

Migrant issue is moral dilemma

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Public say churches must not close again

Catholic Union survey reveals shocking impact of forcing places of worship to shut during pandemic, and vows this must never happen again

The Catholic Union has declared that “places of worship should never be forced to close again” after the “shocking” impact of closing churches during the Covid-19 pandemic was revealed in its new survey.

The survey found that 90 per cent of people thought that in any future pandemic, places of worship should be treated as ‘essential’ services alongside food shops and healthcare facilities, meaning they would not be forced to close.

Worryingly, 62 per cent of people said that their physical or mental health had been affected by church closures.

One participant described church closures as “one of the most distressing experiences of my life”. Another said: “I became very depressed - it felt a part of me was missing.”

Other findings from the survey include:

■ Only 25 per cent of responders thought that it was necessary to close churches and oth-

er places of worship by law at the start of the pandemic.

■ 93 per cent of responders did not think that politicians gave enough consideration to people’s faith when making decisions during the pandemic.

■ 89 per cent of responders said that it was unhelpful having different legal restrictions on churches across regions and nations of the UK.

The survey also found a resilience in Mass attendance, with fewer than 10 per cent saying that they go to church less frequently or not at all since the pandemic.

Catholic Union president, Baroness Hollins, described the results as “shocking”, saying it was clear from these results “that places of worship should never be forced to close again.”

“These results are distressing,” she added. “They confirm that the lockdown of churches was not only hugely unpopular, but had a real impact on people’s wellbeing. The increase in the number of people feeling lonely or depressed as a direct consequence of the closures is particularly shocking.”

The Catholic Union survey of almost 1,000 people is the first major study of Catholic attitudes towards the closure of churches during the pandemic and the impact this had.

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Cardinal talks tactics



FOR ALL

Is Cardinal Nichols eyeing up a new career in football? Find out more on pg 3...

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How to keep your poinsettia blooming
COMPANION

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Enough! World leaders told they must force end to Israel-Hamas conflict

Andy Drozdziak

CAFOD has joined fellow Catholic leaders, Christian Aid and other humanitarian agencies in saying 'enough is enough' and calling on Rishi Sunak to support a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

"We write as religious leaders to say enough is enough. We cannot remain silent as generations of families in Gaza are wiped out in an instant," the letter stated.

"World leaders cannot sit by while Palestinian civilians in Gaza experience such catastrophic destruction and trauma.

"The relentless and unrestrained bombing campaign with horrific indiscriminate effects and the ground invasion by Israel must end.

Dominican leader Father Timothy Radcliffe, OP, who led a retreat at the Synod in Rome in October,

also signed the letter.

As last week's ceasefire came to an end, Israel intensified its bombardment of Gaza's second largest city, Khan Younis, with dozens of injured people rushed to hospital as a new phase of the war continues.

The leaders expressed disappointment at the support of Western governments for continued violence.

"We are deeply grieved by the complicity of the United States and several other Western countries in the continued violence through efforts to actively oppose a ceasefire, including by vetoing multiple United Nations Resolutions," the leaders stated.

"We weep with broken hearts as we hear of hospitals, mosques, churches, and schools damaged and destroyed by this war. In Gaza, there

is no safe place. There is no refuge. There is no escape."

Palestinian militants have also kept up their rocket fire into Israel, both before and after the truce. The fighting has brought unprecedented death and destruction to the coastal strip

The leaders called on Rishi Sunak and 'governments worldwide' to urge a ceasefire, to allow for the safe release of civilian hostages held in Gaza, and allow for humanitarian aid to be delivered.

The letter ended: "We call on all governments to show support for the protection of all human life, advocating for a just and durable resolution to this crisis in which all Israelis and Palestinians might realize a vision of a just peace, illuminating human dignity, advancing security and self-determination for all."



A Palestinian vendor prepares his products in an open-air market in the Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza, amid the ruins of houses and buildings destroyed in Israeli airstrikes. Photo: Ibraheem Abu Mustafa, Reuters

Public say churches must not close again

Continued from page 1

The survey was live from 16th October to 30th November 2023.

The study puts further pressure on the Chair of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry Inquiry, Baroness Hallet, to properly consider the decisions around the closure and reopening of places of worship during the pandemic as part of the Government's independent inquiry.

The Catholic Union will use the survey results to inform its evidence to the UK Covid Inquiry, which is currently taking evidence from senior politicians and advisers, includ-

ing former Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Last month, the Government Minister responsible for faith and community during the first lockdown, Lord Greenhalgh, said that the decisions to close places of worship was "outrageous" and tweeted

that defending church lockdowns was a "ministerial low" for him.

Baroness Hollins criticised the Government for "pushing aside"-faith communities in decision-making during the pandemic.

She said: "It is vital that the Covid Inquiry properly considers the decisions to close and reopen churches during the pandemic.

"There is a very strong sense that faith and faith communities were pushed to one side when decisions were made, and this needs to be addressed in the learning from the Inquiry."

Baroness Hollins: 'Faith communities were pushed aside by the Government' during the rush to lockdown



FA scores as Cardinal Nichols addresses Faith and Football event at Wembley

Andy Drozdziak

Cardinal Nichols – sporting a Liverpool shirt – joined Catholic convert Adrian Chiles at a ‘Faith and Football’ event at Wembley stadium.

Opening the event with a blessing, the Cardinal spoke about the importance of belonging, both in football and Christianity. TV presenter Adrian Chiles, who converted to Catholicism at the age of 40, told of how long-time rivals on the pitch, Arsenal’s Patrick Viera and Manchester United’s Roy Keane were reconciled when they met at Mass in Warsaw during the European Championships in 2012.

Approximately 400 attended the event on 3rd December, which saw Chiles ask various former players, and others associated with the game, to explain how faith was part of their lives in football. There was also a service on the Wembley pitch side, complete with a Salvation Army band, gospel choir and carols, which James Somerville-Meikle, deputy director of the Catholic Union, found “inspiring.”

“I never thought I would be singing *O Little Town of Bethlehem* in the

stands at Wembley Stadium,” James told the *Universe*.

“It was truly inspiring to be at the home of English football and hear so many people talk openly and honestly about their faith. Congratulations to the FA for hosting such an important event.”

James was also inspired by Adrian Chiles’ stories. “A highlight of the day was hearing him tell the story of how Patrick Viera and Roy Keane were reconciled at a Mass in Warsaw during the 2012 Euros,” he said.

“The links between faith and football run deep. It was good to hear about the Christian foundations of so many football clubs – including Fulham, which was founded in 1879 as Fulham St Andrew’s Church Sunday School FC.”

Dr Graham Daniels, director of Christians in Sport, explained how the number of Christians in football has increased over the past ten years.

The afternoon was organised by Michael Wakelin, executive chair of the Religion Media Centre, and Dal Darroch, head of diversity and inclusion strategic programmes at the Football Association.



Michael Wakelin described the FA’s approach to football and faith as “very encouraging.” “The tie-up between Christianity and football runs deep, going right back to the origin of the club game in England,” he said.

“It’s important not to lose sight of the early pioneers who regarded football as a great way of creating communities and having fun. The

way the FA is taking the opportunity to revisit and celebrate football’s links with the Christian faith is very encouraging.”

James Somerville-Meikle added: “I hope this is the first of many such events and encourages more players, staff, and pundits to have confidence as Christians in football.”

Pictures: © Mazur/cbcew.org.uk



Adrian Chiles

New abortion data shocks pro-lifers

Pro-lifers have said they are “deeply concerned” over statistics which show that 3,900 women were admitted to hospital in England during 2021 because of complications following surgical abortions.

As reported in last week’s *Universe*, a change in the way post-abortion complications are calculated has revealed that problems with the surgical procedure are far greater than previously thought.

There were 19.3 hospital admissions for complications related to incomplete abortions per 1,000 abortions conducted in England for residents.

Government data indicates a total of 203,662 abortions in England that year.

This suggests that at least 3,900 women may have been admitted to NHS hospitals in England due to complications arising from incomplete abortions.

Abortion can be carried out using vacuum aspiration up to the 14th week of pregnancy. This is the most common surgical technique. In 2021, eight per cent of abortions were performed by this method in England and Wales.

For abortions up to 24 weeks, the procedure is dilation and curettage. This procedure is used when the baby is too large to be sucked out by vacuum aspiration.

Surgical abortion carries the risk

of what health staff call ‘incomplete abortion’ in which body parts of the unborn child are left inside the mother.

Risks and adverse effects associated with this kind of surgical abortion include injury to the uterus or cervix, haemorrhage and infection.

SPUC’s Michael Robinson, executive director (public affairs and legal services), warned of the dangers of using “misleading language and messaging” in communicating facts about abortion.

“It is deeply concerning to learn that nearly 4,000 women had to be admitted to hospitals due to complications from incomplete abortions,” Mr Robinson said.

“Misleading language and messaging can often be used by the abortion industry to conceal the truth about abortion and the danger it can pose to some women.

“The physical and emotional consequences that abortion can have on women can be life changing.

“An evidence-based review, *Abortion and Women’s Health*, revealed the adverse impact that abortion can have upon the mental health of some women.

“We know that there is no such thing as a safe abortion.

“Each abortion destroys a defenceless unborn life and can leave a trail of destruction for many women and families.”

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In Brief

Raab gung-ho over suspects' fate

Dominic Raab approved an operation by MI6 that posed "a real risk of torture" and compared his risk appetite for allowing the potential mistreatment of suspects to ordering a "spicy madras" curry.

During his two years as foreign secretary, Raab authorised at least three operations where MI6 had passed on intelligence to a foreign government where a suspect faced cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, documents released to MPs have shown.

But he said he was "confident" that "decisions were necessary to protect life and entirely lawful".

KFC thwarts obesity ban

KFC is taking councils to court in a bid to get round anti-obesity policies designed to stop takeaways being opened near schools. At least 43 local authorities in England and Wales have had their anti-obesity policies challenged by KFC since 2017, and in more than half the cases the chicken giant has won, forcing town hall bosses to either abandon or significantly water down their plans.

The moves comes as research shows more than 38 per cent of children in year 6 at English schools are overweight or obese.

Whooping cough outbreak

The UK is facing a whooping cough outbreak, with the number of cases up 250 per cent. Between July and November, there were 716 cases, three times the number during the same period in 2022. Whooping cough in young babies can be "very serious" and vaccinating mums in pregnancy "the only way of protected them in the first few months", said Dr Amirthalingam.

Coptic Christians honoured by King's visit on inter-faith tour

The King was given a handwritten Christmas letter by a young girl during a visit to an orthodox church.

Charles received his gift while attending an Advent service and Christmas reception at the Coptic Orthodox Church Centre UK in Stevenage, Hertfordshire, on Tuesday.

His visit was part of his efforts to encourage inter-faith dialogue and a greater understanding of different religions in Britain and abroad.

Six-year-old Taormina approached the King through the crowd and handed him the letter, which included love hearts and the words 'Happy Holidays!' and 'To: King Charls'.

The Coptic Orthodox community, an indigenous Egyptian Christian community, has grown with the establishment of a diocese in London, with approximately 40,000 Coptic Orthodox Christians now in the UK.

They make up around 15 per cent of the population in Egypt, the largest presence of Christians in the Middle East, but those of Christian faith face widespread persecution in the region.

Charles last visited the centre almost exactly 10 years ago, when Prince of Wales, in December 2013, and photographs of the occasion were displayed at the entrance.

The King was greeted on arrival by the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, Robert Voss, local councillors and the Anglican Bishop of St Albans, Alan Smith.

A 15-minute service including prayers, gospel readings and the Orthodox Creed, was held in the Cathedral of St George.

At the conclusion of the service, sisters Sarah and Laura Ayouba gave a cello and violin performance for the royal visitor.

Charles was then led to the church hall, where he stopped to speak with individuals at four stalls showcasing



Left, King Charles III and Archbishop Angaelos at the service at the Coptic Orthodox Church Centre. Right, Taormina's welcome letter to the King
Photos: Kin Cheung/PA Wire



different services held across the diocese.

He then shook hands and exchanged laughs as he moved through the congregation of around 500 people in the packed hall, eventually coming across Taormina and receiving her letter.

The King was also given a fragment from the Coptic Orthodox Altar within the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem by Archbishop Angaelos.

He then signed the Visitors' Book before unveiling a plaque commemorating his visit.

Speaking to the congregation after the unveiling, Charles said he has the "greatest admiration for the Coptic community", before adding: "If I may say so, this has been a very special occasion and I want to wish you nothing but a very happy Christmas indeed."

The King concluded his visit by planting a plum tree at the front of the centre, and waved to attendees as he left.

David Boutros, trustee of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of London, said: "It makes me really proud



that our King decided to come to visit us in our church, and it's a special day that I'll tell my kids about and they hopefully ask me questions about in the future."

His fellow trustee, Tina Salih, said: "I think, for a lot of us, we'd heard about the King coming 10 years ago, but this time to actually be able to witness that... it's quite a humbling experience."

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Pope sends tribute as Indi laid to rest

Andy Drozdziak

Pope Francis was among many who sent tributes to tragic baby Indi Gregory, whose funeral took place last Friday (1st December).

The funeral – at Nottingham’s St Barnabas Cathedral, with Bishop Patrick McKinney presiding – was an opportunity to celebrate the life of baby Indi and to entrust her soul to God’s love.

“We believe that Jesus has a very special place prepared in Heaven for all children, and especially for those who, like baby Indi, die so young,” Bishop Patrick said.

“That’s why Dean and Claire arranged for baby Indi to be baptised. They wanted her to know God’s love and to be able to be close to Jesus forever, and I know this truth gives them great comfort.”

The message from Pope Francis, sent by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, conveyed the Holy Father’s condolences. “His Holiness Pope Francis was saddened to learn of the death of little Indi.

“He sends condolences and the assurance of his spiritual closeness to her parents, Dean and Claire, and to all who mourn the loss of this precious child of God.

“Entrusting Indi into the tender and loving hands of our heavenly



Indi’s tiny coffin is carried into the Church by her father, Dean.

Father, His Holiness joins those gathered for her funeral in thanking almighty God for the gift of her all-too-short life.”

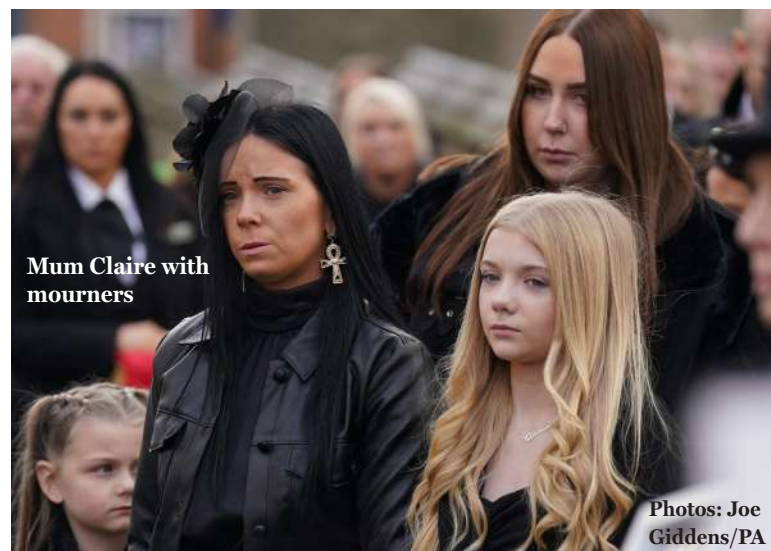
Indi, who was born in February with a rare mitochondrial disease, was at the centre of a legal fight before her life-support treatment was withdrawn and she died at a hospice on 13th November.

Her parents, Dean Gregory and Claire Staniforth, from Ilkeston, lost legal bids in the High Court and Court of Appeal in London for specialists to keep treating her.

The couple, supported by Christian Concern, also failed in a bid to transfer Indi to the Bambino Gesù Paediatric Hospital in Rome for specialist treatment, with the Italian government offering to pay for Indi’s funeral after she was made an Italian citizen.

More than 100 people attended the funeral, with the Italian Minister of Families, Eugenia Roccella, and its Minister of Disabilities, Alessandra Locatelli, representing the Italian Government.

A tribute read out by Canon Paul



Mum Claire with mourners

Photos: Joe Giddens/PA

Newman on behalf of Mr Gregory recognised Indi as a “true warrior” whose baptism was an important part of her journey. He said: “I had Indi baptised to protect her and so she would go to Heaven. It gives me peace to know she is in Heaven and God is taking care of her.

“I just knew, from the start, she was very special. She didn’t only have to battle against her health problems, she had to battle against a system that makes it almost impossible to win.

“Yet, it was her weakest point, her

health problems, that distinguished Indi as a true warrior.

“Indi overcame so much: she had seizures, two operations, sepsis, e-coli, including other infections, that even another child would struggle to beat.

The grieving parents vowed to make sure their daughter is ‘remembered forever’.

A book featuring thousands of tributes from Italy was presented to Indi’s parents. Eugenia Roccella said the Italian government felt “deep sorrow” at Indi’s death.



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**UNIVERSE
CATHOLIC WEEKLY**
COMMENT
BBC has to face facts: times – and our habits – have changed

The BBC licence fee is now expected to increase by around seven per cent next April. A few years ago that would have seemed extortionate but inflation has risen rapidly since the deal to index-link the payment was agreed after a two-year freeze at £159.

Faced with a £15 increase in what is an increasingly unpopular tax, the Prime Minister has signalled his willingness to intervene to hold it down. It is now likely that the rise will be held to the September consumer price index rate of inflation of 6.7 per cent, rather than the higher 12-month average of about 10pc. That means the licence fee would rise by £10.65 to £169.65 per year.

But the real issue is not how much the fee should be going up, but how long it can last. It is apparent to everyone that the way we view and listen to our media has changed irrevocably. In general newspapers are now read more online than in print and the industry has had to adapt to this reality.

But the BBC remains wedded to a funding model first set down almost 100 years ago, paid for through a licence fee levied on owners of television sets, whether they watch the corporation's output or not.

This is enforced by law, with non-payers risking imprisonment. Yet TV audiences are in free-fall as viewers flock to streaming channels.

The argument that the BBC provides good value for money with its TV and radio programming has merit but it fails to address the issue of choice: why should people pay through the licence fee for output they may not wish to see or hear?

The real debate here is not the cost of the license fee but how much longer the licence fee system of funding a state broadcaster can continue.

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The UK economy is in a state – and even Labour doesn't seem to realise how bad things are

POLITICS

**Costas
Lapavitsas**

The Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has warned that if his party wins the next UK general election, he will not be able to “turn on the spending taps”. Speaking at a thinktank event focused on the stagnation of the UK economy, he said the country was “in a hole” after 13 years of Conservative rule.

So if Labour were to win the next election, what would its economic vision look like? And is it prepared to deal with the stagnation that has turned off those metaphorical taps?

For although the shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves has previously talked about what she calls “securonomics” – a promise to build an economy from the bottom up to provide security for working people – what that means in practise is not entirely clear.

And Labour's planned policies – revitalising the NHS, boosting house building, providing clean energy across the UK – would all require significant public expenditure.

Reeves has also insisted that she would be fiscally prudent – that money would only be borrowed to invest, and public debt would fall. But that prudence will also have to tackle the time bomb that has now been placed under public finances: £27 billion of tax cuts announced by the chancellor in the 2023 Autumn Statement, and effectively secured by reducing real expenditure on public services.

So where will the resources come from to fulfil Labour's ambition? Apparently from growth rising again after 13 terrible years.

And many agree that lack of growth is indeed at the core of the UK's problems. But UK stagnation is not simply the result of successive Tory governments.

A similar malaise is afflicting some of the biggest economies in the world, and its roots can be found in the impact of two trends that have hindered growth for years.

First is globalisation, the aggressive spreading of production and trade across borders, controlled by huge multinationals.

And then there is ‘financialisation’, which may be defined as the way financial markets, institutions and elites gain greater influence over economic policy. This has involved the aggressive buying and selling of

Keir Starmer appears to realise the mess the Tories have left Labour to repair as he addresses the Economy 2030 Inquiry



increasingly complex and multi-layered financial assets across the world.

The failure of globalisation and financialisation became clear in the financial crisis that stretched from 2007 to 2009. But since then, most wealthy countries have been unable to find a new path of sustained growth.

If it is broke, fix it

Our new book, *The State of Capitalism* examines this seemingly impossible situation – where the old ways can no longer continue but a new way has not yet emerged.

We found that globalisation has undermined the forces of domestic investment in wealthy countries, while creating volatile supply chains across borders, the great risks of which became clear during the pandemic. Financialisation meanwhile, has promoted profit making through transactions, encouraging speculation and undermining investment in productivity. These conditions are far from conducive to sustained

growth.

This can be seen in the US, in Japan and in the EU, especially Germany, which is currently in recession.

In the UK, productivity growth has been appalling, especially over the last 15 years, as the Resolution Foundation thinktank's report noted. Poor productivity is at the heart of stagnating growth. The vaunted new technologies are simply not raising productivity rapidly enough.

The Resolution Foundation also noted that low productivity is associated with persistent weakness of private investment.

The point here is that weak investment is closely related to the financialisation of big businesses and the globalisation of productive capacity. Large enterprises with a global footprint hold huge amounts of liquid funds that are used in financial transactions, including the payment of dividends, instead of being productively invested. Productivity growth suffers.

And research suggests that when

productivity growth is weak, profitability also suffers and relies on keeping wages low.

Confronting the challenge of UK stagnation, therefore, calls for real boldness. It requires moving away from globalisation and financialisation and a change to the structure of the economy to focus, above all, on manufacturing. And here Britain could build on some of the strengths and competitive advantages it holds in sectors like pharmaceuticals, clean energy and new technology.

Our book concludes that the answer to stagnation in wealthy countries, including Britain, is not more growth of the service sectors – especially finance – which have a poor record in raising productivity. Rather, Britain needs a wave of public investment in its productive sector and a sustained effort to reduce inequality.

In simple terms, there must be a decisive shift away from capital and towards labour.

Decrying the economic failures of the Tories is easy. But confronting the economic disaster currently facing the UK requires a complete reset.

‘Securonomics’ offers little evidence that the Labour Party is aware of the magnitude of the challenge it hopes to face. **Costas Lapavitsas is a Professor of Economics, SOAS, University of London**

“Globalisation has undermined the forces of domestic investment in wealthy countries, while creating volatile supply chains... financialisation has encouraged speculation and undermined investment in productivity. These conditions are far from conducive to sustained growth..”

Light up a seafarer's Christmas

HOW ARE YOUR CHRISTMAS PREPARATIONS GOING?

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This December, Stella Maris chaplains and their teams of volunteers all over the United Kingdom will be visiting dozens of ships in ports across the country. They'd love to provide a gift for every seafarer and fisher who will be at sea on Christmas Day.

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Your gift means so much to seafarers and fishers. It shows you care. Your kindness is a blessing. It makes them feel loved, and they know they are not alone.

If you went on board with a Stella Maris chaplain to deliver the festive goodies, you'd see that even the toughest seafarers and fishers are moved to receive a package from someone like you.

Your gift will light up Christmas for even more seafarers and fishers. It's also a way to thank these hardworking men and women. Remember, 90% of everything you use has been shipped here. Many Christmas presents you give and receive will be delivered by seafarers, often at huge sacrifice.

Can you help light up Christmas for a seafarer or fisher?

Your gift to a seafarer or fisher is a way to share God's love and make Christmas special for them.

Please visit www.stellamaris.org.uk/christmas/ for more information about how to give a gift to a seafarer/fisher. Thank you, in advance, for any support you can kindly give.

And please keep seafarers and fishers in prayer.



STELLA MARIS

An economy of caring?

Sir John Battle



Modern democratic politics is complex and difficult business, and most often dealing with having to make hard choices.

Immigration policy in particular polarises reactions. Is immigration to be regarded as natural to international exchange? Is immigration essential to economic development and tackling key labour shortages?

Is immigration a ready welcome for those driven out of their own lands by natural disasters or wars?

Nor are these objectives easily reconcilable into a single 'border control' approach. Increasingly, recent globalisation is retreating into political nationalism (now called 'nativism') and summed up by 'British workers in British jobs'. But the problem in a society with an ageing population, whose birth rate is not renewing the labour market, is labour shortages in crucial sectors.

Now NHS leaders, care homes, local councils and charities are saying they fear that the latest changes to restrict immigration to Britain will hit the health and care sectors hardest, leaving the elderly and disabled paying a heavy price. In practice the elderly and sick still awaiting reform of social care could find themselves further neglected.

There is at present an estimated shortage of 120,000 staff in the NHS and 150,000 in social care, and without immigrant labour there is little chance in the short-term of trained UK staff filling the gap. Rather than pitting current labour market needs against immigrants in a reductionist binary economic equation, perhaps we should be asking rather more basic questions such as what and who is the economy for.

A major shift from an industrial to a service sector and notably one dominated by financialisation, consumerism and new technologies, has characterised recent decades in our society.

Perhaps it is now time to insist on the purpose and direction of an economy and one rooted in moral values founded on the dignity of each person – especially the sick and elderly – and the common good.

It's now time to urgently explore the Church's social teaching on developing that vision of a new 'economy of caring'.

Modern migration is challenge to Catholic social teaching

CATHOLIC COMMENT

Caroline Farrow



Immigration is currently top of the political agenda, and so the latest Home Secretary, James Cleverly, has travelled to Rwanda to sign another treaty which supposedly would assure the safety and freedom of migrants who are deported there from the UK, after the Supreme Court ruled that the Government's current plans were unlawful.

According to the Supreme Court ruling last month, there is a strong risk that once they arrive in Rwanda, certain refugees arriving from Britain could then be deported back to their countries of origin, where they could face imprisonment and torture.

In 2022, Rwanda turned down all asylum claims from Yemen, Afghanistan and Syria, which does not bode well for any of those citizens who have washed up on the shores of Calais.

Bishop Paul McAleenan, the Lead Bishop for Migrants and Refugees for the Bishops' Conference in England and Wales, has repeatedly called out the Rwanda policy because it ignores the human dignity of those seeking sanctuary, reminding us that refugees, migrants and asylum seekers are human beings made in the image of God and not simply a political problem to be solved.

Bishop McAleenan is, of course, correct but I also have to confess that the issue of immigration is perhaps one where I, and I think many other Catholics, find Catholic social teaching most challenging, and the current fracas around the Rwanda policy distracts us from a very difficult quandary.

It is not racist, xenophobic or contrary to Christianity to believe that people ought to be discouraged and disincentivised from paying extortionate amounts of money to criminal gangs and risking their lives to come to this country. Whether that is best achieved by applying a deterrent effect or in fact, making it easier for genuine asylum seekers to come here ought to be determined by hard evidence.

What is clear, however, is that current levels of immigration are unsustainable and many of those who are settling in the UK are doing so for economic reasons and because they want to achieve a higher standard of living for themselves than may be possible in their own countries. All of this is entirely understandable, but at the



A group of migrants are landed at Dover: Such arrivals make up just seven per cent of newcomers to the UK

"It is not contrary to Christianity to believe that people ought to be discouraged from paying money to criminal gangs and risking their lives to come to this country.."

same time, it is not hyperbolic or more importantly, un-Christian, to say that this country's infrastructure is currently at a breaking point and we simply cannot accommodate every single person who would like to settle here.

We have to somehow reconcile that Christ calls us to welcome, to feed, clothe, and shelter the stranger, while at the same time recognising that finite resources are available. At this time of year, as the bitter weather sets in, I am beset with guilt as the number of homeless who come to our front door gradually increases, especially around Christmas. Much as I would love to offer these desperate people a warm bed, or even sofa to kip down on, I simply cannot because of having to balance the safeguarding needs of my children. It would not be safe or practical to invite an unknown man to share our bathing and sleeping quarters.

Neither am I in the position of being able to hand out cash. Instead, we ensure that those who do knock on our door seeking sanctuary and support are always invited in for a sustaining hot meal

"We have to somehow reconcile that Christ calls us to welcome, to feed, clothe, and shelter the stranger, while at the same time recognising that finite resources are available..."

and drink, and sent away with backpacks stuffed full of high calories snacks and drinks, and we have a stash of sleeping bags, woolly hats, gloves, toiletries and other sundries. We'll often drive a person to their nearest shelter or place of sanctuary. Sometimes, we will wake up in the morning and discover that despite the freezing temperatures, our guest has decided to spend the night in the porch.

I always feel terrible when I inform people that it's just not possible for them to stay here – it feels wrong and deeply un-Christian of me – but I also pray that God sees that I am doing the very best I can with the resources I have.

Hospitality and respect for the stranger is not optional, it's Biblical, with both the Old and New Testaments giving countless examples of how we should open our homes for the weary and dispossessed, but back then, it would be quite acceptable to offer a stranger your barn, or outhouse, or adjacent dwelling to sleep in, rather than invite him to enter the place you slept with your family.

If it could be shown that another country (and I don't necessarily mean Rwanda) could be just as safe as the UK and a place where the immigrant could thrive, even if it wasn't their first choice, would this be an acceptable equivalent to directing a homeless person to a place of safety or welcome?

As I said above, however, Rwanda is nothing but a welcome distraction for both the Conservatives, who get to flex their

muscle and look as though they are doing something about immigration, and Labour, who can use it as a propaganda tool to point out how desperately uncaring the Government is showing themselves to be.

They may be illegal, but small boats currently make up less than 7 per cent of immigrants. Net migration is currently standing at 672,000 people in 2023, compared to 219,000 in 2019, the year before the pandemic. Again, as Catholic teaching reminds us, we cannot dehumanise people as numbers, but this amount of people is unsustainable because we are a finite piece of land, with finite resources. I certainly know from my own experiences that there is not enough to go around, whether that's safe, secure homes, doctors or dentists' appointments, school places or council budgets.

Current laws allow for firms to pay migrant workers 20 per cent less than the market rate for particular jobs, which is encouraging domestic wages to be undercut. Meanwhile, five million people are on out-of-work benefits.

Just as it feels counter-intuitive and contrary to the Gospel to regretfully tell the homeless man that I cannot let him sleep in our family home, the same applies to our treatment of migrants. We must not see individuals as undesirable, or not worthy of respect, help and support, but do whatever we can to keep them safe from harm, while at the same time acknowledging our existing responsibilities.

But in order to do this, both sides need to dial back on the rhetoric. Migrants are people, made in the image of God, to whom we owe a duty of care; just they should not be demonised as a problem neither should they be dehumanised and exploited as a political weapon.

New internet Bill has to get child safeguards right



CARE has responded to the “next step” towards internet safeguards that prevent children accessing pornographic sites.

Ofcom has begun consulting on guidance for “highly effective age checks to stop children accessing online porn services”.

The regulator is tasked with implementing age verification measures that were included in the recently ratified Online Safety Act. Ofcom explained the reasons for the consultation.

“Currently, services publishing pornographic content online do not have sufficient measures in place to prevent children from accessing this content. Many grant children access to pornographic content without age checks, or by relying on checks that only require the user to confirm that they are over the age of 18,” the regulator said.

“The Online Safety Act is clear that service providers publishing pornographic content online must implement age assurance which is highly effective at determining whether or not a user is a child to prevent children from normally encountering online porn.”

Ofcom’s proposals do not cover “user-generated pornographic content” found on social media, which will be covered separately.

James Mildred, director of Comms and Engagement at CARE, said it is imperative “that Ofcom gets this right.”

“It is vital that Ofcom gets this right. Porn use is linked to disturbing cases of sexual harassment in schools, and studies demonstrate its harmful impact on relationships and mental health,” Mr Mildred said. “We are confident that age verification can be implemented in a

measured way that protects the privacy of internet users.

“We will engage with the detail of Ofcom’s proposals and respond in due course.”

A CARE poll of 2,100 UK adults, found that the public strongly agreed strong age verification measures were needed to protect children from accessing porn online, and 8-in-10 believe access to online porn should only be for over-18s.

In a separate poll of UK adults, CARE found that 6-in-10 fear porn is inspiring sexual violence against women and girls.

Archdioceses make big saving thanks to Church Marketplace

Seventy Catholic primaries and secondaries in the archdioceses of Birmingham and Westminster have saved over £500,000 by clubbing together to commission reviews of how their premises use energy.

Known as Heat Decarbonisation Plans (HDPs), these detailed assessments, commissioned by the archdioceses’ education services, revealed that upgrading building management systems could make big savings through more efficient energy use.

The schools then put in place measures including improved metering for gas and electricity monitoring, LED lighting, and solar panels, which provide up to half of their electricity.

St John Paul II Multi Academy runs nine schools in the Birmingham area, including in Walmley, Erdington and Sutton Coldfield, which have since saved £80,000 – equivalent to 871,000 units of gas.

John Carroll, the facilities manager said: “The prices just kept going up – we had to take control of it.”

“The HDPs recommended new control panels for the boilers, and

straight away we saved a lot of money. By managing data for energy use it’s made a huge difference – we’ve cut down gas usage by 30 per cent.

“Schools are looking at conservation now, and headteachers can talk to pupils about savings and say ‘this is what you’ve done, let’s keep going.’”

The archdioceses used Churchmarketplace, a not-for-profit procurement service set up by the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales to help Catholic schools and parishes bulk-buy collectively to save on costs. Items covered included stationary, transport, catering, computers, broadband and printers.

The archdioceses contracted energy efficiency consultancy Zeco to work out where savings could be made in schools, supported by Churchmarketplace.

Jennifer Williamson, director of Churchmarketplace, said: “Schools continue to come under huge pressure when setting budgets. By buying together with other schools real savings can be made, and energy-efficient systems put in place which go on to save even more.”

• See www.churchmarketplace.org.uk

Help shine a light on leprosy

You are invited to join us at **Westminster Cathedral** for a Holy Mass to mark Lepra’s centenary in 2024.

The 100th anniversary of Lepra
Friday 26th January 2024 at 2.30pm

Mass will be celebrated by **Bishop Declan Lang**, Bishop of Clifton Diocese and Chair of the Bishop’s Conference Department for International Affairs.

Please join us as we **give thanks** for the centenary and the charity’s international work in finding, diagnosing and treating people affected by leprosy.

For more information please visit:
www.lepra.org.uk/events

Or scan the QR code with your smartphone

Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was Patron of Lepra
Vice President: His Royal Highness The Duke of Gloucester KG GCMG
Registered charity number: 00213251 (England and Wales) SCO39715 (Scotland)

Photography by Tom Bradley

In Brief

C4 rejects writer nepotism claim

Channel 4 has rejected accusations of nepotism after it was revealed that the writer of its latest hit thriller is married to its head of drama. *The Couple Next Door* is written by David Allison and was commissioned by Caroline Hollick, its drama boss. It's a "talking point" in TV circles that the writer is Hollick's husband, noted Deadline.

Channel 4 also recently announced that there will be a second series of *Suspect*, a psychological thriller, with Allison named as one of its two writers. The network insisted that Hollick "registered a conflict of interest".

Chester 'world's prettiest city'

A group of mathematicians has named Chester the prettiest city in the world, beating Venice, into second place.

The researchers used Google Street View to judge cities in the UK and across the world, and ranked them based on which had the highest percentage of buildings adhering to the "golden ratio" – proportions that has "captivated mathematicians since ancient times".

"Chester came out on top; we must make the most of our golden ratio," said one of the team.

Deadly London shooting

A 42-year-old woman has died and two others have been injured after a shooting in Hackney, east London, this week. Police were called to Vine Close at 6.28pm to reports of a shooting. Officers said the victims were found with gunshot wounds after the attack, and a murder investigation had been launched. Gun crime "has no place on the streets of London", said DS Vicky Tunstall, vowing that "we will do all we can to bring whoever is responsible for this despicable crime to justice".

Sunak faces resignation threat

Up to 10 ministers may quit if Rishi Sunak adopts a hardline approach on Rwanda and uses emergency legislation to circumvent the European Convention on Human Rights. The MPs are mostly from the One Nation group of centrist Tories, who warned yesterday that "overriding" the convention would be a "red line". Legislation is set to come before the Commons shortly.

Fossil fuel use must reduce, and we're late in starting the transition

ENVIRONMENT

Steve Pye



According to the President of COP28, the latest round of UN climate negotiations in the United Arab Emirates, there is "no science" indicating that phasing out fossil fuels is necessary to restrict global heating to 1.5°C.

President Sultan Al Jaber is wrong. There is a wealth of scientific evidence demonstrating that a fossil fuel phase-out will be essential for reining in the greenhouse gas emissions driving climate change. I know because I have published some of it.

Back in 2021, just before the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, my colleagues and I published a paper in *Nature* entitled *Unextractable fossil fuels in a 1.5°C world*. It argued that 90 per cent of the world's coal and around 60 per cent of its oil and gas needed to remain underground if humanity is to have any chance of meeting the Paris agreement's temperature goals.

Crucially, our research also highlighted that the production of oil and gas needed to start declining immediately (from 2020), at around 3 per cent each year until 2050.

This assessment was based on a clear understanding that the production and use of fossil fuels, as the primary cause of CO₂ emissions (90 per cent), needs to be reduced in order to stop further heating. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says that net zero CO₂ emissions will only be reached globally in the early 2050s, and warming stabilised at 1.5°C, if a shift away from fossil fuels to low-carbon energy sources begins immediately.

If global emissions and fossil fuel burning continue at their current rates, this warming level will be breached by 2030.

Since the publication of our *Nature* paper, scientists have modelled hundreds of scenarios to explore the world's options for limiting warming to 1.5°C. Many feature in the latest report by the IPCC. Here is what they tell us about the necessary scale of a fossil fuel phase-out.

Fossil fuel use must fall fast

A recent paper led by atmospheric scientist Ploy Achakulwisut took a detailed look at existing scenarios for limiting warming to 1.5°C. For pathways consistent with 1.5°C, coal, oil and gas supply must decline by 95 per cent, 62 per cent

Continued fossil fuel extraction is an unnecessary risk



and 42 per cent respectively, between 2020 and 2050.

However, many of these pathways assume rates of carbon capture and storage and carbon dioxide removal that are likely to be greater than what could be feasibly achieved. Filtering out these scenarios shows that gas actually needs to be eliminated twice as fast, declining by 84 per cent in 2050 relative to 2020 levels. Coal and oil would also see larger declines: 99 per cent and 70 per cent respectively.

In fact, oil and gas may need to be eliminated even quicker than that. A study by energy economist Greg Muttitt showed that many of the pathways used in the most recent IPCC report assume coal can be phased out in developing countries faster than is realistic, considering the speed of history's most rapid energy transitions. A more feasible scenario would oblige developed countries in particular to get off oil and gas faster.

A fair and orderly transition

The International Energy Agency

(IEA) has added to evidence in favour of phasing out fossil fuels by concluding that there is no need to license and exploit new oil and gas fields, first in a 2021 report and again this year.

This latest IEA analysis also estimates that existing oil and gas fields would need to wind down their production by 2.5 per cent a year on average to 2030, accelerating to 5 per cent a year from 2030 (and 7.5 per cent for gas between 2030-40).

A separate analysis of the IPCC's scenarios for holding global warming at 1.5°C came to the same conclusion. Since no new fields need to be brought into development, global production of oil and gas should be falling.

This message was reinforced by the UN's recent production gap report, which concluded that producer countries including the United Arab Emirates need to be moving towards a rapid phase-out of fossil fuels, not expanding production. Instead, the report estimated that in CO₂ terms,

planned fossil fuel production in 2030 is projected to be 110 per cent higher than the required phase-out trajectory to meet 1.5°C.

The evidence for a fossil fuel phase-out is clear. The debate should now turn to executing it.

A fair and orderly transition from fossil fuels must acknowledge the differing capacity of countries: developing countries are more economically dependent on fossil fuels and have less money to switch to cleaner technologies. Some investment in oil and gas will be needed for existing infrastructure. This would maintain the minimum level of production necessary for a carefully managed transition. Overall though, fossil fuels should now be in rapid decline.

Rich countries need to phase out fossil fuels now and raise the funding to help developing countries make the transition.

Steve Pye is an Associate Professor in Energy Systems, UCL

URGENT

Help a young person reach a safe place tonight

This winter thousands of young people in the UK will have nowhere safe to sleep. Some are visible on the streets, but for many, their homelessness is hidden. The danger for all of them is very real.

Nightstop is our national emergency service. Trained and vetted volunteer hosts welcome young people into their homes and provide a safe and warm place to sleep.

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DEPAUL

Homelessness has no place

In Brief

Priest sentenced for historic abuse

A priest from Westminster has been convicted of abusing a minor in the early 1990s.

Former priest Fr Reginald Dunkling was initially arrested in 2020 before being released on bail.

On 1st December, Fr Dunkling was sentenced at Wood Green Crown Court, following a conviction in relation to non-recent sexual abuse of a minor. The court imposed a 12-month community order, with additional requirements.

On 21st April 2020, detectives received allegations of non-recent sexual abuse in the 1990s. The victim-survivor, who was 17 at the time, told officers that he met Reginald Dunkling – who was working as a priest – at his local church.

The Diocese of Westminster said: “Fr Reginald Dunkling withdrew from ministry in May 2020, and since that time has had no role in public ministry.

“Following his conviction, he does not and will not have any role in public ministry.

“The Diocese of Westminster has been co-operating with the police throughout their investigations. We are deeply sorry for the hurt that he caused to his victim, the victim’s family and the wider community, and acknowledges the gravity of the abuse he inflicted.

“The diocese is committed to the safeguarding of all children and vulnerable adults in its care.

“If anyone has any concerns of a safeguarding nature involving the diocese, they are asked to contact the statutory authorities or the Diocesan Safeguarding Service at <https://rcdow.org.uk/safeguarding/>”

‘Resilience’ warning

The Government has said that households must buy battery-powered radios, torches and candles to boost their “personal resilience” in the event of a national crisis wiping out digital network or power supplies.

The deputy PM, Oliver Dowden, said that members of the public needed to be more “personally resilient” as we have become too reliant on digital devices.

Pregnancy failures

Around 20,000 women a year struggling with mental health problems caused by pregnancy or giving birth are being denied support by the NHS.

Even those who do receive assistance for their trauma are having to wait up to 19 months to start treatment in some parts of England because specialist services are so overstretched.

Bishop John says COP28 must act decisively on climate crisis

Andy Drozdziak

Environmental Bishop John Arnold says “there is no option but for COP28 to succeed”, as the United Nations Climate Change conference continues to run until 12th December 2023, at the Expo City, Dubai.

“Given that the impacts of climate change will only worsen, there is no option but for COP28 to succeed,” Bishop Arnold said.

“I have recently written to the Prime Minister asking his government to take a real leadership role at the COP28 climate summit. Pope Francis, and our own bishops of England and Wales, have asked political leaders to take decisive action at this summit and create energy transition targets that are efficient, obligatory and readily monitored.”

Observers say the talks got off to a “flying start” when a ‘Loss and Damage fund’ was agreed on the first day. This creates a funding pool for the poorest nations to draw on, to mitigate the consequences of climate change.

Welcoming the move, Liz Cronin, Climate Policy Lead at CAFOD, said: “The UK has pledged up to £60 million which is a really welcome recognition of how important the fund is and the country’s historic responsibility for climate impacts.

“But while this is a great start, the fund now needs filling up with new



Cardinal Parolin reads Pope Francis’s speech to COP 28

“There is no option but for COP28 to succeed,” Bishop Arnold said.



hardest by the impact of climate change, despite doing the least to cause it. Communities will be at the heart of the project, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs are met.”

Pope Francis was due to attend the talks, but was unable to do so due to ill health. Excerpts from his written message were read by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, who said there must be “a breakthrough that is not a partial change of course, but rather a new way of making progress together.”

Neil Thorns from CAFOD welcomed the message. “It was an urgent call to action for global leaders to look beyond their national interest and to work for the common good,” Mr Thorns said. “He wanted to make sure that those who have the most finances and money contribute fairly going forward to those poor communities who are suffering first and hardest from the climate crisis.”

More on COP28: See pg 16

and additional climate finance.”

Scotland’s First Minister Humza Yousaf said an initial pledge from Scotland at COP26 in Glasgow had led to this point.

“At Cop26 in Glasgow, Scotland became the first developed nation in the world to commit funding to address loss and damage,” he said.

Scottish Catholic charity SCIAF was given £250,000 from the Scottish Government from its Loss and

Damage funding, which will support a new project in Zambia.

SCIAF Chief Executive Lorraine Currie said: “SCIAF has a great deal of experience of Loss and Damage programming in Malawi. This new funding will allow us to build on that work, this time in Zambia, to support communities there to build back better from the effects of flooding and drought.

“The people we serve are being hit

Irish Church calls for care, not death as it lays out defence against assisted suicide

Andy Drozdziak

The Catholic Church in Ireland has set out its opposition to assisted suicide in the Irish parliament.

Petra Conroy and Dr Margaret Naughton delivered a presentation on 5th December on behalf of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference in response to an invitation from the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Assisted Dying to speak on the theme ‘*The perspective of religious, faith based and other philosophical groups regarding assisted dying.*’

Referring to the service of those who are sick and dying as ‘an integral part’ of the Catholic Church’s mission, Petra Conroy explained that “Our Christian faith... teaches us that life is a gift which we hold in trust. The life and death of each of us has its impact on others and there is no such thing as a life without meaning or value.”

“The common good is the good of each and of all, and it is the responsibility of the State to uphold it,” she added.

The main thrust of the presentation focused on the provision of pal-

liative care.

Referring to terminal illness, Petra Conroy and Dr Margaret Naughton said: “This process is supported through palliative and pastoral care, which places the focus on the needs of the whole person.

“A decision to end life prematurely, by contrast, cuts off any prospect of growth or healing and represents a failure of hope.

“We ask the committee not to rec-

ommend the legalisation of assisted suicide, but rather to advocate strongly for greater investment in the provision of palliative care across Ireland, as well as better awareness of its scope and purpose which is often poorly understood.”

They also mentioned the ‘slippery slope’ argument, saying that “What begins as a limited right tends to become a societal norm.”

“Assisted suicide, once it is legal-

ised in “limited cases” very quickly expands beyond people who are terminally ill, to include others who have poor health or physical or intellectual disability. This has happened in Belgium, the Netherlands and in Oregon in the US,” they said.

Despite the evidence to the contrary, this was disputed by the Humanist Association of Ireland, who argued that there was “no evidence” of a slippery slope.

The Joint Committee on Assisted Dying was formed in January 2023 to consider the legalisation of assisted dying in Ireland.

The Church was one of several faith groups who were invited to contribute to the debate. Other groups invited included the Church of Ireland, and representatives from Presbyterians, Methodists, Muslims and Humanists.

Rev Dr Steven Foster of the Methodist Church said that legalising assisted dying “could be interpreted as a duty to die”. Rev Dr Rory Corbett of the Church of Ireland called assisted dying “a euphemism for suicide or for killing by a third party”.



Petra Conroy



Dr Margaret Naughton



Andy Drozdziak

A Place in the Sun star Jean Johansson is encouraging parents to leave out a Mary's Meals gift card for Santa to deliver to a hungry child this Christmas. The TV star has teamed up with international school meals charity to encourage families to bring hope to hungry children over the festive season.

Catholic charity Mary's Meals feeds more than 2.4 million children every school day in 18 countries including Haiti, Malawi and Syria. The promise of a nutritious meal encourages children into the classroom to gain an education and hope

for a brighter future.

Jean Johansson, who recently landed a hosting role on *This Morning*, explained the benefits of sharing the gift card.

"Alongside milk and cookies, my son and I will be leaving out a Mary's Meals gift card for Santa to pass on to a hungry child this year. These Christmas gift cards cost just £19.15 and will feed a child with Mary's Meals for a whole school year," she said.

"Christmas is a time for giving, and there is no better gift than the gift of hope for a hungry child," the star added.

Religious freedom is vital part of democracy - Alton

Andy Drozdziak

Catholic peer Lord Alton has used the 75th anniversary of the Genocide Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to call for greater religious freedom.

Reflecting on the "suffering of believers" at the hands of the Nazis and modern-day victims, Lord Alton said: "This fundamental and foundational freedom is routinely ignored by policymakers."

Speaking in Prague on the subject of *Freedom of Religion Under Authoritarian Regimes* at the international Ministerial Conference on freedom of Religion and Belief, Lord Alton shared how the idea of Red Wednesday – a day for remembering victims of religious violence – came about.

"As a small way of addressing silence, ignorance, and indifference, several years ago I suggested to the Board of Aid to the Church in Need, on which I served, that we should at least use one day each year – during the November month of remembrance – to commemorate the victims of religious persecution, and that we should call it Red Wednesday," he said.

Lord Alton shared his experience of Red Wednesday this year. "On Red Wednesday last week Fiona and I met Dominic and Margaret. 18 months ago, in Owo, Ondo State, their church of St. Francis Xavier was attacked by Jihadists, and 40 congregants were murdered. Margaret's shattered legs had to be amputated. In a culture of impunity, no one has been charged or brought to justice," he said.

He warned of the dire consequence of countries who 'deny religious freedom.'

"Those countries that deny religious freedom are serial human rights abusers – denying every other human right too. It is a litmus test. Nations that uphold religious freedom uphold other freedoms too. That is why it matters so much," he said.

"We owe it to those whose freedoms have been compromised or denied their liberty to learn their stories and to hand them on, especially as we come to mark the anniversaries of Article 18 and the UDHR, and of the Genocide Convention – and the events which 75 years ago led to their proclamation."

NGO slams 'deport now, ask later' policy

The director of an NGO working with exploited women said it was "very worrying" that victims of modern slavery are at risk of further exploitation, detention and even deportation while waiting on support from the Home Office.

Victims are now required to provide a higher threshold of evidence of their abuse before they have had formal access to help.

Some reports show that even after reports of abuse are made via the "National Referral Mechanism" – in which a person is assessed to see if there are "reasonable grounds" to be identified as a modern slavery survivor – individuals have been made to wait a record 58 days on average before receiving any support.

Director of the NGO After Exploitation, Maya Esslemont said: "It's very worrying to see we're now moving towards a 'deport first, ask later' policy which puts even more people at even greater risk.

"The two-month wait for support also increases survivors' risks of reprisals by traffickers, as well as their risk of homelessness and destitution at a time when they should be given the tools to start rebuilding their lives.

"During this limbo, survivors are not guaranteed safe housing, putting them at risk of reprisals from their traffickers, and some may even slip through the net at this stage be-

cause of a lack of support," she said.

"For this reason, a 58-day wait is unconscionable, it leaves people at their most vulnerable without a safety net for months."

The Government's Illegal Migration Act, and the Nationality and Borders Act has been coined as the reason for the rise in wait times and that new measures put in place are simply criminalising victims.

Other measures introduced under the Act includes banning referrals for victims who have a criminal record. However, victims are more often than not forced to commit crime as a result of their exploitation.

New research has revealed that there may be more victims of modern slavery in the prison system than previously thought, with survivors not being identified and therefore missing out on the support that they need.

According to reports, the total number of potential modern slavery victims referred to the Home Office this year sits at 12,872, while the number of those actually classified as victims and therefore receiving support has sharply declined.

With the lower number of classifications has come a record number of appeals to these cases, in which more than half have been reconsidered to be victims of modern slavery.

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St Vincent de Paul Society
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Turning Concern into Action



Ooberfuse offers cry of hope amid the despair

Andy Drozdziak

Fresh from their recent collaboration with Snoop Dogg, Ooberfuse are hoping to bring some light into the darkness of the “rubble and ruins” of Bethlehem at Christmas through a new song.

As the Israel/Hamas conflict continues to rage, the Bethlehem Municipality has cancelled its Christmas celebrations. However, London-based Catholic band Ooberfuse has collaborated with Youstina Safar, a resident of Bethlehem and a student at Bethlehem University, to deliver a powerful message through their Christmas song, *Hear Angels Cry*.

Ooberfuse are a songwriting duo composed of Hal St John and Cherie Anderson. Singer Cherie said: “As we embarked on this music project in June, we never anticipated the cancellation of Christmas displays in Bethlehem. The dimming lights in Manger Square honour those who tragically lost their lives in the Holy Land.

“*Hear Angels Cry* embodies Jesus’ message of love, prevailing even in the face of hopelessness,” she said.

All proceeds from the song will directly benefit those suffering in Gaza, particularly the children re-



constructing the fragments of their lives.

Youstina shared his hopes for the song. “In the midst of despair, *Hear Angels Cry* stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of hope in Bethlehem. While the traditional Christmas displays may dim this year in remembrance of lives lost in Gaza, our voices unite to affirm that hope will never succumb to darkness.”

Bethlehem music producer John Handal, the owner of RJ Music company, has helped bring the collaboration to life. He said: “*Hear Angels Cry* is a testament to the enduring power of music to convey messages of peace and resilience. We aim to shine a light on the indomitable spirit of Bethlehem and support those affected by the conflict.”

Proceeds from the song will go to Friends of the Holy Land. It described *Hear Angels Cry* as “a heartfelt plea for unity, compassion, and the enduring power of hope”, adding: “Bethlehem will be a sombre and sober place this Christmas with no celebrations due to the current war. *Hear Angels Cry* is a sign of hope amid the despair.”

It urged Christians to download the song, as all proceeds will bring relief to those suffering in Gaza and the West Bank this Christmas.

Through its office in Bethlehem, Friends of the Holy Land is well-placed to get urgent, personalised aid to the families most in need in Gaza and the West Bank. “The message of Christ has been a light, both spiritually and practically through the work of so many Christian institutions, in the region for thousands of years. We can’t let that light go out in our generation,” the charity said.

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Job’s story given new twist in sci-fi thriller

Andy Drozdziak

The producer of a new Christian film hopes that a film about loss based on the book of Job can inspire people at Christmas.

The Shift is a dystopian drama and sci-fi thriller, in which Kevin Garner (Kristoffer Polaha) travels across worlds and dimensions to reunite with Molly (Elizabeth Tabish), the love of his life, with whom he has experienced the loss of a son.

A mysterious adversary known as The Benefactor (Neal McDonough) upends Kevin’s world as he tries to escape an alternate dystopian reality.

Producer Ken Carpenter believes that *The Shift*, which will be released in cinemas on 15th December, is “ultimately a story of hope.”

“The story says, in essence, that when all is lost, there is hope after loss,” Ken Carpenter told the *Universe*. “In this season of ultimate hope, experience a story that points to that. Although it does not immediately resonate as a Christmas story, I think it does have some resonance on that level.”

The Shift is produced by Angel Studios, who are behind *The Chosen*, (see below). References to the book of Job are strong, with The Benefactor, played by Neal McDonough, providing a disturbing and chaotic presence who is striving to bring Kevin to despair.



Considering the parallels with the book of Job, Carpenter says that it is common for humans to ask “why” when painful experiences occur.

“We can’t work out this walk of faith. We are often prone to ask – why this? Why that? It’s hard to make sense. I’m going to do my best to persevere. That’s part of how the book of Job informs this story.”

Ken Carpenter hopes that audiences watching *The Shift* will be entertained-but that the message will go deeper. “It’s not a sermon,” he said. “I hope they’re entertained – but consider some ultimate truths: that there is a Creator who doesn’t promise that it will be easy, but who does promise to be faithful and provide a hope that there is a fulfilling experience after loss.”

• **The Shift will be released in cinemas on 15th December**

Leicester Square’s red carpet is ready for *The Chosen*

Andy Drozdziak

The Chosen has announced that its Season 4 Global Red Carpet Premiere will take place in London’s Leicester Square on Monday, 22nd January, 2024.

Cast and crew members from the hit show, along with press, key supporter organisations and celebrity supporters will attend the event, which promises to be a night to remember for fans.

Director Dallas Jenkins has high hopes for Season 4 – although he revealed that the latest season “is the hardest one we’ve filmed.”

“You will see that it’s the most mature season yet,” he told the *Universe*. “Spiritually, historically and culturally we introduce you to things we haven’t gotten into yet in the first three seasons.”

He added: “Definitely, this has been the hardest to film. Jesus is weary and heavy laden and he needs rest and he’s not necessarily getting it from his closest followers.”

The red carpet event will launch the hit series in the UK, and fans will then have the chance to watch the first episodes of Season 4 in cinemas across the UK and Ireland from 1st February 2024.

UK and Irish fans can also access Season 4 merchandise at the new UK-based website, www.thechosentv.co.uk.



Dallas Jenkins organises a crowd scene on series 4 of *The Chosen*. This season has been the hardest to film, he admitted.

The premiere episodes will also be released in cinemas in Latin America, Poland, Australia, and New Zealand via a consortium of distributors.

After the full-season run in cinemas concludes in the US, *The Chosen* will announce its debut on popular streaming platforms like

Amazon and Netflix, on linear television, and on *TheChosen.TV*.

Dallas Jenkins hopes that it will be a faith builder for many in the UK. “We have seen over and over that *The Chosen* has been used for discipleship; it has allowed people to go deeper and a connection point to understanding scripture more,”

he said.

“Every time we’ve dipped our toes in the theatrical waters, viewers have overwhelmingly told us they want more. After seeing the Season 4 episodes, we knew we’d be doing our fans a disservice if we denied them the chance to see them all on a big screen with others they can



laugh and cry with.”

The first three seasons of *The Chosen* have become something of a cult classic, accumulating more than 450 million views in more than 140 countries and viewed in 56 languages, making it one of the most popular shows in the world.

The Chosen became the No. 1 crowdfunded media project in history in 2019 when £10 million was given by 19,000 people.

The Chosen is available to view on Amazon Prime, Netflix, Peacock and on The Chosen mobile and TV app.

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Box of 18 Religious Christmas Cards 4.5” x 6.5” (11 x 16 cm), with litho gold highlights, presented in cardboard box. Four nativity scenes within Gothic Stained Glass window border, with the words Christmas Blessings below. Inside text: May the Blessings of Christmas be with you today and always. Ref: X0871 Price: £7.25 + P&P



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Pack of 12 Religious Christmas Cards 4.5” x 6.5” (11 x 16 cm) in 4 designs, embossed and gold foil stamped, featuring Nativity image enclosed in gold-embossed wreath and wording: Christmas Peace. Inside Text: Wishing you a very Happy Christmas and Peaceful New Year. Ref: X0497 Price £6.50 + P&P



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Pack of 12 Religious Christmas Cards 4.5” x 6.5” (11 x 16 cm) in 4 designs, embossed and gold foil stamped. Four inset nativity designs with holly border, and the words Silent Night, Holy Night, all is Calm, all is Bright below. Inside text: To wish you the Peace of that First Silent Night and the Joy of the First Christmas Day. Ref: X0874 Price: £6.50 + P&P

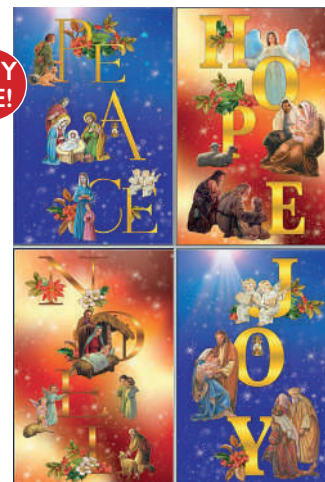


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Pack of 12 Religious Christmas Cards 4.5” x 6.5” (11 x 16 cm) in 4 designs, embossed and gold foil stamped. Four nativity motifs combined with Illuminated Words: Peace, Joy, Hope, Noel. Inside text: May the peace of Christmas be with you always. With Best Wishes for a Happy Christmas. Ref: X0873 price £6.50

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Churches need to remember the simple power of an embrace

The journey of reconciliation between Catholics and Orthodox Churches began with an embrace almost 60 years ago, a sign of how important personal contact and time spent together are in the search for Christian unity, Pope Francis said.

In a letter to Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople for the feast of St. Andrew, the patriarchate's patron saint, Pope Francis focused on the anniversary of the meetings of St. Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I in Jerusalem, 1964.

Their meeting, the pope said, "was a vital step forward in breaking down the barrier of misunderstanding, distrust and even hostility that had existed for almost a millennium."

Today, he continued, people do not remember the statements of "those two prophetic pastors" as much as "their warm embrace."

"Indeed, it is highly significant that this journey of reconciliation, increasing closeness and overcoming of obstacles still impeding full visible communion, began with an embrace, a gesture that eloquently expresses the mutual recognition of ecclesial fraternity," Pope Francis wrote in the letter delivered by a delegation led by Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity.

Conference has new vision for theology

Theologians, social scientists, historians and artists, including an Indigenous Mexican rapper, met in Bogotá, Colombia to discuss how religion is represented in popular culture today. Their meeting came as Pope Francis said theology must resist being self-referential, but understand "it must be an interdisciplinary dialogue."

Emilce Cuda, secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, told the conference at the headquarters of the Latin American bishops' council, known as CELAM, that "theologians must be among the people and listen to the language they use to express the faith today, to express their needs and dreams," and to engage with popular expressions of faith conveyed through tattoos and rap music, for instance.

Cuda said the conference was motivated by the need for an "outgoing theology" that aligns with a vision of an "outgoing church" as Pope Francis requested.

Felipe Legarreta, a biblical scholar at Loyola University of Chicago, said the conference would support a "new methodology for theology that is in dialogue with the other sciences and with the peoples of the earth, above all those who are on the peripheries."

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, poses next to Sultan Ahmed al-Jaber, the president-designate of COP28, left, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, the UAE Minister of Tolerance and Coexistence, centre, and Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso along with other representatives at the inauguration of the Faith Pavilion during the UN Climate Change Conference, or COP28, in the UAE.



End the 'sin' of climate crisis urges pope in speech to COP28

Carol Glatz

The future of humanity depends on what people choose now, Pope Francis said in his message to global leaders at the World Climate Action Summit of the UN Climate Change Conference.

"Are we working for a culture of life or a culture of death?" he asked in his message. "To all of you I make this heartfelt appeal: Let us choose life! Let us choose the future!"

"The purpose of power is to serve. It is useless to cling to an authority that will one day be remembered for its inability to take action when it was urgent and necessary to do so. History will be grateful to you," the pope wrote.

Excerpts from Pope Francis' full written message were read by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican Secretary of State, during the high-level segment with heads of state and government at the climate conference, COP28, being held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Pope Francis was to have been the first pope to attend the UN climate conference but canceled his trip after coming down with a serious bronchial infection.

Cardinal Parolin read only excerpts of the full speech in deference to the three-minute limit on national statements. The text was submitted in full to the conference.

"Sadly, I am unable to be present with you, as I had greatly desired," the pope's text said.

The destruction of the environment is "a sin" that not only "greatly endangers all humans, especially the most vulnerable," he wrote, but it also "threatens to unleash a conflict between generations."

"The drive to produce and possess has become an obsession, resulting in an inordinate greed that has made the environment the object of unbridled exploitation," the pope wrote. People must recognise their limits, with humility and courage, and seek authentic fulfillment.

"What stands in the way of this? The divisions that presently exist among us," he said.

The world "should not be unconnected by those who govern it, with international negotiations that 'cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above

the global common good," he said, quoting from his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

The poor are not to blame for today's climate crisis, he wrote. "Almost half of our world that is more needy is responsible for scarcely 10 per cent of toxic emissions, while the gap between the opulent few and the masses of the poor has never been so abysmal.

The poor are the real victims of what is happening."

He also criticised those who blamed the current ecological crisis on high birth rates in developing nations, labelling such criticism as a form of colonialisation.

"We have a grave responsibility," he added, which is to ensure the earth, the poor and the young not be denied a future.

The solution requires coming to-

gether as brothers and sisters living in a common home, rebuilding trust and pursuing multilateralism, he added.

The care for creation and world peace are closely linked, the pope said.

"How much energy is humanity wasting on the numerous wars being waged, and how many resources are being squandered on weaponry that destroys lives and devastates our common home!"

The pope again urged governments to divert money away from arms and other military expenditures toward a global fund to end hunger, to promote sustainable development of poorer countries and to combat climate change.

"Climate change signals the need for political change" away from narrow self-interest and nationalism, he wrote.

There must be "a breakthrough that is not a partial change of course, but rather a new way of making progress together," he wrote. There must be "a decisive acceleration of ecological transition" regarding energy efficiency, renewable sources, the elimination of fossil fuels and "education in lifestyles that are less dependent on the latter."

He promised the "commitment and support of the Catholic Church, which is deeply engaged in the work of education and of encouraging participation by all, as well as in promoting sound lifestyles."



Pope laments fighting in Gaza but says own health improving

The end of the temporary ceasefire between Israel and Hamas and the resumption of fighting this week means only “death, destruction, misery for the Middle East,” Pope Francis said after reciting the Angelus prayer last Sunday.

The pope made his comments from his Vatican residence after being forced to cancel his usual appearance to the faithful in St Peter’s Square, as he continued his fight against a troubling bout of bronchitis.

The angelus and his homily were read by Mgr Paolo Braida, as they were last week.

“Many hostages have been freed, but many are still in Gaza in the hands of Hamas,” the pope’s text said. “Let’s think about them, their families who had seen a light, a hope to embrace their loved ones again.”

The week-long ceasefire had seen several dozen hostages released in exchange for Palestinian prisoners and humanitarian aid into Gaza, where conditions are now said to be “unbearable,” according to the UN.

“In Gaza there is much suffering;



there is a lack of basic necessities,” the papal text said. “I hope that all those who are involved may reach a new cease-fire agreement as soon as possible and find solutions other than weapons, trying to take courageous paths to peace.”

Pope Francis also used his midday Angelus remarks to pray for the victims of the bombing at a Catholic Mass being held in a gym at Mindanao State University in Marawi, Philippines.

Five people died and 50 were injured.

“I am close to the families and the people of Mindanao, who have already suffered so much,” the pope’s message said.

He commended “the souls of those who died to almighty God’s loving mercy, and he implores the divine gifts of healing and consolation upon the injured and bereaved.”

“With prayers that Christ, the prince of peace, will grant to all the

Pope Francis listens as Mgr Paolo Braida reads his Angelus reflection

strength to turn from violence and overcome every evil with good, His Holiness cordially imparts his blessing as a pledge of strength and consolation in the Lord,” the message said.

When asked about his own health, the pope said he was feeling “much better”, and on Tuesday made an appearance in the Vatican audience hall – though again he asked an aide to read his remarks.

He appeared in good spirits throughout and chatted to several prelates who came to speak to him individually at the end of the audience.

Explaining why he asked his aide to read his remarks, he said: “I’m much better, but I get tired if I speak too much.”

The Vatican said it was likely the pope would help kick-start Holy See Christmas festivities, which officially begin on Friday (8th December), the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Priests must be at one with their flocks

The pope has told a meeting of seminarians in France that they must become “humble, patient and simple priests who walk at the same pace as their people.”

“This is how the priest will touch the hearts of his faithful and evangelise,” the cardinal said.

The pope’s message doubled down on the importance of celibacy, stressing that it was “at the very heart of the priestly identity.”

“Priests are celibate – and they wish to be, because Jesus was celibate. Celibacy is not primarily theological, but mystical: may this be understood by he who is able.”

He accepted that the figure of the priest has lost “its prestige and natural authority in the eyes of the majority of people and has even unfortunately been tarnished.”

That means “we can no longer rely on it to reach out to the people we meet,” he added.

“This is why, to carry out the new evangelisation, so that everyone can have a personal encounter with Christ, we need to adopt a pastoral style of closeness, radical self-giving to others, simplicity and poverty.” The priest must know the “smell” of his sheep and walk with them “at their pace.”

Mercy and justice lie at the heart of Canon law

All the Catholic Church’s structures, including tribunals and faculties of canon law, must undergo a “pastoral and missionary conversion” to ensure the Church is giving the world “the only thing it needs: the Gospel of the mercy of Jesus,” Pope Francis wrote.

“To be pastoral does not mean that the norms should be set aside, and one sets off in whatever direction one wishes, but that in applying the norms one should make certain that the Christian faithful find in them the presence of the merciful Jesus, who does not condemn but exhorts them to sin no more because he gives grace,” the pope wrote to an international group of canon law scholars.

Pope Francis made his remarks in a message to the Consociatio Internationalis Studio Iuris Canonici Promovendo (literally translated as the international association for promoting the study of canon law), which was holding a conference in Rome for its 50th anniversary.

When canon law is an instrument of mercy, the pope wrote, “even when a severe sanction is to be applied to one who has committed a very serious crime, the Church, which is mother, will offer him the help and spiritual support that is indispensable so that in repentance he may encounter the merciful face of

the Father.”

In its application, he said, each Church law must be interpreted in light of the “supreme law,” which is *salus animarum*, the salvation of souls.

The application of canon law is something which must be done in prayer and with fidelity to the word of God, the living tradition of the church and the magisterium or teachings of the popes, he said.

“The wisdom that comes from God, received in prayer and in listening to others,” he said, should guide canonists “in distinguishing what is essential in the daily life of the Church, inasmuch as it is desired by Christ himself and established by the Apostles, and also expressed in the Magisterium.”

As a model, Pope Francis pointed to most Catholics’ mothers, who first taught them the faith. This essentiality of faith is what was transmitted to us by our mothers, the first evangelisers.

“Why not take her as a point of reference regarding the attitude of spirit to be lived in the various situations of Church life?”

The pope thanked the canon lawyers for their contributions to Church life and prayed that they would be “instruments of God’s justice, which is always inseparably united with his mercy.”

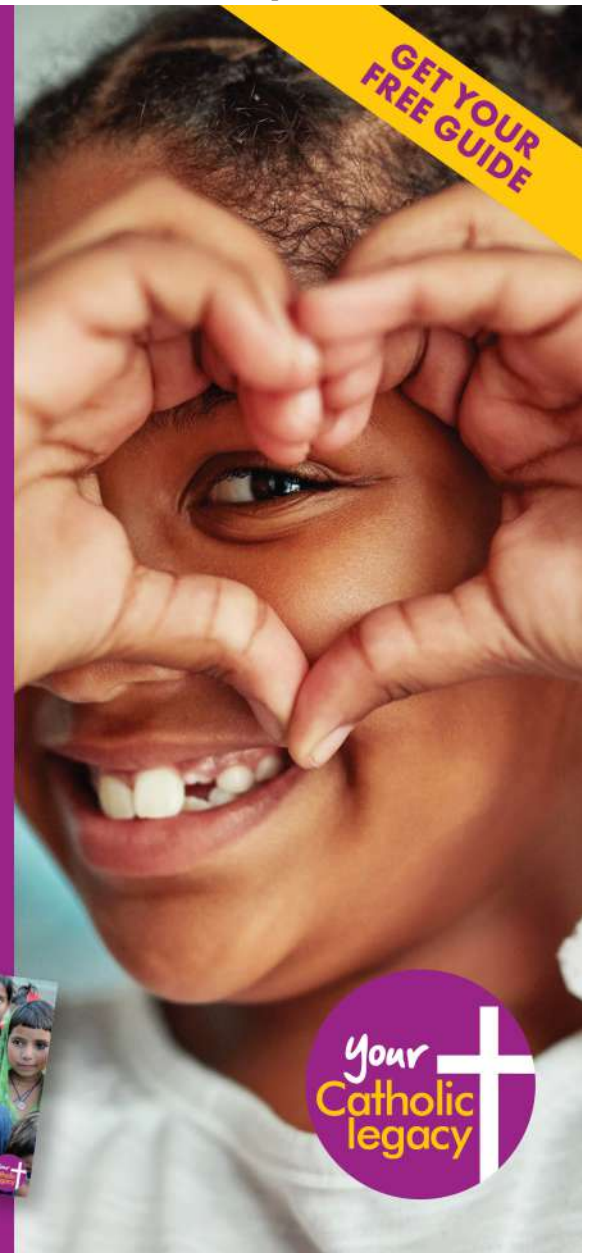
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In Brief

France sees big rise in anti-semitic attacks

In the month since the Hamas attack on Israel, France has seen a big increase in anti-semitic incidents, including several that have left victims requiring hospital treatment.

The French Interior Ministry said 1,247 antisemitic incidents had been reported since 7th October, nearly three times the total for the whole of 2022.

These incidents have included the star of David being marked on Jewish people's homes – which reminded the older French generation about the horrors of German occupation, marking the Jewish house only to point whom to later exterminate.

A march last month saw 180,000 people gather in Paris to protest against rising anti-semitism, with President Macron calling on citizens to rise up against “the unbearable resurgence of unbridled antisemitism.”

“A France where our Jewish citizens are afraid is not France,” he said.

Five US states still pushing executions

Just five US states – Texas, Florida, Missouri, Oklahoma and Alabama – carried out executions in 2023, according to research by the Death Penalty Information Center, but there was still an increase in the number of death penalties carried out on 2022.

The remaining states have either stopped executions all together or have paused them by executive order.

The numbers are relatively small, however: 24 people were executed in 2023, up from 18 in 2022. This year is the ninth consecutive one with fewer than 30 executions.

Part of the blame for the increase had been laid at the door of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who is Catholic. The Republican politician resumed executions in his state ahead of his presidential bid.

US agent conspired to kill Haiti president

A former informant for the US Drug Enforcement agency has pleaded guilty to conspiring to assassinate Haitian President Jovenel Moise, whose death in 2021 sparked a near civil war.

Joseph Vincent, a dual Haitian-American citizen is the fourth of 11 defendants in Miami to plead guilty.

He faces life imprisonment for conspiring to kill and kidnap Moise.

Netanyahu aiming for Israeli post-war control over Gaza

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has offered the first insights into what Gaza will be like after the current conflict has ended by saying that Israel must have control over its security in the future.

His comments cut across any hopes that the ‘two-state solution’ could continue, and suggests a strong Israeli military presence will remain in Gaza long after the current fighting has ended.

The remarks came as Israeli troops entered Khan Younis, Gaza's second-largest city of 400,000 people, in its drive to wipe out Hamas.

The war has already killed more than 15,000 Palestinians and displaced over three-quarters of Gaza's 2.3 million residents, who are running out of safe places to go. Gaza sources say 70 per cent of the victims are women and children.

The United States, Qatar and Egypt say they are working on a longer truce, but Israel has not suggested it is in the mood for another pause in its combat operations.

Under US pressure to prevent further mass casualties, Israel said it is being more precise as it widens its offensive into southern Gaza after obliterating much of the north.

Most of Gaza's population is now in the south near the border with Egypt, crammed into UN camps and shelters. Israel has barred people who fled the north earlier in the war from returning.

Sahel tragedy needs world's spotlight says bishop

Catholic villagers in the Ivory Coast are rallying to provide food and supplies for the nearly 42,000 refugees who have fled to their country from the Sahel region of Africa, the head of the Commission of Integral Human Development for the bishops of Ivory Coast has said.

Most of the refugees are Muslim, fleeing violence from Islamic extremists who perpetrate violence against Muslims as well as Christians, said Bishop Joseph Kakou Aka of Yamoussoukro.

“We want to bring them some smiles,” Bishop Aka said, describing the current situation in the region as a “terrible humanitarian crisis.”

He recalled how one priest had called him in the middle of the night for help because a family of six was hosting over 50 people who had fled across the border. “These are houses that we see in the villages,” where people go outside to the toilet, Bishop Aka said. In addition, the welcoming villagers had to find food for the refugees, he said, noting that in Africa, “You don't have to be full ... you share what you have.”

Caritas and the bishops' conference called on people in other dioc-



Smoke trails over Gaza City.
Photo: Reuters

Palestinians say that as Israel continues to strike across the besieged territory, there are no areas where they feel safe, and many fear that if they leave their homes they will never be allowed to return.

Israel has vowed to dismantle Hamas' extensive military infrastructure and remove it from power in order to prevent a repeat of the 7th October attack that ignited the war.

Military sources claim it is taking

every step possible to spare civilians, and accuses Hamas of using them as human shields as it fights in dense residential areas, where it has a labyrinth of tunnels, bunkers, rocket launchers and sniper nests.

But the militant group is deeply rooted in Palestinian society, and its determination to end decades of open-ended Israeli military rule is shared by most Palestinians, even those opposed to its ideology and its

‘Hell’ in Gaza, warns UN

The United Nations has warned of an “even more hellish scenario” following Israel's fresh evacuation orders in Gaza. Aid groups say people are running out of places to flee as the Israeli military continues to push southwards. “Our camps are full, and the situation on the ground is becoming critical,” said one official.

The UN's children's agency said that “to accept the sacrifice of the children in Gaza is humanity giving up”.

ceses for help, saying the need is still increasing.

Bishop Aka said most refugees in northern Ivory Coast have fled from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in the Sahel, a belt of 10 countries stretching across Africa from the northern Sahara Desert to the more arid savannas to the south.

The United Nations says nearly 38 million people in the Sahel need life-saving aid and support, and more than 4.4 million people are displaced in Burkina Faso and Mali, two countries that border Ivory

Coast. The 10-year crisis has been attributed to violence, which includes aid being cut off to those most in need.

Bishop Aka said the world's media and politicians were focused on the Middle East and Ukraine, “but they should not forget the Sahel.”

The bishop described the violence in the Sahel as a cancer, noting that if, unchecked, it could extend to coastal countries. Islamic militants attacked an Ivorian beach resort in 2016, killing 19 people and wounding 33 others. Border post attacks



This family in Burkina Faso are among the estimated 38 million people in the Sahel who need aid now

attacks on Israeli civilians.

That will complicate any effort to eliminate Hamas without causing massive casualties and displacement.

The US has pledged unwavering support to Israel since the October 7 attack, including rushing weapons and other aid to the country.

In his latest statement President Biden urged the world to condemn Hamas's reported use of rape and sexual violence against Israeli girls and women in the 7th October attack.

The US president called on the world to condemn such conduct “without equivocation” and “without exception”.

He said: “Reports of women raped and their bodies being mutilated while still alive, are appalling. Hamas terrorists inflicted as much pain and suffering on women and girls as possible and then murdered them.”

“The world can't just look away at what's going on”

Israel hosted a special event at the United Nations on Monday where former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York and former Meta chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg were among those who criticised what they called a global failure to support women who were raped, sexually assaulted and in some cases killed.

also have left some of the bishop's countrymen dead.

“We need humanitarian aid,” he said. “We need humanitarian protection for the refugees” and internally displaced persons.

Bishop Aka said although France and the European Union have had peacekeeping troops in the Sahel for 10 years, “we haven't achieved the peace that is needed so that people can return to their homes.” He called instead for “intensive diplomatic efforts on the ground.”

Donor countries need to hold the leaders of Sahel countries accountable, he said, adding that the countries need an influx of financial assistance.

Faith-based leaders in the region – not just Christian, but also Muslim – are trying to change the approach to peace. They are participating in the Catholic-led Sahel Peace Initiative, which helps those affected – especially women and children – and advocates interreligious dialogue and reconciliation.

Bishop Aka said religious leaders believe it is important that all those involved know both sides have rights and responsibilities.

Philippines Advent service bomb blast condemned

Five dead, 50 injured after Islamic State bomb tears through university gym as it is being used for Mass

Pope Francis has assured the people of the Philippines of his prayers after a deadly bomb blast ripped through a church service being held in a university gym, killing five and injuring 50.

Dozens of students and teachers were in the makeshift church last Sunday when the bomb detonated at Mindanao State University in Marawi, capital of Lanao del Sur province. Shortly after the blast the Islamic State terror group claimed responsibility.

After praying the Angelus, Pope Francis said he had been left horrified by the attack, adding that he was “close to the families, to the people of Mindanao who have already suffered so much.”

In a telegram to Bishop Edwin de la Peña of Marawi, the pope said he was “deeply saddened to be informed of the injuries and loss of life caused by the bombing.”

The pope concluded his message, praying that “Christ the Prince of Peace will grant to all the strength to turn from violence and overcome every evil with good.”

Nearly 80% of the population in the Philippines is Catholic, but the state the university is in is predominantly Muslim.

In 2017, Marawi saw a five-month battle between government forces and Islamic militants aligned with the Islamic State, which left over 1,000 dead, including some civilians, and displaced around 100,000 people. International forces helped the army to regain control of the besieged city.

Regional military commander Maj. Gen. Gabriel Viray III said they were trying to identify those responsible.

Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. condemned the attack, offering condolences to the victims’ loved ones, urging calm and promising that the perpetrators will be brought to justice.

“I condemn in the strongest possible terms the senseless and most heinous act,” he said. He blamed it on “foreign terrorists,” adding that “extremists who wield violence against the innocent will always be regarded as enemies to our society.”

He added that the armed forces and police have been instructed “to ensure the protection and safety of civilians and the security of affected and vulnerable communities.”

The state governor, Mamintal Alonto Adiong Jr. said the attack on an educational institution showed a “twisted morality,” while Mindanao State University said it was “deeply saddened” and “appalled” by the act of violence, saying that “violence has no place in a civilized society, and it is particularly abhorrent in an institution of higher learning like MSU.”

Cardinal Orlando B. Quevedo de-

scribed the atrocity as “a massacre that literally cries out to Heaven.”

He said its timing, on the first Sunday of Advent, “is the most terrible and most damnable terroristic crime against innocent worshippers.”

It is believed the blast was in reprisal for the deaths of 11 Islamic militants in a military operation on 1st December. The dead were members of the Dawlah Islamiyah, a group that has aligned with Islamic State and which still has a presence in Lanao del Sur province.

There were also two other operations in the following days in Mindanao that targeted Islamic militants amid growing tensions over the islands.

A security officer stands guard at the gym entrance as a victim lies on the floor in the background



Church laughs off claims Nicaraguans looking after bishop

The Church in Nicaragua has ridiculed claims that Bishop Rolando Alvarez is receiving preferential treatment while in prison, pointing out that official photographs of him in jail show him looking emaciated.

Latest photos show Bishop Alvarez greeting family in a visiting area full of snacks, and receiving medical attention. Nicaragua’s official Government spokesman said “as can be seen in the photographs, the conditions of confinement are preferential”.

But friends of the bishop, 57, say it is clear he has lost a lot of weight, and questions over his health have gone unanswered.

“The dictatorship must not believe that with their cynical language and photos, they are going to justify their crime and silence us,” Auxiliary Bishop Silvio Jose Baez of Managua, who is currently living in

exile in Miami. “Bishop Alvarez is INNOCENT and we will continue to shout this injustice to the world. He must be released immediately without conditions!”

Fr Edwin Roman, a Nicaraguan priest also exiled in Miami, said via social media: “They will arrest them, they will persecute them and they will imprison them because of my name,” citing Luke, Chapter 21.

“What helplessness, pain and indignation I feel when I see images of Msgr. Rolando in a setting staged for the photo, while his face reveals another reality,” he continued.

Bishop Alvarez was arrested in August 2022 before being convicted in February on charges of conspiracy and spreading false information. He was sentenced to 26 years in prison but offered exile, something he refused.



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St Mary's University, Twickenham has developed a new apprenticeship for those looking to become chaplains. Andy Drozdziak reports

Effective school chaplaincy is “about the proclamation of the Gospel message – it’s evangelisation.”

This belief led Susan Elderfield, Chaplaincy Adviser for the Archdiocese of Southwark to approach Philip Booth, the Director of Catholic Mission at St Mary's University, in Twickenham, in 2020. The result was the setting up of a Chaplaincy and Youth Ministry Apprenticeship, with the Education Skills Funding Agency awarding the university training provider status.

“I want our students to have good chaplaincy,” Susan told the *Universe*. “I want it to bear fruit in their lives, to see discipleship at its best for them, so that they are able to navigate this world in a much better way.”

Drawing on the continued work of Tom Baptist in the Diocese of Nottingham, Susan is on a mission to provide strong, theologically sound school chaplaincy and help establish a career pathway from apprentice level up to a Catholic Academy Trust chaplaincy director. She has a considerable task in the Archdiocese of Southwark, where there are 163 Catholic schools.

Historically, chaplaincy coordinators have struggled with the issue of appointing, and keeping hold of, high quality school chaplains.

“The catalyst for the programme were related to problems of recruitment and retention. This is a national picture which needs change,” Susan said.

The Level 4 apprenticeship promotes a vocational pathway to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours of chaplains and youth ministers. It pays particular attention to their formation, which has historically suffered due to an overreliance on informal on-the-job training with some support.

Susan paid tribute to the support of St Mary's. “The university was brilliant in terms of the whole process of the validation and of getting the university training provider status,” she said.

The apprenticeship covers a range of topics, including safeguarding, special education needs and disabilities, bereavement, mental health, behaviour management and the skills to support and lead the spiritual, religious and liturgical life of a school. During the programme, each apprentice qualifies as a Youth Mental Health First Aider and achieves a Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies.

Susan approached the formation of the course with a number of



Photos Lucy Nicholson, CNS

St Mary's apprenticeship offers an exciting route to chaplaincy



“It provides a brilliant Catholic formation for anybody working in chaplaincy. St. Mary's has been delighted to work with Southwark Archdiocese...”

Philip Booth



fruit in Southwark, where, according to Susan, ‘a greater number of schools now have access to a chaplain, and the apprentices feel part of a professional support network. This is important for pupils and for the Catholic life and mission of schools.’

Philip Booth has spoken in glowing terms of the Chaplaincy and Youth Ministry Apprenticeship, sharing how the course can be accessed in cost-friendly ways.

“The apprenticeship levy is a tax imposed upon all employers, including universities and dioceses.

“They can reclaim the levy if they spend it on approved forms of training. However, significant bureaucratic hurdles have been

questions to help train and form theologically-sound, professional, caring and innovative chaplains. These questions included: Are they caring? Are they competent? Would they be good in a difficult situation? How can we secure the depth of their theological knowledge and their professional capacity in terms of working in a school?

As part of the course, input from outside experts has been encouraged. Susan shared how Catholic prison charity PACT delivered a training session to help students support children who have family members in prison.

“Within PACT training, they provided case studies related to the impact that an arrest of a family member can have on a child - and

yet they still come to school because it's the safest place for them,” she said, describing PACT's input as ‘gold dust.’

“PACT gave them a structure about how to dialogue with students who may have experienced this trauma, or whose parent is in prison or whose brother is in prison. This is valuable to all chaplains.”

The course is already bearing

“The university was brilliant in terms of the whole process of the validation and of getting the university training provider status...”

Susan Elderfield



created that can make it difficult for employers to spend the levy. St. Mary's University has worked with Southwark Archdiocese to overcome those problems and create this apprenticeship programme for chaplains and youth ministers which could easily be used by schools in other dioceses,” Philip told the *Universe*.

“Because of the way the levy works, there is generally no cost to students, schools or dioceses, unlike for traditional degree qualifications. As such, it provides a brilliant Catholic formation for anybody working in chaplaincy. St. Mary's has been delighted to work with Southwark Archdiocese on this programme and we hope that it will spread to other dioceses and other areas of chaplaincy.”

For further information about the Chaplaincy and Youth Ministry Apprenticeship, [CLICK HERE](#) for Southwark Archdiocese [CLICK HERE](#) for St Mary's University

Russian mortar shell won't stop Grazyna from helping Ukraine's disabled people

Filip Mazurczak

As the world marked International Volunteer Day on 5th December, Grazyna Slawinska, a young Polish volunteer who left her comfortable job to aid people with disabilities in Ukraine, was in eastern Ukraine to spend another December in the war-torn nation.

Last Christmas she lost her leg due to a mortar shell explosion in Bakhmut. But this did not lead her to abandon those in need.

Helping people with disabilities is Slawinska's passion. Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Slawinska, 33, taught special education at the Pedagogical University of Krakow, preparing students who in the future will work with people with disabilities.

She also had for many years been involved with Klika, a group of lay Catholic volunteers at the Dominican Basilica of the Holy Trinity in Krakow. Active for half a century, Klika seeks to make people with disabilities feel wanted and to know that the volunteers who spend time with them do so not out of pity, but because they genuinely want to hang out with them.

Although Russia's war of aggression has been trying for all Ukrainians, it has proven especially challenging for those with disabilities, she said.

"Already before the war, the situation of Ukrainians with disabilities was difficult," Slawinska said. "Many of them felt unwanted and so they did not even feel it necessary to fight for themselves." After the Russian invasion in February 2022, Slawinska took a year of unpaid leave at the university and ultimately quit her job, knowing well that relocating to a country under military



occupation could entail the loss of life or limb.

If war is challenging for a healthy person, it is a nightmare for a disabled one, Slawinska said. Not only does Ukraine lack the accessible infrastructure for the disabled common in Western countries, but during Russian bombings they are often physically unable to go down to bomb shelters and basements, which makes them especially prone to attacks. Since the war's beginning, Slawinska and her colleagues have helped to bring people with disabilities, the ill, the elderly and others with limited mobility to safety during bombings.

For her efforts, Slawinska was honored with the Good Samaritan Award this September, presented by the St. Elijah Volunteer Network and the Krakow Medical Association.

On 6th January, 2023, when eastern Ukraine's Orthodox majority celebrated Christmas, Slawinska went to Bakhmut, a city in the eastern Donetsk oblast that

"No one should have to spend Christmas under artillery fire with no heat, running water, or electricity,"

has been regularly shelled during the war and which she calls "probably the biggest hell on earth today." Slawinska and her colleagues went to visit the people who had not yet evacuated the city to bring them bread, soup, the traditional Eastern Slavic sweet Christmas sweet poppy dish kutia and a sense of normalcy.

"Even in times of peace, spending Christmas alone is terrible," she explained. "No one should have to spend Christmas under artillery fire with no heat, running water, or electricity," she said. Many of those who remained in Bakhmut included numerous children and people with intellectual disabilities, including those unwanted and thus left behind.

That wartime Christmas, tragedy struck: A mortar shell hit Slawinska, which necessitated an amputation of her right leg just below the knee.

After surviving such an ordeal, anyone would be fully justified in wanting to go home for good. But after several months of treatment back in Poland, Slawinska returned to Ukraine in June. She considers herself "tremendously lucky" for having "just" lost her leg and knowing that many Ukrainians with disabilities still require Christian charity.

Although based in Kharkiv, Slawinska and her colleagues travel across Ukraine. In sites threatened by bombings, they help bring people with disabilities to safety. "I don't really consider myself to be a volunteer. 'Volunteer' is such a formal word, but I went to Ukraine because my heart told me I must go. That's the most important part of volunteering – wanting to accompany another person in need and take on his or her perspective."

Slawinska visited Mykolaiv to organise celebrations for St. Nicholas Day, 6th December, with the local children left behind in the besieged city. However, she will be spending Christmas this year in Poland with her family.

She emphasises that after all the support they gave her during her treatment, they have the "sacred

right" to spend the holidays together. Yet in 2024, she will go back to Ukraine for an indefinite period.

"After you've seen all the human dramas I've seen in Ukraine, it's impossible to go back to your desk and be calm," she said. "It doesn't suffice to see other people suffering. Thanks to my work, I know I can help people suffer just a little less."

Slawinska said that for her, every day little miracles happen – being given the use of an apartment by a local businessman who was grateful for the volunteers' help in local communities, or a transfer of money to their crowdfunding campaign that fills their needs precisely in a given hour – but the needs are huge every day.

Slawinska and her fellow volunteers need fuel to continue traveling across Ukraine and helping all affected by the war as well as firewood and flour for families in the harsh Ukrainian winter. "Just this past week, I spent \$2,000," she said.

For her, being a volunteer became an everyday reality and an unpaid full-time job. She said she will continue because "Nobody deserves this war."



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- Why do we say Amen?
- What's God's Grace?
- Why do we go to Confession – and Mass?
- What's Communion about?

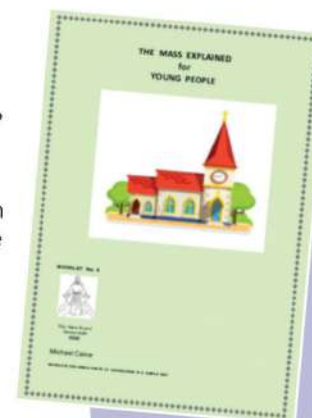
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Have yourself a sustainable Christmas

Virginia Bell

Christmas is the best time of the year for many, but the worst time of the year from an environmental perspective.

On Christmas Day last year, BBC Radio 4 broadcast *Christmas Recycled* which looked at how we could make Christmas more sustainable and less wasteful.

It looked at the presents we might buy, the wrapping paper we might use to enclose the presents, the trees and decorations we might choose and the sort of food we might enjoy.

The programme also looked at companies whose Christmas products are designed to be more sustainable. Where it found one company offering a particular innovative scheme or produce, there must be others, perhaps near your locality. And remember that recycling is not the best answer to tackling waste – reducing consumption is far better.

Clothes

The BBC broadcast found that Christmas jumpers, so attractive at the time, usually end up as landfill or are burnt – both wasteful and polluting. Some companies, like British Christmas Jumpers, offer Christmas jumpers made from recycled materials.

And there are companies that hire outfits, which is a much more sustainable option, with The



Independent listed its top eight clothes rental companies.

We're also encouraged to donate unwanted clothes to charity.

Presents

Presents come with packaging. 114,000 tonnes of plastic packaging will be binned not recycled at Christmas time, according to Wildlife and Countryside Link.

Each year the UK spends £700 million or more on unwanted presents, according to research by eBay and Wealthify.

So how we can cut this down? Find out what people need before you buy; offer home-baked treats instead, or arrange a spending limit

with family and friends.

Check that the items you buy are green and ethical – workers are properly paid, not tested on animals, sustainably sourced. Lists of ethical companies can be found by looking online. Make reciprocal arrangements with family and friends not to buy each other presents. They may be relieved.

Children's gifts

Presents for children are an environmental headache, as they are only needed for a while before being discarded. Yet toys can be reused again and again.

Some companies and schemes rent out toys. You pay a subscription and get a box of toys every month or so. When you send that box back you get another box.

There are also local schemes that take unwanted toys. And national initiatives like Trash Nothing which enable you to give away your unwanted goods – and take other people's offerings.

Cards

The Greeting Card Association tells us that 1 billion Christmas cards are sold each year, a huge proportion of which can't be recycled because they contain glitter and plastic.

Organic waste can be turned into cards, which is what Earthbits in Huddersfield is doing.

Or we can use online greetings in place of actual cards, which more and more people are doing.

Do you really need to buy cards for people you see regularly? If you decide not to, explain that you are trying to reduce consumerism. Home-made cards are a great idea – people like the thought and effort that goes into them. Use up leftover resources.

A better idea is to send a Happy Christmas email. If you receive cards, recycle where possible, don't bin them.

Wrapping paper

In Britain every Christmas, it is estimated that we use 227,000 miles of wrapping paper, at the

expense of 50,000 trees. Lots of it is single use. There is no need to throw it away. It can be re-used many times. Buy reusable bags, and you can buy wrapping paper made from recycled paper, or from hemp (organic hemp is one of the most sustainable fibres you can use).

Chirpy in Leeds sells cloth wrapping, while Wrag Wrap sells cloth wrapping made from recycled bottles from post-consumer waste.

You could also use attractive and re-usable cloth bought from charity shops. Use ribbon instead of tape for sealing, so that the wrapping can more easily be re-used or re-cycled. The ribbon can be re-used as well, as can bows.

Trees

Millions of Christmas trees both real and artificial are discarded every year in the UK. To cut down on plastic dependence and to offset carbon emissions, buy a living tree, and keep it in the pot in the house or garden when not being used. It can be re-used year after year. Norfolk pines are suitable, as they don't grow large.

Many local councils will collect and compost your tree, or you can take it to the local recycling centre, or compost it yourself.

But burning or mulching trees will release CO₂ back into the atmosphere, so a rooted tree is best.

One company, Rooted Christmas Trees, rents them, then 'retires' them at the end of their decorative life, by planting them in land where they are needed to prevent flooding.

Tree decorations

Make your own tree decorations out of unwanted household materials and waste, and/or out of home-baked treats. Use greenery – grow your own mistletoe and holly. And use LED lights, as they use up to 95 per cent less energy than traditional bulbs. Buy craft kits of pre-used, unwanted things like buttons, material scraps etc to make tree decorations.

Alcohol

Toast Ale sells beer made from surplus fresh bread from bakeries, which would otherwise go to landfill. This not only prevents waste, but also reduces the carbon and water footprint of beer

compared to malt. Some companies offer a refill scheme for bottles of alcoholic spirits.

Food

One manufacturer estimates that each Christmas, households bin 270,000 tons of food. The waste figure for producers and supermarkets is much higher – 2 million tons of edible food waste produced each year.

If food waste were a nation it would have the third largest carbon footprint in the world, after the USA and China. FareShare is an organisation that uses food that would otherwise go to landfill, to feed people.

Rotting food creates methane. But it could be used to produce energy and fertiliser instead, if councils invested in recycling food waste. At least one company in the UK is doing that, Saria Ltd.

There are things you can do at home to reduce waste, such as don't cook more than you will eat, and freeze leftovers for a future meal/s.

You've probably seen headlines like *'Tackling the world's most urgent problem: meat'* (United Nations Environment Programme). Growing animals for food involves destruction and pollution of the land, forests, waters and atmosphere, and takes resources from the poorest people.

Include some vegan meals over the Christmas period. Veganuary.com has some great options – and there are plenty of vegan ready meals in the shops.

Online


When buying online, add the words 'eco-friendly' to whatever you're looking to buy. You'll be surprised at the number of sustainable offerings available.

So there are plenty of options out there. Let's use Christmas time to move closer to God by thinking about how we can care for His creation.

Have a healthy, holy, wholesome green Christmas.

Virginia Bell is a member of Laudato Si animators, a group who are trying to encourage and implement environmental, sustainable lifestyles in the light of Catholic teaching.





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A VIEW FROM THE PEWS

MICHAEL CAINE

ST WINEFRIDE'S PARISH, LYMM, CHESHIRE



Understanding Heaven is beyond our grasp

Heaven, sometimes called Paradise, is the fantastic place where our immortal spiritual souls can live with God after we die, but only if we obey the covenant that He provided.

I was once asked by eight-year-old children what it is like. As I thought about it, I realised I was truly stumped. I got out of it by asking them what they thought it was like. The type of answers I was given were: “it’s Christmas all the time”; “no more school”; “living with people you like”; “always playing the games you like”; “having money to spend”; and “it never rains”, and many others.

I couldn’t help smiling at these innocent replies until I realised that these were their honest ideas on Heaven and were better than any I had. I then remembered that story about St Paul (1 Cor 2:9) saying:

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of



man, the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”

This answer still does not tell us what Heaven is like, but it does tell us that we haven’t a clue.

I tried to determine why Heaven is so special, because from a human point of view, it had to provide for every pleasure and comfort known

to us, and do so for all eternity, without us getting fed up.

As I thought about this, it became clear that of all the billions of people who have ever lived, with their individual likes and dislikes, how could Heaven satisfy them all? It all became a more puzzling problem.

I thought about the teachings of love by Jesus Christ. Would this provide an answer? If people loved God and their neighbour as Jesus told them, there would be no wars, no jealousies, no sinful desires. We would all live in a great peaceful and prosperous existence. Was this getting near to my thoughts on Heaven?

I also asked myself, what about all those special places in fictional writings such as Atlantis, Utopia and Avalon; places where everyone lived in peace and harmony. Were these imaginary places, ideas of what Heaven is?

Eventually I came to realise that none of these things could even attempt to describe Heaven, and for one very simple reason: **Heaven was created by God.**

Why is it that people have always tried to work out, or know, what God’s intentions are? We’re told by his Son Jesus Christ, that God does

not think or do things in the same way as human beings. He has ultimate knowledge and wisdom when compared with us, so we cannot know what his reasons are for any actions or decisions, unless he decides to let us know.

This then explained to me what Heaven is. In simple terms, it must provide unending happiness for any being, human or spiritual soul that exists there. God created them all, so he knows what happiness is to them. He can and has created an eternal Heaven to be the promise he intended for those who earned it.

Since God can create anything, we extremely limited mortals have no chance of even guessing what existence in Heaven is like. From my own point of view, I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s pointless for us to even try knowing what it’s like, because it has to be a wonder way beyond our human knowledge and understanding.

JOURNEY IN FAITH

CHRIS MCDONNELL



Merton’s thoughts and words still resonate today

This Sunday, 10th December, is the Second Sunday of Advent. It is also the date when Thomas Merton OCSO, monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, died in 1968, 27 years to the day after he entered the Abbey in 1941.

A prolific writer, with many books published in his lifetime and not a few after his death, and the inspiration for even more books, articles as well as poetry about him, he will perhaps be remembered most for his journals.

He kept journals from before his reception into the church, in November 1938 at Corpus Christi church, New York City, until two days before his death following an electrical accident while showering in his room. He was attending an interfaith conference between Catholic and non-Christian monks in suburban Bangkok, the primary purpose for his journey to Asia.

His journals are extensive in their detail and give us a picture of a man whose search for God was never easy but who kept trying none the less.

Writing in his journal for December 4th 1964, he said: ‘In the hermitage one must pray or go to seed. The pretence of prayer will not suffice. Just sitting will not suffice. It has to be real. Yet, what

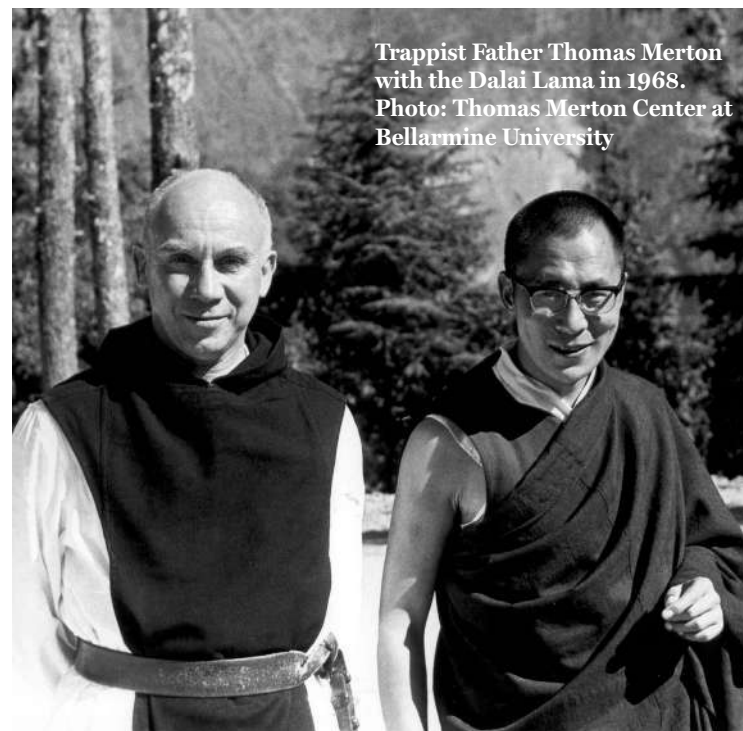
can you do? Solitude puts you with your back to the wall, or your face to it, and this is good. So you pray to learn how to pray’.

His friendship with the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, in the early 60s was part of this exploration, his deep desire to explore the faith of both East and West.

His written contribution to the peace movement during the time that Vietnam saw so much bloodshed, was circulated through contacts. His order forbade him publishing on issues relating to nuclear weapons and peace, so his comments were passed round in mimeographed copies. They became known as the Cold War Letters, some 110 of them, and were published in book form after his death.

Merton was returned to the United States in a B52 bomber carrying the war dead for that week – an ironic twist after his committed opposition to the war in Vietnam.

Merton was not a conventional monk. When he moved to his hermitage in the grounds of the Abbey, he was more likely to be seen in denims and a jacket rather than a monastic habit. Yet his influence was extensive. He was a joyous man, a man of humour and



Trappist Father Thomas Merton with the Dalai Lama in 1968. Photo: Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University

a prolific correspondent. His collected letters fill five volumes.

I have tried to gather a few words on Merton, the Christian Monk of the West, and his contact only weeks before his death, after many years of reading and letter exchange, with the Buddhist East, these few words.

Polonnaruwa*

It was at this time of the year that he went to the valley of the Buddhas and, pausing a moment to remove his shoes, walked barefoot through the wet grass among the reclining figures.

The faint smile of their unfaltering gaze returned his awe at being in their presence.

A Christian monk of the West experiencing the East, just six days before his disappearance.

* December 4th 1968 Diary entry.

“I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic experience”.

Thomas Merton ocs

John Herriott, writing in the *Tablet* a number of years ago, described how Merton “would, in retrospect, be regarded as the archetypal example of a monk of the late 20th C”.

I don’t think it would be too much of an exaggeration to talk of Merton in association with the Advent season.

For his life and teaching centered on the teaching of the coming of the Christ Child as a gift for all men, both East and West.

If you haven’t found him yet, dip into the pond.

Advent is our time for renewal

As we are now well into the season of Advent we continue to keep our hearts and minds firmly on renewal. The Advent wreath candles, three purple and one pink, are symbols of a journey of renewal over the Sundays leading up to Christmas but the real journey lies within us.

On that First Sunday, we set out filled with anticipation and spiritual preparation for the birth of Christ. This journey is not just a remembrance of a historical event but a real, living encounter with Christ. It invites us to turn our hearts and minds over to Jesus.

Advent is not just about decking our homes with lights and ornaments. It's a time to reflect on what it means to welcome Jesus, not just in Bethlehem, but into our own lives. It serves as a gentle reminder of our imperfections and calls for constant improvement.

No one is perfect; thus we need constantly to grow spiritually, to be renewed through Christ amidst our daily routines. Take time to pause, reflect, and strive to become better versions of yourself, to step outside your comfort zone, and let others into your world. It could be as simple as showing kindness to a stranger, to a lonely person, providing support to the homeless, a smile for your neighbour.

This season encourages us to break free from complacency by spreading love and goodwill beyond our usual circles.

The essence of Advent lies in



transformation within, the renewal of our spirits. It means listening to Christ's teachings and embodying them in our dealings with others. It means being prepared, not just outwardly, but inwardly. It means sharing the gift of presence, of truly being there for one another. It means being attentive to the needs of the sick, the lonely and the vulnerable, extending a helping hand and a compassionate ear to everyone we meet.

Read the scriptures during Advent, seeking wisdom and guidance, and live out those teachings in your daily lives. In doing so, you grasp the true meaning of the season.

At the heart of Advent is joy, not superficial or showy, but a deep-rooted, genuine expression of the spirit of Christ. In a world often weighed down by darkness and despair, Advent reminds us that we can rise above the cruelties of life. A

smile, simple and sincere, can be our greatest asset. Let us not allow the challenges and complexities of life to overshadow the joy that resides within us. Instead, let's radiate that joy, illuminating the lives of those around us with the light of Christ's love.

Vigilance is key during Advent. As we engage in the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, let us continue to make a conscious effort to see Christ in the faces of those

This season encourages us to break free from complacency by spreading love and goodwill beyond our usual circles.

around us. Whether it is a family member, a friend, a stranger, or even an adversary. Let us strive to extend love, grace, and forgiveness to all.

During this season, parents can get bogged down, trying to please their children with expensive gifts. But the best gift to give your children is to love them, to be there for them in good times and in bad. No packaged gift, lacking love's content, will ever be a substitute for love itself.

And so, the Advent season marks the beginning of a sacred journey towards a deepening of Christ's birth in us. It is a time of introspection, renewal, and anticipation. As we embark on this path, let us constantly strive for repentance and personal improvement, extending goodness by sharing the joy of the Lord's good news.

May this season continue be a time of renewal, as we open our hearts to the presence of Christ and allow His love to guide our thoughts, words, and deeds.

Trust in the Lord to take away life's burdens

'Come to me all you who are weary and are burdened, and I will give you rest'

Gospel of Matthew, chapter 11:28

One day an elderly man entered a hospital. He was grumpy from being on medication and the nurses thought him to be insane, as he yelled for his wife to get the apple basket. By the time they had checked him into his room the nurses were exhausted.

"Sir, you have to calm down; we are doing everything we can for you" they would try to explain.

"I don't need your help" the grumpy old man would yell; "I want my basket." He finally went to sleep.

The nurses sighed with relief and talked among themselves whether they should call the hospital psychologist about the old man and his obsession with the apple basket.

As they talked and laughed about the situation the wife came in carrying a basket of apples. The nurses were stunned as she asked if she could see her husband and deliver his basket. "Sure," they said, as they watched her slip past into his room

Curiosity consumed the nurses for the next few weeks as they tended to the elderly man. He was eaten with cancer and the doctors had given him no hope of survival. He turned out to be a very calm, happy man once he had his basket. His wife, they noticed, would come in with apples and go out with apples and the curiosity of the nurses grew even more.

One night as the old man was nearing the end, a nurse sat down in a chair beside him: "May I ask why you have that apple basket? I just don't get it."

"I am an apple farmer by trade," he sighed. "From the time I was 20 until the day I die I will forever have my apples." The nurse nodded, thinking she understood.

As she started to leave, the old man asked her to sit down again: "At the age of 20 I accepted Jesus as my Saviour. The day I accepted Jesus I got this basket, and each time I had a problem or concern that I couldn't handle, I put an apple in the basket un-shined."

"Why?" The nurse said shaking her head.

"Because it reminded me to hand over my burdens to the Lord for him to shine. See my basket now," he said. "As my burdens



disappear, so do the apples. As I get a new burden I put a new apple into the basket."

The humble nurse looked into the basket... only one apple was there.

With that, he took a big breath and grabbed by the hand his wife who sitting

"I put an apple in the basket un-shined ... it reminds me to hand over my burdens to the Lord for him to shine. See my basket now ... as my burdens disappear, so do the apples..."

there and faded into eternity. The wife paused for a moment and got up from her seat to take from the basket the last remaining apple. She whispered in his ear that his reward awaits him in Heaven.

The nurse stood still with tears in her eyes: "what do you think his reward will be?"

"The biggest apple pie you can imagine" she said, "eternal life with Jesus, His saviour."

From that day on the nurse always had a basket by her bed.

Author Unknown

SUNDAY WORSHIP

ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS



St John the Baptist knew his job: to clear the way for the one who came after

10th December 2023 –

2nd Sunday in Advent,

John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ by raising expectations. Once Jesus had arrived, there only remained for John to quietly disappear from the scene.

1st Reading: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11
God is coming to save his people and to open up our way into the future

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the desert prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Responsorial: Psalm 84: 9-14

R./: Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

*I will hear what the Lord God has to say,
 a voice that speaks of peace,
 peace for his people.
 His help is near for those who fear him
 and his glory will dwell in our land. (R./)*

*Mercy and faithfulness have met;
 justice and peace have embraced.
 Faithfulness shall spring from the earth and justice look down from Heaven. (R./)*

*The Lord will make us prosper and our earth shall yield its fruit.
 Justice shall march before him and peace shall follow his steps. (R./)*



As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

2nd Reading: Second Peter 3:8-14
God gives us time to repent and so be ready to meet him when he comes

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it

will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish.

Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

John the Baptist prepares the people for the coming of their Saviour

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight".'

John the baptiser appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."

A preacher's vocation

John the Baptist could be the central figure in today's homily. He prepared the minds of people in his circle to welcome the bringer of salvation. That is how God seems to work: sending the message of salvation and meaningful living to us through each other. St Paul once asked two vital questions, "How can people know about God if they have never heard? and how can they hear if nobody is sent to them?" So the vocation to proclaim or preach religious truth is vital, if God is to be known and loved.

Jesus found his first disciples among those who heard John the Baptist preach. It was John who showed them the value of self-control and of prayer, who urged them to listen to the inner voice of God, with a contrite and faithful heart.

The high point of John's short ministry was meeting with Jesus. Not only did he baptise Our Lord but he sent some of his own followers to join the Jesus movement. Through him, Andrew and his brother Peter, and Philip and Nathanael became apostles.

God still wants us to help other people to know and love him. If we were more committed as Christians, maybe we could do more to influence others towards

"God still wants us to help other people to know and love him. If we were more committed as Christians, maybe we could do more to influence others towards faith in God..."

faith in God.

Parents can introduce their children to God, with words about trust and prayer. But their words will only be effective if built on the example of their actual life. In all sorts of way, people are in position to influence others, for good or ill. This is clearly so for those who work in the communications media, press, radio and TV.

But ordinary people doing ordinary jobs can also influence the views and values of those they interact with.

In light of today's portrayal of John the Baptist, does our way of speaking and behaving help others to share our values, or do we confirm their suspicion that this world is a selfish and cynical place?

And what about promoting vocations to the priesthood or other ministry, or any form of service to the church of Christ? The future of our church as an organised, priest-served community handing on the prayer-life and values of Jesus is under serious question today. But if enough people open their hearts to God's work, like John the Baptist and those first disciples, Andrew and Philip and Peter, then a way will be found to keep the world aware of the saving message of Christ.

In the process, our bishops may need to be urged by many practising Catholics to open up the priesthood to well motivated, devoted married people, as well as to the traditional but diminishing cadre of the voluntarily celibate.

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The Holy Family's marriage was valid – they gave consent to their unique call

Q. As Advent begins, and we look towards the figures of Joseph and Mary, my question is this: if sex is so important to a marriage, would you consider the marriage between the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph to have been a valid marriage?

A. Yes, the marriage of Mary and Joseph was a valid marriage. Even though this marriage was never consummated, it was the spouses' consent that validated the marriage bond, and their decision to maintain Mary's virginity was made mutually.

They gave full consent to their unique call to raise the child Jesus as husband and wife.

The Church's understanding is that marriage is ordered by its nature both to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring. At the time of their marriage, both Mary and Joseph knew of Mary's pregnancy.

The Gospel of Matthew (1:16) explicitly recognises the validity of this marriage when it calls Joseph "the husband of Mary"; and in the eucharistic prayer of the Mass, we say: "Blessed Joseph, her Spouse."



Icon of the Holy Family
‘The marriage of Mary and Joseph was a valid marriage. They gave full consent to their unique call to raise the child Jesus as husband and wife.’

Photo: Mihoko Owada, Catholic Standard

Q. When we say the Lord's Prayer at Mass, we pray, 'Lead us not into temptation.' Why would God lead us into temptation? I know that God allows temptation to occur, but the word 'lead' is an active verb that implies God may be actively involved in our being tempted. Would you please clarify the Church's teaching on God's role in temptation?

A. I agree with your concern over the phrase 'lead us not into temptation.' But more important, so does Pope Francis. In an interview in 2017 with Italian television, Pope Francis said: "That is not a good translation."

He suggested, as a possible alternative: "Do not let us fall into temptation." And within two years, Vatican-approved translations in French, Italian and Spanish included equivalents such as "Do not abandon us to temptation."

That comports with the biblical Letter of James that says: "No one experiencing temptation should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; ... Rather, each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (James 1:13-14).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church clarifies that the Greek wording used in the Scripture "means both 'do not allow us to enter into temptation' and 'do not

let us yield to temptation'" (No. 2846).

So be comforted: The God who created us out of love—who loves each of us completely—would not purposely place us in temptation and set us up to fall into sin.

Q. Every Mass I attend begins with a penitential rite, which I take to be the forgiveness of sins for those who are there worshipping. And then, just before Communion, we say: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." Why, then, does the Church require Catholics to go to confession?

A. It is true, as you indicate, that several times throughout the Mass we indicate our unworthiness to participate in such a sacred act. However, none of these expressions of sinfulness and sorrow is equivalent to sacramental absolution, and they do not dispense us from the obligation of confessing grave sins before receiving holy Communion.

The Church's Code of Canon Law states clearly that 'a member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and number all grave sins committed after baptism and not yet remitted directly

through the keys of the Church nor acknowledged in individual confession' (Canon 988.1).

Grave, or "mortal," sins are those involving serious matter, committed with knowledge of their gravity and the deliberate consent of the will.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, the Church's official 'guidebook' on liturgy, notes, 'the priest calls upon the whole community to take part in the penitential act, which, after a brief pause for silence, it does by means of a formula of general confession. The rite concludes with the priest's absolution, which, however, lacks the efficacy of the sacrament of penance' (No. 51).

The penitential rite (as well as the reception of Communion and other acts of prayer and devotion)

"The Church's Code of Canon Law states clearly that 'a member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and number all grave sins committed after baptism..."

can, though, forgive venial sins. Strictly speaking, one is obliged to go to the sacrament of penance only for serious sins—although it is a certainly a good idea to confess regularly even for lesser sins and imperfections.

Pope Francis has revealed that he himself goes to confession every two weeks and considers it the best path to spiritual healing and health.

Q. Recently I read an article in our Catholic newspaper about the work of a deacon in another parish, who regularly baptises people and distributes Communion at Mass. I don't understand where he gets the authority for this, since the deacon in our parish is not allowed to do any of that.



With most parishes now having only one priest, wouldn't it be helpful if deacons could do more?

A. Deacons are authorised by the laws of the Catholic Church to baptise, witness marriages, perform wake and funeral services outside of Mass, distribute holy Communion, proclaim the Gospel, preach homilies and expose the Blessed Sacrament for eucharistic adoration. (A deacon is not empowered – as a priest is – to consecrate the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, to hear confessions or to anoint the sick.)

The work of a deacon, however, is done at the discretion and under the immediate supervision of the parish priest to which that deacon is assigned. So there is some variation from parish to parish as regards the particular ministries of the deacon assigned there and the frequency with which those ministries are exercised.

As you have pointed out, the current shortage of priests has made the work of deacons in the Church today all the more valuable.

Unfortunately, this column cannot accept questions from readers

FAITH AND ART

MICHAEL SANFEY



There are seven figures in the painting: from left to right they are John, Jesus, Judas, three soldiers (the one farthest to the right barely visible in the rear), and a man holding a lantern to the scene. They are standing, and only the upper three-quarters of their bodies are depicted. Judas has just kissed Jesus to identify him for the soldiers.

The mystery of Ireland's Caravaggio

ON THE TAKING OF CHRIST BY CARAVAGGIO

Italy's leading business newspaper, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, had a recent feature in its Sunday arts supplement *Domenica* casting doubt on whether the painting at the National Gallery of Ireland that is attributed to Caravaggio (1571-1610) - *The Taking of Christ* (*La presa di Cristo in Italian*) - was in fact by Caravaggio.

The *Il Sole* piece was written by Anna Coliva, former long-time director of the Galleria Borghese in Rome, the only museum in the world to have six paintings by Caravaggio. She has written extensively about Caravaggio's work. Her *Il Sole* article coincided with an exhibition of the version of *The Taking of Christ* by Caravaggio that is part of the Ruffo Collection, currently taking place at Palazzo Chigi in Ariccia, located about 26 kilometres from Rome.

In her article Coliva referred to

the fact that two versions of the work exist – in Rome and in Dublin – seeing this as possibly being a case of the recurring question of Caravaggio replicas and copies.

A replica is a second work by the artist himself: a copy is done by a different artist altogether.

She contrasted the pathos of the Rome painting with the Dublin version, which in her view seemed to “loosen the grip of dramatic tension in a diffused, golden, reassuring luminosity, devoid of violence, typical of Honthorst's best achievements”. This is a reference to the Dutch artist Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1656).

The opportunity to see the painting now on display in Ariccia “raises many doubts about the Irish painting hitherto almost unanimately considered to be by the hand of Caravaggio,” wrote Coliva.

Her firm view is that the Dublin painting is a van Honthorst and not

a Caravaggio. In a meeting with her in Rome at the weekend she instanced a number of tell-tale signs. For example, in the Rome version there is a scar on the left hand of Judas, a sign of evil, whereas in the Dublin version the depiction is rather of muscle movement, not a scar. Similarly she is adamant that Caravaggio would

“Her firm view is that the Dublin painting is a van Honthorst and not a Caravaggio...”

not have painted the lamp in the way that van Honthorst did. In fact she said van Honthorst was known as ‘Gherardo delle Notti’ (Gerard of the night) and that the lamp in the Dublin version is a trademark of his, as it were. She later told me that her opinion on the Dublin painting crystallised when she saw

it alongside other Caravaggios at an exhibition in Rome some years ago.

If definitively established that the Dublin version is a copy by van Honthorst, and not an original Caravaggio, the news would be a big disappointment for Irish art lovers, of whom I myself am one, even if Coliva described the Dublin painting to me as a masterpiece in its own right. The discovery of the “Dublin version” in a Jesuit house on Leeson Street by the late Sergio Benedetti was one of the most remarkable occurrences in recent art history. Benedetti, a Florentine, was conservator and Head Curator at the National Gallery of Ireland. He passed away in 2018. (*more on him at <https://www.nationalgallery.ie/remembers-sergio-benedetti-1942-2018>*)

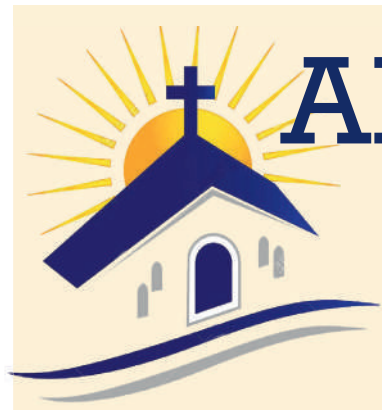
This is not the first time that doubt has been cast on the Dublin art work. For example, there was a small flurry of reports in 2004 about whether or not the painting

on display in Merrion Square was a real Caravaggio. The *Irish Examiner* reported at that time that: “In a further gesture that underlies the confidence of the National Gallery that it has the true Caravaggio, Mr Benedetti has proposed that the Roman dealer's copy of the painting be put on display alongside the Dublin painting when it is exhibited in Milan (later that year)”.

Perhaps this idea should be looked at again. Notwithstanding the logistical challenges it would entail, the two paintings could be displayed side-by-side, say for three months in Rome and three months in Dublin.

The National Gallery of Ireland has been asked to comment on the *Il Sole 24 Ore* report, and is looking into the matter.

Michael Sanfey is a Visiting Fellow, Robert Schuman Centre, European University Institute, Florence.



AROUND THE PARISHES & EDUCATION

The Universe Catholic Weekly's guide
to Catholic life in your neighbourhood



The arrival of our Saviour is a reminder to put prayer first

**Advent reflection by
Bishop Mark Davies,
Bishop of Shrewsbury:
'Prayer Comes First'**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I know some of you were present in Cardiff the day the Pope – now recognised as one of the great Saints of our time – declared: “As long as the memory of this visit lasts, may it be recorded that I, John Paul II, came to Britain to call you to Christ, and invite you to pray!”

They were striking words to the young people of our land, and they echo today as Advent begins with the Gospel's urgent call: “Stay awake!”

At the first Christmas, the slumbering world was oblivious to the greatest gift, as poor shepherds alone found the Saviour born for us. Advent and Christmas call us once more to wake up to the “grace and truth (which) came through Jesus Christ”.

In a similar way, Pope Francis invites us to dedicate the year ahead to rediscovering in all our lives, the place of prayer in anticipation of the graces God wishes to give the Church and the world in the Jubilee Year 2025.

Prayer is always simple, and we shouldn't make it complicated. It is our readiness to speak with God and be silent and attentive in His presence. Prayer should really be as natural to us as breathing. It may be simple, yet prayer is also



difficult. The Catechism reminds us, prayer involves a battle for us to remain silent and attentive, a moment of truth for our hearts, revealing where our real love is placed.

The best advice in beginning to pray is simply to begin praying! Many are the paths and the aids which will help us enter into prayer, such as the reading of the scriptures, or the taking up of the Rosary, or being silent before the Blessed Sacrament.

Yet, prayer is not a technique, still less is it an achievement by a feat of concentration. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts even when you and I meet with dryness and distraction.

Saint Teresa of Avila teaches that our part in prayer is to be ready, to

dispose ourselves to all the Lord wishes to give. Saint Teresa compared our task in prayer to preparing the ground, making ourselves ready as the farmer prepares the earth. The greatest temptation is to believe we have no time to pray, or that giving time to prayer conflicts with the duties and demands which fill our waking hours. The first step in rediscovering prayer may be to make time to pray.

A papal voice

At a recent meeting in Rome, Pope Francis gave this beautiful explanation as to why prayer must come first: “In every diocese, in every parish, in every community, let us adore the Lord! Only in this way will we turn to Jesus and not to

“Prayer involves a battle for us to remain silent and attentive, a moment of truth for our hearts, revealing where our real love is placed.”

ourselves. For only through silent adoration will the Word of God live in our words; only in his presence will we be purified, transformed and renewed by the fire of his Spirit. Brothers and sisters, let us adore the Lord Jesus!”

To face the questions and challenges of our own lives, do we give time to prayer by turning to the Lord Jesus in the silence of our hearts? Do we prepare to receive the supreme gift of the Eucharist in the silence of adoration? Is our conversation and attention given to the Lord or to the confusing voices around us? The hope of Advent will be found amid life's challenges and the lengthening shadows of our world insofar as we are each ready to open our hearts in prayer “to receive the outpouring of God's grace.”

May Our Lady help us be so awake in giving time more generously to daily prayer and to adoration of the Lord Jesus in every tabernacle of the Diocese. In the words of the Christmas carol we will sing: “O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.”

United with you in this prayer and adoration



Platinum joy for Fr Olindo

Fr Jeffrey Downie

A 96-year-old East Anglian priest is looking forward to marking an incredible 70 years of ministry in January.

A native of Italy, Fr Olindo Cramaro was born in a small village near Udine on 3rd November 1927. Ordained priest for the Society of St. Paul on 24th January, 1954, he was transferred to Northern Ireland for 3 years in 1955.

In 1957, Fr Olindo moved to East Anglia, eventually incardinating into what was then part of the Diocese of Northampton, serving in Norwich and Peterborough. In January 1984, he became parish priest of Southwold, enjoying 20 years of fruitful ministry there before retirement.

In retirement, Fr Olindo returned to Peterborough, settling in Yaxley close to long-time friends Bridget and Roy Day. He continued to remain very active, supporting the local Catholic community, schools and parishes, especially St. Luke's, enjoying driving around in his Fiat along with Italian food and wine.

At the age of 96, Fr Olindo takes things a little more quietly now, supporting us with his daily prayers, keeping up with the news and welcoming visits from friends.

Son of Galway to lead music in East Anglia

The Diocese of East Anglia has appointed a new director of music for the diocese and for St John's Cathedral in Norwich.

David Grealy, a native of Galway, comes to the diocese from the Diocese of Leeds, where he has been assistant organist at Leeds Cathedral as well as a tutor on the diocesan schools' singing and keyboard studies programmes.

David will also be leading the diocese's schools singing programme, which aims to bring high quality choral music into Catholic schools. The programme has already been successfully established in the Cambridgeshire part of the diocese, and David will be seeking to expand it.

Welcoming the appointment, the Bishop of East Anglia, the Rt Rev Peter

Collins said: “David emerged after a highly competitive process with a very strong field of applicants in which the candidates' skills in liturgical music and in leading adult and children's choirs were put to the test over two days.

“He will be carrying on the tradition of excellent Catholic music-making at St John's Cathedral and leading its choirs. He comes to us from Leeds Cathedral where his high standard of musicianship has been on display, as well as previously at Westminster and in Europe.

David said: “I am delighted to be taking up the position of director of music for the diocese and St John's Cathedral. I look forward to continuing the great work of my predecessor, Daniel Justin, in

cultivating a fine tradition of choral, organ and liturgical music and in placing it at the heart of worship in the cathedral community and the wider diocese.

“In the past I have worked in Catholic dioceses in Ireland, England and Germany – each with its own unique traditions and approach to sacred music – and I very much look forward to bringing this experience to my new role.”

David is a graduate of Maynooth University (Ireland) and the Hochschule für Musik, Cologne, and is also a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists.

He has previously held positions at Westminster Cathedral and St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Dublin. He will be taking up the post in early January 2024.



David Grealy

College puts its art up for auction as it looks for bumper Christmas appeal

Christ the King Sixth Forms and East Kent Colleges Group are aiming to raise more donations and gifts than ever in their 2023 Christmas fundraising campaign.

Now in its fourth year, the campaign, run by husband-and-wife team Shireen Razey (executive principal of Christ the King Sixth Forms) and Graham Razey (chief executive at EKC Group) targets those in need, spreading festive cheer through the collaboration, with donations and gifts. The campaign has raised over £20,000 so far.

The Christmas Gift Appeal and charity art auction, organised by Christ the King Sixth Forms (CTK) and East Kent Colleges Group (EKC), aspire to continue this tradition. The gifts, donations and funds raised will go towards child hospice charity Demelza, Refuge, Lewisham Foodbank, homelessness charity The Manna Society and the St Vincent De Paul Society, which tackles poverty and disadvantage.

Shireen Razey explained: “We are delighted to be organising our annual Christmas Gift Appeal

again this year, as we know what a difference it makes to the local charities we support. Many families continue to face real hardship, and we hope our appeal makes a difference to those at Christmas time. CTK staff and students contribute hugely to social action work within the local community throughout the year, and we are always touched by the kind donations we receive to our appeal.”

The art auction sees students and staff from across the two college groups donating artworks to be sold for charity. Bidding on the art auction closes at 1pm on 11th December, with items aiming to be sent out before Christmas Day.

Those who would rather simply donate money to the campaign can do so via the college’s ‘GoFundMe’ link.

Suggestions for items that can be donated include toys, puzzles, colouring/puzzle books, gift vouchers, toiletries, chocolates, biscuits and hot beverages.

• **The deadline for donating gifts is Wednesday 13th December.**



Ambassadors are leading the way at St Paul’s

St Paul’s Catholic High School in Wythenshawe is delighted with its new team of Year 8 student ambassadors, who are important positive role models within the school community.

Their role is to make the school a better place, through their actions, words, encouragement of others – even, when necessary, cautionary words. They also offer feedback and advice to staff, and set the tone for their peers and younger pupils.

It is a significant post of

leadership and responsibility for the younger half of the school.

One Year 8 Student Ambassador said: “It is an honour to be selected as an ambassador and I hope to make an impact at Saint Paul’s.”

The Student Ambassadors were selected at the beginning of Year 8, with pupils selected for their excellent attendance and behaviour, and the highest Achievement Points in the year. They will help at school events and perform a variety of duties around school.

Year 8 Progress Leader Erin Rudd said: “This is the first time that Year 8s have had the opportunity to be selected as ambassadors. I am excited to see the impact they will have around school and the wider community.”

Headteacher Mike Whiteside described the student ambassadors as “true leaders in every facet of school life, representing the values and expectations of Saint Paul’s. They embody our values of respect, love and compassion.”



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Submit your stories to Andy Drozdziak
andy.drozdziak@universecatholicweekly.co.uk

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Public Engagement by Catholics for the Common Good



The completed mural and (inset) the children busy at work

Busy bees at St Robert's produce stunning mural

A picture is said to paint a thousand words, and that is certainly the case at a Northumberland Catholic school, where pupils have gone to creative lengths to express a sense of community.

Children at St Robert's Catholic First School in Morpeth have designed and painted their very own mural, which represents the school's ethos in the form of artwork created from different pupils' designs.

"We had an old and rotten mural on our fence," said headteacher David Sutcliffe. "Having looked into getting professional artists to help us create a new mural, and discovering that it would be extremely expensive, we decided to try to create a new mural ourselves."

Mr Sutcliffe said the mural has been welcomed by the local parish community. "The parish and our priest have all commented on the mural," he said. "They love the bright colours and the fact that the children designed and created it."

"It has made our playground very welcoming and shows visitors what is important to us at St Robert's."

The project involved four, large wooden boards, acrylic paint and yacht varnish, and was completed over a three-week period by Year 4 children working with the school's art lead, Alice Butler.

"We wanted the children to be involved with the mural design, and had a competition in school to gather their ideas," said Mr Sutcliffe. "The design competition was open to the whole school, and

we had around 60 entries. There were four winners – one from Reception, one from Year 3, and two from Year 4.

"We wanted the designs to be bright and eye-catching, and to reflect what is important to us in school. The designs we chose all had different elements that when combined created a lovely image."

The finished mural also represents the core values of St Robert's, a member of the Bishop Bewick Catholic Education Trust.

"Our six 'bees' (school core values) are all on the mural," explained Mr Sutcliffe. "Be happy, be respectful, be spiritual, be honest, be kind, be the best you

can. It also has a lovely church depicted by a reception child, full of stick people, which illustrates how close we are to our church and how important it is to us.

"In addition, the trees show the seasons and the passing of time, and the leaves were made using the handprints of the children, showing our growth and development."

"Finally, a lot of the entries had a rainbow on – the children remembered it as a symbol of hope during Covid – and we felt it was important to include that too."

"The children who helped with the painting were all in Year 4. Staff also enjoyed contributing, and some spent several hours painting

side-by-side with the children."

The vibrant artwork has pride of place in the playground where it is making a favourable impression on visitors to the school. St Robert's School mission statement is: 'We care, we serve, we learn together in the love and truth of Jesus.'

"We love being creative and sharing our ideas. We are known as a school that celebrates and displays the work of our children, and we love to share what we have been working on with the wider community," Mr Sutcliffe said. "Our mural celebrates our core values, our mission statement and our environment. We are extremely proud of our work."

NTS appoints Canon John to new role at Christ the King

Canon John Poland has been installed as an Honorary Canon in a special Mass at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King in Liverpool.

Canon Poland was awarded the honour following his appointment as the Judicial Vicar in the first instance in the newly launched National Tribunal Service (NTS) of England and Wales.

Four clergy of the archdiocese of Liverpool were appointed to roles on the new NTS. In addition to Canon John, Bishop Tom Neylon, Vicar General, was appointed Bishop-Moderator in the second instance; Canon Aidan Prescott, Vicar General, was appointed a Judge in the first service; and Fr Sean Riley, Chancellor, was appointed Promoter of Justice in the second instance.

The Mass was celebrated by

Archbishop Malcolm McMahon, who works closely with Canon Poland. He described it as a great gift to be able to install Fr John as an honorary Canon.

The Mass was celebrated in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel in the cathedral, with the Chapter of Canons, the archbishop, and other priests, including other officers of the NTS, in attendance. Members of staff from the archdiocesan offices were also there.

Celebrating a Mass for the feast day of St Cecilia, patron saint of music, the installation then took place following the homily, and Canon Poland took his place alongside the Chapter of Canons.

The new Canon received congratulations from many people attending the Mass and greeted them before returning to the sacristy.



Archbishop Malcolm with Canon John at the installation Mass

Nuncio fact-finding tour highlights Caritas Salford's work

Caritas Salford welcomed 'a very special visitor' last week when Archbishop Miguel Maury Buendía, Apostolic Nuncio to Great Britain, visited the north west charity to find out more about its work supporting people experiencing poverty, homelessness, discrimination and isolation across Greater Manchester and Lancashire.

The nuncio's visit included a trip to the Lalley Centre, Community Pantry and Allotment in Collyhurst, and to the Caritas House building in the city centre.

Director Patrick O'Dowd said: "It was a real privilege to be able to introduce the Apostolic Nuncio to Caritas and talk to him more about the challenges that are impacting people in our local communities.

"He was extremely interested to hear about the pressures people from across Greater Manchester and Lancashire are facing at the moment, and how Caritas Salford is responding.

"Due to the cost-of-living crisis, we are



Bishop John Arnold with nuncio
Photo: Nick Harrison Photography and caritassalford.org.uk

seeing demand for our services increase significantly as more and more people find themselves having to make difficult decisions around how they can spend the limited

money they have. Hardworking families needing to choose between eating three meals a day or warming their home in the winter months isn't something that should be

happening in 2023, and we really appreciated the Apostolic Nuncio taking the time to understand the issues people are facing and to discuss ways to support them too.

"He was particularly interested to hear our ongoing work of supporting people experiencing homelessness as well as how we seek to welcome, protect and integrate those displaced by conflict and seeking sanctuary in the communities of the North West."

The visit to Caritas came as part of a wider visit to the area, including other parts of the diocese and the Laudato Si Centre.

The nuncio also celebrated Mass at St Patrick's Church in Collyhurst, where more than 100 priests and deacons gathered to concelebrate a wonderful Mass to mark the occasion.

It also included beautiful music from the Cathedral Choir, and the Mass concluded with a Apostolic Blessing for those who joined this special visit.

Parish comes together to support Christmas fayre

Paul Gilbert

On Saturday 25th November, parishioners from St Mary's, Thetford, hosted a Christmas fayre for the local community.

Parishioners supported the event by running stalls which included toys, puzzles, bric-a-brac, books, cards, cakes, drinks, children's face painting and jewellery. In addition to these, there was a tombola and raffle stall.

Father Christmas paid a visit to the young children – and the not so young – later reported how pleased he was by the good behaviour of all in attendance. All are how on his 'good list'.

The event raised a marvellous £1,440 for the parish. This is a considerable amount, considering the cost-of-living crisis that we are

experiencing, and was a real team effort that showed how working together can make a difference.

Fr Pat Cleary, parish priest, was delighted with the turnout and the amount raised. "It was a great social occasion and it brought people together. There was a great atmosphere in the parish hall and, as the event finished, there was talk of planning for future events for next year.

He added: "The parish is a small, close-knit community, and when it comes together for an event like this, it truly is amazing what we can achieve together.

"This is a family and it's wonderful to see the generosity, not only financially, but with the time and effort it takes to prepare and organise events such as this."



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GARDENING



A poinsettia can be for life and not for just one Christmas!

Restoring a Poinsettia back to its Christmas colour – and some other interesting facts about your grandma's favourite floral gift

Today, the poinsettia is, according to research, one of the most sold potted plants in the Western hemisphere.

But what's amazing is that, according to the same research, that's over a very small six-week window of the Christmas retail period!

It is thought that Franciscan monks were the first to begin using poinsettias at their homes to decorate nativity scenes in Taxco, Mexico. Certainly that's the region that gives them their name: they are named for the first US Minister to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, a member of the United States House of Representatives who discovered it and sent samples back to the United States.

The rest is history as they say; the showy red, white and variegated poinsettias are Christmas icons and popular holiday plants.

But eventually the leaves will start to drop off and very few of the millions sold, ever make it to a second Christmas. While we enjoy them over the holidays, getting them to bloom again it is a challenge.

But it is possible to get your poinsettia to flower again. And it starts from realising that what many perceive to be flowers are really the colourful bracts.

If you plan to return them to their Christmas glory next year, cut the stems back to four to six inches. Keep the soil fairly dry, and the plant warm until new growth occurs.

In the spring you can then plant in the garden in a sunny spot. Add a light amount of fertilizer in the spring and summer and if you're up to the task, restoring a healthy green poinsettia plant back to its original colour is no problem if you follow these few simple rules.

How to restore its colour

Assuming you've cut the plant back and fertilised it once per month until spring, it can be planted in the garden after all danger of frost has

passed. You can then enjoy it throughout the rest of spring and summer before the real work begins.

Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) need total darkness, for 14 hours each day, starting about eight weeks before you want to display them. During the day, the plants need bright light, along with the other routine care. However, starting in the evening, the plants must get complete darkness. Even a nightlight can disrupt this process! Depending on where you have the plant (planted outside, or in a pot indoors), will determine how you approach this process. I'll let you decide that.

These plants are photoperiodic which means they respond to day length. So, dig them 8-10 weeks before Christmas and place them in a location where they receive 12 hours of total darkness each day. This may be accomplished

by placing a box over the plants or by placing them in a closet or unlighted basement area. Be sure they get an equal amount of daylight and darkness each day and the bracts will start to turn colour in about four weeks, and continue if you carefully keep up the process they should be colourful and ready to enjoy by the following Christmas.

Poinsettias need a humid environment during this time but be careful not to spray the foliage directly, as you may invite leaf spot...not a desired feature on such a showy leaf!

In about eight weeks, the bracts should be completely coloured, if you've followed the above guidelines.

They'll stay this way for several weeks, at least until after Christmas.

Come next October, start the whole process over again!

During the day, the plants need bright light, along with the other routine care. However, starting in the evening, the plants must get complete darkness. Even a nightlight can disrupt this process!

HEALTH

Blood tests for dementia announced but what can they tell us and who benefits?

Sebastian Walsh, Carol Brayne and Edo Richard

A five-year, £5 million initiative has just been launched to investigate the feasibility of using new blood tests in the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. Alzheimer's Research UK and the Alzheimer's Society are working with the National Institute for Health and Care Research to use these blood tests in the NHS.

This funding, hot on the heels of recent drug trials for Alzheimer's disease, continues a wave of breathless excitement in a field that has traditionally found good news stories hard to come by.

Of those seen by specialists in memory services, the vast majority are given a diagnosis of dementia based on their symptoms alongside cognitive tests, blood tests to rule out other explanations (such as hormone imbalances), and sometimes an MRI brain scan.

A small percentage, particularly those who are younger or who have more complex symptoms, may be offered a more detailed investigation to look for some proteins (amyloid and tau) that can build up in the brain.

At the moment, this would involve a lumbar puncture (placing a needle into the spine and removing some of the fluid) or a specialist brain scan called a PET scan. If simple blood tests can tell us the same information, with enough accuracy, then this will be preferable for this small group of people.

So far, so good. But what about those people who don't need a lumbar puncture or PET scan? Will they see meaningful benefits from these new blood tests? It is far from certain.

Some argue that more "precision" in the diagnosis will help people understand what the coming years will entail. But this assumes that we can confidently place all people with dementia into the various disease categories (such as Alzheimer's, vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementia) based on the pathologies we find in their brains, and that we can then accurately predict how things will unfold for that person.

Unfortunately, we can't. Instead, data show that many pathologies (disease-causing abnormalities such as protein build-up or damage to blood vessels) are linked to dementia, and most people with dementia have more than one. This mixed disease is a big part of what makes researching the syndrome of dementia so complex.

The other suggested benefit is that the tests will tell us if the patient is eligible for the new drugs approved in the US (and currently being considered by UK and European regulators). But beyond the headlines, the current crop of new



drugs don't stand up to scrutiny.

Beyond the amyloid theory

The theory on which they are based (that the build-up of the amyloid protein is the trigger for everything that comes after) is increasingly challenged by experts. We need to better understand the complex biology of dementia.

In the past, this has been heavily focused on amyloid even though evidence has told us to also look elsewhere.

The ultimate frontier that many seek is screening people who have no symptoms but who would, if tested, be found to have raised protein levels. They hope that by detecting people at this stage, drugs could not just slow down the disease but prevent it altogether.

A recent trial tested this, in which people with raised amyloid but no symptoms took the amyloid-clearing drug solanezumab for more than four years. It had no effect on cognitive function compared with a placebo, confirming that this ambition is, sadly, not close.

It may not ever be realised for such a complex disease. The most significant problem is that many of those who have raised brain amyloid but no symptoms will die without developing dementia. Therefore, most symptom-free people with a positive blood test have nothing to gain and can only experience harm – from anxiety, further tests, or treatments. Importantly, the focus of this new initiative is not people without symptoms.

New initiative

Several studies of new blood tests have been carried out already in people with dementia symptoms, showing they are almost as good as PET scans or lumbar punctures at detecting protein levels. But the people in these studies were typically younger (in their 60s and 70s), with minimal brain pathologies (except amyloid) and other disorders, and minimal ethnic and socioeconomic diversity.

This initiative will test how well these emerging blood tests perform for those with

suspected dementia in the NHS. Most people in the UK who develop dementia are in their 80s, have mixed brain pathologies, commonly have other diseases (for example, kidney disease, which may affect the accuracy of the blood tests), and rates are higher among poorer groups and those from some minority ethnic backgrounds.

The results of this new initiative will tell us how well the new blood tests perform in these older, more complex people. The most important question, though, will be: do the results of protein tests change the way we look after people with dementia, resulting in a better quality of life?

Sebastian Walsh is a NIHR Doctoral Fellow in Public Health, University of Cambridge

Carol Brayne is a Professor of Public Health Medicine, University of Cambridge

Edo Richard is a Professor of Neurology, Radboud University



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FOOD

Ramp up the flavour this Christmas

If you want to bring more Christmas cheer to your next get-together, try these two recipes that will wow your guests with unexpected twists on this seafood favorite.

Merry Shrimp Martinis

5 minutes prep time; 17 minutes cook time. 6 servings.

Pair these festive bites with seasonal cocktails or mocktails for a fun and fast party appetiser that everyone will love.

Ingredients

1 (12 oz) package shrimp scampi, frozen
1 (14.5 oz) can diced tomatoes
1 teaspoon lemon zest
1 teaspoon horseradish
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
2 teaspoons hot sauce
6 celery sprigs

Garlic Crostini:

Thinly sliced ciabatta bread
1/2 cup reserved Shrimp Scampi butter

Method

■ Heat a large skillet over medium-high heat 1-2 minutes. Heat oven to 400F.

■ Place shrimp in skillet and saute 7 minutes. Pour off 1/2 cup of scampi butter and reserve for crostini.

■ Brush reserved scampi butter on bread slices. Place on baking sheet and bake 10 minutes.

■ Add tomatoes, lemon zest, horseradish, Worcestershire sauce and hot sauce to skillet. Stir to incorporate. Bring to simmer.



■ Portion shrimp and sauce into serving dishes. Garnish with celery sprigs and garlic crostini.

Mini Shrimp Scampi and Spinach Quiches

12 minutes prep time; 13 minutes cook time. 12-15 servings.

Spinach adds a bright earthy note to the savoury flavour of shrimp scampi in these delightful mini quiches that are perfect for a crowd.

Ingredients

1 (12oz) package shrimp scampi, frozen
2 (1.9oz) packages frozen mini filo cups
1/2 (5oz) package baby spinach, chopped
2 large eggs
1/2 cup whipping cream
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
And serve!



Method

■ Heat oven to 375F. Arrange filo cups in mini muffin tins coated with cooking spray; set aside.

■ Heat large skillet over medium-high heat. Add shrimp scampi and cook for 5 minutes. Add spinach and cook about 1 minute. Set aside a few whole shrimp to garnish; keep warm.

■ Cut remaining shrimp into smaller pieces. Use a slotted spoon to divide shrimp mixture evenly among filo shells.

■ Whisk together eggs, cream, salt, and pepper in a medium bowl. Pour egg mixture carefully into shells. Bake for 12 to 15 minutes or until eggs are set.

■ Garnish the top of a few of the mini quiches with reserved shrimp. Drizzle quiches with additional pan sauce before serving, if desired.

BEAUTY & LIFESTYLE

Science has some pointers to banish winter dry skin

Skin science secrets for smooth winter skin: Insights from a chemist to break free from dry skin woes

If the dropping temperatures instantly make your skin feel dry and uncomfortable, you're not alone. Between the frigid air outside and overheated air inside, the winter months are loaded with skin stressors that can put your skin on a seemingly endless dry skin roller coaster. According to Dr. Kate Biberdorf, also known as Kate the Chemist, this roller coaster can lead to a weakened skin barrier.

"Think of your skin barrier as a leaky bucket, and you're constantly trying to fill it with moisturisers – but things like changes in temperature and humidity levels can strip the skin of moisture and contribute to leaks," explained Kate.

"The best solution is to fix the holes in the bucket to strengthen the skin barrier."

If you find yourself reaching for product after product to get your skin off the dry skin roller coaster, here are Kate the Chemist's tips to keep your skin looking and feeling its best all winter long.

Protect your skin from winter stressors

Our skin barrier responds to the humidity of

the air around us, absorbing and releasing moisture to maintain a balance. To help protect your skin from everything that comes with cold winter months, it's important to consider what the skin needs when you're inside or out.

When spending time indoors with the heat on, try to avoid bumping up the thermostat higher than is necessary for comfort. This makes the air hotter, drying out your skin. Consider adding an in-room or whole-home humidifier to moderate the moisture in the air or upgrade your thermostat to one that indicates



the humidity levels in your home. Your skin and your energy bills will thank you.

When you head outside, whether enjoying winter sports or playing with the children out in the snow, defend your skin from inclement weather by bundling up. Go for breathable layers that will keep you cosy and can be shed in case you get too warm. Grab a fashionable hat, scarf and glove set to top it off. Finally, make sure you're wearing sunscreen on any exposed skin to protect your skin from harmful UV rays.

Don't just use any old body wash or lotion

Key to breaking the dry skin cycle are the products you use to cleanse and moisturise your skin. "Certain body care products hydrate the skin temporarily but don't help repair the skin barrier. That's why your skin feels dry again within a few hours," said Kate.

Body care products that actually help repair the skin barrier make all the difference. Kate recommends using the Olay Hyaluronic Body Wash and Olay Hyaluronic Body Lotion to help break the dry skin cycle.

Olay Hyaluronic Body Wash is formulated with moisturising ingredients that penetrate the skin's surface to nourish and restore dry, thirsty skin from within. The body wash is also dermatologically approved by the Skin Health Alliance (SHA), a global organisation of independent dermatologists and skin scientists that assess the research and development

behind various products to help consumers know what's good for their skin.

"Olay's Hyaluronic Body Wash and Body Lotion are packed with skin-loving ingredients, including petrolatum, hyaluronic acid, and a special Vitamin B3 Complex," said Kate. "These products go the extra mile by diving 10 layers deep into your skin, leaving you with visibly healthier skin. Olay's special blend of moisturisers isn't just your average skin saver – it's a unique formula that deeply nourishes your skin barrier, helping it become stronger and healthier looking over time."

Shower with care

How you shower can also impact your skin. "By taking short showers with warm water rather than hot water, you can help to keep your skin's natural oils in your skin where they belong," Kate noted. After showering with Olay Hyaluronic Body Wash, gently towel off and apply the matching Hyaluronic lotion to your skin while it's still a bit damp and feel the result.

"Winter can be really rough on the skin," added Kate. "So make a great body care routine part of your daily ritual. You'll look and feel so much better when you get off that dry skin roller coaster and break the dry skin cycle for good!"

Learn more about how to care for your skin at Olay.com.

GAMING

Spidey clings on to his morals in latest game

Adele Chapline Smith

Back when Stan Lee created him in 1962, everybody's favourite web-slinger was one of the first superheroes to whom adolescents could relate. More than six decades later, that theme continues to be highlighted in the latest video game to be derived from Lee's creation, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* (Sony Interactive Entertainment).

With its generally restrained combat and dialogue that only sporadically lapses into vulgarity, this addition to the wall-crawler's saga is acceptable for teenagers. This is not, however, a suitable Spidey outing for younger children.

Extending a series that kicked off in 2018, the game teams the respective protagonists of the two titles that preceded it, Spider-Man alter egos Peter Parker (voice of Yuri Lowenthal) and Miles Morales (voice of Nadji Jeter). They combine to go up against Kraven the Hunter (voice of Jim Pirri), a villain who preys on those endowed with superpowers as well as ordinary people.

The duo is aided by an ensemble of familiar franchise characters. These include Peter's girlfriend, Mary Jane Watson (voice of Laura Bailey), Miles' best friend, Ganke Lee (voice of Griffin Puatu), and Aaron Davis, the former Prowler (voice of Ike Amadi).

The narrative is exceptionally well-done and features both moral subtlety and the Gospel-



Scene from the game *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*. Photo: Sony Interactive Entertainment

congruent belief that conversion is always possible and redemption always within reach. Graphics are equally impressive with the thrill of swinging through New York City high above ground level effectively conveyed via the central pair's fluid motions.

Additionally, gameplay showcases an array of

ethnically and otherwise diverse characters, including those with disabilities. In fact, Miles and other characters are shown conversing in American Sign Language, an unusual sight in a video game.

While the frequent mayhem inherent in the story is occasionally bloody, it's never

excessively explicit. There is a cutscene depicting a dead body and another showing someone being choked to death. But the good news is that the protagonists prefer to employ nonlethal means in their effort to protect the innocent.

The game is playable on PlayStation 5.

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AI could help historians to finally reveal the secrets hidden in ancient writing

HISTORY

Mark Faulkner

How AI could reveal secrets of thousands of handwritten documents – from dusty medieval manuscripts to ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics

Have you ever struggled to read what that scrawl between “carrots” and “potatoes” is on your shopping list? Soon, artificial intelligence (AI) may be able to help.

Over the past ten years, researchers have gradually been working out how to teach computers to read handwritten documents. As in most machine learning, a computer is fed training data: in this case, images of handwriting and details of what it says. It then learns how the marks on each page correspond to letters. It learns that that half circle is a “c”, that that short vertical stroke is an “i” and that it might therefore be “rice” that you wrote on your shopping list, for example.

How it does this no one is quite sure – machine learning is often a black box. But it seems likely it is at least partly learning which characters are likely to occur in sequence, thus determining that you are unlikely to want to be shopping for “qvjx”, however much the word might look like that.

But while useful for your weekly shop, the technology has been put to what historians would consider more valuable work: it has been applied to handwriting from many countries and periods, from dusty, cracked medieval manuscripts to 19th-century diaries (if not yet 21st-century shopping lists), in languages from Latin to Old French to Hebrew.

Because the technology works on the basis of image analysis, it is in theory applicable to any writing whatsoever, from Egyptian hieroglyphs to copperplate. Ten years after its initial development, some truly exciting consequences of the development of handwritten text recognition (HTR) techniques are becoming clear.

AI's archive applications

One is that it democratises access to knowledge. The digitisation of



manuscripts has made many libraries' collections accessible at the click of a button (cyber-criminality notwithstanding). But lengthy training, only available in select universities, is still needed to read what they say (and some scripts, like Beneventan, have the power to make even postgraduates gnash their teeth).

HTR has the power to generate a tolerably accurate, machine-readable version of a manuscript at more or less the click of a button. If language is still a barrier for the user, that transcript can be subjected to machine translation and a workable English (or French, or Chinese) version given, side by side with the manuscript.

The sheer quantity of data these processes will make available has significant ramifications for scholarship. Many medieval manuscripts haven't been read since the middle ages. In the past, major questions (like the date of composition of foundational works like *Beowulf*) have often been resolved with the tiniest fragments of data, such as a single spelling. We are now starting to look at answering such questions with data

sets of tens of thousands of spellings: with HTR it will be hundreds of thousands, if not millions. And the answers we get will be different.

Beyond qwerty

The data HTR can generate is also richer. Over the past half millennium, the representation of medieval texts has been fundamentally constrained by the printing press and the computer keyboard.

Some medieval scribes use three different forms of “s”, but all have been transcribed as the familiar, snake-like “s” on a keyboard. Marks of punctuation, like the poor *punctus elevatus* (which looks something like an inverted

semi-colon) have had to be modernised out of sight.

Because HTR is based on visual recognition technology, it can recognise any number of letter forms, not just the hundred or so on a qwerty keyboard, and reproduce them more accurately than a human who has become accustomed to copying all four forms of “s” as “s”.

Realising these potential applications for the earliest written English, from the period before 1150, is the goal of my new pilot project, Ansund, at Trinity College Dublin.

Ansund aims to use HTR to build an exhaustive, open-access digital corpus of Old English texts, that transcribes all surviving Old

English for the first time, and in an unparalleled level of detail. We're particularly excited to see how many new letter forms we discover and to gather the first, substantial data on word division in Old English (scribes did not always put spaces where we might expect).

Ansund is one of a number of initiatives at Trinity that aims to harness new technologies to increase access to manuscripts, including the Trinity Centre for the Book, which focuses on the history of writing and sharing of the book. Virtual Trinity Library has digitised over 60 manuscripts and launches this week with the Many Lives of Medieval Manuscripts Symposium.

The ethics and dangers of AI have received important attention over the past year, but its power to make legible and navigable our cultural heritage also deserves attention. Some day soon, it may even ensure you can decode your muddled shopping lists.

Mark Faulkner is Assistant Professor in Medieval Literature and Director, Trinity Centre for the Book, Trinity College Dublin

“The ethics and dangers of AI have received important attention over the past year, but its power to make legible and navigable our cultural heritage also deserves attention... even if it may be a while before we get to the bottom of your scrawled shopping list!”

Education, sport and the importance of physical health as we tackle obesity

SPORT

Dr Colm Hickey

In 1997, the Labour Party won the General Election. Do you remember Tony Blair's three priorities? They were 'Education, education, education.'

Blair knew that it was a key to combat poverty, raise standards and stimulate the economy. Yet 200 years before, at the end of the 18th century, politicians were struggling with what they called the 'rising generation.' Put simply, the agricultural revolution of the late 1780s had led to increased urbanisation as fewer labourers were needed due to improvements in farming efficiency. At the same time, new manufacturing processes called for workers in factories.

While this may have been a period of economic growth, it was also a time of social unrest, with concerns about new radical ideas inspired by the French Revolution stirring up agitation against the establishment and even threatening the monarchy.

Something had to be done – but what? One answer was education. If the poor could learn to read the Bible, it was argued, they would become compliant Christians and would reject French anti-monarchical revolutionary ideas. However, there was the problem of cost. At this time the Government was wedded to the ideology of *laissez faire* which essentially meant that good government was small government, and the state should only raise taxes in the pursuit of defence, law and order and foreign policy objectives. Schools, hospitals, transport, housing or public health had nothing to do with it and should be provided by voluntary agencies.

Yet the problem for any voluntary society was cost. Philanthropists had to find suitable premises or build a school, and then pay a teacher. The issue was who would pay for this, as the poor could not afford the fees required to pay the teacher and maintain the school.

In 1798, Joseph Lancaster found a solution. He opened a school in Borough Road, Southwark, and took 150 children in and gave a demonstration lesson. He employed ten monitors, older children aged 13 upwards, who would then teach that lesson to younger children in groups of 10. It was a stroke of genius. The poor could pay a modest fee, the monitors were trained as teachers and children were taught to read and write.

This was called the Monitorial



Method of teaching and thus Borough Road College, became the second oldest teacher training college in the world and was the origin of elementary education and teacher training in this country.

So it was that I was at Twickenham Stadium on Saturday evening for a dinner to celebrate the 225th year of Borough Road since its foundation. It is not a stand-alone college anymore, having merged with Brunel University in 2003, but still produces teachers of real quality.

One of the strongest departments is physical education and the subject has dominated college life. Everyone who attended the dinner believed in the value of education and of the power of sport to change peoples' lives for the better. There were men and women who had devoted themselves to sport. There were international athletes and international rugby players, and coaches, administrators, national selectors and policy makers, as well as dedicated primary and secondary school teachers. Truly, it was a memorable and inspirational evening.

As St Paul taught: "We have different gifts according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is in teaching, let him teach; if it is in encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously if it is in leadership let him govern diligently; if it is in showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully" (Romans 12: 6-8).

However, one of the things that

all the attendees would all have been appalled about is the state of child obesity in England. The overall proportion of 10 and 11-year-olds who are overweight and obese remains above the level before the start of the pandemic. It is a sad fact that children living in the most deprived areas of England are more likely to be obese than children in more affluent areas. According to The National Child Measurement Programme, obesity rates in 2023 are 22.7 per cent in Year Six and 9.2 per cent in

Reception classes.

The vice-president for policy at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Dr Mike McKean, called the findings linked to deprivation "unacceptable." He said: "Today's data shows that two-in-five children are leaving primary school overweight and are subsequently at a higher risk of chronic illnesses, mental health issues and even a shorter lifespan. To have these children at such a disadvantage before even starting secondary school is a national

disgrace."

Boys are more likely to be overweight than girls. For boys in Reception, obesity prevalence was 9.3 per cent, compared with 9 per cent of girls. For boys in Year 6, it was 25.1 per cent, compared with 20.1 per cent of girls. The proportion of children in Year 6 living with obesity was highest in the Northeast (25.8 per cent), the West Midlands (25.2 per cent) and London (24.8 per cent). It was lowest in the Southwest and the Southeast (both 19.4 per cent).

An Ofsted Report from 2018, *Obesity, healthy eating and physical activity in primary schools*, declared that 'Childhood obesity is one of the pressing issues of our generation. By the start of primary school, almost a quarter of children in England are overweight or obese. This rises to over a third by the time children leave Year 6.'

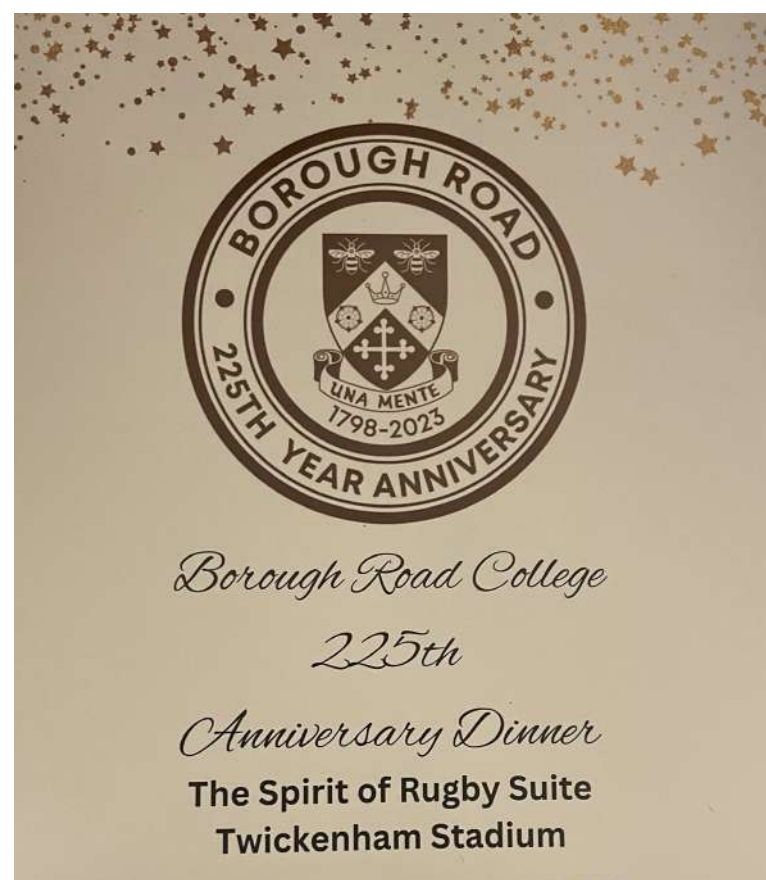
The report's authors added: 'Schools have responsibility for a curriculum that gives children a solid body of knowledge about healthy living and the skill to pursue it. Children need to learn how our bodies work, why physical health is important and how to prepare food. They need to grow in competence in sport and physical pursuits so that being active is enjoyable for them as well as challenging.'

While schools have a responsibility to tackle obesity, so do parents. As the report notes: "There are 24 hours in a day, but children only spend six in school. The other 18 hours matter enormously... schools and parents sometimes spoke to us as if they are on different sides, but they are on the same side.

'If schools listened a bit more closely to what parents want for their child's education, this is where some real gains could be made.'

So, what should you do? As Mahatma Gandhi once said: "You must be part of the change you wish to see." We need to eat more healthily. We need to be role models and participate in physical activity. We should promote sport and take an interest in our child's sport. That means going to see them play football, or taking them swimming, or going on a park run with them, or on a family bike ride. In short, do whatever it takes. If you do, you can help turn the tide. You can give your children the best chances of not becoming obese or overweight as an adult. You can give them a life-long interest in sport, health and fitness.

In doing so, you will have the support and approval of the former students and practitioners of one of the most important colleges of physical education in the world. And that's not a bad thing at all.



A pictorial round-up of the past seven days



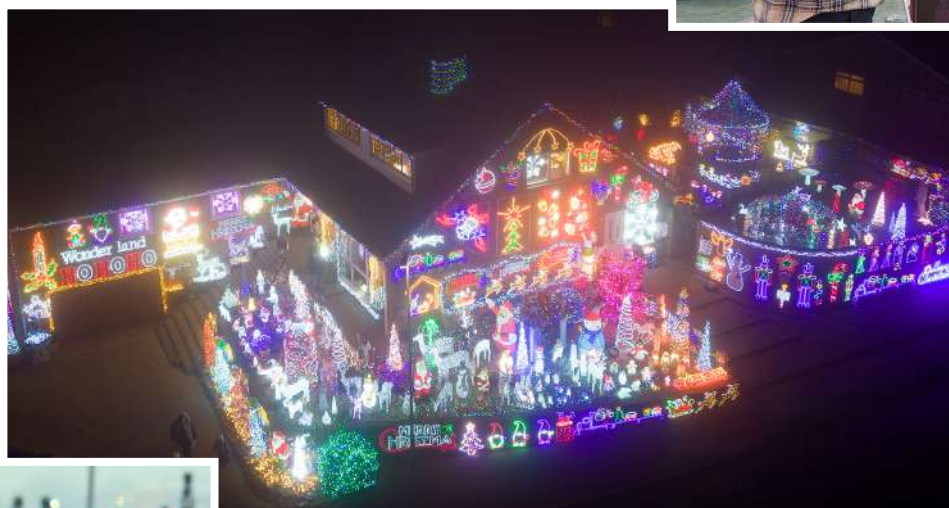
The Royal Institute of British Architects has dubbed this family home – known as the Green House – as the Riba House of the Year 2023.

It's beginning to feel a lot like Christmas...

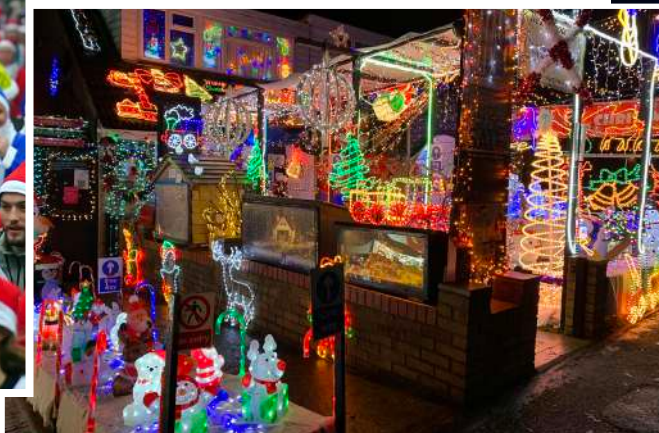
Right, Christmas lights...

Top, Helen and John Attlesey's home in Soham, Cambridgeshire. The couple decorate their house every year to raise money for charity, with cash raised going to East Anglia Children's Hospices, Great Ormond Street Hospital Children's Charity and Dreamflight, who all helped their grandson Jacob recover from a serious form of epilepsy.

Bottom, the Pulis home in Hemel Hempstead has been lit up in this style for 10 years in a row. The family do it "to provide a bit of magic over Christmas."



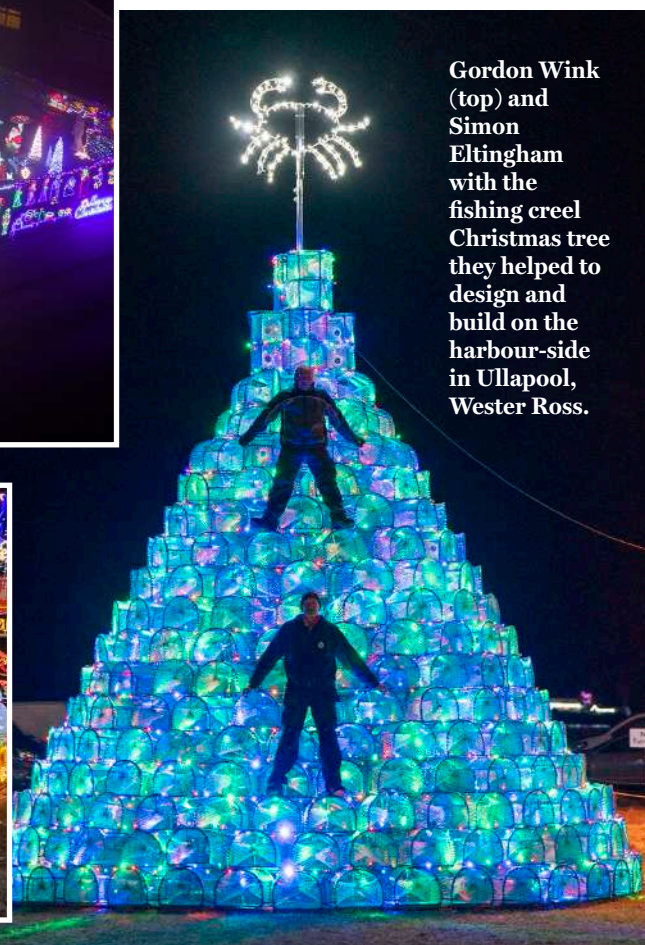
Participants taking part in the Liverpool Santa Dash in Liverpool in aid of Alder Hey Children's Hospital.



Above, people hold candles during an anti-hate vigil on Whitehall in central London. The event called Building Bridges, Together for Humanity, speaks out against both antisemitism and anti-Muslim hate and call on us to protect community relations in the UK.



Right, a couple enjoy Christmas cocktails in the London Eye



Gordon Wink (top) and Simon Eltingham with the fishing creel Christmas tree they helped to design and build on the harbour-side in Ullapool, Wester Ross.

LITURGICAL CALENDARS

Ordinary Form

Sunday Year B, Weekday Cycle II
Sunday, December 10: Second Sunday of Advent: Isa. 40:1-5, 9-11; Ps. 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14; 2 Pet. 3:8-14; Mk. 1:1-8

Monday, December 11: Weekday of Advent, St Damasus I, Pope
 Isa. 35:1-10; Ps. 85:9-14; Lk.5:17-26

Tuesday, December 12: Weekday of Advent, Our Lady of Guadalupe
 Isa.40:1-11; Ps.96:1-3,10-13; Mt.18:12-14

Wednesday, December 13: St Lucy, Virgin, Martyr Isa.40:25-31; Ps.103:1-4,8,10; Mt.11:28-30

Thursday, December 14: St John of the Cross, Priest, Doctor of the Church Isa.41:13-20; Ps. 145:1,9-13; Mt.11:11-15



Our Lady of Guadalupe

Friday, December 15: Weekday of Advent Isa.48:17-19; Ps.1:1-4,6; Mt.11:16-19

Saturday, December 16: Weekday of Advent Ecclus.48:1-4,9-12; Ps.80:2-3,15-16,18-19; Mt.17:10-13

Our Lady of Fidelity



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 Alternatively, call us on **01404 42601**

Sister Mary Ita O'Riordan

The Ursuline Sisters announce the death of **Sister Mary Ita O'Riordan** on 29th November 2023, aged 94.

Funeral Mass will be held at **Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Wanstead** Thursday, 21st December 2023 at 11 O'Clock.
 Followed by a cremation at the City of London Crematorium

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