other people and religions who make up the history of this place, and it is important to learn about them," he said. "You can't understand Jewish history without understanding Christian history. You would be missing an important piece of the puzzle."

No visit with teens would be complete without taking selfies and posting the photos on social media, and as the teens wrapped up their morning at the museum, several snapped photos with Ms Valley, typing in her social media contacts on their phones to send her copies.

"This small trip has been so cool and interesting to see what life was like here," said Taleen Sharawneh, 14. "There are so many families living here - Muslim, Christians, Jews."

Additional reporting by Judith Sudilovsky in Jerusalem.




Monica Valley, head of education and engagement of the Terra Sancta Museum in Jerusalem's Old City, speaks to students from the Jerusalem Hitech Foundry in front of an art wall in the museum.



Students from the Jerusalem Hitech Foundry draw during an activity.




Students from the Jerusalem Hitech Foundry.



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Nuala O'Loan

The View



We can't allow Christ to be airbrushed from Christmas

When I was a little girl, all the best stories began with "Once upon a time..." It was a magical opening because I always wondered, "Where is this book taking me? When is it happening?" In the days before television (I am very old!) books were the medium through which I was transported to another world.

I always loved reading, and I still remember with delight, receiving the present of an illustrated copy of the book *Heidi* as a nine-year-old. Heidi took me to a country I knew only as a name – Switzerland – with majestic mountains and great lakes, with a little goatherd, Peter, who minded his animals on the slopes of the Alps. Heidi was a very different little girl. There was no one left to look after her, and she ended up living on the side of a mountain with her very old grandfather, who had absolutely no idea how to look after a little girl. I

read about Clara, another little girl, suffering from a mystery illness which left her in a wheelchair, and of how she eventually found her way up onto the mountain with Heidi and Peter and grandfather, and learned to walk again.

“That life of love should involve giving our all for the Lord, living as Jesus lived”

It was a very different world from the world in which I lived as the oldest of five (later eight) children in a mining town in Sough, Yorkshire, where the nearest hills were coal slag heaps, and goats were not to be seen. As I write this, that illustrated and very precious book is long gone, but it is downloaded on my iPad, together with a number of other favourite childhood books, which seem not to lose their resonance and magic even

after decades.

The experiences which we have in childhood, even the books which we read, mark us, I think, for the rest of our lives. It is thus with another great story which definitely should begin, "Once upon a time..." – the story of a young girl called Mary who was visited by an angel and asked if she would bear a very special child, the Son of God. That story of the pregnant girl who, with her husband Joseph, had to go to register at a census in Bethlehem, and whose time came when they were alone in this strange place. There was no accommodation available, and eventually they found shelter in a stable, where Mary's baby boy was born. That night a great star shone in the sky alerting the very poor shepherds, working in very difficult conditions in the cold of the winter night. They came to find this wonderful new baby. The star guided the three kings who travelled from afar bearing gifts for the Son of God. The story does not end there.



The Holy Family at the Nativity is depicted in this painting by artist Laura James.

Mary and Joseph were warned by an angel of danger and fled, with their tiny newborn son to escape possible death, seeking refuge in Egypt.

Story

It wasn't just a story though. As children we heard the story, we drew and coloured in pictures of the story, we participated in nativity plays in which the story of the baby was told, and we learned that it wasn't like all the other stories we read. This one was true. This one was actually an account of the coming into the world of the Son of God to redeem mankind. That redemption, secured through the life, death and resurrection of the man, Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph, is the source of our understanding of who we are and why we are here on this earth and what our destiny might be, if we embrace the gifts which we have been given, and live a life of love. That life of love should involve giving our all for the Lord, living as Jesus lived, and finding our way through the dark and, on occasion, terrifying paths of our journey of life until we come again into the light, and ultimately to eternal life.

Many children and many adults now, do not know why we have a holiday called 'Christmas'. They do not know that it marks the time of Christ's coming to the world. For them it is a time to have fun, to buy presents, to eat and drink, celebrating the season. Yet that is all it is.

It is profoundly sad to real-

ise the extent to which Christ has been airbrushed out of Christmas. We have allowed it to happen. Even buying Christmas cards which portray the Christ child has become almost impossible. The festive season is celebrated with pictures of little fat pink pigs, reindeer, robins, trees and puddings. There is no place for the baby Jesus in many people's experience of Christmas now, just as there was no room at the inn all those years ago.

“Many children and many adults now, do not know why we have a holiday called 'Christmas'”

Yet the experience of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus is being lived across the world in front of our eyes. We believe that Christ lives in each of us, and so we believe that he lives in the migrants trying desperately to reach a place of safety, often with tiny children for whom the journey is so terribly tiring, and so awfully frightening. He lives in the old and young for whom things like Brexit and Covid-19 and general poverty has made life difficult, with jobs and even homes lost; the people for whom there is no possibility of buying a Christmas present because the money is needed for heat and food. He lives in parents who will scrape to try and give their children some-

thing, maybe selling precious possessions to get some money, and who will receive no presents from anyone.

Relationship

I have written before of a young mother with three children who, many years ago, fled an abusive relationship on Christmas Eve, taking only what she could carry. She was granted a house by the authorities, but she had no food, no furniture and, definitely, no presents. The authorities had all gone on leave for Christmas. The St Vincent de Paul were informed, late on Christmas Eve afternoon. My husband and others set to work and by the evening she had fuel, furniture, a cooker, beds and bedding, cutlery and plates, the makings of Christmas dinner and a present for each child. There was also a present for her.

As a little girl I, too, knew great poverty and I knew the joy of the generosity of good people. When people care enough to help those who are marginalised, lonely and in pain, they bring the light of Christ wherever they go, and those who are helped may feel the warmth of love in their hearts. I know we did.

As we celebrate and rejoice at the birth of the beautiful little boy who grew up to become our Saviour, let us remember what Christmas is really about and ask ourselves, "What more does Christ want me to do?"

A New Beginning

for an Ancient Order



Since 1920, Benedictine nuns have made Kylemore Abbey a place of spiritual devotion, international education, natural beauty, heritage and sustainability. Their values of *ora et labora* (pray and work) attract visitors to Connemara from all over the world.

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- * a monastic guesthouse for pilgrims and visitors to share their lives through short courses and residential retreats

Building began in September 2019, but Covid has halted construction, eliminated income, and increased costs.



Artist's Impression, Kylemore Abbey New Monastery



Funds are needed to complete the Monastery project. If you can, please consider

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“The experiences which we have in childhood, even the books which we read, mark us, I think, for the rest of our lives”

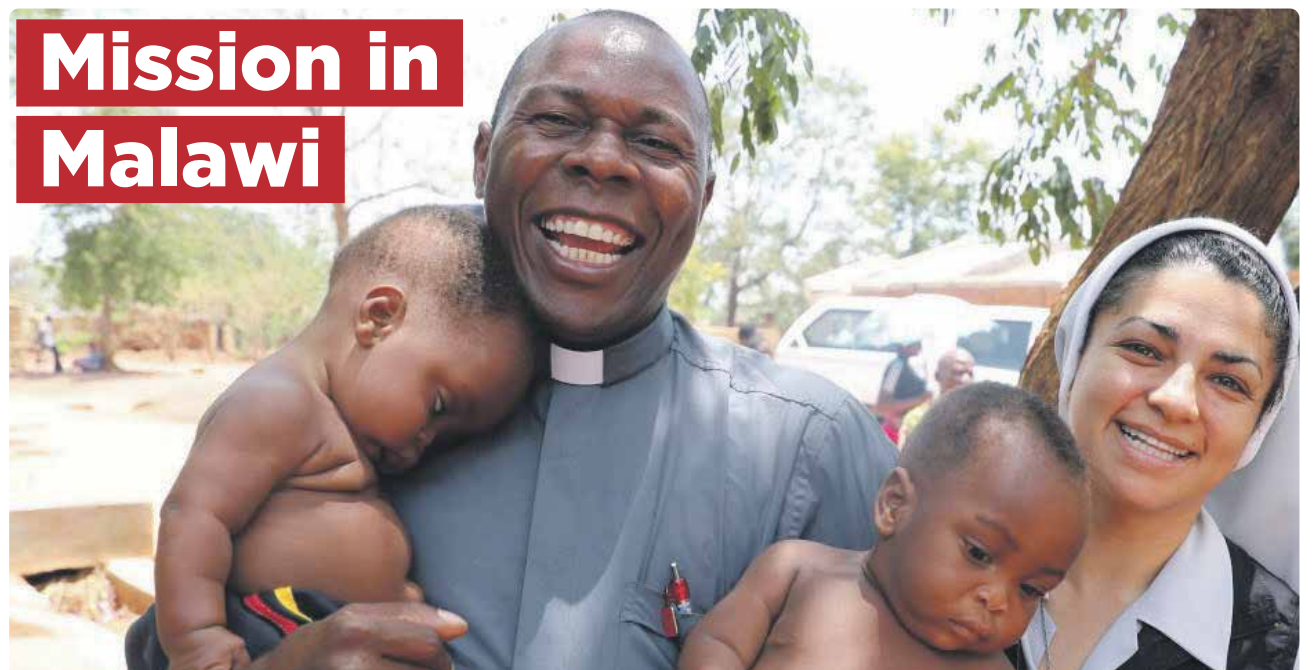
Before the pandemic firmly took its grip, Missio visited Malawi to witness first-hand the vital impact the Church is having. As we drove towards the Lisanjala Health Clinic to meet Father Vincent and Sister Nilcéia, we were in awe of the stark beauty of the countryside. Bright blue sky framed against blood-red earth. But however spectacular the landscape, scorched earth does not a bountiful harvest make. Poverty in the region is widespread, and supplies of maize are constantly in short supply as people anxiously await the rainy season. Life expectancy is low, just fifty-eight for men and sixty-one for women. Malaria is the constant threat, and it can kill in just one or two days. This is why Church-run services like the Lisanjala Health Clinic are so important. They offer a beacon of hope.

An all-embracing Church

When we arrived and stepped out of our van it felt like we were walking into a sauna. Under trees, groups of Malawian women had taken refuge from the heat. They eyed us warily until Sister Nilcéia appeared with outstretched arms



Sr Nilcéia, a Brazilian Benedictine missionary, is sharing God's love with the people of Malawi



'I truly don't know how we would go on without the support of our brothers and sisters in Ireland. It sustains us mentally, spiritually and financially.' Fr Vincent Mwakhwawa

and her infectious smile. As she walked towards us she scooped up a small child and rested him on her hip. She told us that today's clinic was full, 'many of the women have walked over three hours carrying their sick children', and on other days, 'pregnant teenage girls might walk almost six miles to get help from our clinic.' But today is Tuesday, the day when boys and girls up to five years old are seen. In the all-embracing nature of the Church, the small team of health workers at the Lisanjala Health Clinic welcome all - no matter their religion, who they are, or where they are from.

Sorrow in this broken world

Although the rewards far out-weigh the challenges, missionaries experience much sorrow. Sister Nilcéia, many miles from her home in Brazil, shared this sad reality, 'I remember delivering a little boy called Blessing. His mother Linda was only fifteen. She had been abused by a much older man. Not long after he was born Blessing contracted malaria.' In time, Blessing went to live with his grandmother, 'we provided milk for him every week'. But when he was just ten months old Blessing died. He was malnourished. 'It turned out his grandmother had

been giving the milk to another child.' 'I cry when I think of Blessing. He didn't have to die. But this is a broken world. Our only hope is in God, who is with us through the sadness. It was our privilege to love Linda and baby Blessing when it mattered most.'

Far-reaching solutions

By being on the ground it is glaringly obvious what the Catholic Church is doing to help combat the huge challenges people face in Malawi. Sister Nilcéia's and Father Vincent's faith and charitable actions offer far-reaching and long-term solutions in a region that is desperate for help. As Sister Nilcéia put it, 'the need here in Malawi is great. But the Lord is faithful and we continue to serve. We take courage from knowing you are with us in this mission'.

Please support overseas missionaries serving around the world today



Phone Fiona on 01 497 2035



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Missio has been aiding the work of missionaries in Malawi for many years, and because of people like you we can keep doing so. By supporting Missio Ireland you are helping the Catholic Church share the love of God not only in Malawi, but with everyone. Thank you for your ongoing prayers and donations.



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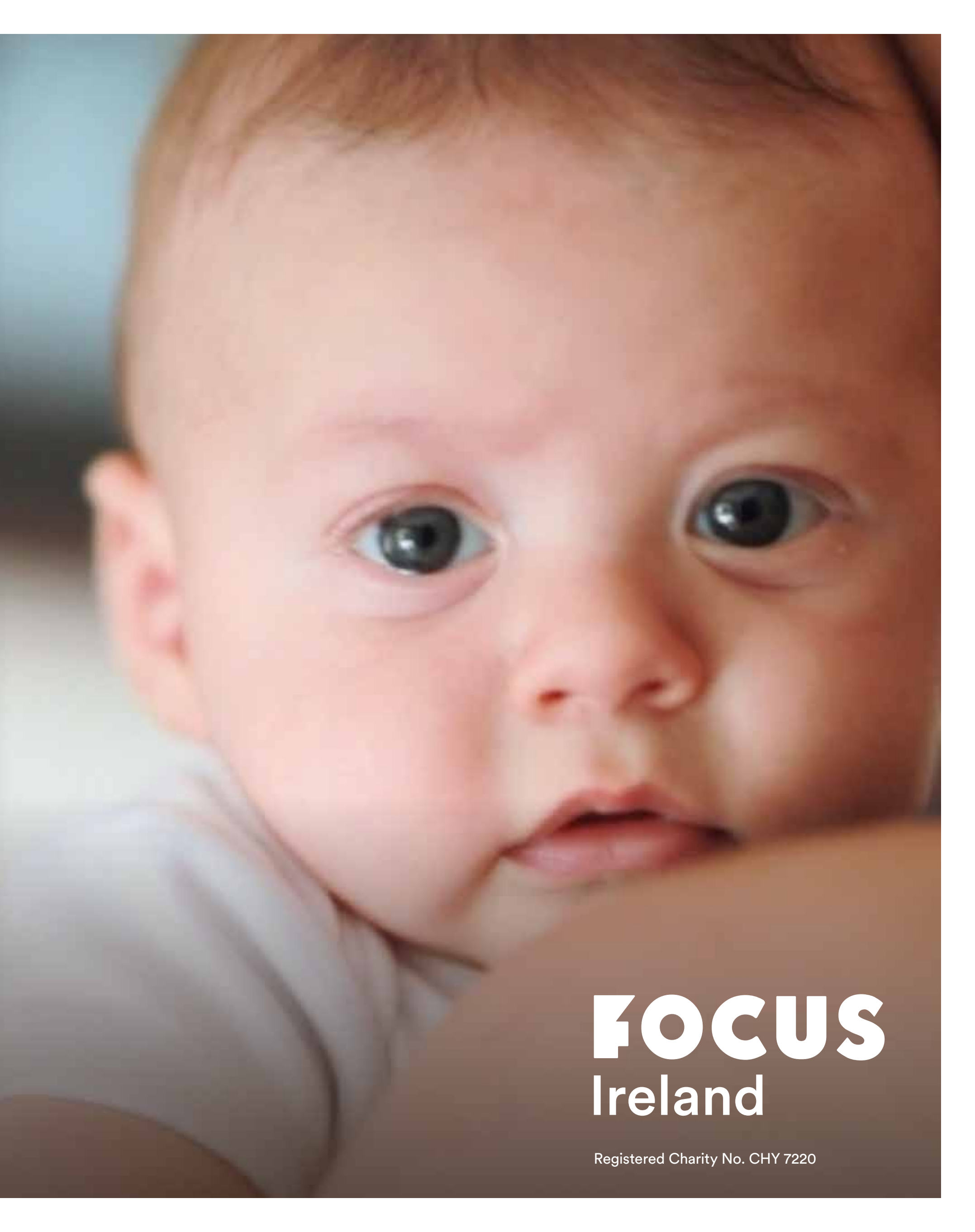
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Approving the unknown



Brandon Scott investigates the cryptic connection between an Irish village and the Church of Scientology

As the inhabitants of Ballivor Co. Meath come to terms with the news that the village is to be the site of a Narconon drug rehabilitation centre, a subsidiary of the Church of Scientology, questions continue to linger over the efficacy of the potential treatment provided in these centres and the unregulated nature of the services on offer.

Although residents had grown accustomed to talks of possible Scientology presence, the village of Ballivor's fate with the church was formally sealed recently as the Court of Appeal upheld a decision ensuring that the Ballivor project would be the first Narconon facility in Ireland. The €9 million site was formerly used as a national school and was left abandoned when the school relocated to a new site in 2010. Plans disclosed prior to the Church of Scientology's acquisition of the property indicated that the site of the former school was earmarked as a potential nursing home for elderly people, but after complications with funding this plan never materialised and the Church of Scientology maneuvered its way into proceedings in August 2016.

Cult

The Church of Scientology has been described by government inquiries, international parliamentary bodies, scholars, law lords, and numerous superior court judgements as both a dangerous cult and a manipulative profit-making

business. The German government classifies Scientology as an anti-constitutional sect and in France it has been classified as a dangerous cult.

“The German government classifies Scientology as an anti-constitutional sect and in France it has been classified as a dangerous cult”

In the aftermath of the court's decision, many in the village remained outraged and were given greater impetus to mobilise against the enigma that was poised to enter its village, while others were battle-worn and resigned to the possibility after more than three years of arduous legal pursuits that proved to be, for the most part, de-moralisingly unsuccessful.

Local councillor for the area and vocal critic of the drug rehabilitation centre, Noel French, pointed out that

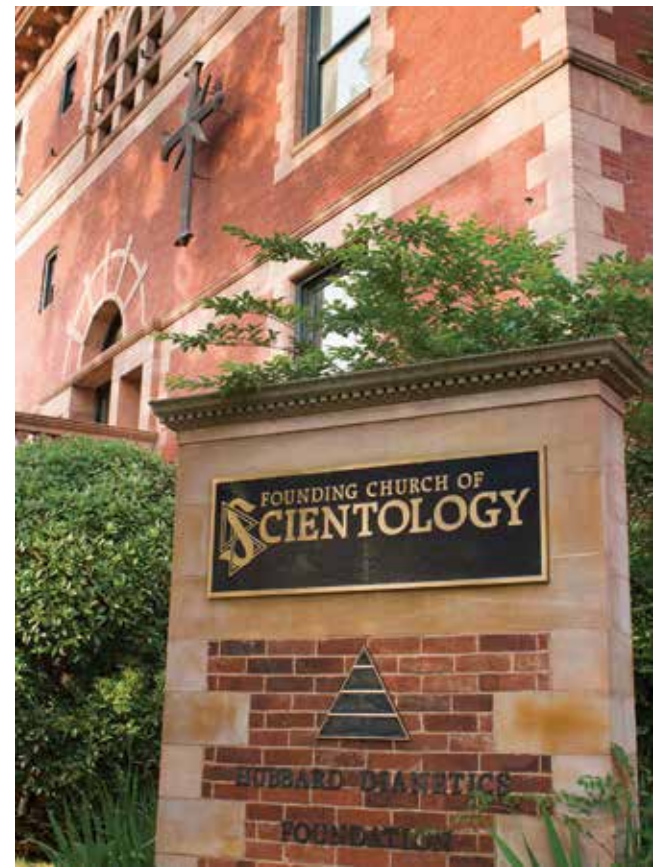
the level of apprehension that residents possessed was not as acute as when the centre was first announced, but that many were still unremitting in their opposition to the centre. “Initially there was a lot of shock and surprise,” he said. “This has now moderated quite a lot. Our biggest difficulty was actually finding out about the change of planning. That took nearly 18 months to find out that Scientology was involved and was establishing a drug treatment centre. The planning was legally done but it was not open to the public and that still is the situation.”

Unknown entity

Mr French, like so many if not all of the locals in the village, regarded Scientology as an unknown entity when the proposal was first announced, and as a result, has since educated himself on the Church's ideology and methodologies in the wake of its proposed arrival to the village. “Scientology was an unknown, really,” he stated. “I didn't think when I got elected in 2014 that I would be coping with Scientology. I've educated myself over the last five years on Scientology and I know a lot more about it now. When we protested against the arrival of the centre, we were accompanied by former Scientologists who were now vehemently anti-Scientology. I have my fears with regards to it.”

Another prominent critic of the proposed centre, TD for Meath-West Peadar Tóibín, was also quick to underline that with practices not verifiably proven to remedy addiction problems, the Government was “leading [those suffering with addiction] to the wild west” by not intervening on their behalf. “I put a parliamentary question to the Minister for Health [Stephen Donnelly] and he said that there is no proof of the efficacy of the treatments that happen in these Scientology locations,” he revealed. “When I asked the HSE if they would introduce regulation to ensure that these centres meet the standard, the Government basically says ‘no’. Eighty percent of people who have long-term addiction also suffer significantly from psychological issues and anyone could set up a residential drug rehabilitation centre tomorrow and deliver any kind of regime we wanted. As long as we didn't break the law, the Government would have no interest in it.”

Although public representatives have been steadfast in their objections to the drug rehabilitation centre operating in Ballivor and issued caveats over its alleged ineffectiveness in the face of drug addiction, most are unable to detail with any certainty the types of procedures that occur within a Narconon centre, nor are they



The Founding Church of Scientology in Washington, D.C.

able to reveal what psychological school of thought (if any) Narconon's approach to drug addiction derives from.

Pete Griffiths, a former member of the Church of Scientology for 21 years and now a leading member in the Ex-Scientologists Ireland group, ran a Scientology mission in Cumbria, northern England and developed an extensive knowledge on Narconon and the application of the concept. This insight sees him appear at schools and functions issuing warnings of the danger of Scientology and its utensils.

“The only reason Narconon exists is to get people into Scientology and their own paperwork says that”

“Narconon is worse than you think,” he said. “I'll tell you that right from the very start. Narconon is not a drug rehabilitation centre. The only reason Narconon exists is to get people into Scientology and their own paperwork says that. If someone is on drugs or alcohol or has some other addiction, they will make attempts to get them to come off of it, usually ‘cold turkey’, with no medical intervention whatsoever. It's a pretty horrifying process.”

Reveal

Mr Griffiths, now living in Co. Mayo, revealed that he is currently in contact with members working in a Narconon centre in Britain and “they both just want to blow the whistle on the whole thing” as they both got “roped into working for them and after a few weeks

said, ‘hang on a minute, this is wrong’,” he said.

The quality of the treatment in the centres, alleges Mr Griffiths, is mostly sub-standard and can be in his view negligent to both patients and staff as he explained that those who convene the centres may sometimes have had their own battles with addiction before they're suddenly designated to supervise a centre from an outreach perspective. “People who go in as patients, when they get to a point where they're not as addicted as they were, they end up working for the Narconon organisation so very often the staff are all ex-addicts. There's nothing wrong with that in itself, except they've not had any training whatsoever. The whole thing is a catalogue of horrors and it's absolutely scary. Not so much for the village of Ballivor because it probably won't even affect them. More so because people are going in there seeking help and they won't get it. That's the bottom line. They'll also pay a lot for it too.”

Introductory

“The programme is the exact same as an introductory phase into Scientology. Only the books are different and they say Narconon on them.

“Places like UCD and Trinity have come out and said that this treatment does nothing. Whatever Scientologists do, it's always the same; whether it's in Sweden or Ireland or America it's all exactly the same, there's no difference,” he said.

Despite repeated requests, the Church of Scientology declined to make a spokesperson available.

The Irish Catholic

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Share Hope This Christmas



Conn McNally

Since 2017, the northern province of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique has been torn apart by a brutal Islamist insurgency. Most of the population of Mozambique are Christians, with the country's Muslim minority mostly living in the north of the country. The insurgency has seen over 3,000 people killed and has displaced around one million people.

Chico

Francisco Faustino Francisco, known to his friends as Chico, is a 52-year-old Catholic father of five from Muidumbe in Cabo Delgado. Chico is just one of many who have suffered in the Islamist insurgency. Chico told ACN about the brutality of the insurgents:

"In the first attack, two people were brutally beheaded, and houses were set on fire. The second attack, in late October 2020, was more violent; the insurgents stayed in town for more than two months. We wandered in the forest, trying to get water. The town was full of terrorists, so at night we went out to look for water or food, like dried cassava. Days went by, and our homes were torched and destroyed. I sent four of my children to Montepuez to stay with a relative; the oldest, who was 24, stayed. When people were caught trying to get food, they were killed, so I told my son not to go into town because it was very dangerous.

"After five days, I had to go to the lower area to get closer to the river so I could drink water and wash. On the seventh day, acquaintances showed up and told me that my son had been beheaded. He had gone out with a group of young

people and encountered the terrorists.

"I went back into the town at night and took the spade from my home. After two weeks, we found the body already decomposing. The head was hanging from a pole with the body lying next to it. Full of fear, we dug a grave while one person stood as a lookout. We were on the town's outskirts. We dug a little, made a hole of half a metre, dragged the body. I took the head from the pole and put it in the tomb. After we finished, we hurried back."

Chico's 95-year-old mother was staying with his sister during these troubled times. She went missing during the attack. Chico could find nothing of her, no body and no clothes. He realised that he would never see his mother again.

“When people were caught trying to get food, they were killed, so I told my son not to go into town because it was very dangerous

Chico traveled to Pemba, the regional capital. There he was reunited with his wife. The couple was allowed to sleep in a woman's garden, but there was insufficient room for their children. The children were sent to stay in different homes as there was not enough room to keep the four surviving children in one place. Chico has a straightforward dream of one day living together with his wife and children under one roof.

Chico had already lived a difficult life. He told ACN about his struggles before the insurgency:

"Before all this started, I struggled so that my children could grow up better than I did. I was born at the time of the armed struggle against

colonialism, then came the civil war. The war and the armed struggle lasted more than 16 years. I didn't have a lot of money, but I worked very hard in the fields so I could support our children. I lived very close to the mission, and all my children went to school. I had to work hard for this. We harvested pumpkin once a year."

Hope

Having been forced to flee from his farm, Chico could not support himself and his family. Father Edegard Silva of the Missionaries of La Salette was able to help Chico and his family find a source of income through a microproject scheme funded by ACN. The project helped Chico set up a small street stall to sell products to support himself and his family. The booth not only helps Chico with income, but it has also helped him have respect and dignity by giving him work that benefits the local community.

Chico explains what Christmas means to him:

"Christmas means to be born again. It means recovering your spirits and strength. It means the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, celebrating the human being in his fullness, welcoming those who suffer, being close to family and friends, sharing what little one has, celebrating together, helping the hungry, clothing the naked. Visit your neighbours, listen to them, give something. That's what Christmas is all about."

Chico has suffered a lot. He has lost one of his sons and his mother and has been forced to flee with the rest of his family. The microprojects scheme has helped to give him hope. ACN is supporting the local Church to assist Christian refugees like Chico, not only in Mozambique but all over the world. If you would like to help us in our work, please consider donating and sharing hope this Christmas.



Chico reading his Bible. Photos: Aid to the Church in Need.



Father Edegard Silva talking with Chico beside the street stall.



The garden Chico and his wife sleep in.

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Boston attorney, NUI Galway law lecturer, political columnist and author Larry Donnelly photographed in Wicklow Town. Photos: Marc O'Sullivan



The Catholic faith is important to Larry Donnelly and he hopes to pass it on to his son, writes Ruadhán Jones

If you live in Ireland and follow American politics, you will likely know Larry Donnelly. With his distinctive Boston accent, he has become a household name due to appearances on Irish radio and television commenting on US elections, among other things. He is also an increasingly rare political animal in American politics – a Catholic Democrat. Having recently published his autobiographical book *The Bostonian: Life in an Irish-American Political Family*, he told *The Irish Catholic* about the how his religious and political views are rooted in his Boston-Irish upbringing.

Although, perhaps saying justIrish is somewhat misleading, as much of Mr Donnelly's faith comes from his mother, a Scottish Catholic: "Dad was a committed Catholic, no question about it," Mr Donnelly begins. "But in terms of where I got the Faith that still makes me go to Mass every Sunday and this is the way to be, is from my mother. And that for her was as much an identity. My mother grew up in a very working-class suburb of Glasgow and over there, as a Catholic, identity was everything."

Faith

"She really was deeply, deeply Catholic because it was so central to who she was and she instilled that very much in my brother and in myself. So she was the real driver and she was the person who really gave me that kind of commitment to Faith and also I suppose the concomitant commitment to the sanctity of human life. That really was instilled by her, more than anyone else, and I think my dad would say that were he alive."

Mr Donnelly reversed the journey of many Irish emigrants, returning to Ireland to pursue a career as a law lecturer with NUI Galway. People he met when he arrived were surprised to find that he was religious, he says.

"There's no doubt about it that some people looked askance or were taken aback or surprised, especially because they knew that my politics were in some respects left of centre,"

he explains. "Sometimes there's an image of a young man who says he's a Catholic – well I was then at least a young man, I'm not sure I'd qualify as a young an anymore!"

"And I think some people in Ireland would have had this image that I spend my weekends on retreat or that I was at Mass praying every day. I like my pints as much as the next guy. I got up to all sorts, including when I was in Galway and had a great time. But I always found that the Faith was there to balance that out as a really good influence on my life and something I could lean on in hard times."

“Donnelly is a name with a legacy in the American political sphere. Mr Donnelly's uncle, Brian, was a Congressman and Democrat of great repute in the 1980s”

"It was and still is to this day, kind of my thing. I know that sounds really basic, but that's the way I've been. I'm Jesuit educated, but I always kind of rejected some of the more esoteric or philosophical justifications of religious faith and belief. Mine is a whole lot simpler."

It's something my parents gave me and something I can lean on and a good force and influence in my life."

It is this aspect of the faith that Mr Donnelly hopes to pass on to his own son: "My older guy Sean, my wife had him before she met me and I certainly wasn't going to try to dictate what happened then. But certainly, my wife is more observant now than I think she ever has been before. And my son, he has been coming to Mass with me – and I've written about this in *The Irish Catholic* before – he's been coming to Mass with me since he was a baby."

While it's something that Mr Donnelly is really committed to, he's honest enough to admit good naturedly that "there's a whole lot of complaining a lot of the time".

Communion

"But by and large, I think – he just made his Communion – I think he gets a sense of just how important it is to me. I think he goes along with it partly for that reason. What my mother and father used to say to me when I was a kid and I was questioning, I was giving out and everything, it was just really basic – it's one hour a week where you press pause and everything and you have an hour to go to Mass and think about things and be thankful for what you have, and thank God for what you have. And that's all I want to give to him, something that simple and that basic that can always be there for him."

Donnelly is a name with a legacy

in the American political sphere. Mr Donnelly's uncle, Brian, was a Congressman and Democrat of great repute in the 1980s. His name will be familiar to Irish men and women of a certain age – he proposed the Donnelly Visa, because of which 20,000 Irish people were able to embark upon a new life in the US. But Mr Donnelly's relationship with the Democrats has been a rocky one, particularly as the party has moved left on cultural issues like abortion and as such has become "a cold place for Catholics".

“There was, however, a brief period when Mr Donnelly did move away from the Democrats and into the arms of the Republican Party”

"The party hadn't become the cold place for committed Catholics [in the 80s] that arguably it is now," he explains. "In particular Brian had a 100% pro-life voting record for seven terms in congress. Back then, he was one of the leading democrats behind the scenes in the House during his tenure. That having been said, he was told that he could have all the behind-the-

scenes power he wanted but his position on abortion made it very unlikely that he would be ascending to a leadership position because of the way primarily some national democrats felt and the way that the big money donors felt.

"Unfortunately, the party has been captive to those hard-left special interests for a long time. There are many Catholics, I'm one of them and my friends too, who are still in the party. But I have not moved personally to the left on abortion like so many of them have.

"One of the things I say in the book is that certainly there are some people I know, some of my own friends, who have become Republicans, but there's an awful lot more that despite not just the abortion issue but as well as that, the forced bussing in the 1970s, which alienated a lot of other Boston Irish democrats, a lot of them stayed behind and fought the battle for the heart and soul of the party. I happen to think that, ultimately, they've lost the battle. I think that those like me are an endangered species at this stage."

“I was very lucky to be born into a family where I had every opportunity, where life was relatively easy for me”

There was, however, a brief period when Mr Donnelly did move away from the Democrats and into the arms of the Republican Party. When I asked him why he did that, he explained that a lot of it came from the "hurt my dad [felt] in particular, that he couldn't reconcile the party's position on abortion with what our Church teaches".

"Also," he continues, "I mentioned the issue of forced bussing to desegregate Boston's public schools, which may have had a noble intention, but was carried out in a manifestly unjust and inequitable way. It really disgusted my dad. Growing up around all that complaining about how the party had lost its way and being a young, impressionable and at that time quite committed conservative, I was saying, I agree with you guys. And I agree with you so strongly, I don't think the situation is salvageable and I'm going to the other side.

"You asked what made me come back, and it is the fundamental beliefs that my dad always had until the day he died, no matter how disenchanting he might have been with the party, that you know, I was very lucky to be born into a family where I had every opportunity, where life was relatively easy for me. Not everybody has that same luck or that same opportunity. When it comes right down to it, there's one party who still fights for those people, even though I wish they would fight more and emphasise those people more.

"And that's why I remain to this day a committed Democrat, even though no one would confuse me with a big liberal or anything like that... I am what I am. I never think I'm the most perfect Catholic there is. I am an observant Catholic, I try

“Even since Mr Donnelly arrived in Ireland, we have seen further rapid social change, the sudden disappearance of the remaining vestiges of Catholic Ireland”

my best, but I almost think that neither party have the answers that I want because a lot of my politics flow from my faith and neither party adequately is responsive to what I believe. That's a shame but that's the way it is."

Catholic Ireland

Mr Donnelly was not naive about the state of the Church in Ireland when he arrived in 2002. Having spoken to Irish people in Boston, he knew the "misty eyed view of Catholic Ireland" no longer existed. He was, however, surprised by the extent of the "deep seated resentment and anger" directed at the Church.

"That having been said, I'm the last person to judge anyone who has been through horrendous experiences," Mr Donnelly continues. "I've

met an awful lot of people who have been through horrendous things at times at the hands of a clergy they were taught to revere. I'm not going to blame them for having very human reactions to what they went through. I was taken aback by some of it."

On the flipside, he says, the place the Faith has in Irish public life is still stronger than the US.

"One of the things I find problematic about the US, to take it beyond Catholicism, is just the degree to which some people want to drum religiosity out of the public sphere. I really have a huge problem with that. For all of the backlash against the Church, for all that's happened in recent years, I don't think that's present to the same extent. You know, we still talk about Christmas, we

don't talk about the holidays.

"Some of that is refreshing to me. But certainly, I was aware that I was coming to Ireland at a time when the Church didn't have so much power. By the way, I think that's broadly speaking a good thing. I think when any institution had the amount of power the Church had, I don't think that's to the good. But I suppose the pace of the change, and the deep-seatedness of the disdain for the Church in some quarters did surprise me."

Even since Mr Donnelly arrived in Ireland, we have seen further rapid social change, the sudden disappearance of the remaining vestiges of Catholic Ireland.

"I thought the pace of it [the social change] was extraordinary," Mr Donnelly remarks. "I know from talking to

people on the inside of Catholic conservative circles that some of them view me with scepticism because I would have taken the view that the marriage referendum was affecting civil marriage and I voted in favour of that. That having been said, I did not vote in favour of the repeal of the Eighth Amendment.

"The reason I voted no is that, with the legislation, we all knew what we were going to get if we had it repealed. And the legislation was just way, way, way too liberal for me in the referendum. I suspect I'm probably one of a relatively small cohort of people in this country whose votes were split on the two issues.

"In a way, I think that gives me a little bit of a benefit in terms of how I see things. As I say in the book, one of the things I regret is that I understand why people took the opposite view to me on both things, but I respect them. I respect people who voted against same sex marriage. I've respect for people who voted in favour of abortion. I try always to be able to see the other side.

“Having traversed topics of family, politics and religion, we finished on a light note with what his ideal Christmas is”

"I can agree or disagree and what bothers me most is that in some quarters, especially on the abortion issue and especially when it comes to women who voted against the Eighth Amendment, is that with some of the people who were victorious in the Eighth Amendment they portrayed it as necessarily being a victory for all women, when the fact is that nearly a third of women voted against it for all sorts of different reasons. This may be down to what I was saying to you earlier about my mother being the source of my conviction on this issue."

Mr Donnelly finishes his train of thought, saying that "we need to be realistic as Catholics as to where things are at. And we need to figure out what the best way forward is for us as a Church. What I've said when I have written in *The Irish Catholic* before, it's being at the same time humble and robust. I think that's something that comes through in the book."

Having traversed topics of family, politics and religion, we finished on a light note with what his ideal Christmas is.

"This year is the ideal Christmas, I can tell you," Mr Donnelly says. "We're getting what I think is the best of both worlds – you would have to ask my wife and son if they agree, I don't know. But what we're doing is we're going to my sister in laws in Lara up in the Wicklow mountains for a really gorgeous, picturesque Christmas. We'll go up Christmas Eve and we'll spend Christmas Day and St Stephen's there. And then, the very next day, we're headed to Dublin airport to go to Boston where we're going to spend the next two weeks. In my view, it just doesn't get any better than that. I'm really looking forward to it."

Larry Donnelly's new book *The Bostonian: Life in an Irish-American Political Family* (Gill Books) is available in stores and online.





Christmas music is the golden thread running through John Rutter's life, he tells **Ruadhán Jones**

If you haven't heard of John Rutter CBE, you are still likely to have heard something by him. The 76-year-old English composer is arguably the best-known English creator of Christmas carols alive today. Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, he explained where his love of carols came from and why it has endured for him.

“I never thought that Christmas and Christmas music would play such a large part in my career...”

“It comes from when I was in my school chapel choir, when I was a boy treble and the only time in my life when I had a nice voice,” Mr Rutter says self-deprecatingly. “I would say that the Christmas carol service was one of the high points of our singing year. We rehearsed it for weeks, we looked forward to it. We always had a good mix of traditional favourites and every year something new. Our choir director was an amazing man called Edward Chapman, who had been a pupil of Charles Wood.”

Mr Rutter describes Sir Charles, who compiled several carol anthologies, as his “grandfather in music”.

“The ideas he passed on to Edward Chapman, my teacher at school, were passed on to me,” Mr Rutter explains. “I think it was perhaps because of Dr Wood that Chapman always made our Christmas carol service a special occasion. He himself wrote a number of lovely carols, as it happens, sadly not so often done. But perhaps that's what gave me the idea to have a try at composing some carols for myself.”

Still a student when he composed his first carols, one of them – *The Shepherd's Pipe* – nonetheless became his signature, Mr Rutter says. While they didn't get to sing the carol at school, Chapman's final words to the young Mr Rutter were to seek out Sir David Wilcox. The advice was to prove key to the fledgling composer's career.

“David Wilcox was himself not so much a composer of carols but a very skilled and imaginative arranger of old ones,” Mr Rutter



Renowned English composer of carols John Rutter CBE.

tells me. “Indeed, I did get to meet Wilcox as a member of his harmony and counterpoint class. He was evidently impressed by what I was writing and asked would I bring a selection of some of my work to his rooms at King's College to look over.

“It included *The Shepherd's Pipe* carol and *The Nativity* carol and several arrangements of traditional ones. He said, ‘well, I'm at the editorial for choral music for Oxford University Press’ – which of course is the leading music publisher, among other things – and he said ‘would you be interested in these little pieces being published?’ That was an amazing offer to be made to a young undergraduate. I would never have dared show my work to a publisher, but I didn't have to because David Wilcox did it for me. He remained after that a mentor, supporter, champion and friend right up until when he died.”

Post-graduate

Not long after that, while Mr Rutter was staying on at Cambridge University as a post-graduate, Sir David asked him to be co-editor of the renowned *Carols for Choirs* series.

“I was just flabbergasted, amazed that he would want me as his co-editor,” Mr Rutter says with admiration. “We collaborated on volume two, and unlike a lot of sequels, it did just about as well as volume one. Because in the ten years that had elapsed since volume one came about, David himself had been doing some fresh and

wonderful carol arrangements that he would delight us with, a new one, at least, or two every Christmas Eve.

“And I of course had started writing carols myself. Really it just went back to my experience at school. It was a form of composition I just found I liked because Christmas was such a special time of year for me. What I didn't realise was that volume II would eventually lead to volume III and then IV. Then we did a grand compendium in 1987, which was simply called *100 Carols for Choirs*, which was perhaps the most widely used of what had been in the first four volumes.

“Musical life is returning to normal and we're still wondering about the future”

“I never thought that Christmas and Christmas music would play such a large part in my career... but I would say Christmas music has been like a golden thread running through my life,” Mr Rutter concludes.

It's not only the Christmas element in music that pleases Mr Rutter – music, he says, is integral to the festive season: “You know, things can go wrong with your well-planned Christmas. But the music will always make it right again. For me actually, as a professional musi-

cian, I put my best foot forward every Christmas because it's a time when we think of choirs and people who may never hear a choir for the rest of the year will turn up to their church or cathedral and they'll hear their choir singing at Christmas time.

“And if they enjoy it and if they think ‘my goodness me that's lovely’, then maybe it will inspire people to attend choral events for the rest of the year or else join a choir themselves. Because what could be a more wonderful way of celebrating Christmas than singing in a choir yourself, sweet singing in the choir.”

Reflections

These reflections have a particular resonance for professional musicians who have, Mr Rutter says, “had a rotten 20 months”.

“Musical life is returning to normal and we're still wondering about the future. You know, will the new variant be not so bad, or will it be? Will we face renewed restrictions? None of us can know that. But one thing we can be sure, music and singing won't die in our hearts. We'll find a way around it as musicians very resourcefully have, with all those virtual choirs during the lockdown period. We'll find a way.

“But goodness me it's wonderful to hear choirs in the flesh again and for people to be allowed to get

together. Let's just hope that the new variant is a bit of a minor threat and not so bad as some people are saying.

We're so used to bad news, we sometimes assume the worst when things aren't as bad as they seem. I'm an optimist – we all need hope.”

This Christmas is somewhat of a return to normality for Mr Rutter, who has composed two original carols and will take part in his usual annual carol concerts with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the Bach Choir in London's Royal Albert Hall.

“Irish choirs have a unique tone quality and I put it down to the Irish speech”

“Regretfully I won't be in the Island of Ireland around Christmas time this year. I have enjoyed some delightful occasions in Ireland, bringing all communities together in song for come and sing days. They always stand out because Irish choirs have a unique tone quality and I put it down to the Irish speech. There's a wonderful lilt and gentleness that you don't hear anywhere else. I hope to return and perhaps in the run up to Christmas, maybe next year,” Mr Rutter finishes.

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Miriam O'Callaghan: How you behave to others is all that matters



The RTÉ star tells **Chai Brady** about Christmas, 'wonderful' religious and why a contemplative order would not be up her street

Christmas is a busy time for much-loved RTÉ broadcaster Miriam O'Callaghan but that's exactly how she prefers it. Coming from a Heuston station-like household, total silence is "a bit odd". Four daughters and four boys, family visits, Mass, presents and cooking keep things suitably loud.

Miriam tells *The Irish Catholic* that being a creature of habit she does the same thing every Christmas. "My youngest child is now 15 so he's in transition year, but I have three boys in college and four daughters, the eldest girl is married just up the road but basically we all end up together at Christmas. I absolutely love Christmas, I've always loved it," she says, adding that things were particularly exciting when Santa Claus used to come when she was young and then with her children.

“On the very rare occasions I ever get the house to myself, we have a dog so I'm probably never alone because he will be there”

Describing the general structure of the day Miriam says: "We get up early, we do go to Mass on Christmas day, we all go but I'm married to a Presbyterian, not a Free Presbyterian as I explained to my mom 26 years ago when I met him," she laughs. "we live in Rathgar and interestingly there's a huge Presbyterian church in the village of Rathgar so Steve [her husband] and his sister who always comes to stay with us at Christmas and some of the boys go with him and the rest of us go to the Church of the



Miriam O'Callaghan.

Three Patrons in Rathgar.

"Then we come back and we do all of our presents and then we always go to one member of our extended family for a drink and this year it's to my brother Jim who lives nearby. My mum will be there. She's a very healthy, independent, 93-year-old who lives at home and drives and all the rest. I meet up with my siblings there and then I go back and I cook dinner."

While some might prefer a quieter Christmas, Miriam has a need for noise, saying: "It's busy and it's all wooden floors so my mother used to say it was a bit like Heuston station, especially when they were all young, playing football or driving trucks. I kind of like noise I have no problem with it, I can be peaceful in a noisy place in a weird way."

"On the very rare occasions I ever get the house to myself, we have a dog so I'm probably never alone because he will be there. I find total silence sounds a bit odd, because I'm not used to it. I'm not sure I'd do very well in a contemplative order because I need noise."

Materialism

In South County Dublin in particular Miriam says there is too much focus on what people have, and credits Jesuit schooling for putting out a more wholesome teaching.

"Part of the problem is also when children are tiny, if you just give them loads of things, they don't really appreciate endless presents. They could be surrounded by all these presents from aunts and uncles and grandparents – I found this with my little children – then you give them a pot and a wooden spoon and they actually get as much enjoyment out of that. It's a simple lesson," Miriam says.

"I think we all discover it, it's a truism, it's an obvious thing to say, the only thing that matters really is how you make other people feel, how you behave towards other people, how you treat people."

"My boys all went to the Jesuits, my youngest boy is still in a Jesuit school, and I do really rate how they approach everything

because we live in South County Dublin where there's too much emphasis on what you have and they very much preach it's what you do for others."

“I didn't have to come in for endless meetings that go on interminably so I was just coming in to do the shows all the time. I got to present the Late Late Show twice at key moments when poor Ryan was ill”

Miriam is also very complimentary of other priests and religious, naming Bro. Kevin of the Capuchin Day Centre and Fr Peter McVerry of the Peter McVerry Trust. She describes Sr Stan who founded

homelessness charity Focus Ireland as "totally exemplary" and "selflessly all her life looking after others".

"Sr Concilio [founder of Cuan Mhuire], who I am incredibly fond of, she sends me scapulars which I mind and give to people. A friend of mine recently is actually going for breast cancer treatment so I sent her that and I always keep one in my bag," she says, "I have a lot of contacts actually, they all pray for me and I say 'Pray for me, keep praying!'"

Miriam mentions her uncle, Msgr Brian Cavanagh who is a priest based in Covina, California, who she describes as "the most beautiful man and he comes home every year to visit my mom. He just radiates goodness, he's really gentle and non-judgemental, he practices the perfect form of Christianity."

Asked whether she thinks the Church gets a hard time in Irish society she says there are many people, such as those mentioned, that radiate goodness. However, Miriam recalls the time when investigative journalist Mary Raf-

tery exposed clerical and institutional child abuse in Ireland.

"I just think there was such a breach of trust and it was such a shock, I think a lot of people of my parent's generation found it very hard to come to terms with and then younger people just started to not trust the Church. I think it's almost balancing itself now," Miriam says.

Lockdown

Having experienced almost two years of the pandemic, Miriam says she was very lucky as being a broadcast journalist she continued working and the job rarely changed – if anything it got better.

The Prime Time presenter says: "I didn't have to come in for endless meetings that go on interminably so I was just coming in to do the shows all the time. I got to present the Late Late Show twice at key moments when poor Ryan was ill.

“Miriam also recalls a particularly difficult piece she did which involved her going to nursing homes during the height of lockdown”

"I am realising it was very difficult for many people, but for me because a lot of my children were home, they were off school or college, Steve was working from home – he normally works out of Glasgow – so it was actually really nice. I got into baking.

"You are certainly around home much more, you realise for years on Prime Time normally you would be rushing in for a 10am meeting and you realise actually, you didn't have to do that you can just do it on Zoom. So little things like that. I do think it made a difference, you're just around more – so some plus sides to lockdown."

There were a few key moments during the pandemic she felt were very important to her as a broadcaster, one of them being the opportunity to present the Late Late Show, particularly at a pivotal moment when then-Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced the country was locking down due to Covid-19.

"Everyone was quite nervous and thinking, are we really experiencing a pandemic? Because you had stuff before like SARS or Bird Flu and then this is really it, and I think everyone was nervous – people were worried," she says.

Miriam also recalls a particularly difficult piece she did which involved her going to nursing homes during the height of lockdown.

"I found that quite upsetting

“I don't believe in challenging people or being aggressive I don't think that gets you anywhere, I think if you're implacably courteous and reasonable and try to be kind, sometimes people do listen”

actually because it was a time that no one was getting in to see them and we interviewed them from the outside. That was actually quite shocking because people were very upset, much older people in their 80s who hadn't seen anyone for a very long time. I just realised then I was lucky I was home with my children and working. That did upset me."

Asked about conspiracy theories related to Covid, some of which target RTÉ and its journalists, Miriam says that all you can do is try to be honest and conduct the research – people either trust the broadcaster, trust the message, or don't.

However, while a plethora of conspiracy theories blossomed, many people did gravitate to mainstream media for information.

Miriam says: "Strangely what we did find out during the Covid crisis is, maybe because people were forced to tune in to us because they were stuck at home, the figures did go up because I think people were nervous and social media puts out a lot of different messages, they can be very confusing and you don't know if they are fact-checked or true. So they went back to mainstream media, whether it was Virgin Media, the BBC or RTÉ, they went back in their droves. Because I think ultimately, they do trust certain places, certain messages and certain people.

"Some people do go down rabbit holes of conspiracy theories and I think that's quite upsetting for people who love those people, it's very hard to sway them back," she adds.

Conspiracy theories

The best way to speak to someone who has become embroiled in conspiracy theories, which may be detrimental to them or others to varying degrees, is not to "bang them over the head", Miriam opines.

"Seamus Heaney once gave me great advice: give implacable courtesy to anyone who is difficult – and I use it every day."

Tempers can flair and arguments spark during the Christmas season as families come together, turning what could and should be a positive affair ugly. In these situations, when conspiracy theories are raised, the best thing to do is be kind and polite according to Miriam.

"I don't believe in challenging people or being aggressive I don't think that gets you anywhere, I think if you're implacably courteous and reasonable and try to be kind, sometimes people do listen to you, not always, but you know... I never cut anyone out of my life I think that's a bit final – try your best and keep trying, don't give up on anyone. Human nature is good," she says.

Lighting candles

Miriam has kept up a tradition of lighting a candle in her nearby church, describing it as her "ritual".

She says: "I almost light a candle every day. I don't beat myself up if I miss one. I live on a road and two seconds away is the Three Patrons Church, I always think if there's a camera there they must think 'What's she doing here again?'" she laughs, "But I'm in and out in a shot, I just have a ritual. Everyone has worries in their life and certainly when you have eight children, you're always worried about one at one time over another and I've found saying a little prayer and lighting candles works. I know some people don't believe in it at all, and that's absolutely fine, but I believe in it, I really do."

Loss

Miriam recalls a time when she was very angry with God due to personal tragedy. She suffered the loss of her young sister, who was aged 33, in the 1990s. This was followed not long after by the death of her father.

"My sister died of cancer really quickly, she just got stomach cancer, a beautiful young woman, out of the blue, died a couple of months later. She was still young and left two tiny little girls behind aged 2 and 4," Miriam says.

“Miriam has kept up a tradition of lighting a candle in her nearby church, describing it as her ‘ritual’”

"And then my Dad was getting her Mass card printed, it was really quite tragic, he was walking out of our garden and he collapsed and he wasn't found until later on because it was the side of the house, he died from a stroke. But there was something really so tragic, that was eight weeks after Anne died.

"He was a beautiful Kerry man, came from a small farm in Kerry, at the time couldn't afford to go into university although he was super clever and thankfully all my sons have this maths gene now from their

grandfather. He came up to Dublin, worked in the civil service, worked really hard, rose through the ranks.

"I remember being really angry with God after that actually and then angry with people. I'd look around and go, 'you're really grumpy all the time, why are you still here and my gorgeous sister and dad are dead?' You try to rationalise life. I was angry at first," she says.

"He actually had a great devotion to Our Lady, my mother would still say that. My mother is a daily Mass goer. They had a great faith as well and I just felt it was a bit like a kick in the face to them at the end of their days, that their daughter died.

"But I got over that and I realised, especially through this job, that so many people have tragedy, and it's not until

you lose someone that you realise actually that family down the road lost someone and that family down the road has a really sick child with a very difficult special need," she says, adding that tragedy effects mostly everyone's life at some point and "I suppose it's how you deal with that".

“So if I can get through next year, 2022, the same – and I wish the same for everybody else – I'll be so happy,”

Miriam's philosophy for life she says is quite simple. After her sister died, Miriam wakes up every morning and if she and her husband, her children and everyone in her family circle and friends are ok – "that's a great day".

"So if I can get through next year, 2022, the same – and I wish the same for everybody else – I'll be so happy," she adds.



Making God laugh



Catholic comedian Jeremy McLellan tells **Ruadhán Jones** about the importance of insults, making Catholics laugh and more

Every religion loves a good conversion story, American comedian Jeremy McLellan tells me towards the end of our talk. While he wasn't referring to himself, his own conversion experience is an interesting one. Born to a strict Presbyterian family, it took 15 years and three attempts before he finally crossed the Tiber. In the meantime, he had established himself as a comedian with an especial popularity among Muslims – after he converted, he began to take the Catholic circuit by storm too.

“You're allowed to be Catholic if you were raised Catholic, you can be a lapsed Catholic, you can also be a serious Catholic – only if you were raised a Catholic”

“There are plenty of Catholic comedians out there,” Jeremy says. “Just as there are plenty of Muslim. But there seems to be a narrative that you are required to adopt when you are a religious comedian, and it's that you come from a very religious background, and those people are idiots. So you make fun of them, now that you realise they are idiots and now you're liberal.”

This, he explains, is the standard narrative a Catholic comedian – or one of any religion – is expected to take in Hollywood or the likes of Netflix. The reason why this is the case is that it's their conversion story, Jeremy says.

“You know, every religion loves a conversion story for their religion, and liberals – by that I mean liberal individualism – is a religion. You can be a Muslim comic in Hollywood, but you've got to make fun of your parents and talk bad about them. I'm from the South, so I've got to make my family look like a bunch of racists when they aren't.”

“Because that's the way history is moving for them. You're allowed to be Catholic if you were raised Catholic, you can be a lapsed Catholic – only if you were raised a Catholic. What they don't understand at all is

someone who would move the other direction, someone who would find themselves even more traditional, whatever that means to the person.

“You know, deeper roots in the past, thinking that history took some wrong turns. Not necessarily reactionary, but is your memory longer than the French revolution and is your tradition longer than that? I know so many Muslim comics and Catholic comedians who complain about this, that you're going in the wrong direction for liberals. They'll write you off as a kook or a confederacy of dunces, a ridiculous 'trad' figure. But when you're a thoughtful person and good at rambling and going the other direction, they don't like that.”

Jeremy cites this as a reason for his success in the Muslim community: “I take them seriously. I take their tradition seriously, I don't see it as a cute recipe that they have that's an accoutrement to the liberal subject. That's something I've been

thinking a lot about, how it's difficult to tell that story without people spitting it out of their mouth like bad meat.”

Thankfully, Jeremy's conversion story is just our cup of tea. He says that, although raised in a conservative Presbyterian family, there were several times that he considered joining the Catholic Church.

“I was convinced that it was true. But it was almost a very Protestant thing, where I was convinced it was true, but I was thinking – isn't that enough? I agree with Catholicism, the end. Why do I have to join, why do I have to ruin lots of relationships I have and risk my parent's judgement?”

Catholicism

Jeremy slowly came to move from this intellectual conviction to accepting Catholicism in its totality. To illustrate his point, Jeremy uses the example of Transubstantiation – the technical term for the real conversion of the bread into Christ's body at Mass.

“You can be a Protestant and believe in Transubstantiation just because you're convinced of it or whatever,” he explains. “For me, I thought that was enough. I believe in it, there you go. I thought the difference with Catholicism was that Catholics believe in Transubstantiation and Protestants don't. But the actual difference between Catholics

and Protestants, not to be a jerk, is that in Catholic Churches, Transubstantiation happens and in Protestant's it doesn't... Catholicism is not a belief about the Eucharist, it is the Eucharist, it is Jesus.

“Originally I was just thinking about Catholicism as one denomination among others. People ask you, why did you become Catholic and they ask you that in the same way as, what's your major in school? But the Catholic Church is the kingdom of God on earth. It's an entire world that exists. It's not like, oh you go through this wardrobe, you get to the Catholic world: it's the world we're living in now. Once I realised this, I sort of just realised I was Catholic.”

It was three years ago that Jeremy came to this conclusion, moving from an intellectual to a real conviction that Catholicism is the truth. He brought his wife along with him, and she returned to the Church having lapsed.

Jeremy's comic career predates his conversion. When I asked how he came to it, he says that he finds he has different answers depending on what that question means. First, there is the logistical side: “I had friends who were comics and I went to bars where they worked and I helped writing jokes. Then I started doing it and there you go.”

But then, there's the broader part of what brought him to comedy: “My depression and anxiety and finding an art form that would enable me to process events in my life, things I was thinking in a way that was accessible to others. Stand-up comedy is interesting because you can't fake the connection. There's a connection there that I feel is at the heart of a lot of stand-up comics' work, this desire to connect with others and to prove something to yourself.”

“He has a course coming out on humour and Catholicism, which has caused him to reflect on what drives our desire to be funny”

“Think about telling a joke, it's a very vulnerable thing. I'm not even talking about stand-up comedy, I'm talking about with friends when you tell a joke. What you find funny is a very intimate part of your background, who you are. And what if everything that has happened to you and the way that you think, what if that isn't intelligible to others? That's just death, that's the worst possible thing. There's this driving hope that what has happened to you in the past or what you're going through is intelligible to others, and the mark of that is being able to make the person laugh about the story or topic.”

As well as gaining popularity through his Twitter account and touring, Jeremy is a teaching fellow



with Word on Fire, the American Catholic media organisation. He has a course coming out on humour and Catholicism, which has caused him to reflect on what drives our desire to be funny.

“I was raised a very deep Calvinist,” Jeremy begins. “I don't want to exaggerate what Calvinists believe, but it's a very dark view of the world. And I think that that is a question that plagues us, ever since we were little, is the world good? [German Catholic philosopher] Josef Pieper has this great thing where he talks about the world being ‘plum and sound’. At the base of reality, it's good. It's not corrupt and we are not just corrupt to the core. We're fallen, but we're not just rotten creatures.”

Comedy

For Jeremy, comedy is an affirmation of this fact, that the world is good: “If you think about the first time you laugh, it's probably when your mother played peek-a-boo. If you slow down and go through what peek-a-boo means to a child, the mother is like the centre of

their world. And she's the universe, and she disappears. She no longer exists, and then she comes back and surprises you. There's this good surprise, and if you grow up with a good mother, you grow up with a sense that the world is good and that surprises are good. And that there are lots of horrifying things in the world, but none of the horrifying things penetrate down to bedrock.”

“I asked Jeremy if people are taken aback or even insulted when he makes jokes about the Faith”

Then Jeremy draws a comparison that may seem surprising, but is deeply rooted in a belief in our goodness – insults among friends are important.

“I talk in my course about insults or roasts, because I love roasts,” he says. “One of the things in roasts is



American Catholic comedian Jeremy McLellan is pictured on tour in Pakistan.



whenever you do a roast it's with people you love. It's with family or friends or other comics, and you like each other. Roasts don't work if you don't like each other. The rule is that everybody has to like each other.

"The roasts are beautiful. These are professional comedians making fun of things that you are insecure about, that you thought people wouldn't notice, etc. And at the end of all that, they still love you! So you realise that those things don't make you unlovable."

Faith

I asked Jeremy if people are taken aback or even insulted when he makes jokes about the Faith. His response is, simply, no: "And maybe it's because I've gotten really good at it, I've made a name for myself performing for Muslims. I've done comedy tours of Pakistan and I've gotten really, really good performing for people who in terms of reputation don't take kindly to jokes about their religion. But there are ways of doing it, and it's definitely playing it on hard mode."

There is no list of rules when it comes to offensiveness, Jeremy adds, but there are rules of thumb. For him, the test of whether a joke is appropriate or not is can you do it in front of the group you're joking about?

"I'm white, so if you're a white comic and you have jokes about blacks, great – go do it in front of a black audience. If you're scared of that, chances are your jokes are not getting at something true about black people. They're not getting at something surprising and good and perceptive. It's probably just a hack observation. And when people are offended, what I've found in my experience, it's not a tricky term, for the most part people just don't like being lied about."

For Jeremy, the goal is to be "very surprising and clean, controversial and clean. That's a bullseye that isn't represented very well, usually people are dirty and controversial".

Our conversation took place over the phone, as Jeremy is in his hometown of Charleston, South Carolina, minding his children while his wife is away. One of them occasionally chimes in from the background, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the question of balancing family life and touring comes up.

Family life

"You know, that is difficult," Jeremy starts to say. "This boy that I'm holding, Jonny, he was born right before the pandemic. And my

travel plans collapsed for about a year. They picked back up in the past few months. What's good about comedy is that, when I'm not travelling, I'm a full-time stay at home dad.

"My wife is on a vacation this week, so I'm just the stay at home dad with them for a week. But it is difficult. The logistics of it are not that difficult because my wife and I are both from where we live, which is Charleston, South Carolina. Her parents literally live across the street. They're awesome people and my parents live 20 minutes away. We have tonnes and tonnes of help, it's definitely a village feel."

While the logistics of minding children aren't difficult, Jeremy finds the hardest part of touring is "having so many experiences that you begin to have a separate story from your spouse".

“But I think that just comes down to communication and my wife and I are pretty good at that”

"That is something I think you have to guard against," he continues. "You have to Facetime every day, you have to keep in touch, to ensure you're having the same story. I remember when I got married, somebody had some really good advice, the only good advice I got before my wedding. They said,

'at your wedding, hold hands and don't separate. People are going to try and separate you and take pictures of you and stuff. Don't separate because then you'll have two different memories of the night and you want to have the same experience of the wedding'.

"I think that's great. We did that and I tell people that all the time now. More broadly I think that's very true of marriage in general. It would be one thing if I was going to the office like. But I'm going to Pakistan and having crazy things happen to me and my wife's not there. So then it's ok in what sense are we one flesh? But I think that just comes down to communication and my wife and I are pretty good at that."

As Jeremy said, his touring plans were undermined by the pandemic. However, he's back on the treadmill now, touring the UK from December 15 to the 31.

Touring

"Not Ireland, we're bigots about Ireland or something," he jokes. "We've never done Ireland, we've done Scotland. This will be my fifth year doing that with four Muslim friends. And I've done it every year and past years, first my wife came and then my wife and baby came. But now she's got two and we're like, no it would be too much for them to come and join me on the tour."

"But the last two years, I've spent at home. So this year, we're just going to have St Nicholas day, so we're just going to celebrate Christmas early. So that's my ideal Christmas. I'm looking forward to St Nicholas Day and to touring. I love touring and the life of that, just saying yes – within reason – to everything and ending up in strange places and in people's houses. I am looking forward to that very much."

“I've done comedy tours of Pakistan and I've gotten really, really good performing for people who in terms of reputation don't take kindly to jokes about their religion”

The reason for the season is Jesus

Have we forgotten why we celebrate Christmas? A friend told me she got a card wishing her a very merry 'Winter Festival'? Could you beat that! People tell me they have to search in shops for cards that portray the nativity but there is no shortage of fir trees, snow, red robins and Victorian carriages. What are the so-called Christmas stamps celebrating?

In the early Christian centuries, there was little if any celebration of the birth of Jesus. The major feasts were Easter, celebrating the Resurrection, and Epiphany, celebration of the manifestation of Jesus as king (gold), priest (incense) and suffering servant (myrrh). Just after the winter solstice, people celebrated the return of the unconquered sun. But, as often happens in pagan festivals, it had become a drunken orgy which usually ended up in violence. The Church authorities addressed this problem by selecting this time to celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ, the light of God coming in human flesh. A few years ago, the renowned soprano Celine Byrne was asked on Lyric FM's *Marty in the Morning* why did Christmas mean so much to her. Her answer was marvellous. "The reason for the season is Jesus."

The Sunday Gospel

Fr Silvester O'Flynn OFM Cap.



The Christmas crib

The popularisation of the Christmas crib is attributed to St Francis of Assisi. His early biographers have left us vivid accounts of Christmas night at Greccio. His desire was "to bring to life the memory of that babe born in Bethlehem, to see as much as possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, now as he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he was laid upon a bed of hay" (Thomas of Celano). On Christmas night, the friars and local people arrived with flowers and lights. His friend, John, had arranged a manger full of hay, an ox and a donkey. "All those present experienced a new and indescribable joy in the presence of the Christmas scene. The priest then solemnly celebrated the Eucharist over the manger, showing the bond between the incarnation of the Son of God and the Eucharist. The nativity scene was enacted and experienced by

all who were present" (Thomas of Celano). Everyone went home full of joy.

Get off your high horses

There is beautiful symbolism in the fact that to enter the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem one must crouch down to pass through a tiny door. Only children can enter the church unimpeded. A long time ago the great doors had to be blocked up to stop the bandits who would ride in on horseback robbing the precious vessels and candelabra which adorned the church. The tiny door calls us to come off our high horses of self-sufficiency and to bend low. In the story of the original temptation, the father of lies promised Adam "you shall be like gods having the knowledge of good and evil".

“In the early Christian centuries, there was little if any celebration of the birth of Jesus”

When you disobey God you claim the right to moral autonomy, to make up your own rules, to claim your own rights above any

responsibility. Adam took the bait, reached up for God's authority and fell. Once he had known only what was good, but, as the tempter promised, he now knew evil also. He felt naked before God. Adam tried to climb up to God's level but the Son of God as our Saviour came down to our level. We should not be surprised that Jesus said we have to become like little children to enter the kingdom of God. Discover the child who is divine. Discover also our lost innocence and our need of God.

The Saviour who can fix it

I like this story which I came across in a book by the late Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini. He was a highly qualified scriptural scholar but well able to enter the world of stories for children. Imagine Jesus as a growing boy in Nazareth. One of his pals was celebrating his birthday. All the kids were expected to bring little presents. In those days most toys were made of wood, like little dolls, houses or trollies. A few days ago, a friend gave me a Rudolf, the red nosed reindeer, constructed from a fallen branch and a few twigs. Anyway, getting back to Nazareth. One of the boys spotted that Jesus arrived emptyhanded, so he challenged him.

"Jesus, you brought nothing". Jesus replied, "Oh yes I did."

"I can see nothing. What did you bring?"

"I can fix it", Jesus replied.

"What do you mean, I can fix it?"

"In Daddy Joseph's workshop people bring in all sorts of broken stuff and he is a genius at fixing things. I have watched him closely. So, if any of the toys you bring gets broken, then I can fix it."

The name, Jesus, which was announced by an angel, means the one who saves...the one who can fix the life that is broken and needs healing.

This Jesus invites us to come to him with our problems and broken parts.

Come to me with your burdens and I will share the load with you.

Come with your sorrows and I will refresh you with my joy.

Come with your loneliness and I will be your friend.

Come to me with your guilt and I will give you my forgiveness.

Prayer

May you experience the singing of the angels rendering glory to God:

*the peace of God in your heart and mind,
the joy of the shepherds,
and the worship of the Magi.*

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Chosen to bring Jesus to life



Jonathan Roumie portrays Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount in an episode of *The Chosen*. Photos: CNS.



Catholic actor Jonathan Roumie was brought to new life by Jesus, and now he's bringing Jesus to life on TV's *The Chosen*, writes Jason Osborne

'Phenomenon' is a term often overused in the realm of movies, TV shows and books, but in the case of TV series *The Chosen*, it truly comes up short. Boasting hundreds of millions of views, rave reviews of 9.6 out of 10 on IMDb and 100% on Rotten Tomatoes, and recently experiencing major seasonal success at the box office with their Christmas special, *The Chosen* is breaking ground that religious offerings don't often reach.

Jesus is at the show's heart, and at the heart of the show's Jesus is Catholic actor Jonathan Roumie. A

daunting role to take up at the best of times, Mr Roumie's portrayal of Jesus is reaching more hearts than it's ever been possible to reach, lending credence to the idea that the hit show is a form of evangelisation never seen before.

Faith

Taking time out of his hectic Christmas schedule, Mr Roumie spoke to *The Irish Catholic* about bringing "the best person who ever lived" to life on an unprecedented scale. But before that was possible, Christ had to bring him to life.

"I was baptised into the Faith

initially as Greek Orthodox and then when we moved out of New York City, we were sort of limited in our selection of Greek Orthodox communities and my dad, in Egypt, having gone to Catholic school as a kid, and then my mother being Irish Roman Catholic, it was an easy transition to just go to the church down the road and so we did that and my sisters and I made our First Communion and our Confirmations as Catholics," Mr Roumie tells this paper.

"It just kind of stuck. We didn't see it as, 'Oh, we're converting, oh, we're this'. We were like, ok, the

theology's pretty similar and at the end of the day, for us, it was about Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit, and of course the Holy Family is a big part of it. And so, there were no issues to just go down the street. I think maybe in my early 20s, I thought the romance of the Orthodox liturgies had me curious about revisiting it, but I never felt compelled. I didn't feel God calling me to go back and revert or go to a different community, and he just strengthened my faith."

Journey

"Then I had a much deeper conversion a few years ago where I essentially just surrendered my will to God's will for me, which took coming to the precipice in my own journey as an actor emotionally, physically, spiritually, financially, coming to and hitting a wall, and then having nowhere else to go but to ask God to show me the way, and he did. Three months after that moment, Dallas Jenkins, the creator of *The Chosen*, called me to reprise the role I had played

for him in short films with a, at that time, limited four-episode series that may or may not go anywhere. Two seasons and a Christmas special later with, God willing, five more seasons to go, it seems like people are responding and I might just get a few more episodes out of this thing," he says self-deprecatingly.

“What's not usual, is to be asked by God to do that before the eyes of hundreds of millions”

Reaching rock-bottom, opening up to God and being restored to new life is a tale as old as our Faith. It's part and parcel of conversion, and the continued conversion in every believer's life, that greater and greater efforts are made day

“The Chosen is a hot topic of discussion among Catholics in Ireland, and no different to most TV series, the question of favourite scenes often arises”

after day to imitate and embody Christ – to become *alter Christus*, *ipse Christus*, as St Josemaría Escrivá put it – another Christ, Christ himself.

What's not usual, is to be asked by God to do that before the eyes of hundreds of millions. Usually, we follow him in our own little circles and among a familiar circle of family and friends, elevated to fame only if God wills it. To be asked to embody Christ by embodying him on-screen, brings the worlds of sainthood and acting clashing together. Mr Roumie tells me what that's like, and where he drew inspiration from.

Most influential

“I have my favourite Jesus movies and stuff that I've seen over the years and the most influential for me as a child was watching Robert Powell in the *Jesus of Nazareth* miniseries,” he says.

“And so I know, I'm quite aware of the power that media has, especially in the realms of faith, when done properly. I trust Dallas and the writers to steer the ship into the direction of authenticity and believability and faith, really. To be a part of that has been nothing short of mind-blowing, life-altering, life-changing, in so many ways, especially when we witness how God is using the show to affect people's lives for the better, only for the better. It's been a humbling, humbling gift for me.”

While there is a heritage and a precedent of Christ on the screen, Mr Roumie's portrayal of Jesus has been lauded for the warmth he brings to the role; a compassion and humanity that are at odds with the often austere, otherworldly depictions of Our Lord. Mr Roumie alludes to the fact that actors' characters influence them, depending on how well they enter into the role. What is that process like, then, when the goal of your profession and of the spiritual life align?

“Well, I think when you think about the sacrifice that Jesus made on behalf of humanity, that has to come from an infinite depth of love and mercy and compassion. If you're meeting somebody in the flesh and you are the embodiment of compassion and mercy and love, how wouldn't you embrace people? How wouldn't you want to make them feel like they're the most important person in the room or in the tent, or at the pool of Bethesda, that you're talking to in that moment,” Mr Roumie says.

“I feel that Jesus had to have been fully present at every moment with every interaction that he had because of who he was. My goal is to try to embody that in whatever limited capacity I can as a human being living in the 21st Century

on this Earth. For me, it's how can I experience the emotional spectrum as deeply as Jesus must have?”

“For me, that means trying to have as much, and beyond even my own usual daily attempts to feel, love for my neighbour as I can. In the scenes that I have with these actors, I try to feel that as Jonathan for Shahaar, for Noah, for George, playing Simon-Peter, Andrew and John respectively.

“The role forces you, if you're trying to live it and play it truthfully, and that's the goal of any actor, is to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances, you can't help but be affected by the character you're playing. And in this case, he just happens to be the best person who ever lived, point blank. I just hope it rubs off on me long after I'm done playing the role, and that I can continue to bring that into the world,” he says.

“The question takes a darker turn then, as I ask him about which scenes he's either most looking forward to filming or most daunted to have before him”

It's hard to believe Thomas a Kempis could have imagined this spin on his famous spiritual treatise and method, the *Imitation of Christ*, but it seems to be having the same effect on Mr Roumie as a rigorous spiritual exercise. A key piece of evidence of this is that he says he's found himself more susceptible to spiritual warfare since taking on the role.

“I find myself much more subject to spiritual warfare than I ever have in my life, but I also find myself exponentially sensitive to it. Now, just having a renewed interest and love for my faith and the vastness of it. The depth and history of the traditions, the history of sacramentals and the meanings behind them and how they have become a daily part of my worship routine makes it that much more easy to know what to do when I am feeling challenged spiritually,” he says.

The Chosen is a hot topic of discussion among Catholics in Ireland, and no different to most TV series, the question of favourite scenes often arises. Given the chance to ask the main character his, it seems foolish to turn it down.



Jesus, played by Jonathan Roumie, entertains children during the Wedding Feast at Cana in an episode of *The Chosen*.

“You know, I can never narrow it down to one scene. There's a triumvirate of scenes, I would say, that come to mind. First and foremost, I think because they were the early experiences and they left such an impact on me, having played them and having then watched them, sort of, objectively and how they affect people. They're kind of in chronological order, almost. The first one is my initial appearance at the end of episode one. That encounter was just – I can't watch it without, just being affected by it myself,” he admits.

Holy Spirit

“It's as if I'm not doing the scene, it's as if somebody else is doing there. I think the Holy Spirit is, I'm sure the Holy Spirit is because to have the reaction and knowing that I acted the scene, and for it to still affect me after I've seen it one or two dozen times, is inexplicable. There's no logic to it. That doesn't happen with other things that I've done. So that's number one.

“Number two I would say would be the end, sort of a bookend, of season one, episode eight, with the Samaritan woman at the well. It was a similar kind of a thing. It was just such a beautiful moment.

When she runs away just full of joy, it literally just brought me to tears of joy, just watching and imagining the joy that Jesus must have felt having this impact on these people and seeing their lives just turn around like that.

“To answer your last question though, daunted, I would say probably the crucifixion will be the most daunting”

“And then I'd say thirdly, one of my favourite scenes with the legendary character actor, Erick Avari, who plays Nicodemus, was the John 3:16 up on the rooftop and having that exchange. Just seeing that exchange fleshed out by this teacher of the law, who in our storyline – not necessarily biblically-inferred – but in our storyline, on the verge of deciding whether or not he should go follow Christ himself, because we

know he was a disciple, a follower, but in secret, so what did it look like to be a disciple in secret? What were his challenges? And so having that conversation with him and trying to explain to him what it meant to be reborn in the Spirit was just a beautiful encounter. I just loved working with Erick because he's just so good.”

The question takes a darker turn then, as I ask him about which scenes he's either most looking forward to filming or most daunted to have before him. As may have been guessed, the crucifixion looms before him as before all who faithfully try to follow God himself.

Crucifixion

“That's a harder question for me to answer because we're not even really told the specifics of the storylines for the seasons. I know that season six will revolve around the crucifixion, season seven will revolve around the resurrection. That's as much as I know. I think there are some storylines in season three that I'm really looking forward to, but unfortunately, I can't say anything,” Mr Roumie says mysteriously.

“To answer your last question though, daunted, I would say probably the crucifixion will be the



Jonathan Roumie and *The Chosen* creator Dallas Jenkins during their visit to the Vatican.

“Speaking to Mr Roumie, you get the impression that his portrayal of Jesus is bringing Christ to life as much in him as on the screen”

thing he'd been in search of for a long time.

“Meeting the Pope was something that I had thought about as a kid, you know, most of my young life. I always wanted to go to World Youth Day and because my parents weren't really keyed in on how to actually make that happen – I still don't know who you talk to to go to World Youth Day,” he laughs.

“Meeting the Pope was something that I had thought about as a kid, you know, most of my young life”

“I may have a few more contacts now to be able to make that happen, but I'm a little too old to be at the World Youth Day in any other capacity than as a guest speaker. But as a kid, it was like, ‘Oh man, I'd love to meet the pope’. The closest I got was in New York, back in, I think, when Pope Benedict visited New York and I had a friend, who was actually my acting coach at the time, who had connections with the visit being set up. So it didn't result in any connection, but he told me what blocks I could see him on, so as he drove by in his popemobile, I just remember the popemobile passing and I'm just waving like, ‘Oh, he's never going to see me’.

“So that was about a year or two year long process to actually have

happen, that was made possible by a friend and journalist, Bree Dail, who I think was working for National Catholic Reporter, I think, at the time, and then she moved to Rome. She said, ‘Do you want to meet the Pope?’ And I said, ‘Wait, what?’ So she helped get that ball rolling and really followed through and made it happen and then I invited Dallas to come along and experience that with me, because how often do you get to meet the Pope? He was excited.

Pray for me

“Then we got there and the Pope came down the line, and I had a little card in Spanish of what I wanted to say, and I told him I prayed for him and asked him to pray for me as well because I was playing Jesus in a TV series and his eyes lit up. He said, ‘May you imitate him, may you find him and may he make you happy’, which was beautiful. Then he moved over to Dallas and Dallas explained he was directing the show that I was playing Jesus in and the Pope says to him, he kind of turns and he's like, ‘He's Jesus?’ And Dallas says, ‘Yeah’. And he's like, ‘You're Judas?’ And he said, ‘No, no, no, no’. It was very, very funny and the Pope had a great laugh and warmth about it. He was just very generous with his spirit and his time, so it was pretty cool.”

Speaking to Mr Roumie, you get the distinct impression that his portrayal of Jesus is bringing Christ to life as much in him as on the screen.



Jonathan Roumie and Dallas Jenkins meeting the Pope.

most daunting. I don't know how Dallas plans to handle that – Dallas, the creator of the show. I know he'll probably do it in a way that hasn't really been done before, so I'm eager and curious and nervous and just hesitant to think too much about it because I don't want to impose my ideas on it and then it turning out to be completely different. I mean, he's a great writer and, I mean, the whole writing staff is brilliant. The three of them: Ryan,

Tyler and Dallas together just make quite a force.

“So I trust whatever they write, it's going to be heart-breaking and I think people will experience Jesus' sacrifice and his death in a way that will be unprecedented, because of the previous five seasons of building up Jesus as your friend, your best friend, hopefully. So, I think it's going to be pretty devastating when that happens. I myself, I'm not looking forward to it because

that'll also mean then the show's almost over, but God's will be done at the end of the day.”

Rare privilege

Assured that *The Chosen* is in the safest possible hands between God, Mr Roumie and director Dallas Jenkins, the conversation turns to the earthly hands that the Church is in: Pope Francis'. Earlier this year, Mr Roumie had the rare privilege of meeting him in person – some-

Re-discovering Ireland's third patron saint



The National Museum of Ireland has launched 'Colmcille: Sacred objects of a Saint – 1500 years of devotion' at the National Museum of Ireland Archaeology, Kildare Street, Dublin.



A new exhibit at the national gallery aims to shed light on 1,500 years of devotion to St Columba, writes Michael Kelly

Stop a passer-by in any Irish town and ask them who the patron saints of Ireland are. Chances are everyone will be able to rhyme off St Patrick. Perhaps many make a stab that St Brigid is also one of the three. But the third one? Well, apart, perhaps, from Donegal or Derry many people I suspect will struggle to name St Columba at the country's third patron saint.

The matter is complicated further by the fact that he is usually known as Columba, often Colmcille, sometimes Colum and even

Columb. The Donegal native – the 1,500th anniversary of whose birth we are celebrating – also suffers from sometimes being confused with his contemporary St Columbanus (Columbán in Irish).

Confusion aside, Dublin's National Museum of Ireland has now opened a new exhibit on St Columba which hopes to shed light on his life and times but also the important place he has played in the devotional life of Irish Christians for a millenia and a half.

Objects

'Colmcille: Sacred objects of a Saint – 1500 years of devotion' celebrates the 1,500th anniversary of his birth.

Colum was born at Gartan in Tír Chonaill, what is now modern Donegal, and lived throughout the Sixth Century. St Columba established the ecclesiastical site of Kells, Co. Meath, and the hugely influential and prosperous monastery of Iona in western Scotland.

Prominent objects associated with St Columba are the focus of this exhibition at the museum's archaeology section on Dublin's Kildare Street. One of the objects is the Shrine of the *Cathach* – a book shrine dating from the Eleventh Century constructed to contain a late Sixth/ early Seventh Century manuscript known as the *Cathach*, or the 'Battler', believed to have been written by St Columba. It

“I want to encourage anyone interested to come down and have a look at these wonderful pieces of our history”

was the battle standard of the O'Donnells, Columba's kinsmen, and is regarded as the chief relic of the family.

Other prominent artefacts include the Crosier of St Columba, the Shrine of the *Miosach*, and the Bell of St Columba from which it was believed that drinking water from could cure disease. A beautiful embroidery of Columba by Lily Yeats from 1920s is also included to represent the saint's continued legacy.

Launch

Speaking at the launch of the exhibition, keeper of Irish antiquities

at the National Museum of Ireland, Maeve Sikora, said “It brings me great pride to be here and help launch this exhibition today, another addition to the proud history of Ireland's preservation and display of medieval artefacts. These objects on display are both national and international treasures and it's incredible that many of which were made over 1,000 years ago.

“They are important to so many people from so many walks of life. These objects are symbols of power and devotion. Not only do they survive for us to see today, but often the inscriptions on these objects name those who commissioned

the shrine, the keeper who was entrusted with its care, and even the craftsman who made them. Incredibly, we know, for example, that a man named Sitric, made the Shrine of the *Cathach* in the 11th Century.

“I want to encourage anyone interested to come down and have a look at these wonderful pieces of our history,” she said.

Fascinating

Lynn Scarff, Director of the National Museum of Ireland, said: “What I find really fascinating within this exhibition is that it not only tells us about the objects, but it also tells





Columba depicted in the church named in his honour in Derry's Long Tower.



Shrine of the Miosach, box-shaped reliquary composed of plates of copper alloy and silver fixed to a wooden core. The front bears an inscription in Irish as follows: BRIAN MAC BRIAIN I MUIRGIUSSA DO CUMDAIG ME AD MCCCCXXXIII.



Ecclesiastical hand bell, copper alloy.

the remarkable story of how they came to be preserved. Care of these relics was initially entrusted to the hereditary tenants of Church lands, several of whom held the objects for generations until the 19th Century.

“Prominent objects associated with St Columba are the focus of this exhibition at the museum’s archaeology section on Dublin’s Kildare Street”

“Many were acquired from these families by the Royal Irish Academy and were later transferred ultimately to the National Museum of Ireland. I think the story of their care speaks so poignantly to Columba’s legacy in Ireland, even today and I am so proud that the National Museum is a part of the history in preserving these treasures for the next generation,” she said.



Shrine of the Miosach, box-shaped reliquary composed of plates of copper alloy and silver fixed to a wooden core. The front bears an inscription in Irish as follows: BRIAN MAC BRIAIN I MUIRGIUSSA DO CUMDAIG ME AD MCCCCXXXIII.

Remembering a lesser-known Irish saint



We unashamedly celebrate and feel proud about our exceptional Christian heritage, writes Alexander O'Hara

Recent proposals to designate Saint Brigid's Day, February 1st, as a public holiday are to be welcomed. It needs to be made clear however that we are celebrating a remarkable Christian saint, not a pagan goddess.

The romanticism linked to pagan Ireland is borne from a fundamental ignorance of history and a cavalier pick-and-mix engagement with Irish cultural history. It is symptomatic of living in a post-truth culture. It is also a form of idolatry.

While there was undoubtedly a pagan goddess whom the Celtic peoples venerated as Brigid (meaning 'exalted one' in Old Irish), it is equally certain that there was a historical person named Brigid who was a Christian female religious and abbess linked to Kildare around the turn of the sixth century.

Public holiday

St Brigid's Day as a public holiday would provide a wonderful opportunity to honour and celebrate Irish women and in particular the role of women religious in the Church throughout the centuries. In the lead up to the Synod in Ireland this would be one way to recognise the fundamental role of women in the Church since the introduction of Christianity to this island in the fourth and fifth centuries. It would equally also provide a public way to acknowledge the abuse of Irish women by the Church and society throughout the centuries. As a society and as Church we need both to celebrate and to acknowledge the remarkable achievements and shameful episodes in our history. We

need a mature and informed engagement with our Christian heritage.

But St Brigid isn't the only shadowy Irish female saint. The city of Bergen in western Norway recently celebrated the 850th anniversary of their Irish patron saint, Sunniva, whose relics were brought to Bergen in 1170 from a small island further up the Norwegian coast called Selja.

Selja is Norway's Skellig Michael; their holy island. The name means 'blessed island'. According to a Latin source from the 12th Century it's where a group of Irish refugees were martyred in the 10th Century.

“St Brigid's Day as a public holiday would provide a wonderful opportunity to honour and celebrate Irish women”

Sunniva is reputed to have been an Irish queen who fled Ireland with some of her followers in order to avoid an unwanted marriage with a pagan Viking. Their ships sailed northwards until they landed on the west coast of Norway where they settled on the small islands of Selja and Kynn. They took shelter in a cave on Selja when an expeditionary force of Vikings came looking for them and prayed that they would not be taken alive. Their prayers were answered as rocks collapsed upon them crushing them to death.

The first Christian king of Norway, Olav Trygvason (d. 1000), discovered their relics and built a church on the site to honour the saints. A bishopric and a Benedictine monastery were established there until the Bishop of Bergen had Sunniva's relics translated to the new cathedral in Bergen located within the royal palace complex in September 1170. Many of Norway's medieval kings would be crowned and laid to rest in this cathedral near the relics of this Irish queen and her cult continued until the Reformation in Norway in the 1530s. She is still the patron saint of Bergen and Western Norway.

Sunniva's story has surprisingly contemporary relevance as Norwegians have seen in this ancient narrative of a woman fleeing her country issues relating to refugees and migrants,

the #MeToo movement, and Christian persecution in many countries throughout the world where Christians are still being martyred for their faith. 2020 marked the 850th anniversary of the translation of her relics to Bergen and to commemorate this a medieval replica ship sailed from Selja to Bergen carrying a small group of pilgrims with a replica of the shrine. This is now a new sea and land pilgrimage route called the Sunniva Leia which promises to capitalise on the success of the old revitalised pilgrimage route of the Saint Olaf Way from Oslo to Trondheim.

Modern cult

A new book exploring the medieval and modern cult of Sunniva and the historical and religious contexts has just been published in a bi-lingual Norwegian and English format which I co-edited with colleagues from the University of Bergen, Profs Alf Tore Hommedal and Åslaug Ommundsen. The commemorative volume, which is beautifully illustrated, has contributions from leading scholars in Irish, Norwegian, and Icelandic medieval and religious studies that explores the cult of Saint Sunniva from the medieval up to the modern period.

Sunniva is likely Ireland's least known saint and yet her cult continues to play a role in contemporary Norway where like the name Brigid in Ireland it is not uncommon to meet other Sunniva's in West Norway. It is a further reminder (at a time when this is needed) that we should unashamedly celebrate and feel proud about our exceptional Christian heritage and cultural influence in Ireland. Before Ireland Inc., let us not forget it was first of all the island of saints and scholars. That was not a myth.

Dr Alexander O'Hara is the National Director for Catechetics for the Irish Episcopal Conference. He is a Fulbright and Visiting Scholar in the Department for Celtic Languages and Literatures, Harvard University. He is the author of Jonas of Bobbio and the Legacy of Columbanus (Oxford University Press, 2018). St Sunniva: Irish Queen, Norwegian Patron Saint, eds. Alf Tore Hommedal, Åslaug Ommundsen, Alexander O'Hara (Bergen: Alvheim og Eide Akademisk Forlag, 2021) is out now. To order a copy email: alvheim.eide@gmail.com



A Late Gothic sculpture of Saint Sunniva from the Austevoll altarpiece (c. 1520), now in Bergen Museum.

World Report



Edited by Brandon Scott
news@irishcatholic.ie

Bishop sparks backlash over Santa Claus comments

Bishop Antonio Staglianò of the Diocese of Noto in the Italian island region of Sicily left parents dismayed after he told a group of children that Santa Claus did not exist, subsequently sparking a week of backlash from parents and international media.

After Bishop Staglianò's comments on the Christmas character caused controversy on social media, the diocesan spokesman said the bishop did not want "to break the charm of Christmas for little ones, but to help them reflect more deeply".

Interviews

In multiple media interviews given after the comments, the bishop stated that "he did not tell them that Santa Claus does not exist, but we spoke about the need to distinguish what is real from what is not real. So I gave the example of Saint Nicholas of Myra, a saint who brought gifts to the poor, not presents".

Bishop Staglianò said he was trying to make a point about the commercialisa-



Pope Francis visits a Nativity scene in the Vatican's Paul VI hall during an audience. Photo: CNS.

tion of Christmas and the figure of Santa Claus as seen in Coca-Cola commercials, which he argued takes away from the "culture of gift" at the foundation of the real message of Christmas: that "the baby Jesus was born to give himself to all of humanity".

The Diocese of Noto's communications manager wrote in a statement posted to Facebook that, "on behalf

of the bishop, I express my sorrow for this declaration which has generated disappointment in little ones".

"If from the figure of Santa Claus (originating from Bishop St Nicholas) we can draw a lesson – everyone, young and old – it is this: fewer gifts to 'give' and 'consume,' more 'gifts' to share, rediscovering the beauty of feeling that we are 'all brothers,'" he said.

Pope: Avoid 'fake Christmas' of commercialism by reflecting on God's closeness

Pope Francis encouraged Catholics to celebrate Christmas with a focus on Jesus Christ's closeness, not on the consumerist, commercial aspects of the holiday.

"Let's not live a fake Christmas, please, a commercial Christmas," the Pope advised. "Let us allow ourselves to be wrapped up in the closeness of God, this closeness which is compassionate, which is tender; wrapped in

the Christmas atmosphere that art, music, songs, and traditions bring into the heart."

The Pope also urged people to not let Christmas "be polluted by consumerism and indifference". The symbols of Christmas, especially the nativity and Christmas tree, "bring us back to the certainty that fills our hearts with peace, to the joy of the Incarnation", he said.

As Christmas approaches, priests should emphasise that Confession can heal, cardinal says

Sacramental Confession has healing abilities that priests should especially emphasise to help bring God's love and consolation to a world damaged by two years of the coronavirus pandemic. That is the advice for confessors from Cardinal Mauro Piacenza,

who stressed the urgency of their work for humanity.

"In the season of Advent, every confessor is called to look to, and, with supernatural grace, in a certain way to identify with John the Baptist, repeating to the world: 'Behold the Lamb of God,'" said Piacenza, the

Major Penitentiary of the Apostolic Penitentiary.

In a message to confessors for Christmas 2021, the cardinal said the approach of Christmas is a time to "further emphasise those aspects of healing" of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

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Letter from Rome

The problem with Francis and the French archbishop



The Pope's answer on Paris prelate raised more questions than it answered, writes **John L. Allen Jr**

As the wise saying goes, "If you don't want the answer, then don't ask the question." That adage doesn't cover every situation, however, because there are also times you genuinely do want the answer, and still end up wondering why you bothered to ask.

A good case in point came during Pope Francis' latest airborne press conference, in response to the question of why he moved so swiftly to accept the resignation of Archbishop Michel Aupetit of Paris.

It was an obvious question, given that, by now, one could assemble an entire 40-man baseball roster just from bishops whose resignations Francis has refused. (Whether even that team would still be better than my KC Royals is, alas, a conversation for another time.) The line-up would include two-thirds of the episcopal conference in Chile, as well as the current archbishops of Munich, Cologne and Hamburg in Germany.

Moreover, many of those bishops were accused of misconduct or failures related to clerical sexual abuse scandals, which, on the face of it, seem far more serious than the alleged foibles of the 70-year-old Dr Aupetit regarding an 'intimate relationship' with an adult woman. Why Francis acted so swiftly in this case – just a week after Archbishop Aupetit offered to resign, and the same day the Pope set out for a five-day trip to Greece and Cyprus – does, therefore, naturally beckon curiosity.

In response, Francis delivered an answer that ran to 431 words in the original Italian, without, in all honesty, really answering much of anything.

Question

In essence, Francis turned the question around, demanding to know what Dr Aupetit did that was so serious. While acknowledging that the archbishop may have partially violated the sixth commandment (regarding sexual morality), Francis also insisted that "the sins of the flesh aren't the most serious sins" and underlined that we're all sinners, including St Peter, the first Pope.

Francis claimed that Archbishop



Pope Francis answers questions from journalists aboard the papal flight returning from Cyprus and Greece. Photos: CNS.

Aupetit hasn't been convicted by a court of law but rather by the court of public opinion, suggesting he's been targeted by a sort of malicious gossip that has destroyed his good name. The Pontiff said that in such a situation Dr Aupetit could no longer govern, and concluded saying he accepted the resignation "not on the altar of truth, but the altar of hypocrisy."

“As the wise saying goes, ‘If you don't want the answer, then don't ask the question’”

The first problem with that answer is that it seems far better suited to explaining why a Pope wouldn't accept an offered resignation, not why he would. If it's true that Dr Aupetit hasn't done anything especially serious, and that his resignation will serve only the interests of hypocrisy, then why go along with it?

The whole reason the Vatican makes a fetish out of the sovereignty of the papacy, insisting that the Pope is accountable to no earthly power, is precisely so that he'll be able to resist the dictates of popular pressure. Indeed, if you take Francis' words at face value, it almost seems to imply a sort of 'heckler's veto' on a bishop: If a crowd screams loud enough and long enough, they can get a bishop removed regardless of the merits.

Of course, one could interpret the reference to inability to govern to mean that the Pope had no choice, except that it begs the related question of how Francis assesses what constitutes 'ungovernability.'

Is Paris right now any more

impossible to govern than the Diocese of Osorno in Chile was, for instance, when Francis refused to remove Bishop Juan Barros despite an avalanche of criticism for his role in a scandal surrounding that country's most notorious paedophile priest, with the Pope at one point being caught on tape fulminating against "being led around by the nose" by a media stampede?

Refused

What about the Archdiocese of Lyon in France, where, in March 2019, Pope Francis refused to accept the resignation of Cardinal Philippe Barbarin when he faced

accusations of having covered up for a sexually abusive priest? (Francis would accept the resignation a year later, after Dr Barbarin had succeeded in having a conviction for failure to report overturned on appeal.)

Is Paris any more ungovernable now than, say, the Archdiocese of Cologne in Germany, where Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki and two auxiliary bishops offered to resign amid a massive abuse crisis, and where the influential *Der Tagesspiegel* recently demanded Dr Woelki's removal? In that case, Francis confirmed his confidence in the cardinal while granting him

permission for a six-month retreat out of the diocese, and also refused the resignations of the auxiliaries.

Target of criticism

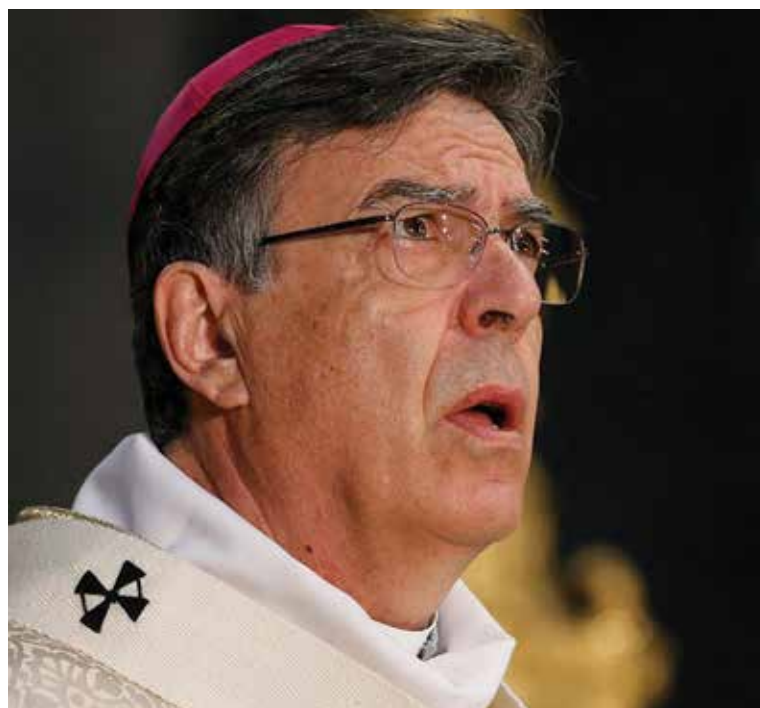
What about the Archdiocese of Hamburg, whose current prelate, Archbishop Stefan Hesse, was also a target of criticism in the Cologne report? Archbishop Hesse too volunteered to step down, but in September Francis refused, saying he wanted the prelate to continue "in a spirit of reconciliation and service to God."

“Francis confirmed his confidence in the cardinal while granting him permission for a six-month retreat out of the diocese”

So, is Paris really more ungovernable than any of these other places?

Given the implausibility that Paris is actually any worse off, most observers assume Francis must know more than he's saying – that perhaps there are other skeletons in Dr Aupetit's closet, or there are administrative reasons why a change of leadership is needed immediately, or the Pope has lost confidence in the Paris archbishop for other reasons.

Whatever the case, Francis's answer didn't seem to provide much additional clarity. Among other things, the situation illustrates why it's too bad that papal press conferences don't really invite follow-up questions – because if any papal answer in recent memory ever seemed to invite one, this was arguably it.



Archbishop Michel Aupetit.

Second chances: Vatican Christmas stamps feature work of homeless artist

Junno Arocho Esteves

Adam Piekarski, a homeless man from Łódź, Poland, never imagined that the sketches he would draw in his free time while waiting for the public showers near Bernini's Colonnade would lead to the opportunity of a lifetime.

In November, the Vatican Philatelic and Numismatic Office announced that its 2021 set of commemorative Christmas stamps would feature images of the Magi and the Holy Family painted by Mr Piekarski.

"Art is my passion even though I never studied it," Mr Piekarski told Catholic News Service from a quaint studio just across the street from St Peter's Square.

"He went to a technical school in Poland and studied gardening in Łódź," added Redemptorist Fr Leszek Pys, known by many as Fr Ruben, a fellow Pole who was among the first to realise Mr Piekarski's talent.

Mr Piekarski left Poland six years ago and, like many migrants, made his way to Rome seeking a better life.

The Eternal City, he explained, is a place that remains in the heart of many Polish people as a source of inspiration for some of Poland's greatest artistic icons, such as Henryk Sienkiewicz, author of *Quo Vadis*, and Henryk Siemiradzki, whose paintings often depicted life in ancient Rome.

Arrival

However, upon his arrival, the harsh reality of finding work, coupled with a fondness for Italian wine, led Mr Piekarski down the dark path of alcoholism that he continues to fight each day.

With Fr Ruben serving as translator, Mr Piekarski told CNS that his life began to change after meeting the



Adam Piekarski stands in front of his paintings in his studio at Palazzo Migliori, the Vatican's homeless shelter. Photo: CNS

Polish priest while waiting in line for the public showers for the poor at the Vatican.

Fr Ruben told CNS that, at the time, he was trying to figure out a low-cost option for a painting of St Clement Mary Hofbauer, co-founder of the Redemptorist congregation, to commemorate the 200th anniversary of his death.

“Mr Piekarski left Poland six years ago and, like many migrants, made his way to Rome seeking a better life”

Explaining his dilemma to Pallottine Sr Anna, a nun who volunteers helping the poor at the public showers, he was introduced to Mr Piekarski, who would often spend his

time sketching while waiting for his turn at the showers.

Fr Ruben then provided Mr Piekarski with paints, brushes and found a workspace in the crypt of the Church of Santa Maria in Monterone, where the burgeoning artist honed his artistic abilities.

His work drew the attention of Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, papal almoner, who then introduced Mr Piekarski to Fr Francesco Mazzitelli, then-deputy director of the Vatican Philatelic and Numismatic Office.

Fr Ruben told CNS that when asked by Fr Mazzitelli to design the 2021 Christmas stamps, Mr Piekarski's answer was an emphatic "no." However, the Italian priest's persistence finally moved the Polish artist to do it.

Friends

For the painting of the three Magi, Mr Piekarski based their likeness on two friends who are also homeless; the third, he explained, was an original image meant to represent all homeless men and women.

Fr Mazzitelli, who was appointed Nov. 27 as an official in the Office of the Papal Almoner, told CNS that Mr Piekarski's story was an example of Pope Francis' call to "nurture tomorrow's hope by healing today's pain."

"What has happened to Adam is a sign for everyone, because each one of us knows someone who has hidden gifts and talents," Fr Mazzitelli said. "The Pope saying that we must nurture hope means he has given us a mission - to the Church and to each one of us



An image of the Holy Family on one of the Vatican's 2021 Christmas stamps by Mr Piekarski. Photo: Vatican Philatelic and Numismatic Office.

- that we must build up hope in others."

Installing showers

Fr Ruben noted that installing showers for the homeless at the Vatican was more than just an act of charity for the poor during the 2015 jubilee 'Year of Mercy', but a fundamental gesture that gave homeless men and women dignity.

"You can't give back someone's dignity by giving them a sandwich or a euro nor even by asking them their name. That is more of a philanthropic gesture that makes us feel good about ourselves," the Polish priest said.

"But for that person, that sandwich, that euro doesn't change anything," he added. "But allowing them to clean themselves means giving

them back their dignity."

Mr Piekarski credits the public showers for not only being the starting point of his journey as an artist, but the place where he decided to confront his battle against alcoholism.

“What has happened to Adam is a sign for everyone, because each one of us knows someone who has hidden gifts and talents”

"For someone who is suffering from alcoholism or who is slightly drunk," Fr Ruben recalled Piekarski telling him, "it is embarrassing to

show up to clean themselves. But going there is the first step in getting out of alcoholism because, once they are at the showers, they want to change their lives."

Small studio

While he continues to paint from a small studio at Palazzo Migliori, the Vatican's homeless shelter, Mr Piekarski now works as an evening security guard at a property owned by the Knights of Malta, who became acquainted with him after he completed a portrait of the late Fra' Giacomo dalla Torre, the grand knight of the order who died in 2020.

"Life is a mystery and God wanted it this way," Mr Piekarski told CNS. "What has happened is a dream and I still can't believe it. God has a great sense of humour."



An image of the Magi is featured on one of the Vatican's 2021 Christmas stamps painted by Adam Piekarski. Photo: Vatican Philatelic and Numismatic Office

Letters

Letter of the week

God and prayer needed to end Covid scourge

Dear Editor, We have a new strain of Covid, with more mutations, and possibly more powerful than our vaccinations. This is frightening, and people are very worried and scared.

People are divided, some are vaccinated, others have chosen not to be. Older people, in many cases, are staying at home, and some have never emerged since Covid first arrived. Certain individuals are ignoring all precautions and living selfish lives.

Governments have been doing their best, but it appears that errors have been made and some precautions too slowly enforced.

Life in Ireland has changed dramatically. The Irish were once a God-fearing people. Many are living lives which ignore the commandments and legislation has been introduced contrary to Christian teaching.

I believe that only God and prayer can, and will, end this scourge. We all need to pray and make reparation. If

possible, attend Mass and adorations. But if not, at least pray the powerful rosary. If you know no prayers, talk to God in your own words.

Fear is the opposite to trust. Place your trust in Jesus and you will get strength and protection. We are told that "we are all in this together", so let us be together in prayer and we will get rid of this pestilence.

*Yours etc.,
Nuala Doran
Raheen, Co. Limerick*

A longer time to be immersed in the incarnation

Dear Editor, The Christmas liturgy seems to be very much concertinaed this year. Is this due to the way the calendar falls?

The secular and commercial world is always in a hurry to close down Christmas celebrations come January 1 and no wonder – they have been going at it since October.

Traditionally, the Church has given us a longer time in which to immerse ourselves in the mystery and manifestation of the incarnation.

This time round, the Christmas season ends January 9.

*Yours etc.,
Judith Leonard
Raheny, Dublin*



Webcam Masses a God-sent response to pandemic

Dear Editor, Instead of seeing the popularity of daily webcam Masses as a threat to Sunday Mass attendance, it could be seen as a God-sent response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Though some Irish parishes have had them for some time, all wouldn't but for the Government over-reaction to coronavirus.

It could be argued that Sunday attendance would gain greatly from making the most of daily webcam Masses. If some Irish Masses are discontinued or are not as

satisfactory an experience as they could be, current attendees will switch to other Irish Masses and to ones available from elsewhere. Those attendees would also have a poor opinion of the related celebrants.

The value of daily webcam Masses is not only for people who are confined to their homes by fragilities. It is also a boon for people for whom daily Mass has for too long been impossible due to inclement weather, distances from churches,

and morning travelling to work or study. The discovery of immense scope for home-based remote working and study has changed things utterly.

Liturgies such as the half-hour 07.30 Donnybrook Mass that Gay Byrne and other RTÉ workers used to attend before going to work can now be attended by workers and students before they breakfast at home, or by those whose workplace or school is a short distance away. Also: a half-hour 10.00 Mass can now

be attended as a 'break' after doing early-morning domestic tasks (including getting children into creches or schools) and other workplace tasks.

In short, if daily webcam Masses (and related spiritual Holy Communion reception) are valued for what they can do for webcam attendees, the outcome will eventually – maybe soon – be transformative.

*Yours etc.,
Joe Foyle,
Ranelagh, Dublin 6*

Catholics are refusing to collude in apartheid of women

Dear Editor, In our ongoing synodal encounters and dialogue, we must be aware of the important difference between core faith and the multitude of curial canon laws, outdated patriarchal opinions and limited clerical teachings. Faithful Catholics gladly give assent to the core religious good news of Jesus Christ.

Beyond that core faith, there are many different Catholic points of view about the man made and deficient clerical doctrines on mundane matters regarding structures, governance, ethics, sexuality and ministry etc. All of those institutional constructs by the patriarchal control group have evolved and changed over the centuries. Now, at a time of crisis for the Catholic Church, people who are sickened by all the patriarchal abuse and domination, demand substantial reform, radical renewal and much increased cooperation between all the Christian churches plus other religions.

Irish Catholicism of the 1930s is long gone and most Irish Catholics do not want a restoration of that era. Irish Catholics are proud democrats, dislike dictators and are deeply uncomfortable with patriarchal monarchy. They treasure knowledge, honesty, freedom and the dignity of their vote. They want active participation, transparent processes and full power sharing rather than the insulting gruel of consultation. The awful reports of the past decades have shamed us for our sheepish silence and frightened collaboration in clerical control, abuse and maltreatment of women. Many Catholics refuse to collude any further in homophobia and apartheid for women.

I think the synodal process could be a great blessing if not smothered by clerical roadblocks and pious syrup. There are talented people, excellent ministries and rich resources in every parish. They know that massive reform and reunion of the Christian Church is needed. Catholic parents know that it is not possible to evangelise today in the language of sexism, misogyny, homophobia or patriarchal monarchy. I pray that the Holy Spirit guide us all together in the synodal process in order to enhance the Kingdom/Queendom of God.

*Yours etc.,
Joe Mulvaney,
Dundrum, Dublin 16*

Designation of Knock as Marian shrine is highly important

Dear Editor, The pandemic has curtailed the normal public response to important occasions but there is one event, low-keyed in the secular press, yet of high importance and that is the designation by the Vatican of Knock as an international Eucharistic and Marian Shrine.

It has been suggested that the apparition at Knock, coming 20 years after the events at Lourdes, which would have been known by the Catholic world, and thus

enabled the Church, by the presence of Our Lady, to establish Knock as a Marian Shrine.

The divine manifestations at the gable end of the parish church followed that mornings' rite at the opposite side, and the attendance at the parish Mass would have represented those visionaries later that day.

The question often arose why there was no message at Knock, having the other major shrines of Lourdes and Fatima in mind.

The designation by the Vatican has clarified the meaning of the apparition and the message of Knock, to quote a passage from a Vatican II documents is "the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is the centre and culmination of the whole life of the Christian community".

*Yours etc.,
Patrick Fleming
Glasnevin, Dublin 9*

facebook community

Each week we publish a selection of comments from *The Irish Catholic* Facebook page

People leaving their Churches

Not enough is being done to counteract the promotion of atheism on TV and on social media. Atheists can give what are seemingly plausible reasons for the non-existence of God. The Church needs to address the basics. Why do we believe in God? Why is the Bible genuine and not just some book thrown together to satisfy the beliefs of the early Church? The young people need answers to questions such as how does creation and evolution coexist. Was there ever a great flood? Etc. – **Gerry Donnelly**

What do you think? Join in the conversation on *The Irish Catholic* Facebook page

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.

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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.

Highlights of an unusual year in films



Frances McDormand stars in a scene from the movie *Nomadland*. Photo: Searchlight Pictures

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” For the first half of the year, Covid-19 had us under house arrest. Starved of cinemas we found sustenance in mini-series, box-sets, the occasional gem from streaming platforms.

The Oscar ceremonies went ahead in February in the kind of funereal atmosphere Zoom webinars (what a horrible word) invited.

Anthony Hopkins was asleep when it was announced he'd won the Oscar for *The Father*. That's how little he expected the news. Chadwick Boseman was the unbackable favourite for it. The shock was palpable on everyone's face.

Women

Women dominated the early part of the year. *Quant* immortalised the work of Mary Quant. *Cruella* was a comedy based on the legendary Cruella de Vil of *101 Dalmations*. A live action prequel to that film, Emma Stone played a blinder as the villainous fashion guru.

Nomadland had Frances McDormand as a feisty woman setting out on the road to explore new pastures after the economic collapse of her town. “I'm not homeless,” she explained, “I'm houseless.” The role won her an Oscar, her fourth. Soon she'll have no room on her sideboard for them.

Another Round was a Danish comedy-drama. Mads Mikkelsen played a teacher who'd just hit 40. Himself and some friends increased their intake of alcohol to see how it might affect their relationships - and jobs. The results weren't quite what one might have expected.

Cinemas opened when



Film Review 2020
Aubrey Malone

the good weather arrived. We were masked and socially-distanced. All the protocols were observed. We all behaved ourselves but somehow it felt flat. An entertainment medium should never be that.

The roll-out of the vaccines went on apace. Incidences of infections fluctuated. At times it felt like we were in a race against time with the variants hovering.

Dark Horse was released in June. It was the last film I'd seen before the lockdown. As I left the cinema listening to *Delilah* - the song that accompanied the closing credits - little did I know that it would be

over a year until I stepped into another one. Sixteen months elapsed between the time I wrote my review and when the film became viewable nationally. It must have had cobwebs on it.

“The Oscar ceremonies went ahead in February in the kind of funereal atmosphere Zoom webinars invited”

The death of Ned Beatty was announced later that month. It saddened me. I'd interviewed him when he was in Ireland to play Josef Locke in *Hear My Song*. I found him to be a total gentleman. He was also a very under-rated actor.

Died

Many other stars died during the year - Charles Grodin, Jane Powell, Olympia Dukakis, Christopher Plummer, Cloris Leachman. And Tanya Rob-

erts. Her death was bizarrely announced a day before she actually died.

Of course the most tragic death of all was that of Halyna Hutchins after Alec Baldwin allegedly fired a 'hot' prop gun at her. It was an appalling incident but not the first of its kind. Bruce Lee's son Brandon died the same way in 1993. There now needs to be a cull on any kind of live ammunition anywhere near a film set. Period.

The musical world was well-served during the year with films like *In the Heights*, *Sound of Metal*, *Summer of Soul*, *West Side Story*, *Phil Lynott: Songs for While I'm Away* and *Respect*, a film about the life of Aretha Franklin. The less said about Will Ferrell's *Eurovision Song Contest* the better.

Marco Pontecorvo's *Fatima* arrived a year later than expected. It reminded me of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St Matthew* in its minimalism. There was no

special pleading in it and it was all the more effective for that.

Documentary

There were two documentaries on the ill-fated Sophie Toscan Du Plantier, *Murder at the Cottage* and *Sophie: A Murder in West Cork*. The 25th anniversary of her killing sparked renewed interest in this heart-breaking story. With all the weird theories surrounding it, it becomes more 'GUBU' (to use Charlie Haughey's term) by the year.

Irish cinema was well served with offerings like *Arracht* and *Here Are the Young Men*. Jackie Collins was remembered in the documentary *Lady Boss*, as was Rita Moreno in *Just a Girl Who Decided to Go For it*. Moreno is to be commended for turning down a life playing Latin Spitfire roles after Hollywood threatened to straitjacket her after her Oscar win for *West Side Story*.

There were zany comedies like *Barb and Star Go To Vista Del Mar*. Arthurian sagas like

The Green Knight. Superhero films by the score.

We had sequels - *A Quiet Place Part II*, *The Addams Family 2* and *Fast & Furious 9*. Or was it 19? There were prequels (*The Many Saints of Newark*), spin-offs (*Black Widow*), romances (*The Last Letter from Your Lover*, *Endings, Beginnings*), political satires (*Irresistible*), crazy rock operas (*Annette*), embarrassing Oirish blarney-fests (*Wild Mountain Thyme*).

“Cinemas opened when the good weather arrived. We were masked and socially-distanced. All the protocols were observed”

There were interesting class dramas (*The Nest*), Cold War thrillers (*The Courier*), melancholic indulgences (*Nowhere Special*), airline thrillers (*7500*), road rage ones (*Unhinged*), serial killer films (*The Little Things*), a very strange film about Marcel Marceau (*Resistance*) and a Hollywood biopic (*Mank*) about its favourite subject - itself.

M Night Shyamalan made a sort of comeback with *Old*. There was a slew of more conventional horror films - *Candyman*, *Psycho Goreman*, *The Night House*, *Demonic*, *Censor*, *Boys from County Hell*. And the inevitable set of animated features (*Snake Eyes: GI Joe Origins*, *The Snow Queen: Mirrorlands*, *The Croods 2*).

Matt Damon, Dalkey's newly adopted son, appeared in *The Last Duel*. Unfortunately it was a period piece so there was no sighting of the famous Supervalu bag. It didn't turn up in *Stillwater* either. Groan.

Daniel Craig retired from the 007 franchise with *No Time to Die*. No tears were shed by yours truly. I never thought he held a candle to Sean Connery.

So why, I hear you ask, did his films succeed so well? The answer is a five letter word beginning with 'm' and ending in 'y.'



Jorge Lamelas, Alejandra Howard and Stephanie Gil star in a scene from the movie *Fatima*. Photo: Claudio Iannone



Dev Patel stars in a scene from the film *The Green Knight*. Photo: A24 Films

King Herod and the wise men

– a Christmas challenge



The Christmas story is surely one of the greatest stories ever told. It chronicles a birth from which the world records time as before or after. Moreover, it is written in a way that has inflamed the romantic imagination for 2,000 years. This hasn't always been for the good. Beyond spawning every kind of legend imaginable, the story of Christmas has, in the Christian imagination, too often taken on a centrality not accorded to it in the Gospels themselves. This is not surprising, given its richness.

“While following the star, they meet King Herod who, upon learning that a new king has supposedly been born, has his own evil interest in matter”

Inside its great narrative there are multiple mini-narratives, each of which comes laden with its own archetypal symbols. One of these mini-narratives, rich in archetypal imagery, is the story King Herod and the wise men.

We see this in the Gospel of Matthew when he tells us how various people reacted to the announcement of Jesus' birth. Matthew sets up a powerful archetypal contrast, blessing and curse, between the reaction of the wise men, who bring their gifts



Fr Rolheiser

www.ronrolheiser.com

and place them at the feet of the new king, and King Herod, who tries to kill him.

We are all familiar with this story since it has been much celebrated in song, icon, and legend. Jesus is born inside of a religious tradition, Judaism, and his birth is announced to that faith-community in a manner that befits religion, namely, by the angels, by supernatural revelation. But those outside of that faith-tradition need another way to get to know of his birth, and so his birth is announced to them through nature, astrology, through the stars. The wise men see a special star appear in the sky and begin to follow it, not knowing exactly to where or to what it will lead.

Star

While following the star, they meet King Herod who, upon learning that a new king has supposedly been born, has his own evil interest in

matter. He asks the wise men to find the child and bring him back information so that he, too, can go and worship the newborn. We know the rest of story:

“We are all familiar with this story since it has been much celebrated in song”

The wise men follow the star, find the new king, and, upon seeing him, place their gifts at his feet. What happens to them afterwards? We have all kinds of apocryphal stories about their journey back home, but these, while interesting, are not helpful. We do not know what happened to them afterwards and that is exactly the point. Their slipping away into anonymity is a crucial part of their gift. The idea is that they now disappear because they can now disappear. They have

placed their gifts at the feet of the young king and can now leave everything safely in his hands. His star has eclipsed theirs. Far from fighting for their former place, they now happily cede it to him. Like old Simeon, they can happily exit the stage singing: Now, Lord, you can dismiss your servants! We can die! We're in safe hands!

Contrary

And Herod, how much to the contrary! The news that a new king has been born threatens him at his core since he is himself a king. The glory and light that will now shine upon the new king will no longer shine on him. So what is his reaction? Far from laying his resources at the feet of the new king, he sets out to kill him. Moreover, to ensure that his murderers find him, he kills all the male babies in the entire area. An entire book on anthropology might be written about this last line. Fish are not the only species that eats its young! But the real point is the contrast between the wise men and Herod: The former see new life as promise and they bless it; the latter sees new life as threat and he curses it.

This is a rich story with a powerful challenge: What is my

own reaction to new life, especially to life that threatens me, that will take away some of my own popularity, sunshine, and adulation? Can I, like the wise men, lay my gifts at the feet of the young and move towards anonymity and eventual death, content that the world is in good hands, even though those hands are not my hands? Or, like Herod, will I feel that life as a threat and I try somehow to kill it, lest its star somehow diminish my own?

“And Herod, how much to the contrary! The news that a new king has been born threatens him at his core since he is himself a king”

To bless another person is to give away some of one's own life so that the other might be more resourced for his or her journey. Good parents do that for their children. Good teachers do that for their students, good mentors do that for their protégés, good pastors do that for their parishioners, good politicians do that for their countries, and good elders do that for the young. They give away some of their own lives to resource the other. The wise men did that for Jesus.

How do we react when a young star's rising begins to eclipse our own light?

“The wise men follow the star, find the new king, and, upon seeing him, place their gifts at his feet”

Some dramatic highpoints, but media bias continues unashamedly

I had hoped that I wouldn't be writing about Covid-19 again at the end of 2021, but it has dominated the media for the year. But should it be so?

One night in early December I was listening to the BBC Radio 4 news headlines and the only mention of coronavirus was when they reported the new Irish restrictions. Before the discovery of Omicron Irish media were giving Covid-19 much more attention than their UK counterparts – for better or for worse. Were they whipping up the fear or just helping us to be more aware?

We got another year of celebrity epidemiologists, frequent demonisation of the unvaccinated, and what felt like the imposition of the preoccupations and perhaps even neuroses of some media presenters. But also we were gifted with the continuation of the weekday Mass on the RTÉ News Channel which has been of huge benefit to the household. I thought the churches got a raw deal with the restrictions in the first half of the year. Archbishop Eamon Martin, interviewed on *The News at One* (RTÉ Radio One) in early July, said the way the previous week's message about restrictions was announced was "grossly disrespectful" and "almost cavalier".

Fictional drama

On the fictional drama front there have been some noteworthy offerings. One of my favourites was the series *Time* – on BBC One earlier in the year and on RTÉ One in December. Sean Bean starred as a teacher imprisoned for causing a death through drunken driving. I don't normally like prison dramas but this one avoided the clichés, and was so full of humanity. Siobhán Finneran played a sympathetic religious sister, a chaplain in the prison, with Stephen Graham as a conflicted prison officer. Mr Graham was also excellent in *Help* (Channel 4), an emotionally gruelling exploration of the early days of Covid-19 in a UK nursing home. The multi-talented Jodie Comer was even better as a dedicated care home assistant under pressure. The *Salisbury Poisonings* (BBC and RTÉ) told a true story very well, with empathy for the real people portrayed.

Unforgotten was back on ITV for a powerful fourth season with a pleasantly convoluted crime story, some



TV & Radio Review 2021
Brendan O'Regan

'woke' elements and quite a performance from Nicola Walker. *Smother* was one of the better Irish dramas with family conflicts around Lahinch. The recent series *Kin* (RTÉ One) was violent and crude, while I found *Hidden Assets* (RTÉ One) underwhelming. *Showtrial* (BBC One) impressed – an adult legal drama with a range of off-the-ball parents coping with errant offspring. *Mare of Easttown* (Sky Atlantic) was gritty and engaging, with some characters for whom their religious faith was important, but the language was unnecessarily foul. *Midnight Mass* (Netflix) started well with strange goings on and a charismatic priest in a US parish, but ultimately it went way over the top – I'm still haunted by that choir of the undead! The importance of religion was also there in *The Pact* (BBC One) a crime drama where abortion figured. Abortion was often a strand in the plots of many dramas – I noticed the predominant attitude seemed to be that women had to have the choice, but that the best choice was to keep the baby.

Bias

Meanwhile the media bias on that issue continues unashamedly and RTÉ is a particular offender. Earlier this year we had the documentary *The Eighth*, a celebration of the repeal of our protective and pro-life constitutional amendment, and recently the drama *Three Families*, which had a few sops to the pro-life perspective (e.g. they did show the huge pro-life march at Stormont), was essentially a drama with pro-choice and pro-abortion rhetoric stuffed into the often awkward script. I could find no sign of any dramas or films with

a predominantly pro-life vision, no *Unplanned*, no *Gosnell*, no *Bella*. I had to go to YouTube, for *Ireland's Fall*, *The Abortion Deception*, a short documentary by Tim Jackson on the loss of the Eighth Amendment. Current affairs programmes were worse – the pro-life perspective has effectively been marginalised and written out of public debate almost entirely. Noteworthy as well is the fact that RTÉ has given wide coverage to the *Dying with Dignity Bill*, but none that I can find to the independent TDs' *Foetal Pain Relief Bill*.

“In the media I fear the days of nuance and neutrality are numbered, but maybe in 2022 we'll shake off the shackles of Covid-19”

Of the regular shows *The Leap of Faith* (RTÉ Radio One) with Michael Comyn kept a high standard of interest and it's disappointing that RTÉ brought the show back for the Autumn season only at the end of November. His interview, early in the year, with then Archbishop-elect of Dublin Dermot Farrell was timely, as was the interview with Vincent Doyle who supports the children of priests, while remaining positive towards the Catholic Faith. I remember also Fr Bryan Shortall OFM Cap. expressing delight at the return of parishioners after lockdown. *Sunday Sequence* (BBC Radio Ulster) always provided interesting listening – one item that impressed was Audrey Carville's interview with astronomer Karin Öberg of Harvard, who was enthusiastic about science and faith. There was also an episode back in August when presenter Mark Davenport spoke to some young people who were very enthusiastic about their faith.

On *Vaticano* (EWTN) Colm Flynn bagged an interview with Cardinal George Pell



Midnight Mass started strong but went downhill. Photo: CNS.

early in the year. Later there was an enjoyable item on Renaissance artist Raphael. *The Big Questions* (BBC One) returned in Spring with a socially distanced audience and debates featured a wide variety of views. I remember one excellent discussion of the role of social media around the time of President Joe Biden's inauguration. *Sunday Morning Live* (BBC One) returned in June and has been on intermittently since then, with a variety of religious and ethics related stories – there was a reasonably balanced discussion in early September about the attitudes of Christian churches to same sex marriage. *Sunday* (BBC Radio 4) is always worth a listen – one interview I liked was that with Harry Connick Jr who spoke about making an album of faith songs – *Alone with My Faith* – during lockdown.

Human stories

Nationwide (RTÉ One) continued to provide positive human stories – e.g. looking at the Jewish heritage in Cork early in the season, a special on St Patrick in March and a repeat of a programme about the late Sr Ethel Normoyle who worked among the poor of South Africa. *All Walks of*

Life with Mary McAleese was worth a look, but it depended on who the former president was walking with. I enjoyed her chat with athlete Ciara Mageean, who was positive towards religion but with a tendency towards the a la carte approach. *The Meaning of Life* returned in the autumn for a short series and I really liked Joe Duffy's interview with Sr Colette of the Poor Clares in Galway.

Informative

On Radio Maria in August and September I liked *Understanding Icons* with Aoife Smith – very informative. On Spirit Radio *Mornings with Donal* is the go-to show for religious and family orientated matters – in September I remember a thoughtful contribution from Ben Conroy on contrasting approaches to Christianity in Ireland.

Songs of Praise (BBC One) is the old reliable par excellence. Apart from the music (much of it filmed in packed churches pre-coronavirus – oh the nostalgia!) I remember an absorbing interview with comedian Frank Skinner about his Catholic faith and his failed attempts to stay atheistic.

Apart from these regular shows there were some

excellent stand-alone documentaries. Nick Hamer's film *Brotherhood – The Inner Life of Monks* (BBC Four) was one of the best – a moving, intimate and thoroughly human insight into monastery life. Just as impressive was *75 Years in Japan* (RTÉ One), James Creedon's lively and touching documentary about the 100 year old Sr Paschal (Jennie O'Sullivan) who had ministered in Japan for all those years. *Poverty, Chastity and (Dis)obedience* (RTÉ One) was a fine documentary about the extraordinary work of Irish missionaries in South Africa. *Scotland's Sacred Islands with Ben Fogle* (BBC One) was a relaxed programme about landscape and faith in the Hebrides. More recently *With God on Our Side* (RTÉ and BBC), with Mary McAleese, gave us an absorbing and very personal reflection on 'The Troubles'.

On the media landscape a new TV channel *GB News* launched in June but was dogged initially by controversies and technical issues. It is a welcoming home for conservative views but there is too much opinion and not enough news. It can be brash and self-congratulatory, but they do give woke and cancel culture a regular thrashing.

In the media I fear the days of nuance and neutrality are numbered, but maybe in 2022 we'll shake off the shackles of Covid-19 and both enjoy and support the good programmes.

“We got another year of celebrity epidemiologists, frequent demonisation of the unvaccinated, and what felt like the imposition of the preoccupations and perhaps even neuroses of some media presenters”

BookReviews

Peter Costello



A CHOICE OF CHRISTMAS BOOKS

Selected by the Books Editor

The December and January holiday season is the most important sales period of the year for many publishers and bookshops. The tables in the books-sellers are piled with books of all kinds, many on topics that would get better attention at another time of the year, such as March and April or late September-October. One of the 'big sellers' of this season is said to be Gary Murphy's *Haughey* (from Gill Books, which will be reviewed here soon). But do you want your Christmas gatherings to be dominated by political talk and arguments, often bitter?

No, 'peace and goodwill to all men'. Here are some books perhaps more in keeping with the season. They are arranged in a somewhat random order.

* * *

Blank Pages

by Bernard MacLaverty
(Jonathan Cape, €16.99)

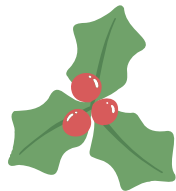
Not to be missed, a real stand-out, the work of a real writer at the full tide of his maturity - his first for an unbelievable 15 years - very much in the great tradition of the Irish short story, going back to George Moore's *The Untilled Field*, Joyce's *Dubliners* and O'Flaherty's *Spring Sowing*, from an Ulsterman who now lives in Scotland (exile being the fate of so many who put pen to paper in Ireland). A vital book, coming from the heart of the Irish literary tradition.

In Fact: An Optimists Guide to Ireland at 100

Mark Henry
(Gill Books €24.00)

"But in fact..." Ah yes, how often do those who see things from

an evolving historical point of view use those three little words in daily conversation. Mark Henry reminds, or I suspect *tells*, today's readers just what has been achieved by the Irish State in its hundred years of existence. We are one of the wealthiest in Europe, which means in effect, in the world. Things that are wrong receive attention and efforts are made to remedy them. This Christmas, a cheering tonic of a book.



The Dublin Railway Murder

by Thomas Morris
(Harvill Secker, €15.99)

Based on trial records, other official papers, and on massive newspaper coverage, the murder of a railway official Mr Little by a railway worker named Mr Spollin, was both sensational and instructive, and full of insights into Victorian police work in Ireland. A great read altogether, and a fine example of what a real historian can achieve in revealing the hidden depths of society. Skip a fashionable thriller this holiday. This is the real thing.

The Coastal Atlas of Ireland

by Robert Devoy and others
(Cork University Press, €59.00)

The latest addition to CUP's large-scale reference book, this may seem an expensive item but the costly book often becomes the treasured tome. And this one has so much and so varied information that it cannot but provide

reading and inspiration for years to come. To know more about our coastline is the beginning of understanding of the seas around and the full submarine spread of 'the real Ireland'.

Haunted Waters

by Daire Whelan
(Hachette Books Ireland, €18.99)

Fishing is one of the most popular recreations in Ireland, but it never seems to attract much attention from the media (which is perhaps a good thing as it is not a hobby for crowds). The great Izaak Walton (of *Compleat Angler* fame) claimed "God never made a more calm, quiet, innocent recreation than angling". Fishermen of all kinds will know the introspective pleasures of being out in the open along rivers streams and lakes in summer time, away from the press and anxiety of the city. This book recounts a year of fly-fishing, but arises from a hoard of rich experiences.

In Kiltumper: A Year in an Irish Garden

Niall Williams & Christine Breen
(Bloomsbury, €22.99)

Thirty-four years ago the authors of this book moved from New York to Co. Clare and created their garden, and what was for them an ideal way of living. Today with illness in the family, and their beloved garden threatened by the advent of a wind farm, they have recorded one passing year in their garden to preserve a little of what they created and enjoyed and have wanted to share. A delightful, but shadowed book; and not just for gardeners.

Living Planet: The Web of Life on Earth

by David Attenborough



Pilgrims look at one of the Raphael rooms during the reopening of the Vatican Museums after weeks of closure, at the Vatican last year due to the pandemic. Fr Michael Collins' book *Raphael's World* sheds new light on the Renaissance Master. Photo: CNS.

(William Collins, €17.99)

The great David Attenborough provides an epitome of the insights that he has been bringing to us since the 1950s. I have been re-reading the series of books from that distant period, and realising with a shock just how great have been the changes around the world since 1945. World War II - now seen from the naturalist's point of view - now seems to have been a matter of winning a battle, but in the end losing the war. Sir David is (like so many others) an optimist. In these coronavirus-ridden days and nights he will give everyone courage to persist.

Champion: A Memoir
by Pat Smullen with Donn McClean
(Gill Books, €19.99)

Leap of Faith
by Frankie Dettori

(Harper Collins, €16.99)

The shops are filled with the usual slew of football, GAA, rugby, and tennis books. These two titles stand out though as more human and more courageous stories of personal and mental courage. And, of course, for Irish readers the horses add an element of instant appeal.

Creation: Art Since the Beginning

by John Paul Stonard
(Bloomsbury Circus, €34.99)

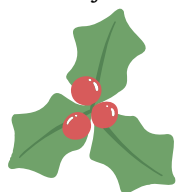
Every home should have a book of this kind somewhere on its shelves, if only to remind the family that art is far, far more than a matter of record-making prices being paid in place like Paris, Tokyo, Berne and Palm Beach, paid by self-indulging millionaires to lock away often unseen in vaults as investments. As the horizon for the appearance of

“The tables in the books-sellers are piled with books of all kinds, many on topics that would get better attention at another time of the year”

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.



human-made art retreats further and further into prehistory (the earliest examples now known are found in Indonesia not Europe), we learn more and more about the creative instinct of humanity. But then all creations reflect in some way the mind of an ultimate creator, and the initial creation in the eyes of many.



Raphael's World
by Michael Collins
(Messenger Publications,
€19.95)

From the very beginning humanist art has been driven by religious, spiritual and philosophical intentions. Art is very life-enhanc-

ing. In some ways the Renaissance was the apogee of religious art in Europe, and Raphael is a prime exponent. So understanding a little about his work is to have insight into important aspects of European culture and civilisation. Fr Collins makes a very great artist accessible in his well-illustrated book.

The Library: A Fragile History
Arthur der Weduwen & Andrew Pettigree
(Profile Books, €29.99)

Books are as the authors rightly observe, fragile things, easily destroyed. Religious, political, philosophical prejudices, all these have led to destruction. There is a celebration of the preservation of books across the ages. The beginnings of modern explorations of the scriptures began with the recovery from the ruins of the library at Nineveh of the baked

clay tablets, a sort of mini-brick on which were inscribed the earliest version of Creation and the Flood. That has always been the purpose of libraries to store materials from which a truer vision of the past can be obtained. A truly fascinating book.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries: A New History
by James G. Clarke
(Yale University Press, €35.00)

"The first account of the dissolution of the monasteries for 50 years - exploring its profound impact on the people of Tudor England", according to the author, should be widely read but one doubts whether it will shift the popular ideas of the tyrannical Henry VIII.

Much interest focuses on the effects on the social life and charities of these islands through the privatisation of monastic lands. Some buildings were converted

into the mansions of the new landed gentry, others lingered on in dwindling down condition as buildings for parish use.

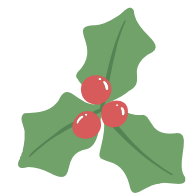
But what was really shocking was the wholesale destruction of libraries and the books they contained, as recorded by John Leland, the king's antiquary, who travelled the country collecting the data. The crime of the Dissolution, robbery on a grand scale, lies at the foot of the Tudor state. These events were a crime against European culture and should be seen and described as such.

James Clark is Professor of History at the University of Exeter, and an important historian of the period. This major book will be essential reading for all students of these dark passages in the history of England and their consequences across these islands. (A full review will appear here shortly.)

Great Cities: The stories

behind the world's most fascinating places
(Dorling Kindersley, €30.50)

Another of this publisher's popular presentations of history aimed at young adults and families, which recounts humanity's adventures and misadventures as an urban creature, but in the manner of 'fun facts from history'. The other week it was claimed that in a generation or two Africa would be the most urbanised continent in the world. Seeing how colonial Kinshasa has developed in the last few decades we are not surprised. These cities will be built, however, with the unshared wealth from gold, diamonds, cobalt, oil and copper. Little of that wealth has gone to relieve the chronic and wanton suffering.



'There might be a drop of rain yet'
by Brendan Lynch
(Mountjoy Publishing, €14.95)

Brendan Lynch was for many years a distinguished and widely-published motor racing journalist. His skill in describing the immediacy of life and death that has people crowded at the most dangerous corner of Brand's Hatch, he has now transferred to his memoirs and novels.

This revised re-issue of a book that was widely admired back in 2006 has the immediacy of real life, but also deeper for of all the pain of growing up in 1950s Ireland under the hand of a domineering, strong-minded mother. After years of working abroad he returned, an established man in his profession, to a much changed Ireland, became reconciled with his mother, uncovering the real roots in the past of her character before she died.

This is an authentic record of a past life realised with an accuracy rarely found in so many novels. It is quite on a level with his own excellent novel *The Old Gunner and His Medals*.

And finally a look into the coming New Year...

The Almanac: A seasonal Guide to 2022
by Lia Leendertz
(Gaia Books, €15.99)

This is the kind of pocket book which was popular in the 18th and 19th century, which was focused on the course of the natural year from spring through summer and into winter. Intended for pocket or purse or knapsack, the author hopes it will allow people to connect with nature on an everyday rather than an occasional basis. The budding naturalists of the nation, and their parents, will love it.

Classifieds

The deadline for advertising in the classifieds is 10.30am, the Friday before publication. Contact the Classified Team on 01 687 4094 or email advertising@irishcatholic.ie

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HEAVEN'S MESSAGE

BISHOP JUAN GUEVARRA, Nicaragua has approved the divine revelations to Luz de Maria at www.revelacionesmarianas.com/english.htm. An important message by Our Blessed Mother on 20th November 2021.

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- 1 & 30d 'Adeste Fideles' in English (1,4,3,2,8)
 - 6 Arctic ship, or something that gets the party going (10)
 - 11 The confused marcher is a mischievous, likeable deceiver (7)
 - 14 Whose birth we celebrate at Christmas (5)
 - 15 & 48d Its pupils live in (8,6)
 - 17 Breed of cattle with a Scottish connection (8,5)
 - 19 Relating to the countryside (5)
 - 20 Sum of money put by (4-3)
 - 23 Snooker stick (3)
 - 24 Greek currency replaced by the Euro (7)
 - 25 Mr Varadkar's star sign? (3)
 - 26 Air about a drowned river valley (3)
 - 28 & 46d Second-hand motors (4,4)
 - 30 In an affectionate way (6)
 - 33 Go to Longford for an original Christmas gift (4)
 - 36 Religiously ordained people (6)
 - 37 Fibre used in making ropes (5)
 - 38 In a superior position (5)
 - 39 Hidden passenger (8)
 - 40 Sailed around one's principles (6)
 - 43 Most pleasant (6)
 - 45 Substance used in making candles (3)
 - 46 Nooks (8)
 - 48 & 18d In a song, how Eartha Kitt addressed a bearded Christmas visitor. (5,4)
 - 49 Historic Hungarian cavalryman (8)
 - 50 Grow weary (4)
 - 51 Sorcerer (6)
 - 54 Historic Russian communist (8)
 - 56 Culpable (6)
 - 57 Enjoy the flavour when I leave the redeemer (6)
 - 58 Troubles (4)
 - 59 Irritate, exasperate (5)
 - 61 Beard of barley found in an article about the west (3)
 - 62 Oh, rap about Ms Winfrey (5)
 - 65 A play on words (3)
 - 66 Plaything (3)
 - 67 The only American state with a one-syllable name (5)
 - 68 Feel unwell (3)
 - 70 Requires, desires (5)
 - 74 Loud exhalation, showing tiredness or disappointment (4)
 - 75 Individual, differing from all others (6)
 - 77 This relaxing place might spell danger! (6)
 - 78 Mountainous regions, especially in Scotland (9)
 - 79 Young eels can move the levers (6)
 - 80 Scorch (4)
 - 83 Road surfacing material (6)
 - 84 See 47 down
 - 86 Pristine, perfectly clean (8)
 - 88 For what reason? (3)
 - 89 Composer of The Messiah (6)
 - 93 Spiced sausage (6)
 - 95 Make the earl step around bishops (8)
 - 97 Shade of blue (5)
 - 98 Flowed sluggishly (5)
 - 100 Where in Dublin to send a lad back with a lock-opener (6)
 - 101 Dines (4)
 - 103 One who has died for his or her beliefs (6)
 - 105 Traditionally, the king of the beasts (4)
 - 106 Bounder (3)
 - 108 The first woman in the Bible (3)
 - 110 Dig up (7)
 - 111 Decompose (3)
 - 112 Wine from Tuscany (7)
 - 113 Rich dairy product (5)

- 116 Asti or cava might disorientate a walking sniper (9,4)
 - 117 Angels distribute much brie (8)
 - 118 Chasm (5)
 - 119 Right (7)
 - 120 Bird with a speckled breast (4,6)
 - 121 Being enlivened, one made the light work (8,2)
- DOWN**
- 2 Notices the boss veer around (8)
 - 3 Make certain (6)
 - 4 The tag has Bella confused (5)
 - 5 Longed for (7)
 - 7 The saying of Mass by more than one priest (14)
 - 8 Not imaginary (4)
 - 9 Topmost point (4)
 - 10 Type of jacket (6)
 - 11 North American country (6)
 - 12 Once a year (8)
 - 13 Harmonica (5,5)
 - 14 The line that follows 1 across/30 down (6,3,9)
 - 16 Unclean, disorganized study (5)
 - 18 See 48 across
 - 21 Mitten (5)
 - 22 Run to keep fit (3)
 - 23 Young horse (4)
 - 27 In an angry state (5)
 - 29 American ten-cent coin (4)
 - 30 See 1 across
 - 31 Ancient (3)
 - 32 Song to help a baby sleep (7)
 - 34 An Academy Award for Mr Wilde? (5)
 - 35 Performing (5)
 - 36 Feline creature (3)
 - 41 With little or no difficulty (6)
 - 42 & 114d Traditional Christmas carol (4,3,6,6,4)
 - 44 Entertaining the neighbourhood with Christmas songs (9)
 - 46 See 28 across
 - 47 & 84a Carol of peace and quiet (6,5)
 - 48 See 15 across
 - 52 Hydroelectric structure (3)
 - 53 A tree's underground parts, or one's family origins (5)
 - 54 Sound like a donkey here in Wicklow (4)
 - 55 Coated wood with a glossy transparent liquid (9)
 - 59 Blacksmith's block (5)
 - 60 Tree whose wood was used to make longbows (3)
 - 63 Small projectile, fired from a gun (6)
 - 64 Makes fun of (6)
 - 65 Addition sign (4)
 - 69 Owing (3)
 - 71 Looks like the Aurora Borealis comes from Ulster bulbs! (8,6)
 - 72 Black Sea peninsula, the scene of a Victorian war (6)
 - 73 Traditionally, one of the Magi (8)
 - 76 Mel's confused about these trees (4)
 - 77 Spanish city, home of the Alhambra (7)
 - 81 Say categorically (5)
 - 82 Banquet (5)
 - 85 This player usually wears the number one (10)
 - 87 Dance that makes you dotty? (5)
 - 90 Name which means 'Christmas' (4)
 - 91 Cook on a pan (3)
 - 92 Native of ancient Mexico (5)
 - 94 River that flows through Foxford and Ballina (3)
 - 95 Partridge's nesting site? (4,4)
 - 96 Direction that is traditionally the origin of the Magi (4)

Christmas Crossword No. 1

Marian Pilgrimages, Ireland's group pilgrimage specialists to shrines throughout the world for over 30 years, are delighted to offer readers of *The Irish Catholic* the opportunity to win a pilgrimage for two to Lourdes during 2022.

Along with Lourdes, Marian Pilgrimages also offer pilgrimages to Medjugorje, the Holy Land, Italy, Fatima and Camino de Santiago, all available to view on www.marian.ie. For more information, please call them on 01 878 8159 or email info@marian.ie.



How to enter the competition

The competition consists of TWO crosswords. Crossword No.1 which is published this week and Crossword No.2 which will be published in next week's edition. All you have to do is answer all the crossword questions correctly on BOTH crosswords and your name will be entered in a draw for the pilgrimage. Remember, even if you don't manage to complete the crosswords correctly you will be entered in the draw to win one of the three runner-up prizes of an Olive Wood Crib from Bethlehem. When you have completed the crosswords send CROSSWORD No.1 and CROSSWORD No.2 before **Friday, January 14, 2022** to: **LOURDES COMPETITION Marian Pilgrimages, 19 Eden Quay, Dublin 1.**

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ADDRESS

PHONE



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- 99 Downhearted, disappointed (8)
- 100 Percussion instrument (4)
- 102 Stitch together (3)
- 103 One who digs for coal or gold, for example (5)
- 104 Colourful arch in the sky (7)
- 106 Alpine dwelling (6)
- 107 Imbibes (6)
- 109 Angel who is not one of the 117 across (6)
- 113 Reindeer named for a rock travelling in space (5)
- 114 See 42 down
- 115 How one may heal Jacob's wife (4)
- 103 Removes moisture (5)
- 104 How strangely some cut such attire! (7)
- 106 Herb with a liquorice flavour (6)
- 107 Somehow retain part of the eye (6)
- 109 Rugby player Jonathan is entangled in ox nets (6)
- 113 Segment (5)
- 114 Seaweed in Japan, found in some of the minor islands (4)
- 115 In the Bible, Jacob's brother (4)

SOLUTIONS, DECEMBER 16

GORDIUS No. 538

Across – 1 Congregation 7 Alb 9 Hyde Park 10 Sierra Leone 11 Mini 14 Skate 18 Tunic 21 Yacht 22 Llama 23 Hopes 24 Cowl 25 Buoys 26 Elegy 29 Mock 33 Savage 34 Trap 36 Tie 37 Funeral rites

Down – 1 Cry 2 Need 3 Rest 4 Greek 5 Tarot 6 Nazi 8 Brinkmanship 9 Halley's Comet 12 Moscow 13 Berth 14 Set up 17 Amazon 19 Nasty 20 Clubs 27 Leave 28 Ghana 30 Chef 31 Veer 32 Stet 35 Ads

CHILDREN'S No. 413

Across – 1 Factor 5 Dream 7 Unpack 9 Tea 11 Emerald 12 Wins 13 Hen 14 Theatre 16 Arm 18 Animals 19 Tidiest 20 Axe

Down – 1 Fruit 2 Captain 3 Orchestra 4 Belfast 6 Middle 8 Benedict 10 Ewe 13 Heart 15 Relax 17 Mud

Solutions to Sudoku No. 412 will be published in the edition of January 6.

Notebook

Fr Vincent Sherlock



Are we there yet?

RECENTLY I WENT TO the United States to visit some people and to spend a bit of time with my aunt who lives in Richmond, Virginia. She was turning 98, and I was happy to be able to see her in the lead up to that day. A mighty woman, but that's another story!

The departure point was Dublin Airport. Like so many I haven't been at an airport since long before March 2020 so there was an excitement about travelling. There was nervousness too, because going through security, with all the taking on and off of shoes, the removal of the belt, putting liquids in clear bags, phones and electronic devices removed from luggage etc, makes me nervous and I always am fearful that I will leave something behind me. That has happened!

Anticipated

It went well. Faster than I had anticipated, and I found myself in another relatively short line of people waiting for the interview at US pre-clearance. I wasn't anticipating a conversation around the latest GAA outing. These conversations tend towards directness.



"What is the nature of your visit to the United States, business or pleasure?"

"Pleasure," I ventured!
"For how long will you be there?"

"Eight days," I told him.
"Where will you be staying?" I told him I would be spending a little time in New York and Virginia. As he leafed through my passport, he asked "What is your occupation?"

"I am a priest", I replied. He stood still, stopped going through pages and said: "I thank you for your service to the Lord." He told me about his parish and his priest in his home parish in Florida, handed me my passport and said have a safe flight and an enjoyable visit. I thanked him

and added "God bless you" to which he replied, "And God bless you too." I was on my way but not there yet! Advent, I suppose.

Exchange

The exchange was not what I had expected but I was glad of it. I thought of what he said and wondered what "your service to the Lord" involves. Yes, I hope I am doing something along those lines but what does it mean for all of us to "serve the Lord?"

Perhaps it is not a bad question to rest with in these closing days of Advent. Whenever we serve, be it food at a table, a sick person in bed or a homeless person on the street there is something happen-

ing where, for a moment, that other person is the focus of our attention and, in that focus, we do the right thing by him or her. That is the aim and that is the hope. We might fall short on occasion, but when we get it right, another person is left in a better place. So are we, because we know we made the right choice and acted in a meaningful way – in a Christian way.

So, as we prepare for the Lord's birthday and as we ask what does it mean to serve the Lord, what can we do to make this a more spiritual Christmas? It could be so easy to lose sight of the Lord's birth in the endless rushing around we do in the name of Christmas but, if we are honest about it, maybe not in the name of Christ!

Maybe you could pick up last Sunday's parish bulletin or check it out on your parish website. There might well be a moment mentioned there, around Confession time, prayer at a crib, a simple carol service, mention of Mass times – something that gives you the opportunity to slow down a little, scroll on the screen a bit less and just "serve the Lord". At the end of the day, perhaps, it is about just being willing to spend time with him so that we can get to know him better and realise that our service makes a difference.

God bless you all. Enjoy what is left of Advent and, to you all, a blessed and happy Christmas.

Christmas morning

A priest was tidying on the gallery of the church, putting some leaflets away after Christmas morning Mass when he heard a noise. Looking down into the church, he saw a little boy cycle up the aisle at great speed. He jumped off his bike, grabbed the baby Jesus from the crib, strapped him to the carrier of the bike and made a hasty exit from the church. The priest was dumbfounded and did not know what to do. He considered calling the child's family but felt that might only cause trouble. Within minutes the boy returned, cycled to the crib and left Jesus where he had found him. The priest called to him: "Why did you do that?"

"Ah Father," the boy beamed with pride "I wrote to Santa for a bike and I told Jesus that if Santa delivered, I would come here and bring him for the first spin on it". A boy of his word! The word was made flesh.



COULD YOU HELP TO SAVE A POOR HELPLESS CHILD

The Little Way Association receives numerous requests from missionaries throughout the world asking for help to feed, support and educate needy, deprived children. Due to COVID-19 they are faced with many sufferings. They tell us of orphaned children left alone with no one to love or care for them, of families so poor that they cannot afford to send their children to school, and of street children, totally abandoned, hungry and homeless, experiencing much anguish and hardship during their most tender years. The whole future of these children often depends upon whether a missionary can find sufficient funds to care for them.

Your Christmas gift will mean a chance of health and happiness for a deprived child.

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:

€..... **NEEDY CHILDREN**

€..... **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 _____

IC/12/23

To donate online go to tinyurl.com/lwadonations

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



As we prepare to welcome the Christ child at Christmas, please consider making a gift to The Little Way Association's fund for children.

Every euro you send will be gratefully received and sent without deduction, to enable a missionary priest or sister to carry the love, care and compassion of Christ to a deprived, abandoned or orphaned child.

In your prayers at the Crib, please ask the Holy Child to bless and protect all missionaries as they labour to bring the knowledge of His love and saving power to the world.



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

- St Therese

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

May St Therese reward you in a special way for the sacrifices you make to support our work, and may she obtain all the blessings and graces you need for 2022.

In gratitude for your kindness a **CHRISTMAS NOVENA OF MASSES** is being offered for YOUR INTENTIONS.