

The Irish Catholic

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Bethlehem Christians long for Christmas miracle as Holy Land war continues to rage

Ruadhán Jones

Palestinian Christians in the birthplace of Christ are praying for peace as they mark the coming of the Prince of Peace, while the Israel-Hamas war continues to rage in the Holy Land.

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic* they said "everyone has hope" and are praying for "something better" as the Christian community eschewed traditional public celebrations to focus on "the real Christmas".

While the situation is "bad" with tours cancelled and many Christians out of work due to the ongoing war, "it is a real Christmas, with family and neighbours" said local tour guide and shopkeeper Louis Michel.

While almost 100km away from the scene of the most intense conflict in Gaza, residents of Bethlehem and other parts of the West Bank have not been insulated from the effects of the war. Some 290 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank since the October 7 Hamas massacre, largely as a result of settler violence or clashes with Israeli troops. In addition, heightened security measures have made travelling around very difficult, particularly getting to Jerusalem.

The traditional Christmas tree and markets are absent from Manger Square outside the Church of the Nativity, following an instruction from the Latin Patriarch, the head of the Church in the Holy Land. Mr Michel said the pared back celebrations have put the focus on the spiritual side of the year, God coming to earth as a child born in a cave.

"Everyone has hope, we are praying that everything will be better," he told this paper.

"We don't say Christmas is cancelled, though we won't put lights on the tree or have singing – we

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Welcoming the Prince of Peace



Bishop of Kerry Ray Browne blesses the new crib in St Mary's Cathedral, Killarney, along with students from Holy Cross Mercy School. Photo: Valerie O'Sullivan.

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MERRY MARRIAGE

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Keeping the Holy Land in our minds this Christmas

My colleague Fr Ron Rolheiser writes in this edition about connecting the dots between the crib and the cross (Page 33).

We're not used to thinking about the cross at Christmas, but in one sense, Calvary always casts a permanent shadow over Bethlehem. Even today, it sometimes surprises pilgrims in the Holy Land that Golgotha and the Manger in Bethlehem are only eight kilometres apart.

Certainly, at Christmas 2023 the cross casts a very long shadow over the Holy Land in the midst of war and mistrust.

If someone who had never heard the story of Jesus were to ask any of us about his origins, we would, I suspect, begin with the story of his birth in Bethlehem. It's a story that we're all familiar with from childhood.

In schools and parish halls across the country, countless generations of Irish children have told and re-told the story in nativity plays.

Truth

But, amid the carols and candles, the presents and parties, there is a profound, but simple truth at the centre of Christmas that can sometimes escape us in the midst of the hustle and bustle: God became man.

It's a simple story with a profound meaning: for the religious believer, Christmas transforms everything. It is a moment in human history that, in the humility of a little baby, God, the Creator of the world, entered into human history.

“The commemoration of the birth of the Prince of Peace comes at a time when that land desperately needs peace”

I love the story of the Magi visiting from the East, expecting to see a king clothed in grandeur and surrounded by a royal court. What they encounter, instead, is a baby laid in a manger, the child of poor people. The Christmas story contrasts the noisy and ostentatious power of this world with the defenceless power of love in a little baby, for who can fail to be moved

“The Christmas story contrasts the noisy and ostentatious power of this world with the defenceless power of love in a little baby, for who can fail to be moved by the unconditional love of a baby?”

Editor's Comment Michael Kelly



by the unconditional love of a baby? Or the story of the Holy Family forced to flee as refugees to Egypt far from the land of their birth?

Heart

But, unless Christ is born and reborn in the cradle of our heart, the nativity narrative from a stable or a cave on the outskirts of Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago remains little more than a beautiful story.

Many people will not have the Christmas they intended this year. Loved ones have died, jobs have been lost, people are struggling with illness – and yet light comes to illumine this darkness.

In the Holy Land, where fewer than 2% of people are Christian, the commemoration of the birth of the Prince of Peace comes at a time when that land desperately needs peace.

Many people have been killed since Hamas terrorists launched their brutal attack on an unsuspecting Israel on October 7. It will be another one of those dates that will be forever etched in the history of that land that has known conflict for too long. It has unleashed the most devastating loss of life and property in Gaza. One observer remarried recently that it had put Gaza back 200 years.

This Christmas,

Christians in the Holy Land are not celebrating the feastday. Of course, they will continue to pray, to attend Christmas Mass and to exchange gifts with their families – but the festive parades and lights will not be a feature this year.

They know only too well the shadow of the Cross. As we celebrate here, let us remember them and all the people who share the Holy Land. May they soon know security and peace that endures respecting the rights and dignity of everyone.

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight”

We can find hope in the vulnerability of the Christmas story. For it is not a story of sentiment: it is a story of struggle. The fear of the young woman Mary found to be with child; the bewilderment of Joseph; the newborn child with a manger for a bed. This new family forced to flee as asylum seekers into Egypt far from their home and families. This is the message of Christmas: a message of a God who is called 'Emmanuel' – a word which means 'God-is-with-us'.

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

Merry Christmas!

Bethlehem Christians long for Christmas miracle as Holy War war continues to rage

» **Continued from Page 1** still have it in our homes for this holy feast,” he added.

“We are very proud to have our families in our homes, to pray with our neighbours and celebrate in church,” he concluded.

Khader Hadweh, who runs Bethlehem's Peace Centre in Manger Square, said Bethlehem is unusually quiet, with hotels closed and many Christians – who are heavily reliant on the tourist industry – out of work.

“It is very difficult, not like before, no Christmas tree, no lighting, it is very sad,” he said.

However, he said “there is still hope, people are preparing for Christmas Mass and to pray”.

“We hope the war will finish soon and return to normal – we try to pray that we will have something better for the New Year,” he said. “It is a time of prayer and spending time with family and neighbours.”

Meanwhile, Palestinian-

born Bishop William Shomali of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said the Christian community is hoping for a Christmas “miracle” that would see the end of the war.

“In Jerusalem, life continues but with less joy and enthusiasm than before,” Bishop Shomali said as the community prepares to mark Christmas.

“We feel the absence of pilgrims and a high rate of unemployment. We prayed a lot for the ceasefire, and continue to do that.”

“We will do that during the Christmas novena, which prepares us to celebrate the memory of the historical birth of Jesus, our Saviour, the Prince of Peace,” he said.

However, he warned that “many Christians started to leave the country” when the war began, “and many more think the same way”.

“Their departure will render the situation more vulnerable for those who remain,” said Bishop Shomali.

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‘I’m only worried what God thinks’ says new Faith-filled Louth manager

Chai Brady

GAA star and now manager of Louth senior football team Ger Brennan has said he is “very lucky” to have received the gift of grace.

The former Dublin senior footballer, and two-time All-Ireland winner, was appointed Louth’s manager in October. Like his predecessor Mickey Harte, he is also very vocal about his Faith.

Mr Brennan told *The Irish*

Catholic he is sometimes called brave for talking about his religion – which he denies. He said: “I don’t consider myself that way [brave], I consider myself very lucky that I definitely have been given some sort of gift or grace, where I do sense regularly the divine presence in the world.

“I’m by no means perfect, I have my faults, my sins, and none of us are infallible so I think having a bit of compassion for myself

and others is important but generally speaking it’s no problem for me to have conversations with public entities, or to do talks on those lines, I’m fairly at ease, so again I consider myself lucky that way.”

He said he was “delighted” when asked to put himself forward for the role of Louth manager. “A lot of candidates would have been interested in it because Louth GAA is in a great place now in the last

couple of years, so I felt very honoured and humbled to have been asked to take it over. I’m just grateful for being entrusted with the opportunity to bring Louth to the next level,” he said.

Asked how he felt as a first-time manager, Mr Brennan said: “I’m very happy with what I can do and cannot do, and I’m also able to ask for help and advice in areas that I mightn’t be as skilled at and that’s part of your management group, putting a good team together and listening to the ideas of others.

“Mickey and Gavin Devlin, the previous management, they did wonderful work bringing Louth from division 4 to division 2, and they certainly left it in a very, very healthy place. I don’t get overwhelmed too often, and Faith probably helps me in that regard, I’m only worried about what God thinks at the end of it.”

See pages 12-13

Vatican explains how and when gay couples can be blessed

Staff reporter

A Catholic priest can bless a gay or other unmarried couple as long as it is not a formal liturgical blessing and does not give the impression that the Catholic Church is blessing the union as if it were a marriage, the Vatican doctrinal office has said.

The request for a blessing can express and nurture “openness to the transcendence, mercy and closeness to God in a thousand concrete circumstances of life, which is no small thing in the world in which we live. It is a seed of the Holy Spirit that must be nurtured, not hindered,” the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith said in a formal declaration published December 18.

The document, *Fiducia Supplicans* (*Supplicating*

Trust) was subtitled, *On the pastoral meaning of blessings*, and was approved by Pope Francis during an audience with Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, dicastery prefect, December 18.

Cardinal Fernández said the declaration “remains firm on the traditional doctrine of the Church about marriage, not allowing any type of liturgical rite or blessing similar to a liturgical rite that can create confusion,” but it also explores the “pastoral meaning of blessings” in a way that opens “the possibility of blessing couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples without officially validating their status or changing in any way the Church’s perennial teaching on marriage”.

European football fans fly flags for the Faith



Jason Osborne

Football fans on the European continent have been faithfully flying flags for Our Lady and one of the Church’s great saints, St Ambrose of Milan, during recent football games.

Images of the flags went viral on social media after the games, with many commenting favourably on the public displays of affection for the Faith.

The fans of Olympique Lyonnais displayed a large banner in honour of Our Lady, patroness of their city, at a recent match against Toulouse. The text at the bottom of the flag translates as: “Lyon, forever under the protection of the Virgin Mary”. Olympique Lyonnais went on to win the match three-nil.

Meanwhile, fans of AC Milan flew a large banner on December 8 depicting St Ambrose, in honour of one of the great western doctors of the Church on his feast day.

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Synodal process caused ‘uncertainty’ about synodality research shows

Ruadhán Jones

The synodal process has increased “uncertainty” about what synodality is and what it means for the life of the Church, Irish research shows.

As the Church in Ireland seeks to embed the practice of synodality into the life of the Church, a survey conducted on behalf of the Irish Synodal Pathway steering committee suggests that “the concept of synodality as a way of being has perhaps become confused by the synodal process”.

“Extensive” comments on the process of the universal synod revealed uncertainty about “timeframes, end point and its impact on the Church at parish or diocesan level”, according to a report on the survey conducted with local leaders of the synod in Ireland.

After almost three years of synodal processes at national and global levels, “the overarching key challenge emerging... is uncertainty about the overall aim, as well as what, if any, impact it has on the local Church,” the report said.

The report also showed that while people were grateful for the opportunity to be heard, concerns were raised “about managing expectations, and in some cases simply not being able to meet the expectations, of some people who had attended listening sessions”.

The study heard calls from participants for increased training and resourcing for synodality both for priests and laity, as both the global and Irish synodal pathways continue.

A pilot training programme for local leaders is currently

being developed and will be rolled-out during the Spring of 2024.

In a separate report from Ireland’s national steering committee for the synodal pathway, the committee called on the bishops to expand the scope of the Irish synodal pathway.

In a report presented to the Irish bishops’ conference, The committee recommended “a commitment to a series of national synodal assemblies”.

These would not be formally constituted synods, but assemblies following synodal methodologies, the report said.

However, the plan for the national synodal pathway is “open to the possibility of a formally constituted synod at national level” in response to possible developments arising from the Universal Synod and/or further learning and insights from the national process.

Pope condemns targeting of Christians in Gaza

Jason Osborne

Pope Francis condemned the Israeli military’s killing of two Christian women taking shelter at a Catholic parish in Gaza, as well as an attack on a convent, describing the IDF’s actions as “terrorism”.

The Pope’s comments came after praying the Angelus in St Peter’s Square, December 17, as Francis decried the December 16 attack on the compound of the Holy Family Catholic Parish in Gaza where, he said, “there are no terrorists, but families, children, people who are sick and have disabilities, sisters”.

He named the mother and daughter – Nahida Khalil Anton and Samar Kamal Anton – who were killed in the parish compound.

“One was killed as she tried to carry the other to safety. Seven more people were shot and wounded as they tried to protect

others inside the Church compound,” said a statement by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which also specified that they were shot by a sniper of the Israeli military.

A rocket fired by an IDF tank also struck a convent of the Sisters of Mother Theresa (the Missionaries of Charity), according to the same statement. The convent is home to over 54 disabled people and has been signalled as a place of worship since the outbreak of the war.

Commenting on the violence on X, Primate of All-Ireland and Archbishop of Armagh, Eamon Martin asked, “When are these merciless attacks going to stop?”

“Our prayers from Ireland go out to all those impacted, and cry out for an immediate end to the violence,” he wrote.

Decapitated statue of Tipperary prelate restored

Chai Brady

A statue of an archbishop that was decapitated outside the cathedral in Tipperary was restored and then blessed on December 17.

The vandals who targeted the statue of Archbishop Patrick Leahy, which is based outside the front of the Cathedral of the Assumption in Thurles, were not caught. Despite an investigation launched after the attack in 2019, the culprits nor the head were found. The statue has

been covered up since with construction curtains so as to preserve the integrity of the sculpture.

Archbishop Kieran O’Reilly blessed the statue at the annual carol service.

The statue of Archbishop Leahy was built in 1911 and recognises his contribution to the building of the cathedral. The prelate was Archbishop of Cashel and Emly from 1857-1875.

Sculptor Stephen Burke carried out the restoration work.

Three wise boys...



The three wise men of P3 in St Eithne’s PS, Derry, are pictured on their way to Bethlehem, ahead of the class’s nativity play.



Archbishop Kieran O’Reilly of Cashel and Emly blesses the restored statue of Archbishop Patrick Leahy in the yard of the Cathedral of the Assumption, Thurles, Co. Tipperary.

Two sides of immigration...

The Italian Prime Minister, Georgia Meloni, often described as right-wing, seems to have struck up a *molto simpatico* friendship with the British PM Rishi Sunak. There was much hugging and embracing by the pair when both attended a festival of ideas in Italy last weekend. The word is that the chemistry between them is excellent. Personal relations do matter between political leaders – it's not just politics.

Immigration

But the pair do agree, politically, on one pressing issue: the need to control, and perhaps halt, immigration to Europe. Mr Sunak, the son of immigrants himself, warned that Europe will be



Mary Kenny

“overwhelmed” by immigration numbers if serious steps aren't taken to stem the flow.

“Migration has to be managed and proportionate if civil unrest is to be avoided”

This thread has an echo all over Continental Europe, in greater or lesser volume. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders is vehemently against not just immigrants, but Muslims; Sweden, France and Hungary have all sounded a note of

alarm about the change in culture that must follow a change in population demographics.

Rational

At a level of economic and political discourse, any rational observer can see the points at issue. Migration has to be managed and proportionate if civil unrest is to be avoided. It also has to be spoken about.

But then, sometimes, a personal experience may bring a different perspective.

I recently visited a relative in her 90s who is in a care home in Co. Wicklow. What immediately struck me

about the ambience was the kindness, the good humour, the attention and even the love that the carers seemed to bestow on the fragile individuals in their care. With the festive spirit in mind, there was an air of jollity and cheer.

“It's a conundrum: immigrants are needed and most European societies couldn't now function without them”

It was also evident that most of the staff employed were from overseas. Many came from Indian and Filipino backgrounds; and, as far as I could see, doing their jobs

enthusiastically and attentive to their charges. (The boss was Irish, and seemed to set an uplifting and warm tone.)

What would we do without such immigrants? Seeing the devotion that was shown to my relation, I felt a wave of appreciation for their conscientious approach to a job that really matters – looking after the elderly, some of whom suffer from dementia.

Pressure

The politicians all over Europe are, no doubt,

feeling the pressure from their voters over immigration (and housing) concerns. But it's a conundrum: immigrants are needed and most European societies couldn't now function without them.

Signora Meloni and Mr Sunak seem to have struck a pact over this question. But besides examining the data and the spreadsheets, maybe they should also visit a care home every now and then.

The poet Aidan Mathews has a new collection of poetry out, bearing the provocative title *Pure Filth*. I am sure the title is ironic or comedic, because Mr Mathews is perhaps the most deeply Christian and Catholic poet writing today.

But he is also playful in language (and humorous in life) and, like Chesterton, employs paradox – he calls himself “a ‘roaming’ Catholic”, when ecumenically attending other Christian services. He has also written novels and books of spiritual exploration, including a marvellous tome called *In the Poorer Quarters*. I shall acquire his new poetry collection pronto.

A heart-breaking Christmas season



Buildings lie in ruin in Gaza as seen from southern Israel December 12, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas. Photo: OSV News/Clodagh Kilcoyne, Reuters

O Little Town of Bethlehem was playing on the radio as part of a programme on carols, and how sweet, peaceable and evocative of a true Christmas spirit it seemed. “How still we see thee lie/Above

thy deep and dreamless sleep/The silent stars go by.”

Peace on earth is a persistent theme of so many the great carols, from *Silent Night* to *Adeste Fideles*, and so many mention the angelic presence over

Bethlehem. But how will Bethlehem, and the Holy Land, fare in this heart-breaking Gaza-Israel war?

In all conscience, we should try to see why both sides are in conflict, but it's hard not to be appalled at what is happening, and

how many innocent people have cruelly lost their lives.

The contrast between the note of “peace and goodwill” that is a feature of so many carols, and the reality on the ground, is distressing indeed.

If entertaining at Christmas, can I again put in a word for those of us who don't drink alcoholic beverages?

We non-boozers like a drink which has a certain piquancy, or non-alcoholic “kick”. Orange juice is too bland, and water is, frankly,

boring. But Coca-cola, non-alcoholic ginger ale or ginger beer, or elderflower spritzer all have that bit of a spark.

Ginger ale with a tiny droplet of angosturas bitters – the smallest possible proportion of alcohol – is delicious.

There are non-alcoholic wines and beers these days, although the only thing that once attracted me to Guinness or lager was the alcohol they contained – I don't rate the taste. Others will. The main thing is to include the non-boozers in the Christmas party.

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A Christian approach to immigration policy



We must strive for the common good of immigrants and citizens alike, writes David Quinn

What is the right Christian approach to immigration? There is definitely one approach that is all wrong, which is to simply close our borders and never 'welcome the stranger', to always say 'there is no room at the inn'.

But after that, there is plenty of room for legitimate disagreement. The other extreme to closing our borders is opening them completely and allowing in as many as want to come.

This approach can just about be defended on Christian grounds, but it's a tough ask because obviously at a certain point our ability to cope with the numbers coming in starts to collapse and other needs become neglected. For example, what do we do with our own homeless when suddenly many more homeless people than we can accommodate arrive here?

Immigration is now possibly the hottest topic in Irish public debate, as it is across the Western world. This is despite attempts to shut down such a debate and delegitimise asking hard but necessary questions about immigration policy as being in some way 'racist'.

Debate

In the debate about this matter, two different aspects of it are often conflated, namely immigration and asylum-seeking. In the first case a person arrives in a country to improve their economic prospects, and in the second they are fleeing persecution.

Those coming to a country to improve their economic situation can do so either legally or illegally. Under EU law anyone can arrive here in search of a job, although the EU does not provide an automatic entitlement to welfare benefits upon arrival.

If that was the case, then EU citizens on welfare would be tempted to go 'welfare shopping', that is to move to countries with the best welfare payments.

When the EU expanded to include the countries of Eastern Europe, Ireland experienced a huge influx of people from that part of the world, especially from countries like Poland and Lithuania.

This coincided with the Celtic Tiger and when jobs were plentiful, although it also coincided with the property boom, that then turned into a property bubble, which then blew up with dire economic consequences.

“As of September there were about 24,000 people seeking asylum in this country”

Today, the Irish economy is growing fast again, driven mostly by the multi-national companies and we need lots of workers that the country itself can't provide. Therefore, we require a lot of immigration to feed the demands of employers.

But the number of people arriving from Eastern Europe has plummeted. That is a bonanza that will never again be repeated. The Berlin Wall can't fall twice. Those countries can't be admitted to the EU twice with a huge movement of people from east to west each time.

So now we must look further afield to find workers, and that means outside the EU.

People from outside the EU must apply for a work permit. In the year to April of this year, no fewer than 81,000 people arrived here from outside the European Union, although half of these were from Ukraine. Most of the rest came from India or Brazil.

On top of this you have to add asylum-seekers from other countries. As of September there were about 24,000 people seeking asylum in this country.

Can we simply assume all of the claims to be granted refugee status here are legitimate? The answer is no. Many are coming from countries designated by the EU as safe, such as Algeria, Georgia and Albania.

It's true that a minority from those countries might be fleeing persecution of some kind, but it would be ridiculous to say a majority have, otherwise why call those countries safe? The term

“If we are not properly assimilating the numbers coming in, or the housing system can't cope, or the health care system, then we need to slow down immigration even if that means some shortages in parts of the workforce. There is no easy answer here”



Ukrainian refugees from Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia sing happy birthday in 15th-Century Ballindooly Castle in Galway, Ireland, April 16, 2022. Owner Barry Haughian offered his castle as shelter for two families of Ukrainian refugees. Photo: OSV News/Clodagh Kilcoyne, Reuters

would cease to have meaning.

It is also the case that many asylum-seekers coming to Ireland arrived in another EU country first, and that is where they should have claimed asylum.

Stricter

But some of those countries are much stricter about what asylum claims are accepted and rejected than we are, which might explain why many seem keen to come here instead. In addition, we rarely deport failed asylum-seekers.

In turn, this makes life harder for genuine asylum-seekers. If you really are fleeing persecution, you must get in line to be processed along with people who should not be here at all, and that is unfair.

Looking at immigrants and asylum-seekers separately, how many of each type should we be prepared to take in?

We have control over the number of non-EU migrants coming in. The answer is basically as many as we need for the workforce, but at the same time not so many that they put the housing and health-care system under strain, or harm social cohesion.

There is no scientific way to determine the right number. But if we are not properly assimilating the numbers coming in, or the housing system can't cope, or the health care system, then we need to slow down immigration even if that means some shortages in parts of the workforce. There is no easy answer here. There will be trade-offs no matter what you do.

“A totally open-ended approach means less resources are available for other needs and a lot of people will understandably feel this is unfair”

In respect of asylum-seekers, the number who can come here and claim asylum is potentially effectively limitless for a small country. Even allowing for those coming from safe countries, there are many parts of the world that are very unsafe.

The Christian duty is to accept as many as possible, but the com-

mitment can't be totally open-ended because that would be incredibly socially damaging.

Catholic social teaching is aimed at serving the common good. The Church defines the common good as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily".

Flourish

That is a bit of a mouthful, but it basically means that we want to live in a society where we all flourish as much as possible. But every need cannot be met equally well when resources are limited.

A simple example is that we would like to spend much more on the health system, but that might mean less is spent on education, or taxes are raised to a point where people are effectively penalised for working.

So, a balance needs to be struck. It is the same with immigration and asylum-seeking. A totally open-ended approach means less resources are available for other needs and a lot of people will understandably feel this is unfair.

Therefore, the answer to the question, 'what is the Christian approach to immigration and asylum-seeking?', is basically that we must strive to achieve the overall common good of everyone, immigrants and citizens like. The principle is easy to state, and understand, even if finding the right balance is hard.

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Nuala O'Loan

The View



Human evil did not triumph

Christmas is becoming two separate feasts: for Christians it is the feast of the Nativity, the time when we remember and celebrate the birth of the Christchild in Bethlehem, with all that followed right up to the moment of the crucifixion and the resurrection; for others it is an unidentified festival – a time for holidays, family gatherings, Christmas decorations, socialising... Increasingly the religious aspects of Christmas are being determinedly extinguished. Christmas cards and cribs portraying nativity scenes, adoring shepherds, gift-bearing kings, angels, have become increasingly scarce. It could all seem rather disheartening.

Yet Christmas lies at the heart of our faith. In the annual celebration of the birth of Jesus, in the story of the gentle faith and courage of his mother and earthly father, and those early years of the life of the little boy who is the Redeemer, we encounter, yet again, the wonder of the gift of the life of this man who was God, and whose short life left a precious legacy – a way to the Father spelled out in teaching and parables delivered on hot and dusty hillsides, by the sea of Galilee, on the dry, arid slopes of the Garden of Gethsemane, and on Calvary.

“In the birth of this little boy and his short years on this earth we were given a way to eternal life”

The present giving that marks our coming together at Christmas is the product of the great gift that God gave to us in his son, of the generosity and joy of Mary as she carried the child in her womb and of Joseph, as he tenderly cherished and protected this little child, who was not his child. This young couple showed such courage in the early days of Jesus's



life when they had to flee because their child might be killed, leaving their home and families and going into Egypt – a strange land, where somehow they found a home and a way to live until they could return home after Herod's death. Even then they could not go back to Judea but had to go to Galilee because Herod's son, Archelaus, was ruling over Judea, and so they made their way to Nazareth, where the little boy grew up.

In this history of our Faith we can see so clearly the hand of God at work – human evil did not triumph. In the birth of this little boy and his short years on this earth we were given a way to eternal life. We just have to follow it.

God's call

Sometimes it can seem difficult to know what God is calling us to do, whether our existence matters in the world; what we are really

here for; what we should do with our lives. We can be troubled.

“If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am”

When Jesus's disciples were troubled he said to them “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may

“Young people have already been conditioned by society to postpone marriage until as late as possible”

be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

And Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” And Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life.”

Understanding

So that is what Christmas really calls us to – a renewed understanding of the fact that Jesus is the way to God the Father, of the wonder that is the gift of life, and especially the life of the Christchild, a clarion call to live our lives in the love and service of God and of all his children.

St John Henry Newman wrote about this, saying that “God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which

He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next...” Newman concluded that all he had to do was “keep His commandments”. In God's gift of his son to us at Christmas, in the living and dying of Jesus, we can come to understand that all we have to do is trust God, and live as best we can.

As Newman said: “If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.”

Thus it was for the little family in Bethlehem, in Egypt, in Nazareth, and later for Jesus in Jerusalem.

We may not be visited by angels as Mary and Joseph were, yet in our living we will experience through the compassion, care, companionship of others, the love of God. In the Eucharist we have the greatest gift of all, Jesus, to strengthen, sustain, and nourish us, if we but accept the gift so generously given.

“As we contemplate these terrible situations, we should ask, what must I do, what can I do to help the coming of the Kingdom of God?”

The situations in Israel, Gaza, Ukraine, Russia, Iran and so many other places are really terrible. The plight of a homeless family at Christmas, the loneliness of isolated people, the struggle of those who do not have enough money to feed and clothe those they love, the fears and weariness of those who live with physical and mental illness all call us to help.

As we contemplate these terrible situations, we should ask, what must I do, what can I do to help the coming of the Kingdom of God? That is a question which can only be answered by each individual through prayer. Our call may be a call to prayer for peace, it may also be a call to contribute what we can to alleviate poverty and homelessness. It may be to work for peace in our homes, our schools, our work places, our communities in thousands of different ways.

We may think we can really make no contribution, yet each of us can and must, because each of our individual contributions, no matter how small, really is vital for others who are also God's children.



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Prayer, coffee and a cig with the Poor Clares



The Poor Clares Galway tell **Ruadhán Jones** about their prayers for busy people

What could nuns in an enclosed convent know about the lives of everyday, busy people? It's a question often asked about nuns, priests and male religious. The answer is, quite a lot more than you would think.

"From the sisters who meet people at the door and the letters that come in, we really are in a privileged position to know what's going on for people," explains Sr Faustina, a Poor Clare in the Galway convent on Nun's Island.

Sr Colette, the community's Abbess, agrees strongly: "When I came in, there were people I would have known before I entered and thought everything is going so smoothly for them. And then they come in and entrust their concerns to us and you realise nobody really knows what's going on in anyone else's life."

"They do entrust their cares to us, both physically coming to the door asking for prayers and writing to us," she adds during our Zoom call. "You do get a real picture."

Insight

The insight these prayerful women have into our lives is on full show in the 10th anniversary edition of the number one bestseller *Calm the Soul* (CTS), a book of prayers and reflections from the Poor Clares Galway. The new edition was released before Christmas, after the sisters were contacted by their



The Poor Clares Galway show off the 10th anniversary edition of their bestselling book, *Calm the Soul*.

publishers.

"They realised it was 10 years and asked would we," says Sr Colette. "We didn't jump at it, but then we thought so many things happened like Covid and everyone was stressed out. We decided that if we were going to do it, we'd add stuff we felt was relevant and we had been asked to pray for at that time."

Normally for a re-release of a book, it's basically a repeat of the original, according to Sr Faustina. However, the job was worth doing, but only if done well. They were originally approached to release a sequel shortly after CTS went to print. "We had to consider that among ourselves," Sr Faustina begins, "and while it seemed something that would be very positive, we decided that at that point in the community..."

"We better start living the life," Sr Colette jokes.

"Sometimes it's easier to take out a book, and say, there are some nice thoughts there"

Sr Faustina continues, saying: "We decided at that point we wouldn't when they approached us earlier. With this idea of a 10th anniversary edition... we decided that it would be a great opportunity to add to what we had originally brought out."

The new edition has a wealth of new material, including prayers for anxiety, for social media use, on bullying, on aging and even on 'FOMO', the fear of missing out!

Prayer for the dying

"When we were discussing with the publisher during the first meeting over Zoom, we were chatting and she had a whiteboard behind her and I couldn't see anything behind her except for one word written above her head which was 'FOMO'," explains Sr Colette gleefully. "I said to her, would that be something? We actually put something in about FOMO."

"It's called the prayer for those who don't want to miss out on anything," adds Sr Faustina. "Another section that I think is really fantastic, very useful especially with all the talk about euthanasia going on at the moment are some prayers and reflections for those who are dying."

"It's really a valuable thing to have, a lot of people who are accompanying someone who is terminally ill, or even seriously ill, you're stuck for words. You don't know what to say. Sometimes it's easier to take out a book and say, there are some nice thoughts there. Sometimes we are so helpless when we want to help, so I think that's very useful."

Another new addition includes prayers to Our Lady Untier of Knots, a devotion promoted by Pope Francis. The Poor Clares' book coincides with the Pope's pontificate, so it is appropriate that his influence is felt. Sr Faustina believes that CTS is in keeping with Francis' approach to theology, as outlined in his motu

proprio, *Ad theologiam promovendam*.

Communicating the value of the Gospel shouldn't be from an ivory tower, the Pope explains. He also emphasises listening and dialogue, "being aware of what is happening in the world and the changes through which we are living", says Sr Faustina.

"Prayer is conversation with Jesus. So really, it was helping people to put words on what I would pray for in that situation"

Just as Pope Francis strives for a theology that is "warm, understanding and compassionate", so too do the Poor Clares. "CTS is friendly, it's conversational really," continues Sr Faustina. "It's to help people understand that's how God really is."

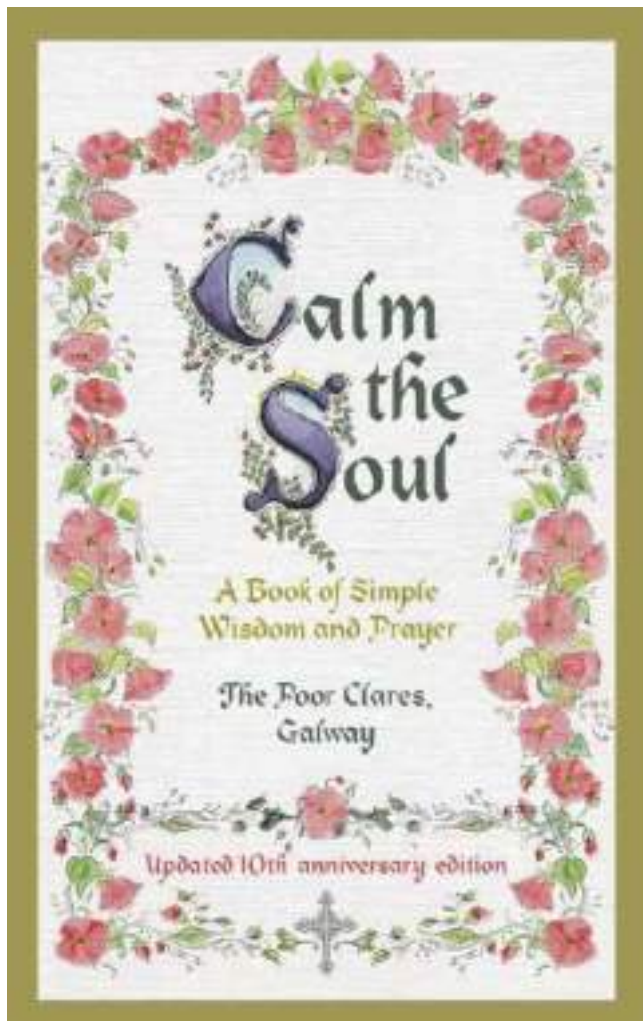
The original inspiration

for the book was a series of reflections published on the sisters' website, prayers for busy people: "Because people are so busy," says Sr Colette. "Yes there's stuff on silence and contemplation and the importance of that in the book – but also if you're outside when you've three kids pulling out of you, how to carve maybe five minutes silence? Or to give a person words that they can sit with God for two minutes and then back to where you are again."

"Just to give people a bit of sanity, particularly as people maybe have moved away from the practice of their faith. So, they don't know how to put words on it. Prayer is conversation with Jesus. So really, it was helping people to put words on what I would pray for in that situation," Sr Colette reflects.

Venerable tradition

The Poor Clares Galway are working in venerable tradition of contemplatives writing books to help everyday people, as done



by most notably the likes of St Teresa of Avila. As Sr Faustina explains, the written word is a good medium for them to put their spirituality "out there".

“It comes up in the introduction anyway, the whole idea of what Pope Francis talks about... that we are loved uniquely by God”

“Even in our community, Mother Bonaventure Brown, she was writing in the 17th Century,” she says. “She’s one of the

most quoted pieces of early modern Ireland’s literature. She encouraged her readers to bolster their faith and to encourage them in future generations of Poor Clares, to be strong in the face of persecution.”

CTS transposes the spirit of the Poor Clares into the 21st Century, Sr Faustina adds, to tackle the “epidemic of meaninglessness” that afflict so many.

The love of God

“This is a book of encouragement for people, to remind them that they are beloved of God,” she stresses. “The whole thrust and thread running

through it is the idea that we are deeply loved and understood in our deepest essence by God.

“If people enter into that, they can contribute then to the community and they have the confidence to do that. It comes up in the introduction anyway, the whole idea of what Pope Francis talks about... that we are loved uniquely by God.”

Modern people find that hard to believe, Sr Faustina laments, before adding that she goes through phases when she is similarly afflicted.

“One of the things that most evokes the friendship of God is a cup of coffee with a friend”

“You hurt somebody’s feelings or whatever and you’re beating yourself up,” she says. “We need to be reminded of this. There is an epidemic of meaninglessness in our society now. We really are convinced that by reconnecting with our relationship with God, which is an important piece, it is part of our humanity. Body, soul, mind, they’re not split. When we split them, then we all run into trouble.”

As we talk, the sisters are enjoying a cup of coffee from some very colourful mugs that read ‘Calm the Soul’. They’re not going into merchandising, they stress, although on their website you can download a PDF of the image to get your own mug made up.

“We just thought when we were launching the book, the idea that God is our friend,” says Sr Faustina. “One of the things

that most evokes the friendship of God is a cup of coffee with a friend.

“There’s a lovely quotation I came across from Dorothy Day, which Sr Bonaventure told me about, about a cup of coffee and something to do with God: ‘I get my strength back with my cup of coffee and the reading of the psalms’. I thought, wow, that’s exactly what we were thinking.”

Normality

It’s not only what the sisters were thinking – some who read their reflections are putting it into practice! Sr Colette relates a story that captures the kind of normality they sought to enter, about one woman who wrote to her after she saw their website and bought the book.

“She says she goes to it every day and starts off her morning with it,” she continues. “About a year later, she wrote and said, I still start my day with CTS, with my coffee and a fag. And she said, God understands, when she mentioned the fag!”

With Christmas only around the corner when this paper spoke to the Poor Clares, it would have been remiss not to ask

about how they hope to spend the season. As Sr Faustina explains, it is a very important time for Franciscan orders.

“The crib is central to our Christmas celebrations so we have several up around the monastery... because Franciscan spirituality is all about the Incarnation, and the awe and amazement that inspires,” she says.

“That God bridged the gap between humanity and divinity. That’s what our whole vocation is about. St Clare, St Francis, that was their life as well, living out of that amazement that God became one of us.”

For Sr Faustina personally, Christmas is “really special”: “It’s my favourite liturgical season. The longing in Advent and then the celebration at Christmas which reminds us what that life is about. Living for the longing of God and, please God, meeting him in the next life.”

“It’s a really joyful time, both on the liturgical and prayer level but also on the human level”

The Poor Clares let the longing build up during Advent, keeping the time as a season in its own right. They start singing the Christmas hymns until Christmas Eve, nor do they decorate the interior of the convent or even put up the tree!

Joyful season

“Liturgy is important for us,” explains Sr Colette. “But we take the 12 days of Christmas as kind of our annual holiday. Unnecessary work isn’t done, we relax during Christmas. We don’t have visits during November and Advent, but at Christmas our families come and visit. It’s a really joyful time, both on the liturgical and prayer level but also on the human level.”

As Sr Faustina sums it up, they experience “a great sense of community” when putting up the Christmas tree together, an experience that is “very important at a Franciscan level”.

i The Poor Clares’ 10th anniversary edition of *Calm the Soul: A Book of Simple Wisdom and Prayer* published by Hachette is available in stores nationwide and online.



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Faith bolsters new Louth GAA manager



Playing GAA and making the most of your gifts and talents praises God, **Chai Brady** hears

New manager and GAA star Ger Brennan denies being brave by speaking publicly about his Faith, instead saying he is “very lucky” to have been given the gift of grace.

The former Dublin senior footballer, and two-time All-Ireland winner, was appointed Louth’s manager in October. Like his managerial predecessor Mickey Harte, he is also very vocal about his Faith and does not shy away from giving his stance on how the positive role of the Church in Ireland has been “watered down”.

Being the fifth of nine children and growing up in inner city Dublin, the large family regularly attended the Jesuit-run Church of St Francis Xavier in Gardiner Street parish. Mr Brennan was heavily involved throughout his youth, being an altar server and taking part in the parish’s music group.

“I recall the great connection with local community. Parents and clergy were involved and it was just a lovely, safe place – a really positive experience”

Recalling his time in the parish, he told *The Irish Catholic*: “We were involved in a lot of the advent ceremonies in the lead-up to Christmas, playing music at Mass, serving Mass. I was probably in the church three to four times a week at different events. There’s a youth group there as well, so I have really great, exciting memories. I recall the great connection with local community. Parents and clergy were

involved and it was just a lovely, safe place – a really positive experience.”

On the lead up to Christmas, Mr Brennan says the children would get small gifts such as selection boxes and there was “joy and anticipation for Santa to come”. Even as a teenager, he says there was still excitement. He was involved in the Gardiner Street Gospel Choir, something he would continue throughout his teens and even past secondary school.

Creating a sense of community in an inner-city parish is hard, but the Jesuits involved in Gardiner Street “were very active and hands in in the community”, Mr Brennan says, specifically mentioning Bro. Éamonn Davis, Bro. Tom Phelan and former PP Fr Donal Neary SJ.

The Jesuits

The Jesuits engaged young people in various activities, whether that be music or swimming, which was a way of “keeping us off the road, keeping us active”, Mr Brennan adds.

He went on to Belvedere College on a scholarship programme, where his formation continued as well as his sporting prowess. At third level he studied theology in Maynooth University, along with Irish and Spanish, as his undergrad. He did his Master’s degree in Pastoral Theology at St Patrick’s Pontifical University.

Leading up to his academic pursuits, he was also involved in two, month-long stints volunteering in Columbia with the Jesuits, the first being after the Leaving Cert and the second during his first year of college. Mr Brennan had signed up for the trip two months in advance while still in school and there was spiritual formation and fundraising done in the meantime. It was during this period he was advised to take up studying theology in Maynooth.

After university Mr Brennan became a teacher of Religious Education and Irish, firstly for a year back in Belvedere and then for nearly five years in St Kevin’s College, Ballygall Road in Dublin 11.

In 2015, he became UCD’s Gaelic Games Development Executive, which he says was another opportunity to do something new.

Throughout all of this, Mr Brennan had been nurturing his talent as a footballer which would later lead him to becoming one of

the best players in Ireland. Asked how he viewed his sporting career, whether it has been challenging at times, Mr Brennan replied that he wouldn’t say that, as he has “always been of the mindset that I’m very lucky to be in this position”.

Drawing on the wisdom and spiritual teachings of the founder of the Jesuit Order, St Ignatius Loyola, he states the order’s motto, *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam* (For the greater glory of God). “Whatever it is you are doing, if you can do it for the greater glory of God, well that’s prayer and that’s making the most of your gifts and talents,” Mr Brennan says, adding that in Belvedere College they were told to write the acronym AMDG on the top-left hand corner of their notebooks – something he still occasionally does to this day.

“I’m all for natural justice, you give and you get, and you get on with it and once no one gets seriously injured it’s fair game and whoever wins, wins”

He continues: “Regardless of where your personal relationship with Christ may be, if you do have a sense of God, a sense of Faith, by doing something that adds value to other people’s lives while making the most of your gifts and talents, that’s praising God. So I always consider myself very lucky because there was thousands of other people in the city that would love to be playing Gaelic football for Dublin.”

Since he was a child, Mr Brennan’s prayer life has taken on a new meaning, particularly before a match, when there was bargaining and pleas to win as part of the intercession. He explains: “My Faith journey developed. I used to pray to win, ‘God if you let me win, I’ll go to Mass everyday’, or something like, that was in my late teens now.”

“I grew out of that quick enough in my early 20s. Then I just prayed in gratitude before a game, I’d go to Mass before matches and you just say ‘thanks, may the best man win’, and that’s it really. In a sporting context I’m all for natural justice, you give and you get, and you get on with it and once no one gets seriously injured it’s fair



New Louth manager Ger Brennan with his wife Aisling, children Patrick (6), Aoibhinn (4), baby twins Donnacha and Éabha, and friend and talented Gaelic footballer Fr Joe Campbell CC of Tullamore parish in Co. Offaly.

game and whoever wins, wins.”

Gratitude

Mr Brennan has gone from strength to strength, from GAA star to manager. He said he was “delighted” when asked to put himself forward for the role of Louth manager and go through the interview process with the chairperson and the committee.

“A lot of candidates would have been interested in it because Louth GAA is in a great place now in the last couple of years, so I felt very honoured and humbled to have been asked to take it over. I’m just grateful for being entrusted with the opportunity to bring Louth to the next level,” he said.

Asked about how he felt as a first-time manager stepping into the shoes of GAA behemoth veteran Mickey Harte, Mr Brennan said he is comfortable in his own skin.

“I’m very happy with what

I can do and cannot do, and I’m also able to ask for help and advice in areas that I mightn’t be as skilled at and that’s part of your management group, putting a good team together and listening to the ideas of others,” he said.

“I definitely have been given some sort of gift or grace, where I do sense regularly the divine presence in the world”

“Mickey and Gavin Devlin, the previous management, they did wonderful work bringing Louth from division 4 to division 2, and they certainly left it in a very, very healthy place. I don’t get overwhelmed too often, and Faith probably helps me in that regard, I’m only worried about what God thinks at the

end of it.”

He continues saying that ‘success’ is knowing that as much preparation as possible has been done for each game and that within each game “everyone has left all of themselves out there, and the result looks after itself”.

“That for me would be a success, that every time the Louth senior footballers are representing their counties that they leave it all on the field. Again, if they win, they win, if they don’t – once they left it out there – that’s success,” he insists.

Faith

Quite often, Mr Brennan says, he is told that it must take a lot of courage in “today’s climate” in Ireland to speak about his Faith. Being in his late 30s now, he insists that over the last 20 years “I’m very happy and comfortable talking about faith when people ask me questions on it, and they say ‘You’re very



Ger Brennan in action during a 2014 match.

brave', but I don't consider myself that way, I consider myself very lucky that I definitely have been given some sort of gift or grace, where I do sense regularly the divine presence in the world.

“There's another world when we move on from this, you're either going to be part of the good Kingdom or you're going to be down with the other guy”

“I'm by no means perfect, I have my faults, my sins, and none of

us are infallible so I think having a bit of compassion for myself and others is important but generally speaking it's no problem for me to have conversations with public entities, or to do talks on those lines, I'm fairly at ease, so again I consider myself lucky that way”.

Divine presence

He added: “I would feel obligated to what I feel and what I believe, that Faith in a God, in a divine presence in the world, the example of Christ in the world, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, all of those things. It just makes sense to me, and I've had so many wonderful prayerful moments and

experiences that are hard to describe and explain in a scientific way. There's another world when we move on from this, you're either going to be part of the good Kingdom or you're going to be down with the other guy – that's something I would be aware of.”

“It's all about proposing the Faith and being a visible example of a personal Faith”

An increasingly secular society and moves to erase much of the roots of Ireland's Catholic history are creating what many have described as

a cold house for Catholics. Asked about some of the challenges the Church faces in this context, Mr Brennan says: “There's probably moments where I get very frustrated and annoyed with how watered down aspects of the Faith are and the positive role the Irish Church has had in Irish society. That does bother me sometimes, but as you get a bit older and you mature, you slowly come around to the realisation that everyone is on their own journey.

“In one of Paul's letters to the Corinthians he talks about being ready to have an answer to the question of what it is you believe in and why you believe in it, so I'm more concerned about understanding that part of myself and what it is I believe in and why, and that if someone does ask, 'How do you go to Mass ever week?', 'How are you involved in the Church, look at all the abuse that went on?' I have an answer there that is my answer, that is contextual for me. It's all about proposing the Faith and being a visible example of a personal Faith”.

Balance

“But again, I have to have balance here, everyone has sins and makes mistakes, I'm absolutely by no means perfect and any of my college buddies or people

that I've grown with, they would tell you my faults as well!

“People are on their own journey and I can only be concerned with my own personal relationship with God, Christ and what that is, so when they do ask, I can share it with them, and if that triggers something in them great, if it doesn't, what can you do?”

Christmas traditions

With Christmas day fast approaching there are plenty of questions that need to be answered for a young family. Mr Brennan and his wife Aisling have a full house, and their hands full with four children, Patrick (4), Aoibhinn (4) and baby twins Donnacha and Eabha.

“You're trying to give your own kids similar experiences that we got from our own parents. Faith and sport are easy, rearing kids? Hard”

Friendly arguments over whose family they will spend Christmas, where to go to Mass etc., are all part

and parcel. Spending time with friends and family and even a dip in the sea at Portmarnock beach is on the cards – followed by a hot whiskey.

Either way he is gearing up for a very family-oriented Christmas, which will certainly be vibrant given there will be 16 grandchildren involved.

“It's a big family, so it's organised chaos but fun, you get great joy from the kids to be fair and even seeing their joy brings back memories that you would have from childhood,” he says, “Opening up the sitting room door to go in to see what Santa left you is a wonderful memory that you still have and again you're trying to give your own kids similar experiences that we got from our own parents. Faith and sport are easy, rearing kids? Hard.”

Mr Brennan adds: “Getting a small bit older you realise the most important thing that it comes down to: relationships and experiences, and if you can have wonderful experiences with people you are close to I think that helps you feel more fulfilled.”

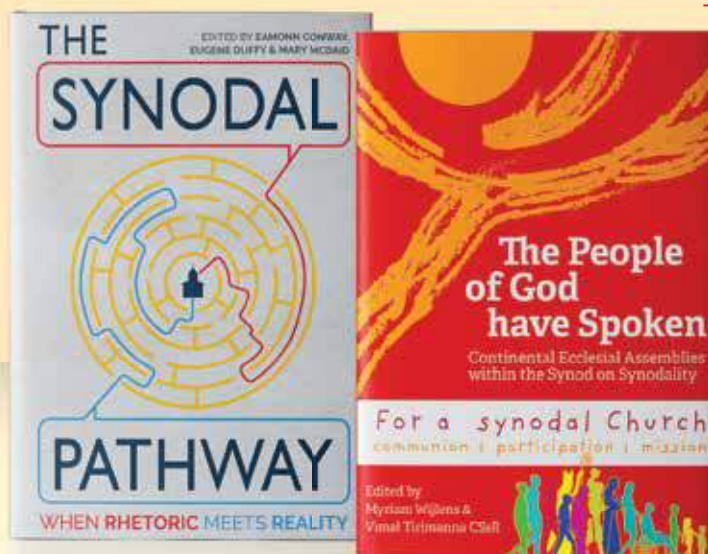


Ger Brennan is pictured in 2015 when he was Gaelic Games Executive, UCD at the UCD GAA Scholarship Awards evening in UCD, Dublin. Photo: Stephen McCarthy/Sportsfile

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The stories behind our favourite carols



The Christmas carol is a truly egalitarian tradition, Dr Andrew Gant tells **Ruadhán Jones**

Tracing the history of the Christmas carol is a rather futile exercise, but as Dr Andrew Gant's new book shows, it can be a lot of fun. Drawing from a wide array of folk, ecclesial and national traditions, the carol is a truly ecumenical and multicultural tradition.

"One of the fascinating things about trying to trace the history of the British carol tradition is that there isn't any such thing as the history of the tradition," Dr Gant, author of *Deck the Hall: The Stories of our Favourite Christmas Carols*, tells *The Irish Catholic*. He believes it to be one of

the "great joys" of the carol that it draws on so many different influences, including "songs which were often about something completely different until somebody decided they liked the tune and turned it into a Christmas carol".

Mystery

Even the origin of the word 'carol' is shrouded in mystery. Scholars believe that there's a dash of French in it, but uses of the word have changed substantially over time.

"If you go back to the early uses of it, it refers to a sort of festive piece of music," Dr Gant explains. "Not necessarily a song, it could be an instrumental piece for dancing or singing in celebration, a party piece if you like."

You can find carols on all sorts of subjects, on hunting, or about other seasons of the Church year, he adds, such as Corpus Christi, New Year's and that sort of thing.

"Shakespeare has a song 'It was a lover and his lass', the last verse begins 'This carol they began that hour,/ With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,/ How that a life was but a flower'. That's a love song, it has nothing to do with Church, certainly not Christmas. Even into the 19th Century, and the 20th actually, there was a volume that was published called *Easter Carols and Christmas Hymns*.



The Howard University Gospel Choir perform during the national tree lighting ceremony near the White House in 2021. The carol is an ecumenical and multicultural tradition. Photo: CNS/Leah Millis, Reuters.

"Easter carols are a very important part of the tradition, but we tend to use the word only for Christmas now. That's certainly not what was done in previous ages."

“A lot of the carols we know well go back many, many centuries, such as ‘Of The Father’s Heart Begotten’, which began as a Latin poem, *Corde Natus*”

But although a comprehensive history of the tradition may be impossible to write, there have been important phases.

"The 19th Century was a particularly important one," explains Dr Gant, "when scholars and folklorists began to collect and write down folk material, a huge explosion in the popularity of hymn signing with the publication of ancient and modern, and indeed composers and poets writing their own material often in a similar style."

A lot of the carols we know

well go back many, many centuries, such as 'Of The Father's Heart Begotten', which began as a Latin poem, *Corde Natus* written by the Roman poet Prudentius in the 5th Century, the historian explains. The manuscripts date back 1,500 years, and to look at them is "very moving".

Annunciation

I ask about some of the carols on the Annunciation, which showcase the varied history of our most treasured carols.

It "is not strictly speaking part of the season of Christmas, but the story feeds very directly into it," says Dr Gant. "The imagery around the angel and the visitation to Mary and to Elizabeth is a very touching and moving scene which composers and poets, painters and decorators of churches, have drawn on over many years, the image of Mary often holding a lily.

"We sing 'Angelus ad Virginem', which is a pre-Reformation, Catholic hymn. It's mentioned by Chaucer in the Miller's tale. It has been variously translated. In the 19th Century, poet's and composers started to draw all these things into an Anglican tradition if you like.

"A hymn writer by the name of John Mason Neale translated that particular poem to be sung in English churches. That one draws back on the pre-reformation Catholic tradition and in its turn, on the very opening verses of St Luke's Gospel which is, you know, where the story begins."

The second Marian carol that Dr Gant chose is the curious 'Cherry Tree' carol, one which has its roots deep in the tradition of folk song.

“In the gospel it’s a palm tree, but this idea turns up in English folk song as the cherry tree”

"This is where it gets really fascinating, because often when you trace the history of these things, it's like going for a walk through a complicated forest," he says excitedly. "Sometimes there's a path and then sometimes it just stops, you know, you don't know where it came from beyond that."

There are some clues for the Cherry Tree carol, how-

ever, which can be traced back to the apocrypha, the so-called 'gospels' that carried down pious traditions. These had little grounding in fact, but were intended to "fill in the gaps". This included the nativity apocrypha, texts written in the earlier years of the Church to narrate the childhood of Christ.

Miraculous

"You get stories of Jesus as a young boy going with his family on travels and all these miraculous things happening, charming wild beasts and causing stone statues to bow down," says Dr Gant.

"And one of the stories is as they are crossing the desert, they run out of food and water and the child Jesus commands a tree to bend down and give them some fruit, which it does.

"In the gospel it's a palm tree, but this idea turns up in English folk song as the cherry tree, where something similar happens. And as is so often the case with folk carols, there are lots of different variants. Sometimes it's Jesus who tells the tree, sometimes it's Mary;



Dr Andrew Gant



Jessica Creed, a junior at Sacred Heart Academy in Hempstead, New York, sings Christmas hymns with other members of her school's choir before Mass. Photo: CNS

sometimes it's a banana palm, sometimes its cherry and that's where this comes from and there are lots of different versions about that particular story."

I mention that one of my favourite hymns is 'The Holly and the Ivy', a curious carol clearly rooted in the folklore tradition. How it became a popular Christmas song is "a mystery", says Dr Gant.

“If you went to a Church 200 years ago, traditional favourites like ‘Good King Wenceslas’ were effectively illegal”

"There is a very rich tradition of holly and ivy songs from the Middle Ages on," he continues. "They're in various collections. But they're a fertility song, they're about winter and the coming of spring, the conflict between the holly and the ivy is about fertility, it's about male and female.

"This version had this sort of sacred element

bolted on to it. It clearly doesn't really fit does it? You know, 'The holly and the ivy, when they are both full grown, of all the trees that are in the woods the holly bears the crown' – that has nothing to do with church or Christmas. Then we get 'the rising of the sun', we were outside and suddenly we're inside listening to an organ."

"It's very odd and there are lots of folk songs that are odd," he says, pointing to another example in "I saw three ships come sailing into Bethlehem", a town nowhere near the sea. "Three ships and two passengers, and tomorrow shall be my dancing day' – what does that mean? It's impossible to say".

Folk

Because carols drew so heavily from a folk tradition, they weren't traditionally sung in Church settings up until the 19th Century. If you went to a Church 200 years ago, traditional favourites like 'Good King Wenceslas' were effectively illegal.

Even devotional poems like 'O Little Town of Beth-

lehem' or 'Once in Royal David's City' weren't common.

"Those were for singing at home or elsewhere," says Dr Gant. "'Once in Royal David's City' of was written by an Irish woman, a bishop's wife, Cecil Frances Alexander in a book of verse called hymns for little children. It was intended to be used in households' prayers at home, in the schoolroom, that kind of thing."

“They published this poem and said this poem was written by Martin Luther to sing to his children. They just made it up!”

One of the unacknowledged realities of the Christmas carol tradition is the role played by the United States in crafting some of the most popular ones: 'We Three Kings', 'It Came Upon the Midnight Clear', and 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' are a few examples. We have the US to thank for one other carol that was once



Participants of the annual Caroling on Horseback event ride and sing on rescued horses from Second Chance Equine at Trail View Farm in Larson, Wisconsin, USA. Photo: CNS

claimed to be composed by Martin Luther, 'Away in A Manger'. "Absolutely not," is Dr Gant's succinct response.

"It was published in a magazine of the Unitarian Church... they were doing a special edition to mark the 400th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther. Although they actually got the date wrong, they were a year out. They published this poem and said this poem was written by Martin Luther to sing to his children. They just made it up!"

The Unitarian Church was a "fertile source" of carols, says the English historian, a reminder that a variety of Christian traditions contributed greatly to the tradition's modern developments.

Methodism

One of the great influences on the British carolling tradition, Dr Gant explains, is the non-conformist tradition: "Methodism, Isaac Watts and the Wesley's pretty much invented the idea of mass hymn singing, which the Anglican Church actually resisted very thoroughly for a long time, basically because it took

authority away from the priest and gave it to laity and they didn't like that," he says.

"That's where we get 'Joy to the World' and 'Hark the Herald' and things of that kind. Eventually the established Church had to give in and admit that's what people wanted."

“The imagery, ‘Oh hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing!’ – it's simple, its direct, but very moving”

When asked about his personal favourite carol, Dr Gant admits it's a hard choice, "like asking you to choose your favourite child"! But he does have a soft spot for 'It Came Upon the Midnight Clear'.

"A lot of these poems are very beautifully written, very skilful," he says. "That was written by Edmund Hamilton Spears, you have Philip Brooks, Christina Rossetti – they were very good poets, they cared

about what they were doing. The imagery, 'Oh hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing!' – it's simple, its direct, but very moving."

One of the carol's "enormous strengths" is that it is so ecumenical and multicultural, both in its origins and its reach. Dr Gant hopes that his book will add to our appreciation by going into the fascinating stories that lie behind them. He finishes with one final example: 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'.

"Bishop Phillips Brooks, who lived through the American Civil War, gave the funeral oration for Abraham Lincoln and then went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to escape the violence he had seen," says Dr Gant. "He talks about walking over a hill in Bethlehem and hearing singing coming from the sepulchre and he was so moved by that, that he wrote that poem there and then."

Dr Andrew Gant's book Deck the Hall: The Stories of our Favourite Christmas Carols published by Hodder & Stoughton is available in hardback online and in store.

Handy tips to avoid marital stress this Christmas



Chai Brady

Although a time of joyful anticipation and celebration the Christmas period undoubtedly throws up stressful curve balls that for newlyweds, and even veteran married couples, cause tedious petty quarrels – or at worst seething vendettas.

Avoiding battles of pride and half-baked principles during the holidays will allow a couple to enter the New Year without their hands at each other's throats. But what does it take to do this?

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, experienced counsellor and the Director of Accord Catholic Marriage Care Service, Tony Shanahan, tackled some of the more challenging situations that can grow arms and legs, causing spousal strife.

Accord recently updated their sacramental marriage preparation programme, which will be launched in February 2024 – it is the first major review of the programme since 2003. One of the changes is the use of 'The Four Horseman', a method developed by American psychologist Prof. John Gottman to tackle ineffective communication styles between couples.

Mr Shanahan explains: "Gottman describes them as four behaviours that are relatively common but are also corrosive to satisfactory relationships. They are: Stonewalling, Defensiveness, Criticism, and Contempt.

"So we've included that material in this course. These are relatively easy concepts to grasp, I use them a lot myself in the counselling room. It's all about helping people to be more self-reflective and more giving of themselves to each other."

One of the first points of contention that comes around this time of year is where to spend Christmas day: My parents or yours? For some it may be sorted with light-hearted banter



and expedient negotiations, but of course, this is not a perfect world.

“It's a half an hour of calming down, it's not half an hour of stewing about 'What am I going to say when we start again?'”

If discussions become heated or embittered, Mr Shanahan says: "It is human nature for arguments or disagreements to get heated from time to time and one of the Gottman attitudes to that is to have 'time-outs'. This means that you disengage from the heated discussion, because once the conversation has really become heated you become emotionally flooded and you can't think rationally anymore.

"It's physiologically proven by neuroscientists that the amygdala – which is where the fight/flight response lives – once that is triggered it takes over the rational functionality of the

brain. Now you're concentrating on fighting or fleeing and getting out of the situation that is causing stress."

Mr Shanahan says that the time-out process takes about half an hour in order to 'reset' everything in the brain and calm down. He adds: "In the timeout, the couple don't talk about the issue anymore, they might go and have a walk separately, they might go to another room and read a book, have a cup of tea, what have you. They just take the time to calm down.

"It's a half an hour of calming down, it's not half an hour of stewing about 'What am I going to say when we start again?'" he insists.

Celebrations

Couples may have very different ideas about what constitutes a perfect Christmas, one may prefer boisterous and energetic celebrations while the latter enjoys something lowkey and quiet. This does not have to become a point of contention, and the trick to avoiding "heat", Mr Shanahan says, becomes a practiced art rather than a flick of a switch

that creates a utopia of peaceful consensus.

“It's about thinking in advance what is it that you want, what is it that your partner wants, discussing it with each other and coming up with a plan”

He warns: "If you keep doing the same thing, you'll always get the same result, there's no surprise there so if you want a different outcome you have to do things slightly differently. In relationships a lot of it is about communication and how you feel as opposed to how you think, but it's also about negotiation: What is important to you? What is important to me? How do you blend those together so that each gets a satisfactory Christmas out of it?"

"It is a matter of saying what you want and listening to what the other person wants and then negotiating,

and then making a plan, but also not getting upset if the plan goes off the rails – but having a strategy if this happens."

He gives the example of a couple planning to spend half an hour with 'Aunty Mary', but it turns into 90 minutes. In a situation in which both are enjoying themselves, there is no issue, however a secret sign between a couple when one wants to stick to the pre-agreed schedule is key.

"If somebody says that 'When it's time to go, I'll look at my watch and that means we'll agree that we're going to pack up', it doesn't matter if you're having the best time of your life, there is an agreement there. So it's about thinking in advance what is it that you want, what is it that your partner wants, discussing it with each other and coming up with a plan," Mr Shanahan says.

Money and budgets often can be a touchy subject, particularly around Christmas. Mr Shanahan says that there are some people who are good with money, and others, not so much.

He says: "Budgeting is really important. If you've got somebody for whom money slips through their fingers, and if you have a partner who is better at managing money, then let that person be in control of it and agree how much you are going to spend in total, how much you're going to spend on the dinner, presents for the kids, presents for each other."

Presents

Some couples may have other arrangements regarding presents at Christmas. Mr Shanahan brings up Dr Gary Chapman's *The 5 Love Languages*. Basically put, these are: Words of Affirmation (compliments), Quality Time, Gifts, Acts of Service, and Physical Touch.

He explains: "For some people giving gifts, it's very important for them, for other people they're not really interested in gifts they would much rather have quality time spent with them or they would like words of affirmation, or they would like to have something done for them. So gift-giving isn't neces-

sarily the be all and end all for everybody. It can be more challenging to find an appropriate gift with a limited budget than to have no particular budget in mind and just splash out on the first thing that is available."

He adds: "If you're somebody for whom gift-giving is important, that you love to receive gifts but your partner is not particularly interested in gifts, you can be quite disappointed that you spent a lot of money buying a wonderful gift for your partner and they don't seem to appreciate it. That's because there is a miscommunication there, because if you had been listening to your partner over time you would have realised they would much rather be told to 'sit down, have a cup of tea, let me get you a slice of cake and I'll do the Hoovering' or something like that."

“You will hear people say from time to time, ‘I shouldn’t have to say it’, but actually it is easier to say it”

During Accord's first interview with couples as part of their sacramental preparation programme the division of labour in the home is discussed – whether it will be equally shared or whether the responsibility will fall more heavily on one spouse. Asked whether gender comes into the equation, particularly regarding expectations some men have, Mr Shanahan says: "If the men in the house were not used to doing house-

work in the house they grew up, they will probably not think it is appropriate for them to be doing housework with their new partner.

"If their partner is a busy person because they have a job outside the house and maybe there are children too, then obviously it becomes even more important that the household chores are shared on a fair basis."

However, he says it is important this discussion is had openly (rather than one partner quietly becoming more enraged day by day).

"You have to say it, nobody is a mind reader," Mr Shanahan insists, "You will hear people say from time to time, 'I shouldn't have to say it', but actually it is easier to say it. If you have a particular expectation, say it, the worst thing that can happen is for the person to say 'No'. In which case you have a discussion, 'I don't think that's fair', and then move on to how to negotiate doing something differently. A lot of the time conflict in relationships is because of misunderstanding or miscommunication."

Excess

Christmas can also be a time of excess, with alcohol consumption being another argument among couples. If drinking is a problem in a relationship, the individual drinking to excess may not see it as a problem at all, but it may become problematic for the husband or wife as they see the changes in behaviour and find it difficult. Depending on how the behaviour presents itself 'difficult' may be an understatement.

Mr Shanahan advises:

"It's a matter of having an agreement, which is discussed in advance, like limiting it to three beers, or half a bottle of wine, or two gin and tonics – whatever it is they like to drink. Or switching to a non-alcoholic beer rather than cans and cans of lager".

If the agreement is not honoured? While this is human nature, Mr Shanahan says the person should do their best not to cause disappointment.

“We have bonds of loyalty, and bonds of love and affection with our family of origin, we have made a conscious decision to marry another person and they are our primary responsibility”

Regarding tackling the situation, he says it's best to do so "when things are calm, because it's always important to discuss difficult things when things are calm and people are relaxed. If the spouse is stressed or preoccupied with something else, you probably won't get a good hearing for one thing, and it would probably lead to conflict".

A couple will not always mutually enjoy the company of each other's friends or family. Sometimes they may dread the encounter – engaging their skills of avoidance to the utmost in order not to endure their company. This is not an uncommon situation and can be hugely stressful.

Mr Shanahan says that it



is no doubt a difficult situation, but again, it's about discussing what works and what doesn't work. "If there is going to be a difficult person in the house, because it has been agreed it would not be possible – perhaps it would be too rude – to exclude them, it begs the questions then:

'How will the situation be contained whilst they are here?'

'Who is going to look after them?'

'Can you keep them away from me as much as you can, and you look after them?'

And that kind of thing," he suggests.

However, he adds that part of the teaching of sacramental marriage is that the two newlyweds leave the

parental home and they form a new home for themselves, and the two become one. "Even though we have bonds of loyalty, and bonds of love and affection with our family of origin, we have made a conscious decision to marry another person and they are our primary responsibility, and that in the new home that we're setting up it is our responsibility to bring up our children in the best environment possible. If you're forced into an unfortunate situation where you have to choose between one or the other, really you have to choose the person you've chosen to marry and what makes that relationship work," Mr Shanahan says.

Family loyalties can be put to the test to the extreme when pressure mounts from parents or friends to follow tradition around the holidays. How do you stand up to the people by whom you have been reared and who have sacrificed much?

Parents

Mr Shanahan says if this situation presents itself, and is causing issues, parents must be "stood up to".

"There are always ways to handle situations with diplomacy, with delicacy, as the psychologists would call it, 'Having boundaries'. So that you are saying firmly, but politely, and respectfully, what works for you and what doesn't work for you so that a domineering mother, or a domineering father doesn't take over a situation or doesn't take over the happiness of a relationship".

A heart-breaking situation, perhaps the most difficult of all for a person of deep faith, is if their husband or wife begins to fall away from religious practice, or even rejects it completely. Coming up to Christmas, a spouse declining to join the

rest of the family for Christmas Mass can spur a variety of reactions – some more constructive than others.

“I think one of the most interesting texts in the Bible is in one of John's letters [John 4:16], where he says ‘God is love, and who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him’”

Mr Shanahan believes it is a matter of "live and let live".

"If you are a very practicing Catholic say, and your partner isn't, it will only add to the stress and the tension if you are pushing that partner or berating them for not coming to the services and so on," he says.

It's better to be accepting and loving, and in time they may come around because we all see things differently at different times in our lives. Life experience gives us different perspectives, different maturities. Sometimes it's not so much that we're against the Faith, it may be against some particular experience we might have had with some member of the Church. But actually the Faith itself is about the Good News of Christ and the love of God, the loving Father and I think one of the most interesting texts in the Bible is in one of John's letters [John 4:16], where he says 'God is love, and who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him'."

He adds: "I think a lot of people talk about being spiritual and so on, but I think a lot of people are a lot closer to God than they really know, because they have loving relationships."



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Out&About

Ring in the season with song



KERRY: St Mary's Cathedral Killarney fills with music and candlelight as choirs from all over Killarney Parish gather to celebrate Christmas on Sunday, December 17. Photo: Valerie O'Sullivan



KERRY: Pictured are the graduates of CPE (Hospital Chaplaincy Preparatory Program) at University Hospital Kerry.



TYRONE: Pictured are the senior students in Dean Maguire College who led an Advent assembly for all Year 10 pupils to begin the season.

IN SHORT

Malachi Cush launches new Christmas single

Embracing the spirit of Christmas, singer-songwriter Malachi Cush has unveiled a new single in collaboration with the Omagh Community Youth Choir.

His composition entitled *Sleep Oh Infant Child* draws from the hope and love of the Christmas story.

Speaking about his inspiration for track Mr Cush said: "At this magical time of year our thoughts naturally turn to the birth of Christ and the radiant star over Bethlehem, so I wanted to create a song that families could connect with, something truly special for the festive season. "As I composed the lyrics, the idea of a choir

elevating the chorus seemed like the perfect addition. Having worked alongside the Omagh Community Youth Choir on a few occasions I knew they were the perfect choice, a group with a remarkable 25-year legacy."

Daryl Simpson from Omagh Community Youth Choir said: "Having Omagh Community Youth Choir join Malachi was an honour for our young people and hopefully added a youthful joy to this wonderful song. Hopefully, it will become an annual staple in years to come."

Kildare church marks 40th anniversary

One of the newest churches in the diocese of Kildare and Leighlin celebrated the

40th anniversary of its opening on Sunday, December 3.

Cill Mhuire in Newbridge, Co. Kildare which cost £380,000 to build back in 1983, was opened by the late Bishop Patrick Lennon. It caters mainly for parishioners on the Curragh side of the town.

The church was crowded as Bishop Denis Nulty concelebrated Mass to mark the anniversary. He was joined by Fr Ruairi Ó Domhnaill PP, Fr Joe McDermott, Fr Tom Lalor and Fr Peter Jakubiak. Deacon Jim Stowe and parish sister for over two decades, Sr Eileen Murphy, also attended.

Parishioners who had significant liturgical events and lay people who helped in ministries or parish activities over the past 40 years participated in a proces-

sion as Mass began. Among those taking part were the first people to be baptised and married when Cill Mhuire opened. Members of the African, Indian and Polish communities also processed.

Bishop Nulty recalled that back at the opening in 1983, the parish priest Fr Seán Swayne urged the people of Newbridge to bond together as a Christian community where the poor will not be neglected and people coming here to live will be welcomed.

After the Mass a huge number of parishioners enjoyed refreshments and shared stories about events over the past four decades in the nearby Scoil Mhuire.

Christmas

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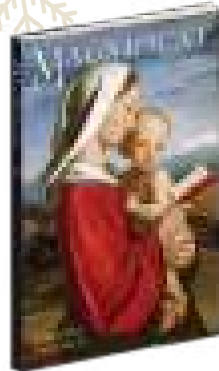


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KILDARE: Emma and Goran Pipunic take a well-deserved break after providing music at the 40th anniversary Mass in Cill Mhuire.



KILDARE: Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin Denis Nulty receives the offertory gifts as he leads the celebration of Mass in Cill Mhuire, Newbridge.



KILDARE: Altar servers hold the bishop's mitre and crozier beside the new statue of Our Lady of Grace at Cill Mhuire, Newbridge.



KILDARE: Laura Scully, the first person baptised in Cill Mhuire parish church, Newbridge, carries the paschal candle to the altar during the Church's 40th anniversary Mass.



GALWAY: SVP Galway City East volunteer Máire Mhic Aodha (left) receives a generous donation of kindling from SISK Builders Contractors Galway. Ms Mhic Aodha is pictured with Michael Joyce, Olga Vencele and Gareth Peake, all of SISK.



KILKENNY: Brian Cody addresses a conference on Catholic education in St Kieran's College, speaking about the importance of good leadership.



DOWN: Fr Alphonsus Chukwunye lights the first Advent candle during Mass at Newry Cathedral, marking the beginning of the Advent season.

Edited by Ruadhán Jones
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Events deadline is a week in advance of publication



DUBLIN: Members of Dublin City University's Catholic chaplaincy and chaplain Fr Seamus McEntee enjoy an end of semester party in the build up to Christmas.



DUBLIN: Young members of the Ukrainian Catholic community in Dublin meet St Nicholas as the chaplaincy in Our Lady of Consolation, Donnycarney, celebrates his feast day.



BELFAST: Singer-songwriter Malachi Cush is pictured with the Omagh Community Youth Choir, with whom he collaborated on his new Christmas single *Sleep Oh Infant Child*.



WATERFORD: Bishop of Waterford and Lismore Alphonsus Cullinan braves the cold December afternoon outside Waterford cathedral to reach out to people, giving blessings and chatting.



WICKLOW: Nathan Carter performs in concert in St Patrick's Church, having been preceded on the stage by Jack Keogh and St Patrick's Parish Choir under the direction of Jackie Olanhan.



THERE IS NO EVENTS COLUMN THIS WEEK, IT WILL RETURN IN THE NEW YEAR.



World Report

IN BRIEF

Women religious sue gunmaker Smith & Wesson

● Four congregations of women religious filed suit against the board of gunmaker Smith & Wesson on December 5 in a Las Vegas court, the day before a shooter killed three people and critically wounded a fourth on the University of Nevada, Las Vegas campus five miles away.

As reported by Global Sisters Report, the Adrian Dominicans, Sisters of Bon Secours, Sisters of St Francis of Philadelphia and the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary filed what's known as a derivative lawsuit, where shareholders in the company sue corporate boards for allegedly failing their responsibilities to shareholders.

The sisters say corporate directors at Smith & Wesson Brands have exposed the company to massive liabilities by its manufacture, sale and marketing of AR-15 style rifles.

Two Ohio dioceses considering merger

● Two Ohio dioceses are considering a potential merger, according to a joint letter issued December 11 by Bishop Earl K. Fernandes of the Diocese of Columbus, Ohio, and Bishop Paul J. Bradley, apostolic administration of the Diocese of Steubenville, Ohio, who said they "have begun very preliminary discussions regarding the potential merger of the dioceses".

The bishops said "the Apostolic Nunciature has

asked the dioceses to work together to consider how different dimensions of the dioceses, including the temporal aspects of life, might be affected by such a proposal".

The move comes a year after a similar attempt was put on hold by former Steubenville Bishop Jeffrey M. Monforton, who admitted he encountered "disappointment and even fear" among faithful regarding the prospect.

Pope reveals burial plans

● Pope Francis said he has decided to be buried in Rome's Basilica of St Mary Major instead of in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican and that he has simplified the rites for a papal funeral.

In a December 12 interview with Mexican news outlet N+, the Pope said he had already discussed preparations for a papal funeral with his master of liturgical ceremonies, Archbishop Diego Giovanni Ravelli.

"We simplified them quite a bit," he said, and jokingly added that "I will premiere the new ritual".

Breaking with recent tradition, Pope Francis said he has chosen to be buried at the Basilica of St Mary Major because of his "very strong connection" with the church. Pope Leo XIII, who died in 1903, was the last pope not buried at St. Peter's Basilica; Pope Leo's tomb is in the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome.

Still recovering from what he described as bronchitis that has affected him since late November – prompting him to cancel a planned trip to the United Arab Emirates – the Pope said he feels "quite well" physically and continues to improve.

Yet asked if people should be concerned about his health, he responded, "Yes, a little bit, yes. I need them to pray for my health".

Kyiv parish enshrines St John Paul II relics

● A Catholic church in Ukraine named for St Nicholas marked its patron's feast day by enshrining relics from St John Paul II, who witnessed the power of faith over authoritarianism.

The Roman Catholic Church of St Nicholas in Kyiv, part of the Diocese of Kyiv-Zhytomyr, celebrated a patronal Mass on December 6, after which faithful had an opportunity to venerate the relics of the late pope.

For the occasion, an exhibition of works entitled 'Strength to Endure' by Kyiv artist Svitlana Sevostyanchyk was displayed, with Ms Sevostyanchyk donating a picture of St Nicholas in military uniform, symbolising protection, to the church.

St Nicholas' pastor, Oblate of Mary Immaculate Fr Pavlo Vyshkovskiy, told the Ukrainian national news agency *Ukrinform* the event was "a very important one".

Cardinal Becciu, five others sentenced to prison at Vatican trial

The Vatican City State criminal court sentenced Cardinal Angelo Becciu to five years and six months in prison on two counts of embezzlement and one of aggravated fraud but found him not guilty of abuse of office or witness tampering.

The 75-year-old cardinal's attorney, Fabio Vegliione, told reporters his client would appeal.

The three-judge panel of the Vatican court handed down the verdicts late on December 16. In addition to Cardinal Becciu, five other people were sentenced to jail time ranging from three years to seven years and were ordered to pay the Vatican millions of euros in damages.

Pending appeal, none of the six people given jail terms were taken into custody.

Only one of the 10 defendants, Msgr Mauro Carlino, the former secretary of then-Archbishop Becciu when he served as *sostituto*, the No. 3 position in the Vatican Secretariat of State, was found not guilty of all charges.

Enrico Crasso, a long-time investment manager who often worked with the Vatican, received the stiffest sentence: seven years in jail.

René Brühlhart and Tommaso di Ruzza, respectively former president and former director of the Vatican's financial watchdog agency, now known as the Supervisory and Financial Information Authority, were "absolved" of the charge of abuse of office but were



Venerando Marano, Giuseppe Pignatone and Carlo Bonzano, judges of the Vatican City State court, read their verdict in the trial of Cardinal Angelo Becciu and nine others on charges of financial malfeasance December 16, in a makeshift courtroom at the Vatican Museums. Photo: CNS

found guilty of negligence for not reporting a suspect financial operation. They each were fined €1,750.

The trial revolved around the Vatican's investment in a property in London's chic Chelsea district. But the way the deal was structured and restructured ended up costing the Vatican as much as \$200 million. Cardinal Becciu was the No. 3 official at the Vatican Secretariat of State when the property deal, using money invested by the secretariat, was first made in 2014.

The cardinal and three oth-

ers – Raffaele Mincione, Fabrizio Tirabassi and Enrico Crasso – were found guilty of embezzlement for taking \$200.5 million from the Secretariat of State's investment fund – a third of the entire fund – and investing it with Athena Capital Commodities.

The court described the fund as being "highly speculative" and risky, which violated Vatican guidelines and canon law on the use of Church funds.

Mr Mincione, who ran Athena Capital, was found guilty of money laundering for using the Vatican funds to buy

the London property, but the court said Cardinal Becciu, Mr Tirabassi and Mr Crasso were not responsible for the London property disaster because they had no control over the money once it was invested with Athena.

The cardinal also was accused of embezzling money that he gave to a Caritas project run by his brother in Sardinia and for aggravated fraud for giving more than €570,000 of Vatican money to a woman named Cecilia Marogna, who claimed she could help win the release of a nun kidnapped in Mali.

'Groundbreaking' gene-editing therapy gets thumbs up from Catholic bioethicist

A new gene-editing therapy called Casgevy, which is designed to help treat patients suffering from sickle cell disease, has been endorsed by the US-based National Catholic Bioethics Center and its president, Dr Joseph Meaney.

Casgevy is a new gene therapy developed by Vertex Pharmaceuticals that uses CRISPR, a genome-editing technology, to modify a patient's blood cells and reverse the problems caused by sickle cell disease.

In an interview with *EWTN News Nightly* anchorwoman Tracy Sabol, Dr Meaney called the new therapy, which is the first of its kind to receive FDA approval, "groundbreaking" and said that from a Catholic perspective it "is a very licit therapy" that "hopefully will be effective".

"The Church has said since *Donum Vitae* really that gene therapies can be acceptable as long as they're

strictly therapeutic. That is to say that gene therapy is used to treat a genetic disease," Dr Meaney explained.

He noted that while there "are other people out there who want to do gene therapies to do human enhancement", such as through "germline" gene editing that targets the reproductive cells in the body to design babies with preferred traits, that is not the case with Casgevy.

"This current therapy is actually for individuals 12 years old and older and will affect a very serious disease and try to cure them," Dr Meaney explained.

Casgevy is a new treatment for sickle cell disease, a blood disorder caused by a genetic mutation that damages the red blood cells, causing them to take on a sickle-like shape that ends up restricting blood flow and limiting oxygen delivery to the

body.

The result is severe pain, organ damage, life-threatening disabilities, and ultimately the possibility of death.

Because of the need for effective sickle cell treatment, the FDA expedited Casgevy's development and gave it priority review. The therapy received FDA approval for ages 12 and up.

Dr Meaney said the newly FDA-approved gene treatments do not present any such moral qualms and that the primary ethical concern for these therapies is whether the benefits outweigh the costs.

In the Catholic understanding, Dr Meaney explained, "the proportion of benefits and possible side effects" need to be examined in every therapy.



Edited by Ruadhán Jones
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Dedicated devotees...



Pilgrims sleep outside the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City on December 12 the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas. Photo: OSV News/Quetzalli Nichte-Ha, Reuters

Cardinal 'ashamed' as lawmaker puts out Hanukkah candles in Poland's parliament

Cardinal Grzegorz Rys of Lodz, chairman of the Committee for Dialogue with Judaism of the Polish bishops' conference, strongly condemned the incident in which a far-right Polish lawmaker used a fire extinguisher to put out Hanukkah candles in the Sejm, the country's parliament.

"In connection with the incident in the Sejm committed by Mr MP Grzegorz Braun, who extinguished the Hanukkah candles and declared that he was not ashamed of what he had done, I declare that I am ashamed and apologise to the entire Jewish community in Poland," Cardinal Rys wrote.

Mr Braun, who belongs to the Confederation party, provoked outrage from members of faith communities and other members of parliament when he used a fire extinguisher to put out Hanukkah candles December 12 during an afternoon event with members of the Jewish community.

Traditional lighting of Hanukkah candles has taken place for the last 17 years in the Polish Sejm.

Rabbi Szalom Ber Stambler and Deputy Speaker of Parliament Piotr Zgorzel-ski lit Hanukkah candles before Mr Braun put them out.

"All decent people think

exactly the same thing, this is an unacceptable thing, this must never happen again. This is a disgrace," said Donald Tusk, newly appointed prime minister.

Poland's Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich told *Reuters* by telephone that Braun's actions were not representative of the country and that he was "embarrassed" by them.

"Someone extinguished the Hanukkah candles and a few minutes later we relit them," Rabbi Schudrich told *Reuters*. "For thousands of years our enemies have been trying to extinguish us, from the time of the Maccabees right through to Hamas. But our

enemies should learn, they cannot extinguish us," he added.

Polish private television channel TVN24 posted footage on its website that showed Mr Braun using the extinguisher on the Hanukkah menorah, or hanukkah – a nine-branched candelabrum lit during the eight-day Jewish holiday of Hanukkah – creating a white cloud.

Asked just after the incident if he was ashamed, Mr Braun replied: "Those who take part in acts of satanic worship should be ashamed," *Reuters* agency reported.



Pope to authorise studies on key synod topics

● The council of the Synod of Bishops will ask Pope Francis to authorise studies on the need to update canon law, revise the rules for priestly formation, deepen a theological reflection on the diaconate – including the possibility of ordaining women deacons – and consider revising a document that provides norms for the relationship of a bishop with members of religious orders in his diocese.

"These are matters of great importance, some of which need to be considered at the level of the whole Church and in collaboration with the dicasteries of the Roman Curia," said a statement from the Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod.

The council met at the Vatican December 5 to discuss preparations for the second assembly of the synod on synodality, which Pope Francis has said will meet in October 2024. Exact dates have not been set.

In the statement, published December 12, the council said the list of study topics it will ask the Pope to approve was requested by members of the synod assembly in October.

Vatican rules on cremated remains

● Under certain circumstances, it may be permissible for a Catholic to keep a small portion of a deceased loved one's ashes in a personal place of significance if some conditions are met, according to the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The guidance came from a letter written by Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, who serves as the dicastery's prefect. The letter was sent in response to an inquiry from Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi, the archbishop of Bologna, Italy.

According to Cardinal Fernández, the ecclesiastical authority may consider and evaluate a

request from a deceased person's family "to preserve in an appropriate way a minimal part of the ashes of their relative in a place of significance for the history of the deceased person".

However, this can only be the case if the family rejects "every type of pantheistic, naturalistic, or nihilistic misunderstanding", the letter emphasised. It added that the ashes of the deceased "are [to be] kept in a sacred place".

The Church shows "particular care and devotion" concerning the relics of the saints" Cardinal Fernández added, saying the same attention must be given to the ashes of the deceased.

Vatican Museums share hidden images

● The Vatican Museums has launched an initiative to give visitors – online and in person – a 'backstage' peek into the secrets, curiosities and insights discovered by their art restorers.

When cleaning, repairing and analysing major works of art up close or with X-rays or infrared radiation, experts often find unexpected and hidden details.

The new yearlong initiative lets visitors learn more about some of the discoveries and view details concealed or hard to see in some 36 masterpieces.

The new digital initiative, 'Beyond the surface. Through the eyes of the restorer', was inaugurated at the Vatican Museums on December 11.

Wherever museum visitors see a self-standing placard with a QR code in front of a masterpiece, they can scan it with a smartphone to access about a dozen or more other images and explanations about the artwork that would otherwise be impossible to see.

The initiative celebrates the 100th year anniversary of the establishment of the museums' first restoration laboratory, which is dedicated to the conservation of all paintings, frescoes and art works made with wood materials belonging to the Holy See.

UK survey shows 'shocking' impact of Covid church closures

A survey released this month by a British Catholic organisation demonstrates what the group says were the "shocking" effects of Covid-19-related church closures in that country.

Catholic Union, a lay organisation that bills itself as "dedicated to the defense of Catholic values in Parliament and public life", said that its survey of almost 1,000 is "the first major study of Catholic attitudes towards the closure of churches during the pandemic and the impact

this had on people's well-being".

The group announced the survey in October of this year. The results will be submitted to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, a public investigation examining the country's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Catholic Union Director Nigel Parker said in October that the group was "committed to making sure [churches] are never forced to close again", with Mr Parker urging the faithful to "take part in our survey to

make sure the voices of Catholics are heard as part of this inquiry".

In its release this month, the group revealed that more than 60% of respondents "said that their physical or mental health had been affected by church closures".

Almost 90% said it was "unhelpful having different legal restrictions on churches across different regions and nations of the UK".

Letter from Rome

Even if the Pope changes conclave rules, don't say it hasn't happened before



John L. Allen Jr

H.L. Mencken once famously quipped that love is like war, in that it's easy to begin but very hard to stop. Had Mencken plied his journalistic trade in the internet age, he might well have added rumours to that list, which are notoriously easy these days to put into circulation and virtually impossible to extinguish once they're in the digital ether.

That may help explain why, despite two separate denials of mounting intensity, speculation continues to make the rounds that Pope Francis has tasked a veteran Italian cardinal and canon lawyer with preparing changes to the rules governing the next papal election, including the possibility of the participation of laity, either beforehand or even in the balloting itself.

Veteran Italian journalist Massimo Franco published an essay in the country's paper of record, *Corriere della Sera*, under the provocative headline, "The ghost document that 'changes' the Conclave: Denials and tensions. The hypothesis of an attack against Pope Francis."

“It's false that I saw the Pope to discuss it. The reality is that I don't know anything, and I've never been asked for an opinion. I'm not involved”

Mr Franco quotes Cardinal Gianfranco Ghirlanda, the canon law expert whose name has been linked to the rumors about conclave changes, basically issuing a flat denial: "It's a lie that I'm preparing a document on the conclave," the 81-year-old said. "It's false that I saw

the Pope to discuss it. The reality is that I don't know anything, and I've never been asked for an opinion. I'm not involved. If something is being prepared elsewhere, I don't know about it."

Noting that the reports originally came from two conservative American Catholic news sites, Mr Franco styles the situation as another reflection of a polarised Church. He quotes an unnamed figure he describes as "very close to Francis" who denounced the rumours as the "dishonesty of whoever arrives at such lies in order to discredit the Pontiff," seeing it as "an action of the Evil One who wants to divide the Church with lies".

As Mr Franco rightly notes, in Catholic argot, invoking the devil is tantamount to sounding the loudest alarm you've got.

Divisions

While there's no question that divisions in Catholicism run deep, what's not immediately clear is precisely how these reports, in particular, would amount to an "attack" on Francis, since, if anything, they seem likely to make his most ardent admirers happy.

After all, they don't suggest any corruption, abuse of power or doctrinal heresy, and politically speaking, the perception that Francis may be considering involving laity in the conclave process – almost regardless of what eventually happens – may help the Pope at least as much as it hurts.

In other words, if this is an attack, it seems pretty off-target.

While we wait to see how things shake out, there are three other bits of context worth bearing in mind.

First, as I've noted before, in some ways it's surprising Francis hasn't already issued a new set of conclave rules. Three of his four predecessors issued their own norms governing papal elections, and the only reason Pope John Paul I didn't do so is because he wasn't around long enough. We know he planned to do so, because he discussed it with Italian journalist Gian Franco Svidercoschi, including the possibility of including the presidents of



In this file photo, before entering the conclave, cardinals concelebrate Mass for the election of the Roman pontiff in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in 2013. Photo: OSV News/Paul Haring, CNS

bishops' conferences among the electors.

(Mr Franco actually cited the Crux piece in which I made that point, adding that "to believe that these precedents are enough to stop the attacks, however, is an illusion," and of course he's right – in the Church, like everywhere else, facts rarely get in the way of a good fight.)

“It wasn't until 1059 that the electoral body was restricted to cardinals, and even after that, non-cardinals occasionally cast ballots”

Second, if Francis were to decree that non-cardinals could participate in the next papal election, it might be spun as a big deal, but it hardly would be unprecedented.

We could start with the fact that the first use of the term "cardinal" to designate a cleric of the city of Rome dates to the sixth Century, which means that cardinals had no role in the choice

of popes for at least 500 years. It wasn't until 1059 that the electoral body was restricted to cardinals, and even after that, non-cardinals occasionally cast ballots.

In 1417, for example, a conclave took place during the Council of Constance in order to heal a schism involving three rival claimants to the papacy. In order to produce a clear-cut result to which everyone could agree, the electoral body was composed of 23 cardinals and 30 representatives of the five nations represented at the council, meaning England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

Those non-cardinal delegates were clergy, including bishops, religious superiors, and deacons, though some of those deacons were essentially honorary positions who functioned as members of lay society, such as lawyers, politicians and university professors.

(As a footnote, one of the delegates representing Italy was Pandolfo Malatesta, at the time an archdeacon from Bologna. He was also a relative of Sigismondo

Pandolfo Malatesta, a secular ruler of Rimini who would go on to become the one and only victim in Church history of an "infernal canonisation," meaning an infallible declaration by a pope that a soul is destined for hell. That, however, is a story for another time.)

The result was that in 1417, not only did cardinals not have the exclusive right to elect the pope, they weren't even a majority. So, don't say it hasn't happened before.

Participation

As far as lay participation in a conclave goes, it's worth recalling that in the early centuries of the Church, all bishops, including the Bishop of Rome, were chosen by a consensus of the clergy and laity of the diocese.

Over time that practice changed, but even in later eras secular monarchs in Europe claimed (and exercised) a right to veto papal candidates, which was known as the *Jus exclusivae*.

Though that right was never officially recognised in Church law, and several popes over the centuries

issued decrees seeking to either curtail or abolish it, the "right of exclusion" continued to be employed until the early 20th Century, when Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria successfully prevented the election of Italian Cardinal Mariano Rampolla in 1903, in a conclave that instead produced Cardinal Giuseppe Sarto as Pope Pius X.

In other words, it's hardly as if laity have never before had a voice in picking popes, even if the laity involved most recently were of a fairly rarified sort.

To sum up: Maybe Pope Francis is contemplating changes to conclave rules, maybe he isn't. (Though if he is, he apparently isn't discussing it with Ghirlanda.)

But even if we take recent reports completely at face value, none of it would amount to a true novelty – because with a Church with more than 2,000 years of history under its belt, pretty much everything, and its opposite, has happened at least once.

i John L. Allen Jr. is editor of Crux

Central American bishops warn of 'unprecedented' migration crisis



**Eduardo Campos
Lima**

With an unprecedented rise in 2023 in the number of immigrants crossing Central America in an effort to reach the United States and Canada, the bishops of the region are urging local governments to establish adequate programs to deal with them and to ensure their safety.

The migration crisis was the main concern of prelates gathered in Guatemala November 27-30 for the Episcopal Secretariat of Central America's annual assembly. In their final document, released on the last day of the encounter, the bishops emphasised that Central American nations are not properly addressing the problem.

"We notice the growing vitality of the human mobility pastoral ministries of our Churches, as opposed to the ineffectiveness of the government programs, totally conditioned by state policies that define migrants as a danger to security," the declaration read.

The letter defined the "migration drama" as a "cry which is not sufficiently heard," and mentioned the migrant caravans of "unemployed youth, whose lives are endangered by violence".

“Honduras keeps being one of the main sources of immigrant youth in the region”

"Many of them [end up] criminalised in detention centres and in the uncertainty regarding their future. They are heroes of our countries' economies, sending revenues earned in environments of underemployment and grave deprivation," the Central American bishops said.

Bishop Javier Román



Migrants, mostly from Venezuela, are seen from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, crossing the Rio Grande September 21, 2023, to return to Mexico from the United States, after members of the US Texas National Guard extended razor wire to inhibit migrant crossing. The group planned to seek asylum in the US. Photo: OSV News/Jose Luis Gonzalez, Reuters

Arias of Limón, Costa Rica, told *Crux* that the migration crisis, along with the region's economic, environmental, and social challenges, appeared in the presentations of all delegations that took part in the assembly.

Complexities

"There are particularly complex situations going on on the borders between Panama and Costa Rica and Guatemala and Mexico. Honduras keeps being one of the main sources of immigrant youth in the region," Bishop Arias said.

Auxiliary Bishop Daniel Blanco of San José, Costa Rica, who is in charge of the country's commission on human mobility, told *Crux* that the Central American episcopate "is aware of the immigrant crisis in the region and has been continually working to attend to the needs of the travellers".

"All over the region, the Church accompanies the immigrants in the cities and on the roads. Dioceses and congregations have welcome centres to give

them temporary shelter and legal assistance offices to help them obtain documents," Bishop Blanco affirmed.

Venezuelans, Haitians, and Ecuadorians continue to make up the majority of the immigrants heading north from Colombia, "but there are people of more than 30 nationalities getting into Panama every month, including brothers and sisters from Africa and Asia," he explained.

“Those people are being really expelled from their countries due to harsh socioeconomic circumstances”

"The crossing of the Darien Gap between Colombia and Panama [a wild forest region with several criminal gangs] is one of the most dangerous routes for immigrants in the world," Bishop Blanco said.

Most immigrants want to move to the United

States to find work, but many end up remaining in countries such as Panama and Costa Rica, where they find a stability that does not exist in their original nations. That's an additional reason why the bishops are demanding that local governments provide programs to take care of the immigrants.

State of emergency

"Last month, Costa Rica decreed a state of emergency due to migration, something that enables the government to more easily allocate funds to the necessary programs," Bishop Blanco said.

Fr Gustavo Meneses, in charge of the Mesoamerican and Caribbean Socio-Pastoral Observatory of Human Mobility (known as OSMECA in Spanish), told *Crux* that around 500,000 immigrants crossed the Darien Gap in 2023. According to the United Nations' International Organisation for Migration, 82,000 people got into Panama in

August alone.

"Those people are being really expelled from their countries due to harsh socioeconomic circumstances. People leave because they cannot find dignified living conditions," he said.

“The bishops discussed during the assembly last week a way of offering help to the volunteers, including psychological attention”

The Church has been among the most active social organisations dealing with the problem. It receives support from UN's branches that work with children, immigrants, and refugees, but also uses its own resources to do so.

"The Church's financial situation is very difficult now. Most of the donations come from local dioceses and parishes," he said.

Catholic centres for immigrants depend on

the work of volunteers. According to Fr Meneses, there are very well-established Church groups of lay people in all Central American nations working with immigrants.

"But that's a rather demanding task. That's why the bishops discussed during the assembly last week a way of offering help to the volunteers, including psychological attention," he added.

Fr Meneses said that the Central American episcopate plans to release a pastoral letter about immigration in 2024. It is part of an effort to denounce the crisis to society and increase the pressure on the local governments.

"We plan to promote gatherings between communities in Central America and the ones where immigrants live in the United States in order to increase awareness on the crisis. We also want to reach out to politicians, both in the region and in the United States," Fr Meneses said.

i Eduardo Campos Lima writes for *Crux*



Letters

Letter of the week

Pray for suffering Christians in Bethlehem

Dear Editor, Christians in Bethlehem are facing immense challenges amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. The uncertainty and fear that has gripped the region has taken a toll on the lives of the residents, especially those who depend on tourism for their livelihoods.

Bethlehem is not only a spiritual home but also a community grappling with the devastating impact of the conflict. The residents, many of

whom rely on the tourism industry, find themselves in an unfortunate position as their main source of income has been obliterated by the hostilities. These are our brethren facing economic hardship, an uncertain future and are suffering. They are quickly becoming a smaller and smaller minority in the majority Muslim town. First the pandemic, and now war, it seems more and more likely with these devastating

events there will be no Christians left in the birthplace of Christ. Already ancient Christian communities in the Middle East are fading away – leaving in favour of greener pastures.

It is incumbent upon us to extend our support to the Christians in Bethlehem. Let our prayers serve as a beacon of hope amidst the conflict.

*Yours etc.,
Gary Horan
Swords, Dublin*

Confession is a channel of grace

Dear Editor, I was delighted to read Darach Ó Maoláin's idea that the Sacrament of Reconciliation should be viewed as an act of humility, [The Irish Catholic – December 7, 2023] rather than a 'guilt trip'. He gives me hope that the laity will renew the Church. If used as frequently as he suggests, i.e. weekly, the Sacrament of Reconciliation can certainly become a path to heroic humility as one confesses the same vice e.g. unexpressed but felt anger, over and over again, for years. However, I would like to advise any confessors reading this or experiencing this kind of penitence to guard against, if at all possible, the slightest sign of irritation at such a confession, believing, as you have been correctly taught that only mortal sins need to be confessed. Please remember, the sacrament is a channel of grace, and you are the instrument that God uses to make that grace available to us, so don't erect a barrier with your obvious irritation, impatience, even unavailability. Thoughts begin as feelings, and these, we are told by the divine master, can be mortal sins Mt 5:28. We though, are called to be as perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect Mt 5:48.

*Yours etc,
Jane Campbell
Ballina, Co. Mayo*



Protecting priests and meeting the future

Dear Editor, As reported, Glen Philips a parish manager stated 'that there is a growing danger of a "class divide" emerging between parishes if there isn't proper financial investment in lay ministries [The Irish Catholic – December 7, 2023].

But is the real issue the fact that in the coming years there is likely to be less and less priests to minister and manage parishes

across our country? Unless there are changes to who can become a priest or deacon, we will be more reliant on overseas priests. But in the interim, there is surely a potential safeguarding concern that our elderly priests may feel pressured to work beyond what is in the interest of their mental and physical health. The idea of a well-trained parish

manager and other trained lay people to share the burden, is one way to protect our priests and meet the future pastoral needs of our parish communities.

*Yours etc.,
Deacon Frank Browne
Rathfarnham, Dublin 16*

Properly compensating lay ministers

Dear Editor, There will certainly emerge a "class divide" among parishes in Ireland due to the lack of proper financial investment in lay ministries as noted in your front page article [The Irish Catholic – December 7, 2023]. The insights provided by Glen Philips, Ireland's first parish manager, shed light on the challenges faced by working-class parishes in securing volunteers and the importance of addressing issues related to pay and job security for lay ministers.

The call for expanded lay ministries and increased

responsibility for parishioners is undoubtedly commendable, reflecting the evolving nature of our Church and the desire to encourage greater co-responsibility among the laity. Expecting individuals to volunteer their time without proper compensation will of course lead to a stark divide between wealthier and working-class parishes.

Glen Philips rightly points out the difficulty in attracting full-time lay ministers when volunteers are already in short supply. The potential for a "class divide" underscores the need for adequate funding to

ensure that all parishes have the resources to support their ministries effectively. The notion of relying on retirees who may have the means and time to volunteer places an unfair burden on working-class parishes, where individuals may not have the luxury of early retirement.

Ger Gallagher's perspective on the impossibility of encouraging greater responsibilities hits the nail on the head. It is unrealistic to expect commitment without recognising the value of the time and effort invested by laypeople. As he rightly emphasises, a clear plan

for investment in lay ministry is essential to reverse the decline in active employment of lay individuals by the Church.

In echoing these concerns, I implore the hierarchy to carefully consider the implications of these challenges and work towards a sustainable and inclusive model that values and compensates the commitment of lay ministers across all parishes.

*Yours etc.,
Catherine Mallee
Castleknock, Dublin 15*

Referendum is an attack on marriage

Dear Editor, I write regarding the sentiments raised in a recent article [The Irish Catholic – December 7, 2023] about the proposed referendum to amend the Constitution, particularly the alterations to Article 41. As the government considers changes to expand the concept of family and eliminate references to the home, it is rightly cautioned that the move will downgrade the significance of marriage in society.

The Iona Institute statement that the proposed rewording of the family section to include relationships beyond marriage may undermine the special value attributed to the institution of marriage is noteworthy. Marriage, as a cornerstone of our society, deserves to be acknowledged and upheld in its uniqueness. Altering the constitutional language to encompass a broader range of relationships raises questions about whether the State fully recognises and values the distinct role of marriage. Which of course, it does not. It is an attack on marriage.

Equally noteworthy is the removal of references to the role of women in the home, with the proposed replacement no longer mentioning the home at all. This omission is indeed significant, as the home holds profound importance in shaping the fabric of our society. While efforts to make language gender-neutral are commendable, overlooking the mention of the home diminishes the acknowledgment of its inherent value to individuals and families.

As these proposed changes unfold, it is crucial for the government to carefully consider the implications of altering foundational elements in our Constitution. The value of marriage and the role of the home in society are principles that should be preserved and celebrated rather than diluted. I stand with warning about the implications of the proposed amendments.

*Yours etc.,
Niamh McDermott
Cork City, Cork*

Letters to the Editor

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

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

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

Your Faith

The Irish Catholic, December 21, 2023

Festive family movies

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How to celebrate a Catholic Christmas

For Catholics, great feasts like Christmas don't come at us out of the blue: In the secular world, 'Christmas' seems to start in October! However, our approach to this holiday as Catholics must be different, and it can be. We can put aside the worldly calendar; we can allow the ancient, rich tradition of the Church to surround and centre us instead. And then, we will be enriched by truly celebrating a Catholic Christmas.

"God's sign is simplicity. God's sign is the baby. God's sign is that he makes himself small for us. This is how he reigns. He does not come with power and outward splendour. He comes as a baby – defenceless and in need of our help," Pope Benedict XVI preached



The Church offers us a richer way to celebrate Christmas, writes Amy Welborn

in his homily for Midnight Mass in 2006. "He does not want to overwhelm us with his strength. He takes away our fear of his greatness. He asks for our love: So he makes himself a child."

A child is coming: As for any birth, we must prepare. The Advent season is a gift, rich with opportunities to ready our lives for the embrace of our Saviour.

One powerful way to prepare for the gift of Jesus is to turn away from the outside noise and pressure and take a few quiet moments to pray with the Church. Use your church bulletin to look up the Mass readings for each day. If you can, take time to attend daily Mass; use it as a period of refreshment in the midst of the busyness all around.

Even during our most hectic times, we can still 'watch and wait' with the Church. Everything else that we do during Advent can echo what we hear in God's Word and the Church's prayer. Our Advent wreaths and Jesse Trees are physical reminders of the coming light and the prophecies fulfilled. When we celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we acknowledge our darkness and need, and rejoice in the light of forgiveness offered through the Child.

Joining our thoughts and prayers to those of the communion of saints whose feasts occur during this season – Ambrose, Lucy, John of the Cross, Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, and others – helps us hear John the Baptist's call along with these holy

men, women and even children who have gone before us in faith. Just as they heard and responded, so can we.

During this season, we twice celebrate the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose openness to God models our own patient Advent waiting. On the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (December 8), we celebrate the truth that she was conceived without sin. On the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12), we celebrate Mary's appearance to the indigenous St Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin ('Talking Eagle') in Mexico in 1531.

St Nicholas of Myra's feast December 6 is celebrated in many European countries as a day to share gifts – often sweets, and often placed in shoes. As Europe-



ans emigrated around the world, various St Nicholas traditions combined and emerged as Santa Claus. Sharing the story of the real St Nicholas can help us emulate the generosity of his faith-filled life, which is in turn an expression of God's own generosity and the gift of Jesus.

When Christmas arrives, we have spent four weeks preparing for the Child. At last, the day to celebrate arrives: The Father has answered our prayers, sending his Son as one like ourselves, humbly immersing himself in human life and speaking words we can understand, inviting us to love.

Gift

At Christmas, we celebrate God's gift of Jesus to the world. The very name of the day and the season – "Christ's Mass," derived from the Old English way of speaking of it – places Jesus, present to us in the Eucharist, at the centre of the day. Might this Christmas be the beginning of a closer friendship with Jesus, nurtured by the Eucharist?

There are actually four different Masses for Christmas: the Vigil, Midnight Mass, Mass at Dawn and Mass During the Day. Each has a distinct theme and different readings, reflecting the richness of the mystery of the Incarnation. Even though most of us will attend only one Mass at Christmas, it's a beautiful custom – and well worth our while – to meditate on the Mass readings from the others as well. This can deepen our appreciation for what God has done for us and the whole world in Christ.

Christmas is rich with symbols. We put up Christmas trees, Nativity sets and lights, all beautiful in their own right – and all symbolic of the deeper, richer dimensions of meaning that our faith brings to this season.

Christmas trees, being evergreens, speak to us of God's eternal life and love, embodied in Christ. They also recall the tree in the garden through which sin came into the world, and the tree of the crucifixion by which that sin was conquered. Saying a prayer as we put up our tree, and making sure that some of our ornaments evoke the Nativity, can help

bring this home to us.

The Nativity scene, or crèche ('crib' in French), was popularised by St Francis of Assisi in the 13th Century out of a desire to bring home the reality of the humility and love of Christ. Setting out the Nativity scene – saving the Child for December 25 and the Magi for Epiphany – can be natural moments for prayer and reflection.

“God has come to us, not in overwhelming power, but in humility as a child”

God gives the world his Son, who dwells among us, filling us with a love that must be shared. So we, on Christmas, give gifts. Contemplating the examples of gift-givers like the Magi, St Nicholas and King Wenceslas can bring a new perspective to our own actions. Who is in greatest need, and what gifts can we give?

Many families have already discovered the joy of giving of themselves to others on Christmas Day: seeking out shut-ins, visiting residents of nursing homes or hospital patients, or serving the poor and the homeless. They reach out, as God reaches out to us in Christ. We can consider other alternatives as well: supporting charities in the name of our friends, or encouraging our families to centre their gift-giving energies on those less fortunate in order to give as Christ has given to us.

We know as Catholics that Christmas isn't over December 26. Even just those first few days after Christmas invite us to continue to open our hearts to the Christ Child and what he brings: There's the challenge of discipleship (St Stephen December 26), the beauty of the Word Made Flesh (St John the Evangelist, December 27), the reality of opposition to Christ (the Holy Innocents December 28) and the blessing of family (Holy Family, the Sunday after Christmas).

January 1 is the beginning of a new calendar year, but that's not the reason we celebrate it as a feast.

On the Roman calendar, New Year's Day is both the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, and a day of prayer for peace. We make all sorts of resolutions for a new year, but alongside those efforts, we say a different sort of prayer. God has come to us, not in overwhelming power, but in humility as a child. So, on this day, we pray that the new year might be marked by humility and peace, brought by Christ and modelled by Mary.

Epiphany

The Solemnity of the Epiphany, traditionally observed January 6 (the day following the familiar 'Twelve Days of Christmas'), comes next. 'Epiphany' means 'manifestation,' and it's the celebration of Jesus manifesting his glory as Saviour to all nations of the world (symbolised by the Magi).

Epiphany is a gift-giving day in some cultures, as well as a day to ask for God's blessings on our homes. One particular blessing includes bracketing the initials of the traditional names of the Magi who visited the home of Jesus – Caspar, Melchior,

and Balthazar – with the year above the front entry door, usually in chalk, like this for 2023: 20+C+M+B+23.

“Even today, the Christmas tree and crèche in St Peter's Square in Rome remain on display until Candlemas”

In the scope of the universal Church, past and present, the Christmas season actually has two endings:

In the old Roman calendar, the feast of the Presentation on February 2 marked the end of the Christmas season. On this day, also called Candlemas, candles are blessed as a symbol of Simeon's recognition of the infant Jesus as the light to the Gentiles, and as a way to bring the light of Christ home to burn all year. Even today, the Christmas tree

and crèche in St Peter's Square in Rome remain on display until Candlemas.

Likewise, the Baptism of the Lord, celebrated the Sunday after Epiphany, commemorates the final 'Christmas' feast of our present Roman calendar. As we hear the scriptural account of the Father revealing the divinity of Jesus at his Baptism in the Jordan River, we celebrate our own Baptism, our 'new birth' in Christ and inclusion in his body, the Church.

For Catholics, December 25 is only the beginning of the celebration of Christmas. As others pack away the decorations, we continue to celebrate the gift of Christ, ever present for us in the Eucharist – a continual manifestation of God's loving care for us all year long.

Amy Welborn is a freelance writer and the author of many books on faith and spirituality for children, teens and adults. Her website is AmyWelborn.com



A festive selection of holiday films

Faith in film



John Mulderig

One promising way to get in the holiday mood is to watch a Christmas-themed movie. And, since yuletide films naturally tend to qualify as family-friendly, they can also provide an opportunity to gather the clan, make some popcorn and relax together.

Following, in alphabetical order, are capsule reviews of eight such pictures with their *OSV News* classifications and, where applicable, their Motion Picture Association ratings. Please note that movies dating from before 1968 were not rated by the MPA upon their initial release.

'The Bishop's Wife' (1947)

A debonair, smartly tailored angel (Cary Grant) uses his heavenly powers to help the neglected wife (Loretta Young) of a busy Episcopalian bishop (David Niven) renew her husband's ministry to those in need rather than raise the money for a new cathedral. Director Henry Koster's sentimental Christmas fable has the virtue of a good script, sincere performances and some amusing moments with Grant's angelic powers and Monty Woolley as a soft-hearted old cynic. Most of the family will find it charming entertainment. The *OSV News* classification is A-II – adults and adolescents.

'A Christmas Carol' (1951)

This British version of the Dickens classic has worn well over the years principally because of Alistair Sim's zestful performance as Scrooge, the old humbug whose transformation into a loving human being is a pleasure to behold. Director Brian Desmond Hurst's period piece does well with its 19th Century London setting, and the ghostly visitations are done simply but with considerable flair. The result is dandy family viewing. The *OSV News* classification is A-I – general patronage.

'A Christmas Story' (1983)

Adapted from Jean Shepherd's nostalgic piece of whimsy, *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*, the movie re-creates what it was like to be a boy (Peter Billingsley) yearning for a genuine Red Ryder air rifle for Christmas



in the Midwest of the 1940s. Director Bob Clark gets some good performances from Darren McGavin and Melinda Dillon as the understanding parents, and the period atmosphere is nicely conveyed with what is essentially a warm celebration of a more innocent, less sophisticated America. Fleeting vulgar mutterings. (A-II) The Motion Picture Association rating is PG – parental guidance suggested. Some material may not be suitable for children.

'Elf' (2003)

Warm-hearted yuletide comedy about a foundling (Will Ferrell) raised by elves in Santa's workshop who travels from the North Pole to New York City in order to reconnect with his long-lost father (James Caan), a workaholic scrooge bereft of Christmas cheer. Full of goofy candy-cane humour, director Jon Favreau's holiday film imparts a strong family-friendly message, but uses a secular sieve to filter out any religious references to the true meaning of Christmas. Minimal mildly crude language and humour. (A-II) (PG)

'It's a Wonderful Life' (1946)

Seasonal favourite about the joys and trials of a good man (James

Stewart) who, facing financial ruin on the eve of Christmas, contemplates suicide until his guardian angel (Henry Travers) shows him how meaningful his life has been to those around him. Director Frank Capra's unabashedly sentimental picture of mainstream American life is bolstered by a superb cast (including Lionel Barrymore as a conniving banker) and a wealth of good feelings about such commonplace virtues as hard work and helping one's neighbour. Young children may find the story's dark moments unsettling. (A-II)

'The Man Who Invented Christmas' (2017)

This charming fact-based historical drama tells the origin story of Victorian author Charles Dickens' (Dan Stevens) beloved novella, *A Christmas Carol*. With his last three titles having failed to sell, Dickens fears falling into debt if his next production is equally unpopular. As he struggles with writer's block and the endless distractions of his burgeoning family's domestic life – a visit from his feckless father (Jonathan Pryce), whom Dickens blames for the sufferings of his childhood, is a particular source of worry and conflict – the writer fancifully summons up and

interacts with his own characters, most prominently dour miser Ebenezer Scrooge (Christopher Plummer). His patient wife (Morfydd Clark) and unpaid literary agent (Justin Edwards) offer him encouragement, and the conversion story he eventually pens finds a real-life counterpart in the amendment of Dickens' own behaviour. Director Bharat Nalluri's adaptation of Les Standiford's 2008 book is family-friendly in most respects and will likely prove a winner with a broad range of age groups. A very vague sexual joke, a single mild oath. (A-II) (PG)

'Miracle on 34th Street' (1947)

Familiar seasonal favourite follows a department store Santa (Edmund Gwenn) as he strives to convince a lonely little girl (Natalie Wood) that he's the genuine article, despite the objections of her rigidly pragmatic mother (Maureen O'Hara) and a court trial that hinges on the US Post Office. Director George Seaton's amusing romantic fantasy has its sentimental moments while spreading a reasonable amount of holiday cheer, largely due to Gwenn's charming performance as Kris Kringle. Problems of single parenthood. (A-II)

'The Nativity Story' (2006)

Dramatisation of the New Testament birth narratives from the Annunciation to the birth of Jesus, focusing on the relationship between Mary (Keisha Castle-Hughes) and Joseph (Oscar Isaac) and their arduous trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem, with subplots tracking the journey of the three Magi and the efforts of King Herod (Ciarán Hinds) to prevent the prophecy of a messiah from coming to pass. A composite of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, embroidered with apocryphal traditions and the imagination of the filmmaker, the Bible story gets the prestige treatment in director Catherine Hardwicke's artful, reverent and affecting retelling, with soulful performances from an excellent international cast – including Shohreh Aghdashloo as Elizabeth – and impressive production design. Mike Rich's screenplay manages to flesh out Mary and Joseph while remaining faithful to Scripture, poignantly suggesting the humanity beneath the halos. Some violent images. (A-I) (PG)

John Mulderig is media reviewer for *OSV News*.

Let the warmth of Advent pull the bleak midwinter from you



Effie Caldarola

Christina Rosetti's poem, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, is a Christmas classic. "In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan, Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone. . ."

As Advent begins and the first wintry weather sets in, those words come to mind. As I write, today is such a day – gusty wind, hard rain, fluid and not yet frozen like a stone, but cold and bleak nonetheless.

Challenging

In the darkest nights of our year, and in the dark nights of our world's present turmoil, it seems so wonderful, yet challenging, that hope appears in the guise of a baby born to the poor.

When we saw the news reports of tiny premature babies huddling together in bombed-out hospitals in Gaza, it seemed the baby Jesus lay there among them. And when some 'preemies' were evacuated to medical care in Egypt, how can we not remember the little refugee who fled into Egypt with Mary and Joseph?

So much suffering in this

“In the midst of brokenness, we bring a heart made joyful by his presence, despite this weary world. It's up to us to decide how we might give our heart during Advent”

world right now, so much sorrow. So many bad, despotic governments, so many refugees, so much climate catastrophe, so much divisiveness, so much terror, so much war.

Rosetti's poem asks us, "What can I give him/poor as I am ..." and ends by saying, "Give him my heart".

“What did Jesus actually bring, if not world peace, universal prosperity and a better world? What has he brought? The answer is very simple: God. He has brought God”

And in the midst of brokenness, we bring a heart made joyful by his presence, despite this weary world. It's up to us to decide how we might give our heart during Advent. We may need a plan.

A small daily journal might help. Keep it short and simple. A prayer offering each morning, a little commitment: I will do this one thing today to simplify my lifestyle to honour our Earth, and one thing today to bring joy to another.

Maybe it's the season you put canvas bags in your car and begin the habit of using them instead of those disposable plastic bags. Maybe find the phone number of an old friend or an elderly relative

and surprise them with a call.

Share Christmas cookies with a lonely neighbour. Give yourself a bonus point for letting your kids help. Start a bag and place one item cluttering your home into it each day. Bonus points for giving away something someone else can really use.

Write your pastor a note telling him what he's done or said to inspire you this year. Find people to thank. Find people to gently and courteously nudge, perhaps toward more environmental activity – your local politician, perhaps, or even your bishop. Add some thanks.

Sit down for a quick coffee with a friend. Give yourself a bonus point if you're at a coffee shop and you've brought your reusable coffee cup.

Add joy by not sniping at your spouse when you're exasperated. Bonus point for giving him or her a hug instead.

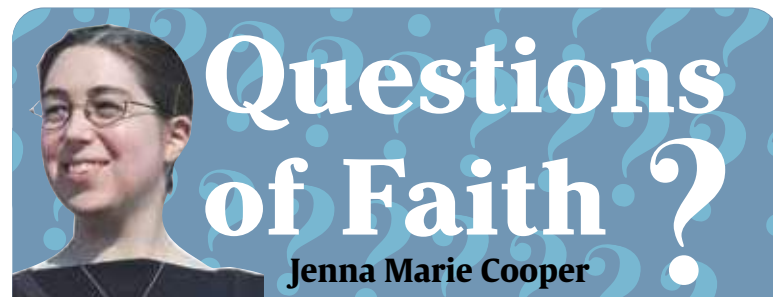
Loving

Make Advent loving and fun, with your focus on Jesus. Write all those little accomplishments in your journal. Keep it meaningful. We're all really busy right now, right? So go easy on yourself in these hard times. Remember that Christmas is all about joy, gratitude – and Jesus.

Pope Benedict XVI, writing in the first volume of his trilogy, *Jesus of Nazareth*, addressed the great question that the book would ask: "What did Jesus actually bring, if not world peace, universal prosperity and a better world? What has he brought? The answer is very simple: God. He has brought God."

And always remember: God alone is enough.

"We are all meant to be mothers of God," wrote the theologian Meister Eckhart, "for God is always needing to be born".



What are miracles, and why do we need them?

Q: A two-point question: It is common to hear, 'It's a miracle,' for a sports comeback victory. Does the Church actually have a definition of a miracle? When it comes to canonisation, miracles are required, aren't they? Does a miracle happen in other domains except health and medicine?

A: A miracle is an extraordinary phenomenon that cannot be explained by any natural cause. In its glossary, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines a miracle as "a sign or wonder such as a healing, or control of nature, which can only be attributed to divine power".

Calling something like an unlikely sports comeback a "miracle" is using quite a bit of poetic license, since there is a readily discernible natural explanation for the victory (namely, the skill of the athletes, which the athletes acquired through their own human efforts).

There also are situations where God truly may have intervened in answer to a prayer – for instance, a disease goes into an unexpected remission after a course of medical treatment, or a wayward loved one has a surprising conversion of heart – but which cannot be called miracles in a strict technical sense, as there can be a strong natural component to such blessings. In instances such as these, we might understand God as working within the natural order he established, albeit perhaps in an especially active way; this is as opposed to 'breaking the rules' of nature, which is what happens in a true miracle.

Medical miracles seem to be the kind of miracle we hear about most often today, but not all miracles are health-related. While Jesus seemed especially fond of performing miraculous healings, the Gospels give us many wonderful examples of other kinds of miracles – consider Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana; the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and Jesus calming a storm. In more recent

times, there was the 'miracle of the sun' at Fatima on October 13, 1917, when numerous witnesses saw the sun move and seemingly dance in a way that should have been impossible.

Q: Second point: We supposedly agree that the human ceremony of canonisation does not create a saint. That is God's doing. So, why are miracles so central to canonisation?

A: Theologically, a saint is anyone who is actually in heaven with God, but canonised saints are those whom the Church has officially recognised as presently enjoying the beatific vision. This recognition is for the benefit of those of us still here on earth, as canonised saints are heavenly intercessors to whom we can confidently turn, and they serve as role models of Christian holiness in various states and circumstances of life.

As this is a determination the Church really wants to get right, the process of canonisation is necessarily a lengthy and involved one. For a non-martyr, the process begins with a very detailed investigation of the potential saint's life. If this investigation shows that they truly lived a life of heroic virtue, that person is declared 'Venerable'. If there can be a proven miracle attributed to the Venerable's intercession, that person is beatified and given the title 'Blessed'; after a second miracle, the person can be canonised and is declared a saint.

Supposed miracles can be and are evaluated by either medical doctors or other impartial experts in their respective fields to rule out any merely natural explanation (thereby proving a supernatural one). As such, miracles are central to the canonisation process because, to put it in very practical terms, they are the best we have in terms of finding objective signs from God that a person is in heaven.

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

Connecting the dots between the Crib and the Cross



The Gospel stories about the birth of Jesus are not a simple retelling of the events that took place then, at the stable in Bethlehem. In his commentaries on the birth of Jesus, the renowned scripture scholar, Raymond Brown, highlights that these narratives were written long after Jesus had already been crucified and had risen from the dead and that they are coloured by what his death and resurrection mean. At one level, they are as much stories about Jesus' passion and death as they are about his birth. When the Gospel writers looked back at the birth of Jesus through the prism of the resurrection they saw in his birth already the pattern for both his active ministry and his death and resurrection: God comes into the world and some believe and accept him and others hate and reject him. For some, his person gives meaning, for others it causes confusion and anger. There is an adult message about Christ in Christmas and the meaning of Christmas is to be understood as much by looking at the cross as by looking at the crib. Hardly the stuff of our Christmas lights, carols, cribs, and Santa.

Meaning of Christmas

And yet, these too have their place. Karl Rahner, not naïve to what Raymond Brown asserts, argues that, even so, Christmas



Fr Rolheiser

www.ronrolheiser.com

is still about happiness and the simple joy of children captures the meaning of Christmas more accurately than any adult cynicism. At Christmas, Rahner contends, God gives us a special permission to be happy: "Do not be afraid to be happy, for ever since I [God] wept, joy is the standard of living that is really more suitable than the anxiety and grief of those who think they have no hope...I no longer go away from the world, even if you do not see me now...I am there. It is Christmas. Light the candles. They have more right to exist than all the darkness. It is Christmas. Christmas that last forever." At Christmas, the crib trumps the cross, even as the cross does not fully disappear.

How do the cross and the

crib fit together? Does Calvary cast a permanent shadow on Bethlehem? Should Christmas disturb us more than console us? Is our simple joy at Christmas somehow missing the real point?

God's permission

No. Joy is the meaning of Christmas. Our carols have it right. At Christmas, God gives us a special permission to be happy, though that must be carefully understood. There is no innate contradiction between joy and suffering, between being happy and undergoing all the pain that life hands us. Joy is not to be identified with pleasure and with the absence of suffering in our lives. Genuine joy is a constant that remains with us throughout all of our experiences in life,

including our pain and suffering. Jesus promised us "a joy that no one can take away from you". Clearly that means something that doesn't disappear because we get sick, have a loved one die, are betrayed by a spouse, lose our job, are rejected by a friend, are subject to physical pain, or are enduring emotional distress. None of us will escape pain and suffering. Joy must be able to co-exist with these. Indeed it is meant to grow deeper through the experiences of pain and suffering. We are meant to be women and men of joy, even as we live in pain. That's a colouring, taken from their understanding of Jesus' death and resurrection, which the Gospel writers insert into their narratives about his birth.

Innocence

But, of course, that is not what children see when they get caught up in the excitement of Christmas and when they look at the Christ-child in the crib. Their joy is still innocent, healthily protected by their naiveté, still

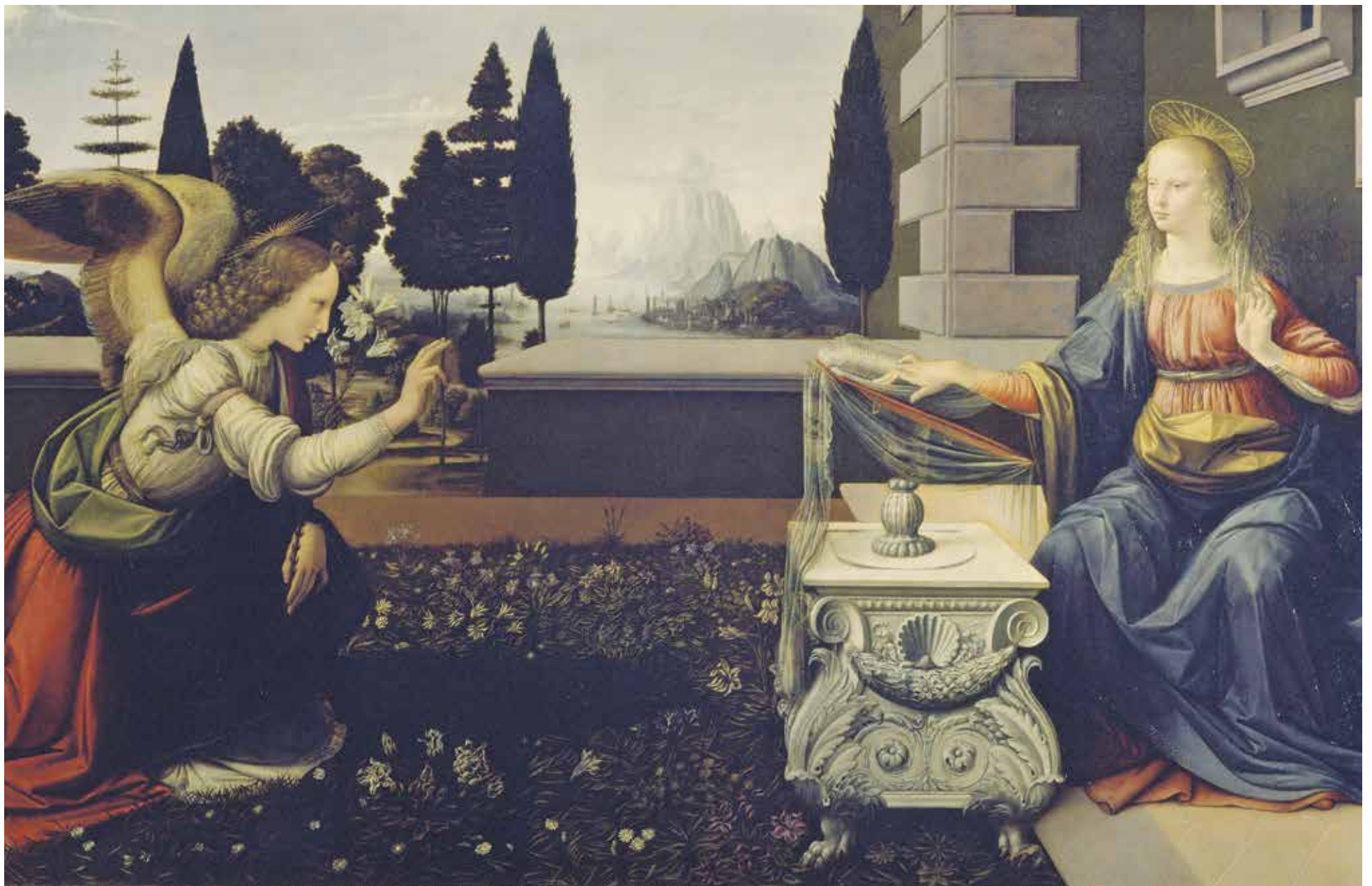
awaiting disillusion, but real nonetheless. The naïve joy of a child is real and the temptation to rewrite and recolor it in light of the disillusionment of later years is wrong. What was real was real. The fond memories we have of anticipating and celebrating Christmas as children are not invalidated when Santa has been deconstructed. Christmas invites us still, as John Shea poetically puts it, "to plunge headlong into the pudding." And despite all the disillusionment within our adult lives, Christmas still offers us, depressed adults, that wonderful invitation.

Even when we no longer believe in Santa, and all the cribs, lights, carols, cards, colourful wrapping-paper, and gifts of Christmas no longer bring the same thrill, the same invitation still remains: Christmas invites us to be happy, and that demands of us an elemental asceticism, a fasting from adult cynicism, a discipline of joy that can hold the cross and the crib together so as to be able to live in a joy that no one, and no tragedy, can take from us. This will allow us, at Christmas, like children, to plunge headlong into the pudding.

Christmas gives, both children and adults, permission to be happy.

“None of us will escape pain and suffering. Joy must be able to co-exist with these”

Nothing will be impossible for God



Leonardo da Vinci's Annunciation, dated to c. 1472–1476, depicts the scene narrated early in the Gospel according to Luke wherein the archangel Gabriel appears to Mary, seeking her Fiat for God's plan. Photo: OSV News/JaneB, Pixabay

2 Sm 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16
Ps 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29
Rom 16:25-27
Lk 1:26-38

The Sunday Gospel

Deacon
Greg
Kandra



The enduring annunciation here is the annunciation of hope.

You find it right there, at the end of the proclamation of an angel, who declares this news with the gusto and enthusiasm of someone who knows he is making history. This figure, Gabriel, stands before a young girl whose life is being rewritten and redirected right before her eyes and what does he do?

A message

He leaves her – and us – with this message, his parting shot: “Nothing will be impossible for God.”

There you have it. All bets are off. Surrender your doubts, your questions, your worries and misgivings. Believe the unbelievable, he says. Embrace the mystery. Miracles are possible. Hope is possible. Anything

can – and will – happen.

We all know what comes next. And this gospel, a prelude to Luke's famous account of the Nativity that we will hear at Christmas, offers us a kind of late-Advent gift, one that we need to continue to unwrap day after day, in moments of shock or wonder or worry.

When all else fails, we need to hang on to these six words, the ones that likely sustained Mary not only for the months that followed, but for the next 30 years, through a flight into Egypt and agony on a hilltop: Nothing will be impossible for God.

Maybe we have forgotten that. Maybe we need to hear it, especially now. At this dark moment in time, what

is being announced is light. Mary, we're told, was troubled at what she heard. Of course, she was troubled. Who wouldn't be?

But what follows is a message that defies any doubt. In our moments of confusion, when we are troubled by what God brings to us, we have this to hold onto. It is the announcement of possibility and promise.

Angels will speak. The Spirit will come. A virgin will conceive. The world will be guided to a saviour in a stable. And decades hence, the blind will see. The lost will be found. God will raise the dead.

“How can this be?,” Mary asks.

It can, because all things are possible. Because

“impossible” is not part of God's vocabulary.

The encounter

There's much that we don't know about this episode from Luke's gospel. We don't know if other words were exchanged between Mary and Gabriel. We don't know what happened immediately after this encounter. What's a pregnant virgin to do? Did Mary share this news with anyone else before departing (in the next chapter) to visit her cousin Elizabeth? It's intriguing to consider. Writers and movie directors have created an entire industry imagining moments that Luke left out of the story.

But all that overlooks the central meaning of this

pivotal scene – and the profound message it offers in these last hours before we celebrate Christ's coming into the world.

Our God is a God without limits. He is the God of possibility. That possibility can even bring about something as elusive and as consoling as peace.

In our world. In our country. In our hearts. Does it seem unlikely? Remote?

When worried or troubled, filled with fear or doubt, maybe we need to ask “WWMD?”

What would Mary do? Well, start by taking a cue from the Annunciation.

Hear the message within, the good news that defies logic, and hold on to what is really being announced.

In times of distress, we need to shut out the anxious noise of the world – and trust enough to listen to angels.

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

“Angels will speak. The Spirit will come. A virgin will conceive. The world will be guided to a saviour in a stable”

Do you hear it? If there is one message the world needs right now, in a moment of high anxiety and seemingly unending wars, you can find it buried deep in this beautiful Gospel for the 4th Sunday of Advent. In the story of the Annunciation, there is a second announcement, an added annunciation – a reminder of something so transcendent and persistent, we might easily forget about it.

“Surrender your doubts, your questions, your worries and misgivings. Believe the unbelievable, he says. Embrace the mystery”

TVRadio

Brendan O'Regan



Secret peacemakers and media bias – 2023 in review

When I look back on the year in the media I usually see what comes to mind before re-reading my columns. This gives me a good impression of what really stands out, though I'm often surprised by what I've forgotten about.

The first thing that springs to mind is war. Last year it was the war in Ukraine that dominated the news media, and sadly that is still going on, without any sign of resolution, and it is being demoted in media priorities by the latest war in the Middle East – the awful attacks by Hamas on Israel in October and the subsequent, and I believe disproportionate, retaliation by Israel.

It all makes for a grim lead up to Christmas. As far as the media goes, it can be hard to discern the truth in a sea of bias, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and all-round fakery.

In the light of such destructiveness the huge controversy surrounding RTÉ sparked by the Ryan Tubridy salary issue seems trivial. Not to him of course. It meant him losing his job in RTÉ, in the 9am morning weekday slot (he had opted to give up hosting the **Late Late Show** earlier).

RTÉ's struggle

His successor on the *Late Late Show* was Patrick Kiely and so far he is doing alright, but the show is rather underwhelming. More broadly, RTÉ is struggling with funding, credibility and vision. Going into the new year it seems likely it will become a slimmer, leaner organisation, outsourcing much more programme making, and shedding some non-essentials such as the +1 channels. They could do with shedding biases in current affairs programmes, along with some of the attempted comedies that seem to assume that what's crude is funny.

On the plus side RTÉ continues to provide good service in religious programmes. The **Mass** on the RTÉ News channel, a

by-product of Covid times, continues to provide a valuable service. Special occasions are well covered, for example the **World Youth Day Mass** in August.

Of course, religious channels like EWTN provide more comprehensive coverage of such occasions. **The Leap of Faith** (RTÉ Radio 1), presented by Siobhán Garrigan, has been consistently interesting and currently has morphed into **Witness. The Meaning of Life** (RTÉ One) had a new season – it started strongly with Joe Duffy interviewing former Archbishop of Dublin Diarmuid Martin.

A few years ago, I was a big fan of **Life and Soul**, which had a short revival recently with a new format – rather than a magazine approach (which I preferred – the music was great) it featured more in-depth coverage of single issues (eg. the Tiglin Centre) – more like one of its predecessors *Would You Believe*.

A Ring and a Prayer (RTÉ One, November) was an innovative exploration of mixed-culture marriages. A new series of the Angelus reflections was launched in May. Much credit goes to Roger Childs, RTÉ's head of religious programming. I wish him the best of commissioning experiences in the New Year. If you wanted more consistent and comprehensive religious content, the likes of Spirit Radio, Radio Maria and EWTN continued to be the channels of choice.

On the drama front, it's hard to get a drama series that's artistically good, isn't overly woke, has good values and isn't full of foul language. Most drama series are definitely for adults and some are downright objectionable.

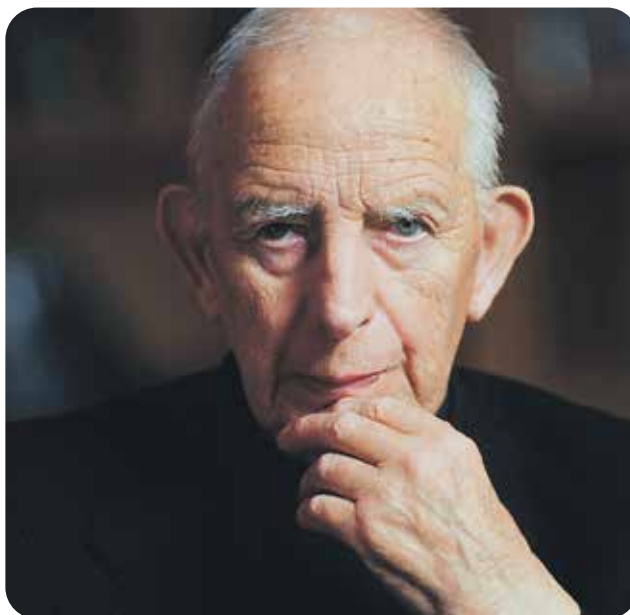
“There was no fuss when it was revealed that €46 million was spent on abortion services since the legislation was introduced in 2019”

I've enjoyed **Annika**, starring the excellent Nicola Walker – here she plays a detective in Scotland and indulges in reflective asides to the camera. The first series was on BBC, the second on Now TV, which is unusual. It's humane and often funny and works well as crime drama, though it's a crime of the week story, with some plot threads continuous. There are affairs and a lesbian relationship that feels somewhat tokenistic, but it's in the background

faith, loneliness, guilt, family dynamics, delusion and arrogance”.

Blue Lights (BBC One), humane police show set in Belfast, impressed in April and got a well-deserved repeat on RTÉ in November–December. It's not surprising that a second series is due.

Prison drama series **Time** (BBC One) returned for a moving and life affirming second series in October. It was grim but engaging, though I thought the chaplain was



Redemptorist Fr Alec Reid, subject of the excellent documentary *The Secret Peacemakers*.

and I didn't find it preaching an agenda. Walker was absent from the new series of **Unforgotten** (UTV) in March, but Irish actress Sinead Keenan did well as her testy replacement.

Shetland (BBC One) was in its eighth series this autumn, with some character changes – the plot was grim enough, but the characters were interesting. A young vicar was portrayed sympathetically, which was welcome.

The final series of **Happy Valley** (BBC One) back in January didn't disappoint, with a tension-filled plot and some outstanding acting (especially from Sarah Lancaster, James Norton and Siobhán Finneran). **The Sixth Commandment** (BBC One), back in July was an engaging drama, uncomfortable to watch, with Irish actor Éanna Hardwicke excelling as a bogus priest. At the time I described it as “a fine reflection on

somewhat compromised, or maybe just humanised this time around. **Three Little Birds** (UTV) was a funny and moving adult drama series in October–November, written by Lenny Henry, about immigrants to England from Jamaica in the 1950's. Bias in current affairs continued to be a problem. Often that's about what's not covered. For example, there was no fuss when it was revealed that €46 million was spent on abortion services since the legislation was introduced in 2019.

Ideology

Why were the investigative journalists not all over this? Where was the outrage about such huge sums being spent on people who, for the most part, are healthy, when people that are really ill struggle to get the appropriate health services? Ideology seems to trump common sense and real compassion.

Ideology also seems to drive RTÉ's obsession with climate change. The recent **Ireland 2050: Tomorrow Tonight** (RTÉ One) was an embarrassing docu-drama on the matter. If you're committed to saving the planet and conscious of the dangers, but also have some artistic sensibility I suspect this would not have pleased you, even if you agreed with the sentiments. Climate extremism is counter productive and produces climate anxiety in the young – they have enough stress to cope with. Not that complacency is to be recommended either.

Newstalk has featured many diverse voices, including people whose views diverge from the 'acceptable narrative'. This is true especially of **Newstalk Breakfast**, **Lunchtime Live** and **The Hard Shoulder**. The diversity is an important contribution to public debate.

“Sunday (BBC Radio 4) and Sunday Sequence (BBC Radio Ulster) continue to provide in-depth exploration of current issues in religion and ethics”

Among the regular religious programmes, as well as RTÉ Radio 1's **Witness** already mentioned, **Sunday** (BBC Radio 4) and **Sunday Sequence** (BBC Radio Ulster) continue to provide in-depth exploration of current issues in religion and ethics.

Both programmes covered big developments like the death of Pope Benedict XVI in January and the synod in Rome in Autumn. **Sunday Morning Live** (BBC One) has done well – I remember a topical discussion of the power and intrusiveness of the press back in June. It's great to see **Songs of Praise** (BBC One) coming to Ireland on occasion – like the item on Sr Clare Crockett from Derry in March and coverage of a 'a walking and kayaking pilgrimage' in Co. Down in May. **Nationwide** (RTÉ One) continued to be pleasantly low-key and reliable. There

was a particularly good episode on Trócaire's 50th birthday back in March.

The media generally excels when it comes to music programmes. This Autumn RTÉ had two in particular that I liked – **Seisiún** which featured folk music from various iconic gig venues around the country, and **Anam, Songs for Hearts and Minds** which did the same from striking public buildings like the Skellig Centre in Dún Chaoin, Co. Kerry. Likewise, **The Ballycotton Sessions**, set in the Sea Church were enjoyable. In **Wayfaring Stranger** (BBC 2) Phil Cunningham explored Ulster Scots folk and trad and how emigrants from that tradition influenced folk music in the USA. Gospel music figured large.

On the documentary front I was impressed by **The Secret Peacemaker** (RTÉ One and BBC One) broadcast at Easter, which told the story of Redemptorist priest Fr Alec Reid, whose efforts were instrumental in bringing about the peace in Northern Ireland.

Also relating to the Troubles was the hard-hitting series **Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland** (RTE One, August). Sometimes we need to be reminded about how bad things were during those troubled times, as a warning to make sure we don't drift back.

Inside the Hospice (Virgin Media One) in May was moving and intense, an affirmation of the value of palliative care, while **Iníúcadh** (TG 4), also in May, looked at one of our most pressing social problems – homelessness. **Ar Son na Poblachta** (TG 4, August) told the gripping story of how the Capuchins of Church St in Dublin were involved in bringing about peace during the Easter Rising of 1916.

Finally, I'm sad to see Michael Kelly stepping down as editor of *The Irish Catholic*. He has been excellent in the role and I wish him well for the future. I suspect he will turn up as a well-informed commentator on many religious programmes.

BookReviews

Peter Costello



Books of the year as chosen by some of our regular reviewers



Thomas McCarthy

Another Cork jewel: Theo Dorgan's *Once Was A Boy* (Dedalus Press, Dublin) is a memoir of childhood told through poems, many of them written in highly effective tercets.

The book is a singular act of recovery, like the best memoir, of a near-inaccessible past through precise description and a child's heightened awareness.

This is a wonderful book from a star poet of Cork's famous North Mon – that Northside world of a working father's 'Brylcreem and pipe smoke' and of a boy-poet flourishing in the optimistic Lemass Era.

And from Faber comes *The Letters of Seamus Heaney*, edited by Christo-

pher Reid (Faber, London). Here is "a chance to hear Seamus Heaney's voice again", as Reid writes in his introduction; that generous, encouraging teaching voice.

Astonishing letters to Charles Monteith of Faber, to a 16-year-old Paul Muldoon and all the other giant creatures of Ulster writing. For Reid's brilliant notes, for the essences of greatness within, this has to be one of the books of the decade.

Anthony Redmond

My choice is *The Philosophers' Daughters*, edited by Peter Vardy (Darton, Longman and Todd).

In this thought-provoking book the philosopher, Peter Vardy, has gathered a number of questions posed by his two

young daughters, Petra and Thora, on life and belief.

“Civilization itself would collapse if atheistic philosophy were implemented”

The children ask many questions about truth and suffering in the world and about the Big Bang Theory etc. Reading this book I am aware that there are many questions but atheism provides no satisfactory answers. In fact, atheism can't be lived by or put into practice.

The well-known atheist writer, Albert Camus, believed that life has no meaning and that morality is purely relative and subjective. Sartre held similar views.

In spite of this both of them were passionately against racism and colonialism. So they believed that something was evil. Quite simply, civilization itself would collapse if atheistic philosophy were implemented. Good and evil would become meaningless and there would be no objective moral difference between Hitler and Francis of Assisi.

Petra and Thora are obviously intelligent children and they ask the questions we all want answers to, important questions that affect every sensitive person. This book is well worth reading.

Desmond Egan

A few years before he died (in 1999), Michael Hartnett surprised me by send-

ing me his selection of poems from my humble work, translated by him into Irish. The manuscript lay there unpublished – mea culpa – until now. Modesty prevents me from making it my personal book of 2023, though it really is. So I will choose *The Essential Tillich* by Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. I have always admired his profound insight into the message of Christ. He points out that doubt is part of believing (otherwise we are sheep); that even the most pessimistic art is a positive (I have always maintained that Beckett was not a laureate of hopelessness – otherwise, why bother writing); and how about this from Tillich: "listening to the cynical denials of God that are an expression of the flight from a meaning of life, we hear the voice of a carefully covered despair" (*The Eternal Now*) or this, "No actual negation can be without an implicit affirma-

tion...The negative lives from the positive it negates...The act of accepting meaningless is in itself a meaningful act. It is an act of faith" (*The Courage To Be*).

Tillich also emphasises (as another giant, Roger Scruton, does) the overlooked importance of beauty in our lives. The appreciation of beauty, central to a Christian vision of the created world, is undervalued in our time. Look at contemporary Church art: its banality, its flying saucer churches and bland stained glass; its crude sculpture; its Hollywood faces of Disneyish cuteness; its dilettantish verse.

Tell me (with a few noble exceptions) of much that would be taken seriously, say, by an architect of the quality of Irish Grafton Architects. On all sides we encounter superficiality, lack of technique (ie. of commitment), an appeal to and reliance on the shortcut of

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.

“Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty’s self and beauty’s giver”

sentimental response.

Church Art in Ireland is too often tainted by kitsch. Let us, with the much-neglected Hopkins, “Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty’s self and beauty’s giver”.

Gabriel Fitzmaurice

It was a good year for translations of Irish poetry both into and from the Irish language. The book I most looked forward to was *Rogha/Choice* (Goldsmith Press) a selection of poems by Desmond Egan translated into Irish by his friend Michael Hartnett. A classic, it did not disappoint. Two major poets at the height of their powers.

John FitzGerald’s *The Lament for Art O’Leary*, a translation of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* (Gallery Press) and *Woman of Winter* (Gallery Press) Vona Groarke’s version of the 9th Century *An Chailleach Bhéara* are beautifully produced, powerful and a pleasure to read.

J. Anthony Gaughan

My choice is for book of the year is also a choice book for Christmastime itself. It is *Christmas and the Irish: A Miscellany* (Wordwell Books, Dublin, Ireland, 2023). The editor has been persuaded to give me a little more space to write about an energetic explorer of the religious culture of Ireland, whose selection of pieces enlarges on the whole matter of Christmas as experienced across our nation over the centuries.

So this is a collection of descriptions of Christmas in different places and of some personal experiences of the festival. Christmas has two abiding features: a religious celebration and a festive meal.

Some of the contributions indicate that the celebration of Christmas could be problematic for Protestants. This is not surprising. The largely Presbyterian English parliament banned Christmas from 1647 to 1660.

Even down to the present-day the Presbyterian Scots are more interested in celebrating Hogmanay than Christmas. Crawford Gribben recalls that John Nelson Darby, the most important leader among the exclusive Brethren, warned his

co-religionists from celebrating Christmas which he described as “the expression of one of the worst principles of heathenism”.

“O’Brien described the condition of the half-starving tenants of an absentee landlord struggling to exist on the slopes of the Galtee mountains in Co Tipperary”

Laurence Kirkpatrick records that Irish Presbyterians have always had a problem with Christmas and so its celebration is limited to a carol service and an informal service on Christmas morning.

However, in sharp contrast to this attitude to Christmas Ida Milne recalls many enjoyable Christmas carol services in the Church of Ireland Cathedral of Ferns. Her mother was the organist in the Cathedral and spared no effort to ensure that each year the carol service was a memorable occasion for all.

Christmas dinner could vary a great deal in different places and in different times. In his contribution Felix Larkin visits William O’Brien’s ‘Christmas on the Galtees’ which was published in the *Freeman’s Journal* in 1877. O’Brien described the condition of the half-starving tenants of an absentee landlord struggling to exist on the slopes of the Galtee mountains in Co Tipperary.

For some of them their only food on Christmas day was no more than a fistful of Indian meal. Ciarán McCabe in his ‘Christmas in the Poorhouse’ records that in 1823 poor children in Dublin were treated by the Mendicity Association to a festive dinner “of beef, beer and bread”.

This, it seems, was not unique. The provision of Christmas dinners by charities in Irish towns and cities was funded through either a subscription drive or the generosity of a particular benefactor.

In Ultan McGooohan’s ‘Fast and Abstinence at Christmas’ we are reminded that up until the mid-20th Century in the Church fast and abstinence, regulated by Church law and local custom, were an integral part of the Christmas season.



Marie and Seamus Heaney at the Dominican Church, Kraków, Poland, 4 October 1996. Photo: Wikimedia.

He visits the School’s Collection, gathered by the National Folklore Commission, and provides a scholarly account of how the Irish kept the fast on Christmas Eve.

In an interview with Salvador Ryan, Nell McDonagh claimed that Christmas was the most important time of the year for her fellow Travellers. It was the only time they met their relatives and “the beggings would be good”. Christmas dinner would be in the open air at a favourite halting site and very late in the day.

In E. Moore Quinn’s ‘My heart goes back to my Christmas in the Island’ an Irish emigrant in the US recalls what Christmas was like on the Basket Islands. She wrote: “On Christmas if no boat could cross over to Dunquin to Mass every family on the island would go on our knees and beg God to give us the grace of the Mass”.

And the Christmas ‘big supper’ was creamed cod fish, potatoes and onions, followed by tea, bread, butter and jam and “a baker’s cake from Dingle”.

In his contribution Ian d’Alton sees ‘Christmas in the big House’ through the eyes of Eliabeth Bowen, the doyenne of the Big House and those who resided in it.

CS. Lewis, the distinguished writer, cast a cold eye on Christmas. His dislike of it is a recurring theme in his letters. He was particularly critical of its commercialisation, a criticism which resonates with many people today.

This book is a genuine miscellany with descriptions of Christmas in the Middle Ages, pre-Norman Ireland, Counties Clare, Leitrim, Mayo, Sligo, in Maynooth, Czech Republic and Rome.



William Power Seed Merchants of O’Connell Street, Waterford selling Christmas trees in 1929.

Congratulations to Salvador Ryan for providing this ideal book for Christmas.

Mary Kenny

I was impressed by two contrasting books. Rory Carroll’s book about the 1984 Brighton bombs *Killing Thatcher: The IRA, the Manhunt and the Long War on the Crown* was a genuine page-turner, as the explosion clock set by Patrick Magee ticked down. Had Mrs Thatcher chosen another moment to visit the bathroom, the whole of history might have changed. What also emerges is how cannily Gerry Adams was meanwhile manoeuvring towards political power.

For anyone interested in French history, Julian Jackson’s ‘France on Trial: The Case of Marshal Pétain’ (Allen Lane) is a riveting and highly readable account of the reckoning facing France in 1945 (though some Irish historians rebut the claim that Ireland offered asylum

to Pierre Laval – only one ill-judged diplomat did so).

Frank Litton

I can still recall the excitement of finding Frank Sheed’s *Theology and Sanity* on my father’s bookshelves. Any thought that Catholicism was anti-intellectual, the authoritarian imposition of baseless superstition was blown away. Sheed reported that it was an article of faith that the natural reason could establish the reality of God’s existence. Faith and reason worked in harmony.

Sheed gave me faith in reason and a live-long appetite for philosophy. The book exemplifies the merging of philosophy with revelation, the marriage of Athens with Jerusalem that is a feature of the Christian, especially Catholic, tradition. Marriage is not without its dangers. The philosophical lens with its abstractions can dim the particulars through which revelation calls for our response.

Janet Soskice’s *Naming God: Addressing the Divine in Philosophy, Theology and Scripture* (Cambridge University Press), a short book based on public lectures escapes this danger. It displays the marriage at its very best.

I am sure that I am not alone in finding the readings from the Old Testament occasionally obscure and sometimes off-putting. Their world is so distant and alien. Edward Feld, a Jewish biblical scholar brings this world to life, showing its relevance for the here and now. He traces the often contentious interactions among priests, prophets, and kings as they seek to remain faithful to God’s covenant through, wars, conquest, tribulation.

His study of the first five books of the Bible, *The Book of Revelations* (The Jewish Publication Society) deepens our understanding of God’s abiding presence in human history. The Old Testament should surely be called the First Testament.

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Leisure time

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 2024.

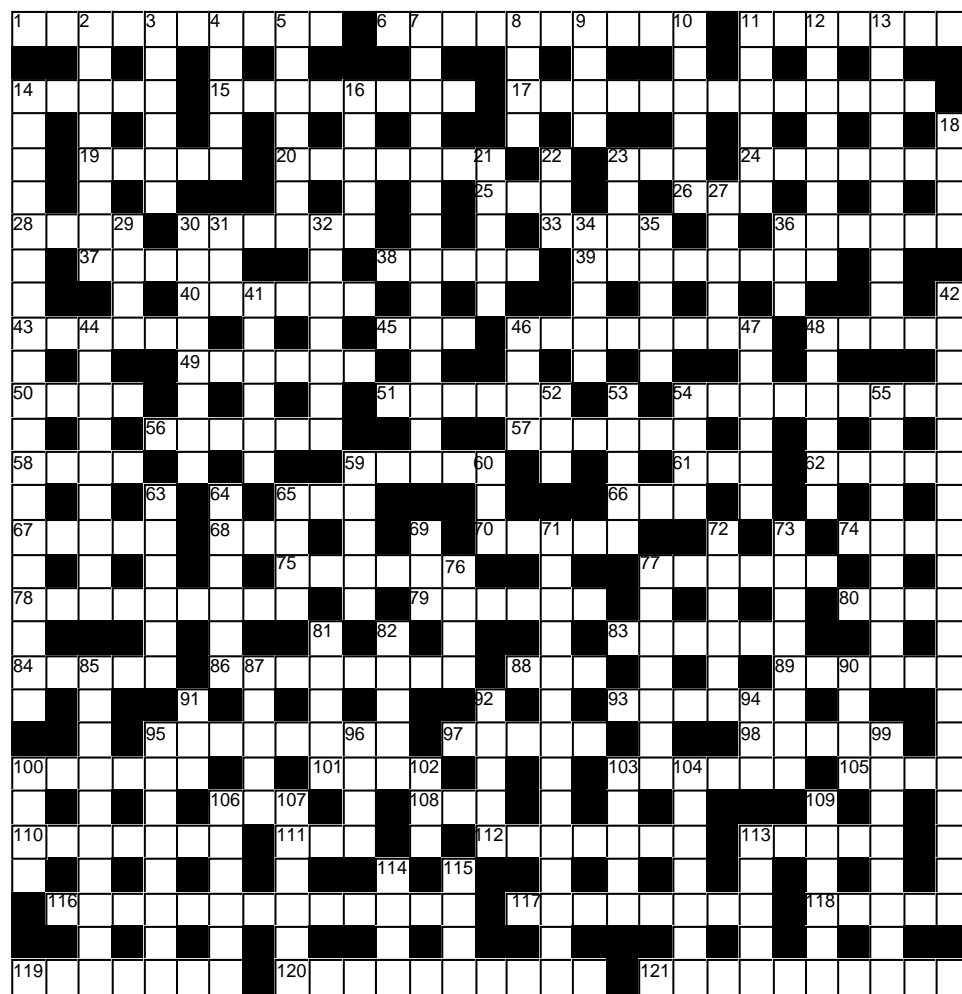
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presented by Balthazar to the newborn Jesus (5)
 116 My true love's 8 down on the ninth day sounds like some women taking part in 'Strictly!' (6,7)
 117 Bin (8)
 118 City in Northern Italy (5)
 119 Embark on a voyage (3,4)
 120 Ninety degrees (5,5)
 121 Fall in value (10)

DOWN

2 Some musical notation scatters elf scabs (4,4)
 3 In physics, the capacity to do work (6)
 4 Water lily or yoga position (5)
 5 Ladies outfit stereotypically accessorised by pearls (4-3)
 7 American political office currently held by Kamala Harris (4,10)
 8 Present (4)
 9 The greatest virtue (4)
 10 Citizen of an ancient city that was besieged for ten years (6)
 11 & 92d Flowering plant named for a fireside implement (3,3,5)
 12 In perfect condition (8)
 13 Betrothal (10)
 14 It allows a crowd hear announcements (6,7,6)
 16 & 82d Soft drink popularly added to gin (5,5)
 18 Indigo plant or dye (4)
 21 Business or skilled occupation (5)
 22 Uppermost part (3)
 23 Poke (4)
 27 Distraught (5)
 29 Information (4)
 30 Dispute (8)
 31 Cereal plant (3)
 32 Paid no attention to (7)
 34 River of Belfast (5)
 35 & 55d Bethlehem's two most famous beastly inhabitants! (3,2,3,3,3)
 36 The first woman in the Bible (3)
 41 A sequence or mixture of songs (6)
 42 & 114d The line of the 71 down before "Sweetly singing o'er the plain" (6,2,4,5,2,4)
 44 & 110a TS Eliot poem inspired by the Wise Men (7,2,3,4)
 46 Pour heavily, like rain (4)
 47 Worshipped (6)
 48 Tempestuous (6)
 52 Substance used in making candles (3)
 53 One who acts on your behalf (5)
 54 A model of Our Lord's birthplace (4)



55 See 35 down
 59 Linger (5)
 60 Dine (3)
 63 It may be measured in kilograms. (6)
 64 Make a stand against. (6)
 65 Obtains (4)
 69 Snakelike fish (3)
 71 Seasonal hymn (9,5)
 72 Suitable for tillage (6)
 73 'Ave Maria', in English (4,4)
 76 Pagan winter festival predating Christmas (4)
 77 & 81d Tasty dish including apple and walnut (7,5)
 81 See 77 down
 82 See 16 down
 85 Army officer (10)
 87 Grin (5)
 90 & 113d Constellation - the Little Bear (4,5)
 91 Greek god of shepherds and the wild (3)
 92 See 11 down

94 Hair-care product (3)
 95 La Gioconda, da Vinci's most famous painting (4,4)
 96 Moist (4)
 99 Extremely happy state (8)
 100 Metropolis (4)
 102 Cask (3)
 103 Solemn vows (5)
 104 She is betrothed (7)

106 Shiny type of decoration (6)
 107 See 54 across
 109 One who professionally assesses a play or other work (6)
 113 See 90 down
 114 See 42 down
 115 The site of the Taj Mahal (4)
 23 Poke (4)
 27 Distraught (5)

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 a copy of **Saint Brigid & Other Amazing Irish Women** and a complimentary annual digital subscription to the newspaper. When you have completed the crosswords send **CROSSWORD No.1** and **CROSSWORD No.2** before **Friday, January 13, 2024** to: **LOURDES COMPETITION Marian Pilgrimages, 38 Pearse St, Dublin, D02 DD83.**



NAME

ADDRESS

PHONE

ACROSS

1 Item of dining linen (10)
 6 Writer of a gospel (10)
 11 Fully sated (7)
 14 Ski run of compacted snow (5)
 15 Work of art created on three panels (8)
 17 My true love's 8 down on the fifth day of Christmas (4,4,5)
 19 Enclosures, confining structures (5)
 20 Area of darkness visible on the solar photosphere the sun puts out (7)
 23 Vegetable found in a pod (3)
 24 Eight-sided figure (7)
 25 Brazil's most colourful city, in short (3)
 26 An almond or cashew, perhaps (3)
 28 Covered a cake (4)
 30 Relating to the northern polar region (6)
 33 Scheme; plan conspiratorially (4)
 36 The material that coats a tooth (6)
 37 Magical being you may find at the top of a Christmas tree (5)
 38 Stage whisper (5)
 39 Glue (8)
 40 Sign of the Zodiac, "The Twins" (6)
 43 From the French, a feeling of having experienced something previously (4,2)
 45 Lyric poem (3)
 46 Hollywood actor John starred in 'Saturday Night Fever', 'Grease' and 'Pulp Fiction' (8)
 48 Shiny material (5)
 49 Up-to-date (6)
 50 In cookery, a thickening made of butter and flour (4)
 51 This apostle was the brother of St Peter (6)
 54 & 107d Tasty pastry that gets its name partly from the French for

lightning (9,6)
 56 Certainly (6)
 57 'Away in a _____' (6)
 58 Performed an aria (4)
 59 Herb of the mint family (5)
 61 Anger (3)
 62 In Greek legend, he had the golden touch (5)
 65 Area in India once colonised by Portugal (3)
 66 The gist of it is: turn over the cupcake (3)
 67 Manner or fashion (5)
 68 Tart or pastry. (3)
 70 Unspoken, but understood (5)
 74 Clarified butter (4)
 75 The main item on the menu of most Christmas dinners (6)
 77 The capital of Poland (6)
 78 Items typically made of textiles. (4,5)
 79 The state of having one's every whim looked after (6)
 80 Festive occasion (4)
 83 Worldwide (6)
 84 Gallic brilliance (5)
 86 Thrilling adventure (8)
 88 Avail of (3)
 89 Whipped cream and egg white dessert (6)
 93 Spanish wine shop (6)
 95 Seasoned liquid in which to leave meat, fish, etc (8)
 97 Chambers - none was vacant on the first Christmas (5)
 98 Rub out (5)
 100 Voucher entitling you to a reduced price or better terms (6)
 101 Gloomy, unlit (4)
 103 The Faithful County (6)
 105 Glow, emanation (4)
 106 Golf peg (3)
 108 Female sheep (3)
 110 See 44 down
 111 Trophy (3)
 112 Italian cheese (7)
 113 Traditionally, the 8 down

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SOLUTIONS, DECEMBER 14

GORDIUS No. 641

Across - 1 Latin America 7 Rob 9 Dyed 10 Choice 11 Mass 14 Pepys 15 Idiom 16 Echo 18 Altos 21 Eager 22 Panto 23 Tunic 24 Apes 25 Odour 26 Scams 29 Euro 33 Siesta 34 Vine 36 Yam 37 Professional

Down - 1 Lay 2 Tidy 3 Neck 4 Moose 5 Rocky 6 Aria 8 Bishop of Rome 9 Deliberately 12 Dingle 13 Smart 14 Plain 17 Canyon 19 Ticks 20 Spoon 27 Chief 28 Moses 30 Ramp 31 Taxi 32 Oven 35 Nil

CHILDREN'S No. 513

Across - 1 Brian Boru 7 Ahead 8 Cabin 9 Kangaroos 11 Sea 12 Tired 13 Keg 16 Ton 18 Hallows 20 High 21 Glasses

Down - 1 Blacksmith 2 Ice-skating 3 Nod 4 Orchard 5 Unblock 6 Wands 10 North 14 Gusts 15 Plus 17 Oil 18 Ail

Solutions to Sudoku No. 463 will be published in the edition of January 4.

Notebook

Fr Bernard Cotter



GAA stalwarts deserve local church's support

We won the county final.

The rural parish where I've been based since 2022 took on the big urban city clubs in the biggest county in Ireland – and we won. It was some achievement for a tiny parish like ours.

Some may wonder who is this "we". I haven't been known previously for my devotion to the GAA, but in this parish where every man, woman and child not only follows the teams and goes to matches, but analyses in detail each player's injuries, chances of recovery etc., attachment to the GAA is a tide that carries all before it.



Fr Bernard displays the parish team's colours outside his house

Newcestown

I spent ten years in the parish of Murragh and Templemartin, whose GAA Club, Newcestown, won a couple of county finals during my tenure. No credit can attach to me however, my role in the club was very much ornamental. Each year I got elected as Patron of the Club at the AGM, and on leaving the parish I got a framed certificate recording that involvement, which hangs proudly in my new home in Union Hall. The lack of a cordial relationship between Newcestown and my new club, Castehaven, is a

matter of unfortunate history, hard to overcome. However, on leaving Newcestown my neighbours made up and presented me with a blue-and-white Castlehaven flag, a kind and thoughtful gesture, much appreciated around here. Even ancient animosities can heal, with imagination and resourcefulness.

The universal Church made a contribution to our county final victory also. The Sunday before the final was Mission Sunday. The 2023 theme of 'Hearts on fire, feet

on the move', reflected passion and commitment, a perfect theme for missionaries, but also for players on the parish team, a link much commented upon. Team members' hearts were certainly on fire and their feet on the move when they defeated Nemo Rangers the following Sunday.

Welcoming

I didn't attend the county final. That night, however, I stood in the Union Hall rain with hundreds of others, welcoming the team home. I saw hundreds of people I had never seen previously in my 14 months in the parish. As in most communities in Ireland, young people around here don't go to Mass in their parish, though I see some at baptisms and funerals. Often I am the youngest at Sunday Mass, and I'm 63. But that night in Union Hall, I saw a completely different demographic mix, an eye-opener. The atmosphere was electric as the victors processed into the village. On the welcoming stand, each team member was named and acclaimed, but there was also mention of parish families, including parishioners who died in the decade since the last victory: everyone got

their moment in the sun, their own applause. This inclusion of everyone marks out the parish's GAA involvement. It's said that it wasn't the team who won the match, it was the whole community. And indeed all the stalwarts in parish life are also GAA stalwarts; they hold everything together and deserve the local church's support: "Up the Haven!"

Simplicity wins at Christmas

Angels and Shepherds are particularly welcome at the two Christmas Eve Masses I am part of this year, in Castlehaven and Lisheen. The idea came from Diana Klein, with whom I wrote a book about parish life a few years back. Her suggestion was that every child would dress as an angel or a shepherd, using ordinary household items (no purchases necessary). At a couple of points in the Mass, the children come to the front and sing one of those carols everyone knows. Fingers crossed that it works! Simplicity wins at Christmas. I hope Christmas refreshes your spirit too.

Sympathy only comes at Christmas...

"You'll be busy coming up to Christmas, Father?" When I was first ordained, I wondered what would make me so busy: getting all the Christmas cards sent in time, maybe? People are still using that conversational line. It's easiest to agree. I am no busier at Christmas than any other day. In truth, every week is busy now – but I'm busy with the priestly stuff I was ordained for. But sympathy only comes at Christmas, and it is to be savoured! Happy Christmas to all the other 'busy' pastors out there too. And enjoy the post-Christmas lull – as will I.



YOUR CHRISTMAS GIFT COULD SAVE A CHILD'S LIFE

Millions of children throughout the world are suffering from hunger and malnutrition due to conflict, disease, displacement, and other factors. And the situation in Africa is only getting worse. Millions of women and children are struggling with inadequate diets which can lead to stunting and other health problems. Countless children are dying of malnutrition each day.

The Little Way Association is receiving requests from missionary priests and Sisters who urgently need funds to purchase sacks of wheat flour, sorghum, maize and beans for their people and for medical needs of their clinics such as intravenous feeding of children and babies. For a helpless child, prolonged hunger is a devastating, bewildering, intensely painful experience.

Your Christmas gift will assuredly help a missionary to relieve a child's suffering. It could save a life. Whatever you can spare will be sent WITHOUT DEDUCTION and will be gratefully received.



"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 2023.

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

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www.littlewayassociation.com

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- €..... **NEEDS OF MISSIONARIES**
- €..... **WELLS AND WATER**
- €..... **MASSES** (please state no.)
- €..... **LITTLE WAY ADMIN EXPENSES**

Please tick if you would like an acknowledgement

Name (Rev. Mr. Mrs. Miss)

(Block letters please)

Address

To donate online go to tinyurl.com/lwadonations

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

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.