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It's a cop out

Ground-breaking agreement at COP28 welcomed but scientists worry it does not go far enough, and CAFOD asks where cash is for the poorest nations

Andy Drozdziak

Excitement that the UN COP28 climate change summit broke new ground on Wednesday by calling on the world to “transition away” from fossil fuel use for the first time has been tempered after a number of scientists and activists said the agreement was not strong enough.

In addition, Catholic charity CAFOD questioned how the deal will work in the world's poorest nations without new funding being put in place.

The agreement to “transition away” from fossil fuels stopped well short of saying they had to be phased out completely, or setting a deadline for the end of their use.

But even that was an improvement on the original draft which had created widespread anger by suggesting only that countries “could” reduce fossil fuel use, but left too many holes for many nations, including the UK, USA and EU, to live with.

And even as the agreement was being ratified, leaders of small island nations complained their voices had been silenced, with one saying the failure to set a deadline for the end of fossil fuels signalled a death knell for their group.

Scientists were split over the final deal. Dr Ella Gilbert, a climate modeller at the British Antarctic Survey, said it was good that it “finally puts

into words what scientists have been saying for decades – that continued fossil fuel use must be eliminated to avoid the worst consequences of climate change,” and Prof Richard Allan, a climate scientist at the University of Reading, said while inadequate, “the COP28 agreement is an essential and sustained baby step towards the goal of limiting human caused climate change.”

But Dr Chloe Brimicombe of the Wegener Center for Climate and Global Change, said the wording of the final text from COP “doesn't match with the science and there is real concern we will miss targets.”

Her concern was echoed by Prof Niklas Höhne, climate policy scientist, New Climate Institute, who said “‘transitioning away’ from fossil fuels is not the emergency break needed.”

But the consensus was that it was a start: as Prof Mary Gagen of Swansea University pointed out, “I did not think I would ever see a COP agreement that included wording on the start of transitioning away from fossil fuels in my lifetime.”

While welcoming the move, CAFOD's director of advocacy Neil Thorns warned that the deal could collapse if major polluters did not provide substantial funds to support low-income countries as they made their own transition, and they



would be pushed further into unsustainable debt.

Mr Thorns said: “With little new funding, ‘how’ this happens in a fair and rapid way to support the needs of low-income countries whose populations are suffering from the climate crisis is far from clear.

“The agreement risks pushing those countries further into a debt crisis with less funding to support

the poorest and most vulnerable communities.”

Prior to the COP28 talks, Pope Francis, who was due to attend the talks, but could not because of ill health, warned that leaders from rich countries must not make promises which could not be met. Neil Thorns suggested that the pope may be “disappointed” at the outcome.

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Above, Columbans in Birmingham joined a Global Day of Action last Saturday to campaign for climate justice as talks continued at the COP28 climate summit in Dubai. Protestors gathered outside a number of sights in London and Birmingham, with prayers taken from Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

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'Queen Bey'
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Slavery victims won't handle deportation to Rwanda, says CARE

Modern slavery victims are at risk of harm under the government's new Rwanda plans, CARE has said.

The Prime Minister won a crunch vote on the Safety of Rwanda Bill after spending the day in talks with potential rebels to avoid a defeat on his flagship "stop the boats" pledge. MPs approved the Bill at second reading by 313 votes to 269, giving the UK Government a winning majority of 44.

Louise Davies MBE, director of policy and advocacy at CARE, shared her deep concerns about the Bill.

"We remain deeply concerned about the impact of the Rwanda plan on victims of modern slavery. Victims are unlikely to receive the level of specialist care in Rwanda that they could access in the UK. And a move to an unfamiliar place could in itself compound trauma in exploited people," she said.

Earlier this year, the plan drew criticism from Tory former prime minister Theresa May, who said it is "not enough" to send people to claim asylum in Rwanda, and warned that the UK is "shutting the door" on victims of modern slavery.



Migrants land in Dover.
Photo: Gareth Fuller/PA

Louise Davies said that the Rwanda plan, along with the Illegal Migration Act, means that victims of modern slavery now have less access to support. "This is the latest in a long series of blows to victims of modern slavery," she said.

"Access to support is being frustrated by the Illegal Migration Act. At the weekend, we learned that a victim support model has been scrapped by the Home Office. The government should be improving, not rolling back, support."

In November, Louise Davies made a plea for the Government to take a compassionate approach towards trafficking victims.

"Victims of trafficking who have entered the country illegally are still in a difficult position, with uncertainty over whether they will be able to access the support they need in order to begin a pathway to recovery and the threat of being immediately removed from the country," she said. **Sunak wary of New Year revolt - see pg 6**

Catholics rallied to help reject 'extreme' buffer zones proposal

Andy Drozdziak

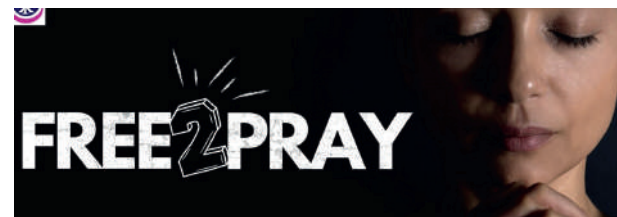
Scotland's Catholic Church has joined pro-life groups in urging Catholics to reject what it described as "the world's most extreme buffer zone law", and respond to a consultation on the controversial legislation which is soon to close.

Green MSP Gillian Mackay has brought forward a buffer zone Bill which, if passed by Holyrood, would criminalise "audible prayer" and "silent vigils", as well as certain actions within private homes.

The Catholic Parliamentary Office, an agency of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland, is urging Scots to take action by writing to MSPs and engaging with the Scottish Parliament's call for evidence on the Bill.

"It is vital that Catholics, and all those concerned for freedom of speech and assembly and the freedom to pray, write to their MSPs as soon as possible," the Catholic Parliamentary Office said.

The consultation explains that the provisions of the Bill apply "within 200 metres of protected premises but not on public land". It goes on to state that "This could include displaying anti-abortion mes-



The Catholic Parliamentary Office has launched a publicity campaign to back its call

saging from a balcony or window that can be seen from inside the safe access zone, or using a loudspeaker to protest in a way that can be heard from within a safe access zone."

The Explanatory Notes accompanying the Bill state that the Bill applies to "residential buildings" within the buffer zone, meaning that it may be illegal to display a pro-life sign from within a church or a person's house if it is visible within the buffer zone. The fine for such an offence can be up to £10,000.

Right To Life UK spokesperson Catherine Robinson said: "If this bill becomes law, the world's most extreme buffer zone law will be introduced in Scotland, and this survey is the public's opportunity to reject this unnecessary and undemocratic piece of legislation."

"This legislation goes further than any buffer zone legislation in

any other jurisdictions, creating a larger buffer zone than anywhere else in the world and giving the Scottish Government powers to extend these zones without limit."

"This law would mean that the vital practical support provided by volunteers outside abortion clinics will be removed, and many more lives will be lost to abortion."

"It is a truly draconian piece of legislation that reaches into the homes of ordinary people. It creates an offence for being publicly pro-life. It is direct viewpoint discrimination."

Throughout 2023, police forces have been strongly criticised for arresting people for silent prayer outside abortion clinics. In Birmingham, Catholic pro-life volunteer Isabel Vaughan-Spruce was repeatedly arrested but never charged and received an apology from the police in September.

Columbans' day of action is wake-up call for worst polluters

Andy Drozdziak

The Columbans in London joined a Global Day of Action last Saturday to campaign for climate justice as talks were continuing at the COP28 climate summit in Dubai.

Protestors gathered outside the offices of multinational oil and gas company BP in St James' Square, where prayers were said by CAFOD, Christian Aid and Tearfund members, who used the 'Prayer for our Earth' resource from Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

They were joined by Christian Climate Action, Operation Noah and Tearfund representatives, Laudato Si Animators and Quakers

Columbans present included Fr Ed O'Connell and Fr Kevin McDonagh, with Columban Sr Kate Midgley and Ellen Teague of the Columban Justice, Peace and Ecology team.

A rally outside BP led by the Climate Justice Coalition, with the banner - 'Climate Justice Not Colonialism' - highlighted that BP has signed financially beneficial but harmful new gas exploration licences with Israel off the coast of Gaza.



Diocese of Westminster

The protestors chanted and aimed calls of 'shame' at Rishi Sunak for travelling via private jet to COP28 for an 11-hour visit. Sunak's revision of net zero targets and proceeding

with North Sea oil and gas exploration licences were also condemned.

Izzy McIntosh of Global Justice Now said that "fossil fuels are on the COP28 agenda because of action



Part of the Church lobby at the London event.

from the streets."

Speeches and banners were also raised at the offices of BAE Systems. Campaigners reported blocking BAE Systems sites a few days ago in Lancashire, Brighton, Bournemouth and Glasgow, in a recent demonstration against weapons being sent to Israel.

Young Green New Deal activists urged politicians to back a Green New Deal in future manifestos, which may include one for the next general election.

Another Columban group attended a similar event in Birmingham.

James Trewby explained the content of the day. "Together, we put our faith into action for climate jus-

tice. We pray with our feet, one foot in front of the other," he said.

"We then joined with others, including those who had just completed a 'critical mass' cycle ride, to march through the city centre, pausing outside the town hall and Christmas markets.

"Our group of CAFOD volunteers, educators, Columban staff and supporters, Laudato Si' animators and families were proud to carry the banners made by the pupils of St Bernard's Catholic Primary School during a recent Day of Action."

There were around 40 similar protests around the UK last Saturday as a wake-up call to the worst offenders on climate change.

It's a cop out warn activists after final climate deal signed

Continued from page 1

"Pope Francis called for urgent action at COP28. He may be disappointed that leaders have not moved 'beyond the mentality of appearing to be concerned but not having the courage needed to produce substantial change', but we now have the basis to create greater ambition at our national levels," Mr Thorns said.

On a final dramatic day at COP28, it seemed that the climate agreements were going to be compromised, with a final draft proving inconclusive and UK minister Graham Stuart suddenly leaving to return to UK for the Rwanda vote - a move condemned by CAFOD's Liz Cronin as "truly shocking."

"It sent a blatant message to countries and communities suffering the worst impacts of the climate crisis that this is not a priority," she said. "Instead of exiting the world stage at this critical hour, ministers should be here at the negotiating table, fighting for the phaseout of all fossil fuels."

However, talks continued through the night, and the final agreement was presented early on Wednesday. Sultan al-Jaber, the COP28 President, said the delegates had gone down "a long road in a short

amount of time".

Joab Okanda of global poverty charity Christian Aid warned of the finance issue for developing countries. He said: "There is a gaping hole on finance to actually fund the transition from dirty to clean energy in developing countries. Without that, we risk the global shift being much slower.

"We now need to see rich countries following up their warm words about wanting a fossil fuel phase-out with actions to actually bring it about and end their use of coal, oil and gas by the end of this decade."

UK Government climate advisers Chris Stark said he is "very pleased" with the agreement but recognised some of the concerns countries had about the phrasing.

He said: "Understandably the focus is on the language of 'transitioning away' from fossil fuels but there's a lot more to it than that.

"We'll publish a report to review Cop28 over the next few weeks."

"Pope Francis may be disappointed but we have the basis to create greater ambition..."

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In Brief

Low support for Covid restrictions

Only a fifth of the British public would support Covid restrictions being reintroduced if the nation's health situation demanded it. Researchers asked adults whether they would back or oppose restrictions, with 16 per cent saying they would "strongly support" rules enforcing the wearing of face masks on public transport, 13 per cent said they would "strongly support" the closing of nightclubs, and 8 per cent said they would "strongly support" the Government only allowing people to leave their homes for essential shopping, 60 minutes of exercise and work.

Farage issues new Tory hint

Nigel Farage has hinted that he could join the Tories if there was a change of leader, and said he would "have a chat" if Boris Johnson called him. Although the former UKIP leader said there was "not a cat's chance in hell" of joining the Tories under Rishi Sunak, he said if Johnson "reached out" and "we really believed that the role of Government was to get out of the way and let men and women set up their businesses and create wealth and do well, then I'll have a chat with him".

'Spy' cameras for sale on Amazon

Spy cameras disguised as clothes hooks are for sale on Amazon, reported the BBC. One listing for the product features a picture of the device positioned in a bathroom, and a privacy expert said the misuse of such devices may break UK laws. A US judge recently ruled that Amazon must face a case brought by a woman who alleges she was filmed in the bathroom using a clothes hook camera purchased on the website.

JRS appalled as barge migrant centre claims its first life

Andy Drozdziak

The Jesuit Refugee Service UK (JRS UK) has called on the Government to close its *Bibby Stockholm* floating migrant centre after a man died by suicide there on Tuesday.

Police were called to reports of the "sudden death" of a man living on the giant vessel, which houses migrants in Portland, Dorset.

South Dorset MP Richard Drax described the news as a "tragedy born of an impossible situation".

Sarah Teather, Director of JRS UK, criticised the "cruelty" of the Government policy of using the barge for accommodation.

"These are the real human consequences of deliberate and performative cruelty against people seeking sanctuary in the UK. It is time to stop focusing on the politics and start considering the people whose lives are torn apart by these appalling practices," she said.

"The Government must immediately stop placing people on the *Bibby*



Floral tributes have been left in memory of the man who died on the *Bibby Stockholm*

Stockholm, and instead ensure they can access safe and dignified accommodation in our communities."

JRS UK worked closely with residents from an immigration detention centre at Napier barracks in Kent, and its report heavily criticised the centre's impact upon people who have fled hostilities, abuses and life-threatening situations.

Placing asylum seekers into re-

mote camps like Napier is "a punishing, confusing, often re-traumatising experience", the report said.

Sarah Teather referred to Napier Barracks when reflecting on the death on Tuesday. She said: "We know only too well from Napier Barracks, the brutal reality of these large-scale containment sites. They are deeply harmful. Our thoughts and prayers are with the man who

died, his friends and family, those still onboard the barge, and everyone affected by this tragedy."

Steve Smith, the chief executive of Care4Calais, said the Government must "take responsibility for this human tragedy."

"They have wilfully ignored the trauma they are inflicting on people who are sent to the *Bibby Stockholm*, and the hundreds being accommodated in former military barracks," he said.

"It's time our political leaders treated them as human beings."

Former home secretary Suella Braverman previously insisted the *Bibby* barge was safe amid threats of legal action from firefighters about the suitability of the plan.

The chief inspector of borders and immigration, David Neal, told MPs last month that conditions inside were "pretty good" and "better than many hotels", but questioned whether some of the staff involved were appropriately skilled.

St Kentigern's RAAC bill too much for council

Andy Drozdziak

A Scottish council says it cannot afford funding required to repair one of the area's largest schools, St Kentigern's Catholic Academy.

West Lothian Council approved plans to remove roof planks affected by RAAC in August, and over half of the existing school will be demolished, with a new building expected to reopen in 2026. But the council, having allocated £20.2 million to the school, says it needs an extra £15 million to complete the job.

Andrew McGuire, Executive councillor for education, told the *Universe*: "West Lothian Council has taken a proactive approach to repairing schools and community facilities to date, but this has come at a significant cost and has re-



quired very substantial council resources. Even allowing for this, there is a £15 million gap in funding required to meet the RAAC costs at St Kentigern's Academy."

"We are now appealing to the Scottish Government for additional support for St Kentigern's."

RAAC was used extensively between the 1960s-1990s in construc-

tion but its lifespan is around 30 years. After that, the material tends to crumble and disintegrate.

Garry Heron, West Lothian Council's corporate communications manager, told the *Universe* that "the project at St Kentigern's will be complete". However, he warned that, if the council does not "get additional funding, we will

need to cut other services to allow us to pay."

Headteacher Andrew Sharkey confirmed that the new work required is significant, but that every effort has been made to mitigate the impact on pupils and staff.

"I have assured parents and pupils that we have gone above and beyond to ensure that the work is not impacting on teaching," Mr Sharkey told the *Universe*.

"Considerable efforts have been made to ensure that learning is not adversely impacted, with a temporary learning village to replace spaces lost to RACC affected areas of the school.

He assured parents, we will have fantastic new facilities for our pupils and staff in place for Summer 2026."

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Mercy Ships offer chance-of-a-lifetime medical help for Sierra Leone's children

A mum in Sierra Leone is rejoicing after a surgical charity gave her daughter life-saving surgery.

Without a single maxillofacial surgeon in her home country of Sierra Leone, Yeï had no one who could treat her daughter, Umu.

While she was pregnant, Yeï had no ultrasound, and no reason to think her baby would be born anything but healthy. When she first saw the lump on her baby's face and neck at birth, she felt devastated.

The tumour continued to grow daily, and, at age three, it was threatening her airway and making it harder for her to eat. Yeï sought help from every hospital she knew of but, without a single head, face and neck surgeon in the country, her efforts were in vain.

But she found hope from international charity Mercy Ships, which was visiting Freetown to offer free surgery and medical training in one of its hospital ships. She made the journey to seek surgery.

Mercy Ships Surgeon volunteer Dr Gary Parker said that, without surgery, Umu "was at very high risk of suffocation with continued



growth of the tumour."

Yeï, who had been briefed on the operation, and knew it was also potentially dangerous, feared that Umu would die.

When her daughter returned, Yeï

cried again. This time, they were tears of joy and relief. She said: "I feel like a burden has been lifted from my shoulders."

Cumulatively, Mercy Ships has trained more than 15,800 medical



professionals in Sierra Leone thus far through programmes focusing on surgery, nursing, biomedical, sterile processing, and anesthesia. Since 1992, Mercy Ships has provided life-changing surgery to 1,089 paediatric patients in Sierra Leone alone through specialist surgical procedures.

The *Global Mercy* arrived in Freetown in August to begin Mercy Ships' sixth visit to Sierra Leone, de-

livering maxillofacial surgery, general, paediatric specialised general, orthopaedic, reconstructive plastics, and ophthalmology until June 2024.

Some 2,350 patients will receive surgery and crucially, training will be given to more than 200 Sierra Leonean healthcare professionals to help meet the unmet surgical need.

One study published in *Lancet Global Health* estimates that western Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest need for surgery in the world. Mercy Ships Chief Medical Officer, Dr Mark Shrimme, said: "Millions of parents and families need safe, timely, and affordable surgical and anaesthetic care for their loved ones. Without it, they face death or a long-term disability.

"We are working proactively with governments across sub-Saharan Africa to identify and help fill the gaps in surgical care. Our structured plans focus on strengthening surgical care systems by investing in healthcare professionals, the infrastructure, the equipment, and the systems needed to have lasting impact on the nations that host us."

Prayers and aid needed for Marialaya project

Missio is encouraging Catholics to contribute to its Marialaya project this Christmas.

Through prayers and donations, Missio has supported the Marialaya 'House of Mary' project in southern India for many years. The project is run by the Sisters of Don Bosco and offers hope to families in dire poverty. Now they are facing a new and more immediate challenge in the form of Cyclone Michaung.

When Chennai's leaders decided to build luxury flats, over 100,000 residents were moved to Kannagi Nagar. This huge 'slum' resettlement on the city's outskirts has poor access to utilities, education, and transport, and is plagued with crime. Families cram into tiny, single rooms, with no running water or safe sanitation.

Most children growing up here have very few prospects for the future. But last week, project co-ordinator Sr Nirmala said that a new, more immediate threat has engulfed the people of Chennai and Kannagi Nagar - Cyclone Michaung.

The severe cyclonic storm has battered India's southern states, killing nine people and leaving thousands homeless and in need of evacuation. Houses have collapsed and schools, colleges and businesses have had to close due to the rising flood waters. Chennai's IT, electronics, and manufacturing districts

have also closed, while power, water supply and public transport have all ground to a halt.

Sr Nirmala outlined the severity of the situation. She said: "The situation is very bad. Cyclone Michaung affected Chennai very much. We are without electricity and water. Rain has flooded people's houses and they are in the shelter.

"Pray for our children."

This Christmas, Sr Nirmala and her team will be working day and night to ensure that as many people as possible are safe, sheltered, and fed. Their hope is that the children they look after will survive this latest disaster, which is compounding the poverty and hardship they already face.

Missio is asking for support for Sr Nirmala and her fellow Sisters, so they can continue to help the families who are most vulnerable and likely to be overlooked in this crisis.

Missio said: "We have faith that, with the help and prayers of our friends and supporters here in England and Wales, the impoverished communities of Chennai will come through the tragedy and rebuild their lives."

Sr Nirmala and her team will continue to stand with the local people and help them through their sufferings."

For more information, visit www.missio.org.uk/donate

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COMMENT
The family unit is still best model

The importance of the family to the well-being of children and the stability of society should not have to be spelled out to politicians, or for that matter to anyone at all.

Yet once again familial breakdown and the misery it brings is being highlighted as a major cause of many of today's ills.

In a new report, the Centre for Social Justice paints a stark picture of Britain, a country riven by the inequality manifested in the "Two Nations" description of Benjamin Disraeli.

Few people today endure, thank God, the privations that were commonplace in the 19th century when Disraeli wrote his famous tract; a generous welfare state has seen to that. But poverty still endures in many homes, and is exacerbated by family breakdown.

Over the decades, political parties have paid lip service to their belief in the family and yet pursued policies to undermine it, from ending certain tax breaks to making divorce easier. These approaches may have had merit individually but have combined to dislocate what many still consider to be the traditional family unit.

Lord King, the former Bank of England Governor who helped to oversee the report, said the institution of the family remained "the one glimmer of light" as a place of nurture, support and fulfilment. The advance of the paternalistic state has removed many of the incentives for families to help one another and ingrained expectations that there is always someone else to look after them.

The problem with such reports is that the recommendations they make are very often a seven-day wonder, with politicians paying lip service to them but not taking them seriously enough.

They should not ignore this one and, indeed, need to take away a key message from it: that support for families will do more to reduce poverty and tackle the dependency crisis than a raft of other Whitehall levelling-up initiatives.

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Sunak wins on Rwanda plan – but the battle is far from over

POLITICS

Michael Winterbottom



Rishi Sunak scored a notable triumph in the House of Commons on Tuesday when MPs backed his controversial plans to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda – but his joy may be shortlived, with talk already of a New Year showdown with right-wing Conservative MPs, who said they could still vote emergency legislation down if it is not tightened.

The vote on Tuesday was a crunch one for Sunak after he and his team spent days in talks with potential rebels to avoid a defeat of his flagship 'stop the boats' pledge.

The efforts to bring people on side worked, with MPs approving the Bill at second reading by 313 votes to 269, giving the Government a majority of 44.

But right-wing Tory factions said they reserved the right to vote against the draft law when it returns to the Commons next year if its contents are not strengthened to ensure asylum seekers can be deported to Rwanda before the next election.

Former home secretary Suella Braverman and former immigration minister Robert Jenrick, who resigned last week following publication of the Bill, were among the high profile Tories to abstain on Tuesday, despite being issued a three-line whip to vote in support of the Government.

Dozens followed their thinking but crucially for Sunak, no Tory MP voted against the Bill, with former party leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith and former business secretary Jacob Rees-Mogg among its critics to end up backing it.

A piece of Government legislation has not failed to pass a second reading, the first Commons hurdle, since 1986.

Mr Sunak said the victory in the Commons for the Bill would pave the way for him to deliver his pledge of stopping boats of migrants from crossing the Channel.

After the result, the Prime Minister tweeted: "The British people should decide who gets to come to this country – not criminal gangs or foreign courts.

"That's what this Bill delivers.

"We will now work to make it law so that we can get flights going to Rwanda and stop the boats."

The emergency legislation, introduced after the Supreme Court ruled that the original proposals to deport asylum seekers



MPs announce the vote result in the House of Commons

and migrants were unlawful as written, were designed to prevent migrants who arrive via unauthorised routes from legally challenging being deported to Rwanda.

The Bill seeks to revive the stalled deportation plan by attempting to prohibit legal challenges based on the argument that Rwanda is unsafe.

It allows ministers to disapply the Human Rights Act but does not go as far as overriding the European Convention on Human Rights, something which Tory hardliners have urged is needed for the policy to be enacted, but centrist One Nation Tories should not be contemplated.

The Home Office has paid £240 million to the Rwandan Government in Kigali so far, with another payment of £50 million anticipated in 2024/25, but no deportation flights have yet taken off.

Mark Francois, chairman of the European Research Group (ERG) of Eurosceptic Tories, announced ahead of the Commons vote that his group and four other right-wing factions, the self-described 'five families' would be abstaining, with a view to putting forward amendments early next year.

The other factions include the

New Conservatives, Common Sense Group, Conservative Growth Group and Northern Research Group.

The ERG leader said Mr Sunak had told colleagues he was "prepared to entertain tightening the Bill" and that, if the Prime Minister does not accept changes to ensure that happens, then the five caucuses "reserve the right to vote against" the Government at the next stage.

A Tory rebel source told the *Daily Telegraph* "This Bill has been allowed to live another day.

"But without amendments it will be killed next month. It is now up to the Government to decide what it wants to do."

Downing Street has indicated it will listen to changes suggested by MPs but has not committed to accepting amendments.

Former Supreme Court judge Lord Sumption predicted that there is likely to be a "clash" with European judges over the Bill, something that would likely enrage Mr Sunak's Tory critics.

Lord Sumption told BBC's *Newsnight* that the Bill "is contrary to international law" because it seeks to "block people off from access to the courts, and not allow them to argue the contrary to what Parliament has now declared".

He added: "Sooner or later there

may be a clash with the Strasbourg (European) Court of Human Rights, which will pay absolutely no attention to domestic UK legislation."

The threat of a rebellion on the right of the party means Mr Sunak faces a narrow path to ensuring his emergency legislation becomes law.

If all non-Conservative MPs oppose the plan, a revolt by 29 Tories could be enough to defeat the Safety of Rwanda Bill at its next test in Parliament.

After the forthcoming committee stage, there will be a third reading vote before the Bill is sent to the House of Lords, where it is expected to face heavy scrutiny.

Tory moderates urged Mr Sunak to stay the course and continue with the legislation as it is following his Commons victory.

MPs in the One Nation caucus agreed to back the Bill this week but have stressed that they will resist any amendments from the right that would risk the UK breaching the rule of law and its international obligations.

Damian Green, the group's chairman, told *Newsnight* the Prime Minister had secured a "pretty solid" majority for his proposal and that he hoped the "third reading would go through reasonably easily".

"On today's vote, the Government has more or less managed the narrow landing strip that it is aiming at, and so it should stick to that landing strip," the former *de facto* deputy prime minister said.

Michael Winterbottom is Editorial Director of The Universe Catholic Weekly



Left, a group of men thought to be asylum seekers are landed by the RNLI in Kent

Light up a seafarer's Christmas

HOW ARE YOUR CHRISTMAS PREPARATIONS GOING?

Before you answer, pause for a moment – and imagine an alternative festive season...

Imagine you are miles from home, working a long contract on a container ship or fishing vessel. The wind is cold and stormy seas batter your ship. Dark nights seem to last forever.

When Christmas Day comes, you won't be with your loved ones. Instead, you'll feel so alone – like the world has forgotten you...

That's the sad reality for so many seafarers and fishers. But today, you can light up their Christmas. You can give a gift to a seafarer, to share God's love and make Christmas special.

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.

There are simple gifts like woolly hats, socks and phone cards. Or bringing seafarers to Mass or arranging access to legal advice. Every single gift will mean the world to someone who'll spend Christmas Day far from home.



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

Releasing prisoners

Sir John Battle



Advent is the season of Isaiah's writings and, according to St Luke's Gospel, a key text of Isaiah was read in the synagogue by Jesus: the "Goods News for the poor" included "liberty to captives".

Whether this is to be restricted to internationally recognised prisoners of conscience, such as the recent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize Narges Mohammadi, the jailed Iranian women's rights advocate, or is to be applied more widely to prisoners in general is much contested in our own society.

In her recent media interview, former Home Secretary Suella Braveman revealed she opposed plans to scrap prison sentences of less than a year for most convicted criminals to try and take the pressure of overcrowded prisons.

She declared simply that the solution "is not to let criminals off the hook; it is to build more prisons and quickly." But at present over 89,000 are locked up, a higher percentage of population than other western countries.

A special commission set up by Diocese of Leeds Caritas undertook a full enquiry into the state of our justice system, issuing a considered report entitled Justice and Mercy. At present in HMP Armley remand prison, over 70 per cent of those locked up – most commonly for acts of robbery or damage to property of less than £5,000 – suffer from serious mental health challenges, illiteracy, drug or alcohol addictions, or combination of all of them. Moreover the greatest challenge facing the system of overcrowded prisons is the lack of time and space for work on rehabilitation. Yet recidivism or reoffending and going back to prison is at an all-time high. A damaging privatisation and reduction of the probation service by previous Minister Chris Grayling has only intensified the problem, leading to backlogs in the legal system and a lack of personal support.

Despite concerns over the prison estate, buried in the Autumn statement was a cut in prison support funding. In the Chief Inspector of Prison's words "The risk is that the revolving door of people committing crime going back into prison, costing the taxpayer a huge amount of money, simply continues".

Shifting budgets into investment in people in order to save taxpayers' money in future is proving a difficult political task. It is even more difficult if the very notion of releasing prisoners rather than supporting rehabilitation is still taboo.

Justice and mercy, as Isaiah stressed, must go together.

Remember to keep modern Bethlehem in your prayers

CATHOLIC COMMENT

Caroline Farrow



I've yet to spot any of the perennial 'Christmas is cancelled' headlines in the media, beyond the usual cliched grumblings (with which I whole-heartedly concur) about commercialisation and the attempted secularisation of our festival.

But there is a bitter irony this year in that while the English-speaking world will be singing 'O Little Town of Bethlehem', in Bethlehem, the actual location of Christ's birth, the very place where God first made Himself manifest in the form of a tiny vulnerable human being, there will be no overt celebrations, because Christmas really has been cancelled.

Palestinian leaders across the West Bank, which is where of course, the Church of the Nativity is situated, have decided that they will forgo all festivities as a mark of solidarity with the people in Gaza. There will be no public celebrations, no twinkling Christmas lights and no Christmas tree in Manger Square.

That's not to say that the season will be totally ignored – after all it cannot be, it's not as though the liturgical calendar can be ripped up or disregarded, the Church is not going to announce that Advent is no longer applicable and dictate that we suddenly switch back into ordinary time. Christmas Masses will still take place, only this year

things will look very different.

On Christmas Eve, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem will continue to make his solemn entrance into Bethlehem, but the procession along Star Street, the route that tradition says was taken by the Magi, will take place without music and also the presence of the Terra Sancta Scout Troops, the boys and girls who usually participate in the procession, will be considerably reduced.

In many ways this is totally understandable. The West Bank is experiencing significant suffering as a knock-on effect of the continued conflict between Israel and Gaza. Since the beginning of the war, the main entry points to Bethlehem have been closed and travel between different Palestinian cities has been incredibly difficult due to checkpoints and blocked roads, meaning that the town has been hit by the double whammy of non-existent pilgrims and no shoppers from either Jerusalem or

"There is a balance to be struck between recognising that the joy of Christmas does not lie in the tree, lights and presents, and giving the impression to the wider world that Christmas is nothing more than a superficial festival that it is not worth celebrating"

neighbouring towns and villages either, meaning that nobody has any money to spend.

The souvenir shops and stalls are open for business as usual, but nobody is buying anything, and neither are the locals coming to buy produce, clothing or shoes, because they barely have enough to pay for food or bills.

Christmas is, unsurprisingly, Bethlehem's busiest time of year, with 60-70 per cent of the town's economy reliant on tourism, but according to figures provided to the Catholic News Agency by the Ministry of Tourism, 12,000 out of the 15,000 tourism workers, are now unemployed, and of those, 90 per cent are Christian.

Which if nothing else should demonstrate why we ought to seriously consider giving generously to support any collections for Christians in the Holy Land at Christmas Masses this year.

Whilst not directly involved in the conflict, Bethlehem is sharing in much of the pain, as many Muslim families from Gaza have been staying in the Christian hospitality facility, having travelled to Israel or to a paediatric hospital facility located in Bethlehem to receive medical treatment before the outbreak of the war. They are now effectively stuck where they are, with no money for the continuing medical treatment and no hope of being able to return home in the foreseeable future, as every day brings more harrowing news about their friends and family members. Issa Thajieh, a Greek

orthodox priest in the Church of the Nativity has said that "we cannot celebrate when our brothers and sisters are dying".

All of this is totally understandable. It would, of course, seem obscene and deeply insensitive, especially in an age where optics are everything, if Bethlehem and the other major pilgrimage sites in the Holy Land appeared to be oblivious to the plight of the Palestinians.

That said, I have to admit to some discomfort, precisely because Christmas should never be anything but an outpouring of joy and celebration that Christ has come to illuminate and bring hope to our world of darkness. The Christmas lights symbolise Christ, the light of the world, who has come to conquer sin and death.

There is a balance to be struck between recognising that the joy of Christmas does not lie in the tree, the lights, the presents and the food (which many families cannot afford) and giving the impression to the wider world that Christmas is nothing more than a superficial festival that it is not worth celebrating, and that we should instead wallow in our misery when times are tough.

Clearly it is not for the likes of me to impose Western cultural Christmas traditions on those Christians who are living in the Holy Land and are experiencing the realities and hardships of the current situation on a daily basis, but the wider world needs to understand that Christmas will still be celebrated, albeit in a more muted fashion.

As the Latin Patriarch said: "This holy time is always an invitation for humanity to accept God's invitation, of his love and of his peace. We decided to concentrate on the meaning of Christmas, more than on showing Christmas, by clothes or by festivals and markets. All these are beautiful things, but they're not the real meaning of Christmas".

I had the privilege of visiting the Church of the Nativity just a few months ago, and seeing the grotto where Christ was said to have been born was a profoundly moving experience. I also met many of the local Christians whose trade was already being affected, due to the diminishing amount of Christians in the Holy Lands. Certainly that is where my thoughts will be this year.

Let's pray that Bethlehem's plight may help us all focus more on the spiritual meaning of Christmas, while we all storm Heaven for a just and lasting peace for the Holy Land.



Top poet joins Pact at Faith in Action service

Popular poet Roger McGough joined Bishop Richard Moth at Pact's carol service in London to raise awareness of the Catholic prison charity's work helping the families of prisoners.

McGough read *Everything Touches*, a poem he first wrote as the words of a hymn. Bishop Richard referred to the poem in his reflection. "God, in the person of his Son, touches our world," Bishop Richard said. "Pact is about the very same thing. Those moments of care in the Visitor Centre, as people leave, each is a moment when people can expe-

rience the love of God himself."

Pact held two two Advent Carol Services - at Our Lady of Victories in Kensington and at Our Lady and St Brigid's in Birmingham - in solidarity with prisoners, and their children and families.

In Birmingham, Fr Cecil Rogerson described the journey his parish is taking, learning and reflecting on how imprisonment affects children and families and how the parish can support them.

A record 100,000 children will spend this Christmas without a parent because they are in prison. Chil-



The Pact Carol service, with guest speaker Roger McGough

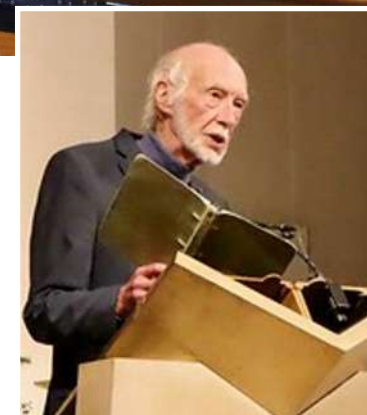
dren and young people were present at the carol services. In London, the choir of Sacred Heart High School Hammersmith sang beautifully-arranged carols, with soloist voices and violin. In Birmingham, Our Lady and St Brigid's Primary School children brought wonderful energy and joy to their performance.

At both events, Andy Keen-Downs, Pact CEO, thanked staff and volunteers, and partners such as HMPPS staff, prison chaplains

and others for "their dedication and resilience." "Thank you for your commitment to making the criminal justice system better for everyone, now and in the future," he said.

Pact also thanked those "who support people in prison and their families - including all who were not able to join us at the Carol Services but nevertheless know that everything touches."

Contact Pact's Faith in Action: parish.action@prisonadvice.org.uk



China in spotlight as Sir Iain to open 2024 Catholic Union series

Sir Iain Duncan Smith has been confirmed as the first guest speaker for the Catholic Union's "Pub Talks" in 2024.

The Conservative MP, and former party leader, will talk about "China, the Church, and Christian persecution" at an event in London on Monday 15th January.

Benedict Rogers, Chief Executive of Hong Kong Watch, will be putting questions to Sir Iain about China's human rights record and the response from the UK Government and Catholic Church.

The Catholic Union's 'Pub Talks' are informal gatherings that give people the opportunity to hear about a matter of interest to Catholics in this country.

Launched in January 2023, speakers in the "Pub Talks" series have included, among others, Lord Alton, Ann Widdecombe and Professor Stephen Bullivant.

They will be returning in 2024,

but at a different venue, in order to give even more people an opportunity to take part.

The event on Monday, 15th January will be taking place at the Morpeth Arms pub in Pimlico. Doors open at 6pm, with the talk due to start at 6.30pm, subject to parliamentary business.

The event is being hosted in collaboration with Catholics in the Conservative Party. The Catholic Union will be teaming up with different groups throughout 2024 to host these events, including Catholics for Labour.

The event is free to attend, but people need to register in advance as spaces are limited. Please use the Eventbrite link at the foot of the article to sign up.

Catholic Union Deputy Director, James Somerville-Meikle, spoke of his excitement at the coming event.

"These events proved hugely popular in 2023 and I'm delighted that we're able to host them for a second year running.

Our first event of 2024 looks set to be one of our best Pub Talks to date," Mr Somerville-Meikle said. "Sir Iain and Benedict Rogers have been fearless in calling out human rights violations in China and Hong Kong.

As Catholics, this is something that we need to be informed about and ask what more our Government and the Church can be doing to help. I look forward to seeing as many of our members and supporters as possible for what should be a fascinating discussion."

Sign up at <http://tinyurl.com/39zr477m>



Guest speaker: Sir Iain Duncan Smith. Photo: Richard Townshend



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In Brief

Mills attacks meat industry as her vegan firm collapses

Heather Mills has blamed the “gaslighting” meat industry for the collapse of her vegan food business. Saying she was “devastated” as VBites prepares to file for administration, Mills said that “one of the major issues the plant-based market needs to tackle is the galvanised and well-funded marketing of misinformation currently being undertaken by the meat and dairy industries”.

She said the dairy industry had launched “well-funded gaslighting initiatives that detract from the facts and sow the seeds of doubt in consumers who deserve to know the truth”.

Santa tells King he’s been a good boy

Father Christmas had told the King that he was “at the very top of his good list”.

His Majesty was “mobbed by shoppers” who snapped pictures on their smartphones when he made an unannounced visit to a London shopping centre.

The Santa, real name Keith Flaherty, said afterwards: “I told him that he was at the top of Santa’s very good list and he said: ‘Really?’ and sounded delighted.”

Ulez bomb theory after blast

Counterterrorism officers are investigating the explosion of an ultra-low emission zone (Ulez) camera in London.

The “massive blast” happened in Willersley Avenue in Sidcup, with debris scattered across the road and the fence of a nearby property was damaged. There are now suspicions it was caused by a homemade bomb and anti-Ulez protesters, known as “Blade Runners”, were suspected of targeting the camera.

Oxfam workers strike over pay

Oxfam shop and office workers are striking for the first time in the charity’s 81-year history. Unite union members will strike for 17 days over Christmas after they rejected a pay offer in last ditch talks.

The union says workers, “squeezed by cost of living pressures”, deserve more of Oxfam’s funds, but the charity said its reserves had fallen.

“Oxfam wants to end poverty and says it is on the side of unions,” said Unite general secretary Sharon Graham, “yet its own workers report having to use food banks”.

Fossil fuel fools: How the oil and gas giants have tried to use their cash to buy COP28



An ARAMCO oil field in Saudi Arabia

SCIENCE

Alain Naeff

From the Paris agreement to COP28, how oil and gas giants try to influence the global climate agenda

There is “no science” behind demands to phase out fossil fuels, according to the president of the COP28 talks, which ended this week.

Having someone with that level of cynicism on the need to act over climate change as the leader of the summit was never a great start, and makes it less surprising that the conference has also been used as an oil trading venue.

A record number of fossil fuel lobbyists gained access to the conference this year. So it seems to presage a bright future for fossil fuels, when it should have been a venue to discuss how to stop using them.

But this is not the first time that the international climate agenda has been “hijacked” by oil companies. In 2015, a few months before COP21 – the summit that led to the Paris agreement, a comprehensive global agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emission by all countries in the world – six oil majors including BP, Shell and Total, wrote an open letter calling for a carbon tax on companies’ CO₂ emissions. Under such a scheme,

the more a company pollutes, the more it is taxed.

The oil majors suggested a two step approach. First, implement a carbon tax in all countries. And then – and this is where it gets complicated – they wanted all nations to get in a room and agree on the scheme. In their letter, the six oil majors said they wanted to “create an international framework that could eventually connect national systems”.

But carbon taxes are difficult to implement because of the international co-ordination they require to be effective. To make a carbon tax work, every country in the world would need to participate. Otherwise there would be what policymakers call ‘carbon leakage’.

This is when businesses simply transfer production to other countries with no – or more relaxed – emissions rules. If China started taxing its companies for the CO₂ they emit but the US refused, for example, it would be less competitive – its taxed products would be more expensive than those from the US.

Getting Russia, China and the US to agree on an international deal today seems near impossible. So any talk that advocates for an international carbon tax is cheap.

Oil majors as climate activists?

Some oil companies understand

“There’s no real risk of a carbon tax being implemented. It’s like supporting the introduction of CO₂-eating unicorns to reduce atmospheric CO₂. The idea is beautiful but impractical.”

that public opinion on climate change is shifting and are starting to reflect this in their public actions. Exxon’s CEO, Darren Woods, urged then-US president Donald Trump to stay in the Paris agreement after Trump announced plans to withdraw the US in 2017. This decision was later reversed by Biden. Woods and Exxon also publicly advocate for a carbon tax.

As some of the world’s most polluting companies, oil producers surely have an interest in avoiding such taxes. But my recent research shows that 54 per cent of oil and gas companies with a policy on carbon taxes support them (78 per cent of the 50 largest firms by reserves). Among the 100 largest globally, I found 19 in favour of carbon taxes and 16 against them. 49 fossil fuel companies, mostly smaller operators, have no public position on the issue.

So why do oil companies support a carbon tax?

In June 2021, undercover interviews conducted by Greenpeace activists who posed as headhunters to interview a lobbyist for ExxonMobil, showed the lobbyist claiming to support a carbon tax because it would be politically impossible to implement.

The lobbyist concerned later apologised, saying he was embarrassed that he “allowed myself to fall for Greenpeace’s deception”. And ExxonMobil’s

Woods condemned the statements made during the interview. He said they don’t “represent the company’s position” and that the lobbyist was never involved in developing corporate policy on the issue.

Nevertheless, that’s one theory for fossil fuel company support – if there’s no real risk of a carbon tax being implemented. It’s like supporting the introduction of CO₂-eating unicorns to reduce atmospheric CO₂. The idea is beautiful but impractical.

One way around potential deadlock is to establish a carbon border tax. The EU wants to do this with its Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). This would place a carbon tax on any goods produced abroad that have not already been taxed in their country of production – it’s essentially a customs tax for countries that refuse to implement a carbon tax.

This tax could be a solution, as long as the World Trade Organization (WTO) doesn’t deem it against free trade rules. It recently launched a taskforce to review the CBAM after some WTO members called it “protectionist”.

But while everyone waits for “unicorn” climate solutions to be implemented, major oil companies continue to profit and generate more emissions.

For real change to happen, fossil fuel companies need to be encouraged to transition to cleaner energy using incentives, as well as stronger limits on fossil fuel extraction – an issue that appeared to be out of reach at COP28.

Alain Naef is an Assistant Professor, Economics, ESSEC

We'll support you ever more, say fans

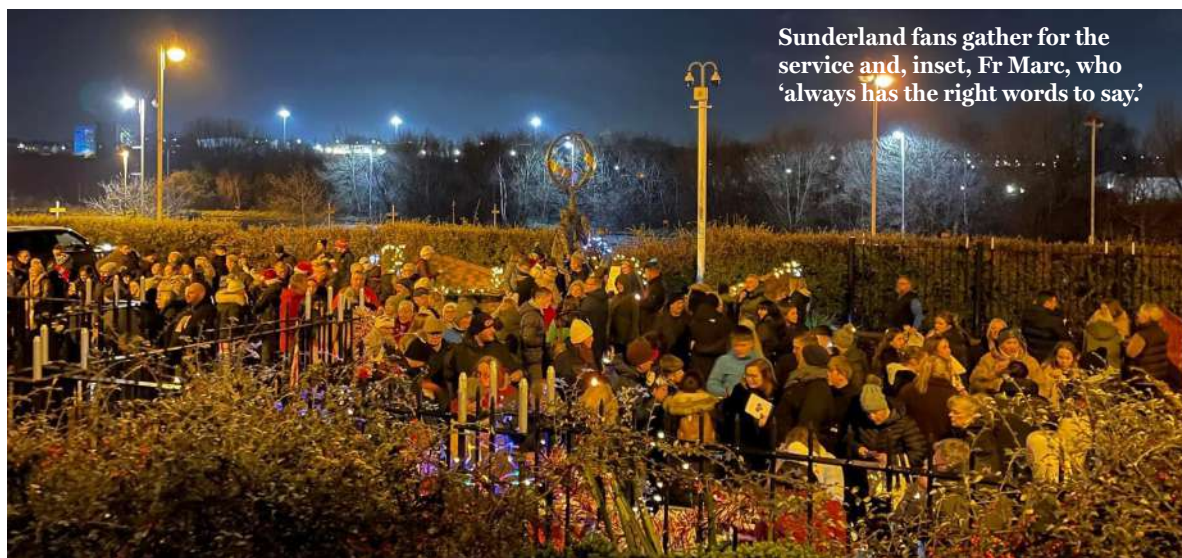
Andy Drozdziak

A football club chaplain has helped Sunderland fans and former players remember loved ones associated with the club at a remembrance service for a special group.

The Sunderland Supporters Heaven branch is an initiative of Sunderland FC, inspired by Sunderland club chaplain Fr Marc Lyden-Smith, to remember loved ones after they have passed away. He told the *Universe*: "It's about offering comfort to people left behind, that their loved ones are still remembered, and they remain part of their beloved club. The one thing we all have in common is the love of our club."

The initiative began from the fans. "Some fans got together, and under the leadership of Joanne Youngson, with others, The Heaven branch was formed," Fr Marc said.

"Anyone who has had a loved one who was a passionate Sunderland supporter can enroll to be a mem-



Sunderland fans gather for the service and, inset, Fr Marc, who 'always has the right words to say.'



ber. We get together and organise socials to support grieving families, sharing memories, stories and photos of loved ones who have died."

Fr Lyden-Smith, who is parish priest at St. Michael's, Houghton-le-Spring, as well as Sunderland chap-

lain, led a Christmas candlelight remembrance service on 10th December. It was attended by 120 in person, and many more online, from as far afield as Spain, Hong Kong and Iceland.

The service included prayers, po-

ems and silence, lighting candles, and closed with hot chocolate and music led by Bojangles Ukés.

"At the service we remembered all those fans whom we have loved that have died. May they rest in peace. Prayers for all those who will be

mourning someone they love this Christmas."

Founder Joanne Youngson shared her thanks with Fr Marc. "Thank you to our amazing Sunderland club chaplain. You always know the perfect words to say," she said.

UN's landmark declaration based on Christian values says bishop on anniversary

Bishop Stephen Wright, a member of the Bishops' Conference's Department for Social Justice, has issued a statement to mark the 75th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

In it Bishop Wright said: "On this 75th anniversary of the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in Paris in 1948, we commemorate the significant moral and legal achievement of the enshrinement of natural human rights on a universal basis.

"It is important to recognise the Christian moral foundations of all such rights and remember the urgent need to protect human rights from violation.

"As the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales concluded in Human Rights and the Catholic Church, released to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the UDHR in 1998: 'It can be said, finally, that the promotion and safeguarding of human

moral principles, grounded in the Genesis account of the equal creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God," he said.

"Indeed, from the beginning, the Christian community has cherished our fundamental human equality before God and the law. As St Paul wrote in his Letter to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 3:28).

"Rights come with related responsibilities which do not always lie with the Government. As well as giving thanks for the greater awareness of human rights that exist around the world, we also give thanks for all those organisations and individuals who ensure that people can live in dignity as children of God.

Bishop Wright underlined the Church's 'commitment' to the defence and promotion of the rights. "The Church has a longstanding commitment to defending and promoting these human rights. Sadly, there are many areas of our society where such rights remain threatened and violated, sometimes in the name of creating 'false rights' which undermine true human rights." Bishop Wright mentioned abortion, restrictions on prayer and peaceful protest near abortion clinics and the migrant crisis as examples of areas where rights are threatened.

"The protection of these, and all other human rights, represents our moral duty as a human community, bound by our shared creation in the image and likeness of God," he said.

Marking the 75th anniversary: See page 18



'The Church has a longstanding commitment to defending and promoting these human rights.'

rights is a religious obligation on all Catholics'.

The UDHR was adopted by the newly-established United Nations General Assembly on 10th December 1948, after the Second World War. Bishop Wright pointed to its Christian origins. "Contrary to the common perception of human rights as a secular project of the Enlightenment, the development of modern human rights law has been historically rooted in Christian



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CAFOD hymn poll reveals our love of creation

A poll carried out by the aid agency CAFOD has found the most popular hymn that celebrates the joy of creation is *I, The Lord of Sea and Sky* (*Here I Am, Lord*).

The runners up were *Morning has Broken*, *All Things Bright and Beautiful* and *For the Beauty of the Earth*.

Many of the hymns in the shortlist have been covered by well-known artists such as Cat Stevens' popular *Morning Has Broken*, with piano arranged and performed by Rick Wakeman which led to international recognition of the hymn.

The composer John Rutter has also written popular versions of *For the Beauty of the Earth* and *All Things Bright and Beautiful*.

CAFOD's head of fundraising and participation, Jo Kitterick, said: "The first hymns many of us learnt as children are about celebrating the joy of creation, and about giving thanks for the beauty of the natural world, from flowers and birds to hills and skies. Listening to, or singing hymns, helps us to appreciate the beautiful world in which we live, and reminds us all that we must protect it from harm."

Jo Kitterick pointed to the lyrics of *I, The Lord of Sea and Sky* echoing Pope Francis' message to care for "our common home."

"The opening line of the winning hymn, *'Here I am, Lord'* echoes Pope Francis' call for people to protect the Earth, our common home, and hear both the cry of the land and the cry of the poor: *'I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry'*", she said.

"Communities CAFOD works with across the world experience the terrible consequences of climate change right now - from floods in Bangladesh and Pakistan, to the catastrophic drought in the Horn of Africa. Human-induced climate change is destroying lives and livelihoods, forcing people to flee their homes, and wiping out whole ecosystems.

"By singing hymns and saying prayers we can stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who are facing these challenging times and who are doing all they can to protect our common home. Together we can share hope in restoring the beauty of the world."



Travellers open their hearts with gifts for Leeds' struggling families

Gypsy and Traveller people from Catholic parishes across Leeds have come together to donate to multiple charities this Christmas, offering their support to people who are homeless and struggling with the cost-of-living crisis.

Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange (Leeds GATE), a community charity, has been supporting a call-out from one of the members, Kathleen 'Suzie' Doherty, to contribute food, toys and essentials to local churches and food banks.

The donations were given by Suzie, along with other members of Leeds' Gypsy and Traveller communities, and delivered to Fr Craig Fitzpatrick at St Nicholas Catholic Church in Gipton. They will be distributed to families in need of help.

To Suzie, giving to charity is an annual tradition. "It's important to help people. In the Bible, Jesus helped people with the little he had, so it's important to help others, even if it only something small."

She added: "Many Gypsy and Traveller people do similar every year. It brings our community together, because sometimes Gypsy and Traveller people can feel separated and isolated. In a world that is seemingly more individualistic, Christmas is a time to think about



Louise Murphy and Rachel Trafford from Leeds GATE present donations to Fr Craig

the other person."

Residents of Cottingley Springs Traveller Site in Leeds also organised a food and toy collection for Christ the King and Holy Family Catholic parish to help families across Armley and Wortley.

Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange, more commonly known as Leeds GATE, is a community or-

ganisation led by its Gypsy and Traveller members. It has been operating for 20 years from Cross Green in Leeds and is now working across West Yorkshire.

Leeds GATE's aim is to improve quality of life for Gypsy and Traveller people, and works for strategic change across five main areas: homes, health, education, employ-

ment and inclusion.

Fr Neil Byrne said: "Since last year it's been very evident families were struggling with cost of living, and the Traveller community wanted to support other people who may be struggling too. Reg, one of the residents of the site and a parishioner of ours, led on this.

"When they put the message out, so many people gave, we actually had to tell them to stop as I had nowhere to store it all!"

He added: "Gypsies and Travellers are misunderstood as a community. We as a parish so appreciate and are overwhelmed by the community's generosity. I cannot thank them enough."

Gypsy and Traveller young people who attend youth groups at Leeds GATE also decided to focus on charity this Christmas. They created gift boxes for young people and bought items from the Dunelm Wish Tree for children who could otherwise go without presents.

Grace Cunningham, a senior youth worker at Leeds GATE, said she is "super proud" of the young people.

One young person said: "It was nice to be told by people shopping how we inspired them to do the same by doing such a kind gesture."

Pope picks Ooberfuse's single for Holy Land as his one for top of the pops this Christmas

Andy Drozdziak

Ooberfuse is hoping for a Christmas number one through their latest song *Hear Angels Cry* - with the help of Pope Francis.

London-based Catholic band Ooberfuse has collaborated with Youstina Safar, a resident of Bethlehem and a student at Bethlehem University, to record the song.

And it's been revealed that not only has Pope Francis heard about the song, he has also sent a message to Cardinal Nichols, commending it for drawing attention to "the sublime significance of the city where Jesus Christ was born" in the light of the ongoing war.

The Pope shared his hopes that the song "will inspire many people this Christmas to pray for a new flourishing of fraternal solidarity, reconciliation and peace in the Holy Land." *Hear Angels Cry* is also being promoted on Vatican News.

Proceeds from the song will go to Friends of the Holy Land (FHL), a UK charity which is also registered in Palestine. The charity said: "Help our Christmas Song *'Hear Angels Cry'* reach No 1. It's a song about light in the darkness, hope amidst the rubble and the proceeds will go



Cherrie Anderson speaking to talk show host Trisha Goddard on Talk TV, with Brendan Metcalfe of Friends of the Holy Land

directly towards helping people in Gaza and the West Bank."

Ooberfuse are a songwriting duo composed of Hal St John and Cherrie Anderson. Speaking to talk show host Trisha Goddard on *Talk TV*, singer Cherrie said: "We usually do east meets west pop. We met the producer in Bethlehem in June and we wrote the song *Hear Angels Cry* together. The original plan was that we would perform it in Bethlehem. Obviously, with what has happened, that has not been possible.

"It's important for everyone out-

side of the Holy Land to join together and pray for peace, and that people will never lose hope and love will always prevail."

Cherrie added: "*Hear Angels Cry* embodies Jesus' message of love, prevailing even in the face of hopelessness."

Youstina Safar shared his own 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 re-

membrance of lives lost in Gaza, our voices unite, that hope will never succumb to darkness," he said.

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.

To watch the video on Youtube: [CLICK HERE](#)
To stream the track on Spotify: [CLICK HERE](#)
To buy the song on Amazon: [CLICK HERE](#)

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Archdiocese in row over Eucharist given Christmas deadline by pope

Syro-Malabar Catholics in the Indian Archdiocese of Ernakulam-Angamaly have been told to end their dispute over the way the Eucharist is celebrated by Christmas – or risk possible excommunication.

The row, which has been going on for two years, even saw some priests claim that letters from the Holy See on the matter were forgeries, leading the pope to address the archdiocese directly by video link, “so no one has any more doubts about what the pope thinks,” he said.

“Heal this rupture. It is your Church; it is our Church. Restore communion; remain in the Catholic Church,” the pope said.

Clergy in Ernakulam-Angamaly have refused to comply with uniform guidelines over which way the priest should face during the celebration of the Eucharist, which were created in 1999. After complaints, the archdiocese and a few other territories were granted a dispensation, but this ended in November 2021.

A group within the archdiocese complained about how the dispensation was revoked and insisted on continuing to celebrate the entire liturgy with the priest facing the congregation, as had been the practice since 1970. The group claims to have the support of almost all the priests and faithful of the archdiocese.

The dispute has led to protests, hunger strikes and physical confrontations between parishioners, including inside St. Mary’s Cathedral in Kochi, which led to its closure.

In his video, Pope Francis told Catholics of the archdiocese: “See to it that by Christmas 2023 your archdiocese humbly and faithfully agrees to get in step with the rest of your Church, respecting all the directions of your synod.”

“Be careful that the devil does not persuade you to turn yourselves into a sect,” he said to all the Syro-Malabar faithful who object to the uniform liturgy.

Describing what happens when a person excommunicates themselves, the pope told them: “Don’t force the Church to acknowledge that you have it because you are no longer in communion with your pastors and with the successor of the Apostle Peter, who is called to confirm all the brothers and sisters in the faith and keep them in the unity of the church.”

“With great sadness,” he said, the bishops would have to do so, and “I don’t want to reach that point.”

St Peter’s nativity looks back to 12th century to mark anniversary

Cindy Wooden

A 15th-century fresco that decorates the cave where St. Francis of Assisi created the first Nativity scene was the inspiration behind St. Peter’s Square’s own nativity this year – 800 years on from the original.

Pope Francis met with the more than 100 people involved in erecting the creche, officials from the Rieti Valley, which includes Greccio, and from the little town of Macra, in northern Italy, which donated the silver fir tree, before officially unveiling both the scene and the Vatican Christmas tree.

For St. Francis of Assisi, who had travelled to the Holy Land, “the caves of Greccio reminded him of Bethlehem,” the pope said. The saint asked that a donkey and an ox, some hay and a manger be brought to the cave on Christmas Eve, “create a living Nativity scene. Thus, the tradition of the Nativity scene as we understand it was born.”

Remembering Greccio today, the pope said, people should also think of Bethlehem. “And as we contemplate Jesus we cannot but think of the tragedy that the inhabitants of the Holy Land are living, expressing to those brothers and sisters of ours, especially the children and their parents, our closeness and our spiritual support. They are the ones who pay the true price of war.”

Whether the Nativity scene is in St Peter’s Square, in a church or in one’s home, the pope said, people passing one should remember Jesus’ birth 2,000 years ago and be moved to “silence and prayer in our often so hectic daily lives.”

“Silence to be able to listen to what Jesus tells us from the unique ‘cathedra’ of the manger,” he said. “Prayer to express grateful wonder, tenderness and perhaps the tears



The nativity scene in St Peter’s Square

that the Nativity scene stirs in us.”

Enrico Bressan, co-curator of the Nativity scene in the square, told reporters that when he and Giovanna Zabotti were asked two years ago to create the Vatican creche for the anniversary, “We felt like Giovanni Velita and his wife, Alticama,” who helped St. Francis of Assisi stage that first scene.

Among the 103 people who worked on the scene, he said, one of the first was Francesco Artese, a master creche maker, who used the fresco now in the cave to design the scene. Antonio Cantone, who has been making Nativity scene figures in Naples for more than four decades, created the life-sized figures of the Holy Family, St. Francis of Assi-

si, other friars and the Velita couple. Set and lighting designers from Cinecitta, the famed Rome movie studio, created the cave and the lighting.

Cantone also created the figures for Nativity scenes in the square in 2013 and 2017. But those had the facial features and clothes of Neapolitans in the 1700s, which is now the standard for Italian Nativity scenes. This year’s figures resemble how people would have looked and dressed in central Italy in the 1200s.

“For an artist who lives making Nativity scenes year-round,” he said, being part of the 800th anniversary celebration “is like winning an Oscar for the years of sacrifice and the creches of the past.”

The figures include a Franciscan priest celebrating Mass, just as one of St. Francis’ confreres did in the cave on Christmas Eve in 1223.

Zabotti said that for her, Nativity scenes were always part of a family celebration of Christmas, but the two-year project for St. Peter’s Square made her realise how St. Francis was trying to tell the simple people of Greccio that “whenever in the world people gather on that night in Jesus’ name, there is the Incarnation.”

“Whenever someone sets up a Nativity scene,” she said, “there is not just Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. We are there.”

“The people of today. We are the shepherds now.”

New diplomats urged to seek path of peace

Carol Glatz

The peaceful means of diplomacy must be used to seek global solutions to the serious injustices that cause so many conflicts in the world, Pope Francis said.

This “urgently demands a reconfiguration of multilateral diplomacy, with the aim of providing effective responses to emerging problems and devising global mechanisms to address the environmental, public health, cultural and social changes presently in course,” Pope Francis told new ambassadors to the Vatican from New Zealand, Kuwait, Malawi, Chad, Guinea and Sweden.

“The noble and patient work of diplomacy to which you are committed must not only seek to prevent and resolve conflicts, but also to consolidate the peaceful co-exist-



Pope Francis meets the new diplomats to the Holy See

ence and human flourishing of the world’s peoples by fostering respect for human dignity, defending the inalienable rights of each man, woman and child, and promoting models of integral economic and human development,” he said.

Welcoming the diplomats to their new posts, the pope said the Vatican is especially concerned about “the

future of our common home and specifically the effects of climate change and the devastation of the natural environment on the most vulnerable members of our human family.”

Speaking while COP28 was underway, he said the summit represents “an historic step forward in responding with wisdom and fore-

sight to these clear and present threats to the universal common good.”

The pope insisted “the future of us all depends on the present that we now choose.”

The Vatican is present and active within the international community, he said, as part of its desire to advance human fraternity and that peace which is “the fruit of justice.”

Recognising the ambassadors were beginning their new mission during “a particularly troubled time, marked by major outbreaks of armed conflict,” Pope Francis told them that “the international community is challenged, through the peaceful means of diplomacy, to seek global solutions to the grave injustices that so often are the cause of those conflicts,” he said.



Pope Francis defied his recent bout of bronchitis to oversee one of the most popular traditional events of Rome’s Christmas, the blessing of the Marian shrine by the Spanish Steps.

The ceremony sees a member of Rome’s fire service climb to the top of the statue of Our Lady to adorn it with a Christmas wreath, while the Holy Father looked on.

In his speech the pope made a renewed appeal for peace in Ukraine and the Holy Land, adding that Mary’s conception, free from original sin, shows that the destiny of humanity lies in life, brotherhood, harmony and peace rather than death, hate, conflict and war. The pope asked Mary to “turn your merciful eyes on all people oppressed by injustice and poverty, tried by war.”

“Look at the martyred Ukrainian people, at the Palestinian and Israeli people, plunged back into the spiral of violence,” he said. “Your person, the fact that you exist, reminds us that evil does not have the first nor the last word,” the pope said to Mary.



Peace would save lives, end hunger – and bankrupt arms dealers

Religious movements within the Catholic Church must advocate for peace and unity in the world at large and within their communities, Pope Francis said.

“After two millennia of Christianity, the yearning for unity continues to take the form of an agonising cry in so many parts of the world,” he told members of the Focolare movement at the Vatican during a meeting to mark 80 years since its founding.

The religious movement, officially known as “the Work of Mary,” was founded in Italy in 1943 and currently has some 110,000 members, including Christians from various denominations. Close to 7,000 members live in small communities and take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

The movement’s goal is to “promote brotherhood and to achieve a more united world in which people respect and value diversity,” according to its website.

The pope recalled the movement’s founder, Chiara Lubich, who he said felt the need for unity during the Second World War and “decided to give her whole life so that the testament of Jesus could be fulfilled.”

“Today, unfortunately, the world is still torn by many conflicts and continues to need artisans of peace,” the pope said. “Think about how, from the end of the Second World War to now, wars have not ended, and we are not conscious of the drama of war.”

Pope Francis shared that when he visited a military cemetery in northern Italy to mark 100 years since World War I, “I cried, I cried. What destruction!”

And, he said, while visiting the Rome War Cemetery on 2nd November when UK and Commonwealth troops are buried, he noted their ages: “22, 24, 18, 30 – all broken lives because of war, and war has not ended.”

“In war everyone loses, everyone. Only arms manufacturers gain. And if wars were not made for a year, world hunger could be ended,” he said. “This is terrible, we must think about this drama.”

Pope Francis urged Focolare to apply its desire for unity within its own structures as well, urging members to realize the dream of a “fully synodal and missionary Church.”

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Public Engagement by Catholics for the Common Good

In Brief

UN warns of war as DRC and Rwanda trade insults

Rising tensions between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda have heightened the risk of a military confrontation that could draw in Burundi, the UN has warned.

The ambassadors from the DRC and Rwanda traded accusations in the council on Monday as the DRC prepares to hold an election on 20th December in which president Felix Tshisekedi is seeking a second term. He wants regional and international peacekeeping forces withdrawn, including a 17,700-strong UN force.

Mr Tshisekedi has long accused Rwanda of providing military support to M23 rebels, the latest iteration of Congolese Tutsi fighters to seize towns in parts of mineral-rich North Kivu.

The UN and human rights groups accuse M23 of atrocities including rape and mass killings and say it receives backing from Rwanda, which denies any ties with the rebels.

Abuse costs force bankruptcy plan

The US Diocese of Sacramento has announced it will file for bankruptcy by March in an effort to resolve more than 250 sexual abuse lawsuits filed under a three-year California lookback window. Bishop Jaime Soto said he had made the decision following "careful consideration," adding that "without such a reorganisation process, it is likely that not all the abuse victim-survivors would receive a fair consideration of their claim."

The majority of the claims dated from abuse alleged to have occurred in the 1980s.

IMF says economic 'cold war' is near

The world economy is on the brink of a "new Cold War" that risks "annihilating" free trade, warned the deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund.

"Growing fault lines" in the global economy, including tensions between the US and China and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have created permanent shifts in the way countries do business, Gita Gopinath told an economic forum in Colombia.

"The economic costs of Cold War Two could be large," she added, with nations becoming entrenched in alliances that shut-out other parts of the world, inevitably leading to tensions and greater risk of new conflicts.

Priest proud as Christians' faith endures attack on Gaza

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza has left society on the verge of collapsing, a Gaza priest has warned, adding that Christians in Gaza are suffering as much as their Muslim friends.

"It is very difficult and the parish is suffering very much," said Fr Gabriel Romanelli, of Holy Family Parish. He said there is little water, gas, food, medicine or diesel fuel needed to use the generators for electricity. The only food many in his parish are receiving is from the religious sisters who manage to cook three

times a week and distribute food to the neighbourhood.

All the Christian community is sheltering either at the Greek Orthodox Church compound or at the Holy Family Church compound, he said. Most Christians have preferred to stay in the north of the Gaza Strip together with their community in the Christian compounds, although Israeli forces asked Palestinian civilians to flee to the south to avoid being caught in the battle.

After some Christians holding foreign passports were able to leave

Gaza earlier in the fighting, there are now about 600 Christians taking refuge at the church, he said.

"There is shock and sadness, even if they have strong faith they remain humans and it is normal to experience sadness. Even our Lord, Jesus Christ, God incarnate, wept," he said.

"These are very hard times, but they have great trust in God's divine protection," he added.

Advent and Christmas celebrations will be "very different" than the normal joyous activities, said Fr

Romanelli. But, he said, "the children are living the essential of Advent with Jesus and praying for justice and peace." Ten pastoral groups, despite ongoing violence around, are still active in the parish: "sometimes they gather to pray and adore Jesus in the Eucharist," Holy Family's pastor said, emphasising that even young children attend adoration.

Pope Francis shows his closeness with the parish and continues to call daily, Fr Romanelli added – even when he was feeling ill recently.

UN vote shows mood hardening against Israel

The UN General Assembly has voted overwhelmingly to demand a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza in a strong demonstration of global support for ending the Israel-Hamas war. The vote also shows the growing isolation of the USA and Israel.

The vote was 153 in favour, 10 against and 23 abstentions, with the US and Israel joined in opposing the resolution by eight countries – Austria, Czechia, Guatemala, Liberia, Micronesia, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, and Paraguay.

General Assembly votes are not legally binding, but its messages "are also very important" and reflect world opinion, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said, and reflects the growing isolation of the United States as it refuses to join demands for a ceasefire.

The US is seen as the only entity capable of persuading Israel to accept a ceasefire as its closest ally and biggest supplier of weaponry. It is also showing a lack of patience with its ally: President Joe Biden warned before the UN vote that Israel was losing international support because of its "indiscriminate bombing" of Gaza.



"I think this vote will send a message about what the world wants to happen next," Riyadh Mansour, the Palestinian ambassador to the United Nations, said, adding that it should be seen as binding.

"And Israel has to abide by it, and those who are shielding and protecting Israel until now should also

look at it this way, and therefore act accordingly," Mr Mansour said.

The resolution expresses "grave concern over the catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and the suffering of the Palestinian civilian population," and it says Palestinians and Israelis must be protected in accordance with in-

ternational humanitarian law.

The war has left much of northern Gaza obliterated, and more than 18,000 Palestinians killed according to the Hamas-run health ministry. 70 per cent of them reportedly children and women, and over 80 per cent of the population of 2.3 million pushed from their homes.

Tusk sworn in to lead a calmer Poland

Donald Tusk has been sworn in as Poland's new Prime Minister, bringing an end to eight tumultuous years of rule by the right wing Law and Justice Party.

An election on 15th October failed to produce an outright winner, but Mr Tusk has brought together a coalition of smaller parties to form a government that will, he vowed, restore democratic norms eroded by Law and Justice and mend alliances with allies – particularly the EU.

Mr Tusk's leadership of the EU's fifth largest member by population will boost centrist, pro-EU forces at a time when Eurosceptics, such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, are gaining strength.

The change of power is felt as vi-

tal for the country, where collective anger produced a record-high turnout to replace a Government that had attacked judges, arrested opponents and hurt alliances.

Law and Justice remains popular with many conservatives thanks to its adherence to traditional Catholic values, and the popularity of social spending policies.

The party lowered the retirement age and introduced cash payments to families with children while also increasing pension payments to the elderly.

But its attacks on LGBTQ+ people and tightening of abortion upset liberals.

Party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the driving force in the country for the past eight years, lamented the

fall of his government and said he feared for what comes next, possibly even "the end of democracy."

• Cardinal Grzegorz Rys of Lodz has condemned a far-right Polish lawmaker after he used a fire extinguisher to put out Hanukkah candles in the Sejm, the country's parliament. "I apologize to the entire Jewish community in Poland," Cardinal Rys said after Braun, a member of the Confederation party, provoked outrage when he put out Hanukkah candles during an event with members of the Jewish community. This is a disgrace," said Donald Tusk, newly appointed prime minister. "Braun's actions were not representative of the country; I am embarrassed by them."



Grzegorz Braun was videoed while putting out the sacred candles

Russia bans Church amid claims it is supporting Ukraine

Gina Christian

Russian occupation authorities have banned the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) and other Catholic ministries in occupied areas of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, according to the Church's main communications office in Kyiv.

The order banning the Church was signed by Yevgeny Balitsky, the Kremlin-installed head of the area's military-civil administration. It declared that the UGCC had been banned and its property was to be transferred to his administration.

The Knights of Columbus and Caritas, the official humanitarian arm of the universal Catholic Church, were also banned.

Among a number of wild accusations the order banning the UGCC said its activities were in "violation of legislation on religious and public organisations", its leaders work "in the interests of foreign intelligence services," and that its parishioners "had participated in riots and anti-Russian rallies."

Even more alarmingly, it said

UGCC churches and buildings stored "explosive devices and firearms weapons" and distributed "propaganda of neo-Nazi ideas."

The Knights of Columbus were described as having links with "the intelligence services of the United States and the Vatican."

There was no explanation for the ban on Caritas.

Researcher Felix Corley of Forum 18, an Oslo, Norway-based news service that covers religious and intellectual freedom violations in several countries, said the order is consistent with previous accusations by Russia against the UGCC.

"It has all the kind of classic accusations they're making against the (Ukrainian) Greek Catholic Church," said Corley; "that they were storing explosive substances and weapons, and that the Church was hostile to Russia, and had links with foreign organisations" he said.

Two Redemptorist priests, Frs Ivan Levitsky and Bohdan Geleta, who were seized in November 2022 from the Church of the Nativity of

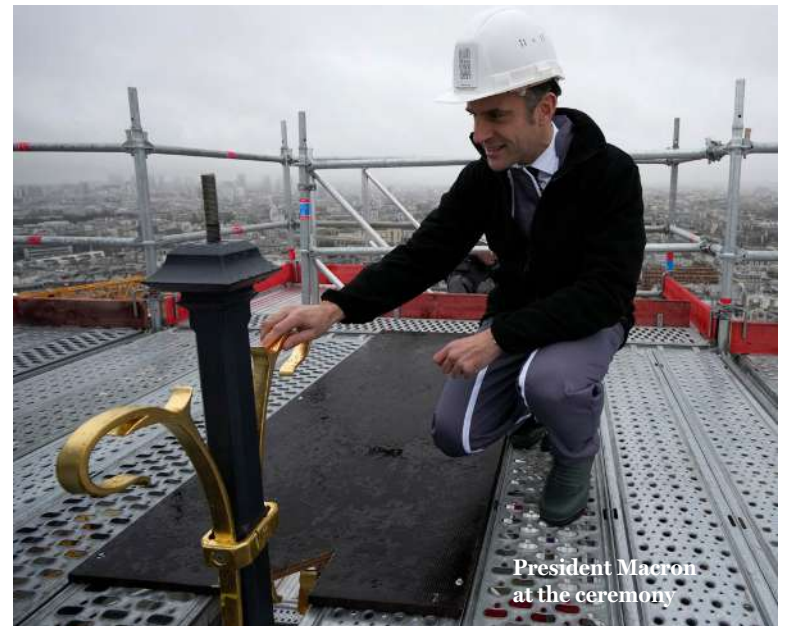
the Most Holy Theotokos in Berdyansk, are still missing, and Corley said no reports had been released on their whereabouts. Both priests had refused to leave their parishioners following the 2022 invasion, and Russian media said they had been arrested for "subversive" and "partisan" activities.

Shortly after the priests were captured, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, said he had received "the sad news that our priests are being tortured."

Balitsky is known as a hardline supporter of Vladimir Putin, and in October called for Russia to restore its historical empire by invading and occupying the Baltic States.

He said that without Russia, the Baltics have "been made into a herd of wordless, trembling creatures."

Balitsky said Russia "will correct this by the power of Russian weapons, to return our people, our subjects so that the whole world does not turn into the Sodom and Gomorrah that is happening in Europe."



President Macron at the ceremony

Pope on guest list for Notre Dame

President Macron of France has said he would be inviting Pope Francis to the re-inauguration of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris when it officially re-opens next December.

At a ceremony to mark the reinstallation of the cathedral's spire, Macron said it was "very moving to be here a year before. You can see the extraordinary progress on this nave, the choir and the frames and the spire," he said.

He told reporters that he would invite the Pope to attend the cathedral's reopening. "I hope he will come, in any case we'll invite him," he said. "The invitation will be extended," he added.

The sight of the cross being re-installed was a "spectacular moment," Fr Ribadeau Dumas said. The priest, who works at the cathedral, said it was "the most visible symbol of the cathedral's resurrection," since the fire that partially destroyed it in 2019.

A new copper rooster is to be installed over the spire's cross before Christmas.

It will contain relics of the patron saints of Paris, a piece of wood believed to be from Christ's crown of thorns, and a roll of paper listing the names of the builders of the new spire and of all the companies involved in rebuilding the cathedral.

US priest killed in break-in

A Catholic priest in a small Nebraska community died on Sunday after being attacked in a church rectory.

The Rev Stephen Gutsell was assaulted "during an invasion" of St John the Baptist Catholic Church in Fort Calhoun, Nebraska. He was taken to an Omaha hospital, where he died from his injuries.

Fort Calhoun, with a population of about 1,000 people, is roughly 20 miles (32 kilometres) north of Omaha.

Police received a call of an attempted break-in at the church just after 5am. When officers arrived, they found Rev Gutsell injured and an alleged attacker inside. Authorities took the suspect into custody, Washington County Sheriff Mike Robinson said.

"This is an ongoing investigation, and the name of the suspect or manner of death will not be released," Mr Robinson said.

In 2007, Rev Gutsell pleaded guilty to theft by deception for embezzling \$127,000 (£101,000) from an area church. He was sentenced to probation and ordered to pay restitution. He was later reassigned to another church. At the time, church leaders said Rev Gutsell learned his lesson, admitted wrongdoing and sought forgiveness.

The Rev Stephen Gutsell was killed after being assaulted in his church



Earlier this year, his brother, the Rev Michael Gutsell, also pleaded guilty to theft charges. He served as chancellor of the Omaha archdiocese from 1994 until 2003.

Mr Robinson told reporters that authorities did not believe Stephen Gutsell's death was related to his criminal history.

Biden Jr faces new charges

Hunter Biden is facing a second criminal case after federal prosecutors filed tax charges against the US president's son.

According to the nine-count indictment, he schemed to evade at least \$1.4m (£1.1m) in federal taxes from 2016-19. The three felonies and six misdemeanours include failure to file and pay taxes, false tax return and evasion of assessment.

In September, he was indicted on federal firearm charges in Delaware. The "scandal-scarred" Biden "faces 17 years in prison".



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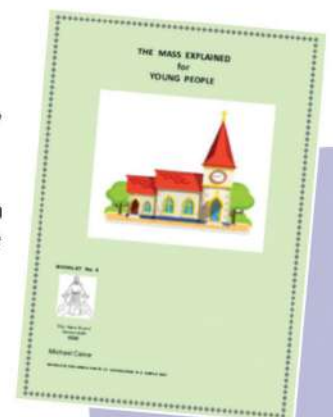
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In Brief

Cardinal backed by bishops' conference

The Latin American and Caribbean bishops' conference has expressed solidarity with Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, after the prelate said he feared that judicial officials are seeking his arrest.

The conference expressed "solidarity and closeness" with the cardinal "in the face of false information that constitutes an attack on his dignity and moral integrity." The cardinal also said that the country's outgoing Government had sent a strongly worded letter against him.

The concern for Ramazzini comes amid increasing tensions in Guatemala, where President-elect Bernardo Arévalo is scheduled to take office on 14th January, but has faced attempts by the federal prosecutor's office to disqualify his Seed Movement (Semilla) political party and undermine his election win.

Arévalo overwhelmingly won an August 20 run-off election on an anti-corruption agenda, taking nearly 61 per cent of the vote. Cardinal Ramazzini and the Guatemalan bishops' conference have repeatedly called for the election results to be respected and for the victor to take office.

The current Congress and other agencies have engaged in efforts seen by the international community as attempts to obstruct the scheduled transition of power.

Rome hospital fire claims three lives

Three people died after a fire broke out at a hospital on Rome's outskirts, forcing the evacuation of the facility and its patients.

People in the intensive care ward at St John the Evangelist hospital in Tivoli were transferred to other hospitals via ambulance. Other patients were moved into a nearby municipal gymnasium pending transfer to other facilities.

The blaze began late on Friday and was eventually brought under control.

Tivoli, 20 miles north-east of Rome, is a popular tourist destination. It is best known for the archaeological sites of Villa d'Este and Villa Adriana.

The governor of the Lazio region, Francesco Rocca, said an investigation would determine the cause of the blaze, but he acknowledged there had been "notable delays" in updating Italy's ageing hospitals with sprinkler systems and other fire safety infrastructure.

UN Charter reaches 75, but faces calls for a refreshed focus

Jonathan Luxmoore

As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is celebrating its 75th birthday, the Vatican's Permanent Representative in Geneva, Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, organised a symposium that aimed to focus on both human rights and care for creation.

The event, co-sponsored by the Sovereign Order of Malta, Caritas in Veritate Foundation, and the International Catholic Migration Commission, formed part of week-long commemorations of the declaration, which was signed on 10th December, 1948, widely seen as a foundational text for modern human and civil rights.

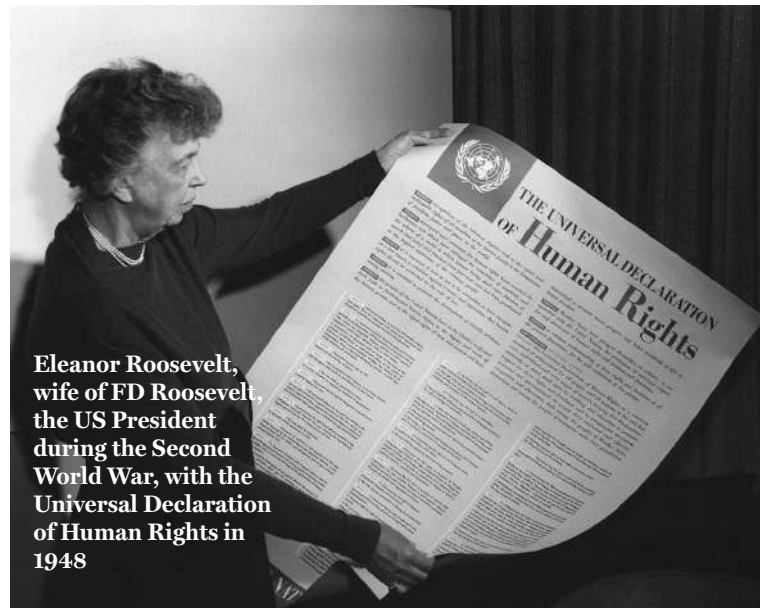
In his introduction, Archbishop Balestrero said the 30-article landmark document, adopted by the UN's General Assembly, had recognised the "intrinsic dignity of the human person" in the wake of World War II.

However, he added that the global situation 75 years later looked "undeniably dire" and said the Vatican also believed human beings were "relational in nature," and existed "not as isolated rights-bearers, but in a web of connections and relationships."

Meanwhile, Salesian Sister Alessandra Smerilli, the secretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, said she believed the declaration's vision of "inherent dignity and inalienable rights" needed urgent revival.

She added that Pope Francis had warned in his most recent apostolic exhortation, *Laudate Deum* against a new "technocratic paradigm" of limitless human capacity, in which "goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power."

"The pope has appealed for



Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of FD Roosevelt, the US President during the Second World War, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948

long-term planning, and made concrete proposals for a possible way forward through a prudent and realistic rethinking of multilateralism," the Italian nun said.

"Without this, the myth of limitless growth seems set to continue, compounded by a deceptive, false meritocratic logic aimed at disadvantaging the weak and excluded, and holding them responsible primarily for their condition," Sr Alessandra added. "The alchemy of these two ideological principles has provided the basis for unscrupulous economic pragmatism and a reckless exploitation of natural resources."

Sr Alessandra said the pope had hoped COP28 would lead to "binding international decisions," adding that she hoped international agencies and organisations would work more effectively in "addressing current challenges together, not in separate silos."

The Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, headed by Cardinal

Michael Czerny, has made resources and planning guides available to Catholics active against climate change and economic exploitation since the *Laudato Si'* Encyclical, which focused on the integral relationship between God, humans and the Earth.

In his follow-up *Laudate Deum*, published at the start of the Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis said he believed the responses had been inadequate, leaving the world "nearing the breaking point," adding that the world's "great economic powers" were still concerned "with the greatest profit possible at minimal cost and in the shortest amount of time."

Addressing the Vatican-run symposium, Amy E. Pope, the director-general of the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration (IOM), commended the pontiff's approach to migration at a time of mass population displacements in Gaza, Ukraine, Congo and elsewhere in the face of war, climate change and

demographic decline.

She added that the IOM also believed in the "dignity and worth of all people" and the "capacity of humans to do good," and said "well-managed migration" could create widespread benefits by enabling migrants to send money home while making up labour shortages in developed countries.

Tatiana Valovaya, director-general of the UN Office in Geneva, said she concurred with Pope Francis that the multilateral system created in the 1940s was "not fit for the 21st Century," and needed replacing with a more "inclusive multilateralism," giving a "equal voice" to all states and drawing on expertise from regional organizations and civil society.

Valovaya, who is Russian, said the human rights declaration had marked the first global rights consensus, enshrining "common values transcending borders, cultures and faiths," and had offered a "contractual foundation for justice, equality and freedom between governments and peoples."

However, she added that she and other UN officials shared the pope's view that a "new paradigm" was now needed, as well as a "renewed multilateralism" to combat "global mistrust and geopolitical tensions."

In his address, Archbishop Balestrero said many "principles and objectives" of the UN system resonated "with Catholic Church priorities," especially in its focus on "solidarity and inclusion."

He added that Geneva provided a "strategic hub" for numerous international organisations, and said he hoped a new multilateralism would enable "ideologies and utilitarian thinking" to be set aside as the UN and its agencies thought and acted more closely in tackling current problems.

Ukraine the loser as Senate divides on party lines

Ukraine has been left eyeing a shortfall in military hardware by the end of this year after the US Senate rejected a request an aid package worth \$105 billion from President Biden.

The request became bogged down in a fierce political tug of war as it also included more aid for Israel while not giving Republicans the extra security they wanted at the US-Mexican border.

The move increases pressure on Congress and the White House to make a deal before the end of the year when aid to Ukraine is expected to run out. Russia's forces have intensified attacks to seize more of eastern Ukraine.

Senator Bernie Sanders was one of those voting against the package,

saying that aid requested for Israel had "no strings attached" for "the right-wing extremist Netanyahu government," so he had to dismiss the whole package.

But Republican Senator James Lankford pointed out that what Republicans want is more security on the Mexican border: "We will not back a security bill that gives security to other nations and ignores our own. We will not do it."

President Joe Biden requested more than \$105 billion in aid for both conflicts, and other security priorities, including boosting military resources and security at the US-Mexico border.

The White House criticised Congress for applying partisan logic, with press secretary Karine

Jean-Pierre saying "it's stunning that we've gotten to this point."

"They're playing chicken with our national security," she said. "That's what we're seeing here. And history will remember them harshly."

Republicans have indicated they will seek measures increasing asylum standards, among other measures they say will reduce illegal border crossings.

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said at the same briefing that "we're willing to negotiate in good faith."

"Biden knows we need to change immigration policy," Kirby said, while Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said "we insist on changes on the [Mexican] border."

But he argued that it is in the

interest of US national security to help Ukraine fend off Russia.

But Catholic immigration advocates expressed concern about potential changes for asylum-seekers. J. Kevin Appleby, a former director of migration policy for the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, said that "there is a lot at stake here and more than meets the eye."

"Asylum law could be forever changed for the worse, effectively placing large numbers of *bona fide* refugees at risk of harm or death when they are returned to their persecutors," he said.

The proposed changes, he said, "would violate human rights standards, betray our values as a nation and go against Catholic teaching."

Italy's regions asked to welcome migrants with 'open arms and hearts'

Justin McLellan

Pope Francis asked Italian government officials to remember the traumatic and often life-threatening journeys migrants endure to reach Europe when welcoming them into their regions and communities.

Migrants, he said, "are faces, and not numbers; people who cannot simply be categorised but should be embraced; brothers and sisters who need to be removed from the tentacles of criminal organisations capable of mercilessly exploiting their misfortunes."

The pope highlighted the 'lagers', or camps, that exist in northern Africa where migrants seeking passage into Europe are "treated like slaves, tortured, even killed."

Meeting at the Vatican with pre-

fects of the Italian government – regional government officials who enact federal laws – the pope said it is up to them to offer migrants a welcome "based on integration" and include them in the fabric of their local societies.

"Migrants must be received, accompanied, promoted and integrated," he said. "If there is not this path to integration, there is danger."

Pope Francis noted that when properly included, migrants contribute to the society that welcomes them. And, he noted, given Italy's falling birthrate, the country needs newcomers.

Just as Italians have a responsibility to have and raise children, he said, they must also "receive migrants like sons and daughters."



Migrants pictured in the sea near the Italian island of Lampedusa

Log out of social media chatter - log in to Christ

To connect with God, Christians must disconnect from the "pollution of vain words and chatter" that reach them through social media and instead seek silence in the desert, Pope Francis said.

The desert is "the place of silence and essentials, where someone cannot afford to dwell on useless things, but needs to concentrate on what is indispensable in order to live," the pope said before praying the Angelus from his studio overlooking St. Peter's Square.

It was the Holy Father's first appearance in public at the Angelus for a fortnight, after his recent spell of ill health, but showed that he was back fit and ready for the heavy workload of Christmas.

"Silence and sobriety – from words, from using things, from media and from social media" – are not just sacrifices offered to God, he said, but "essential elements of Christian life."

Pope Francis said that the power of St. John's preaching is linked to the silence he experienced in the desert, which allowed him to listen to the Holy Spirit.

"If someone does not know how



to be quiet, it is unlikely they will have something good to say, while the more attentive the silence, the stronger the word," he said.

After praying the Angelus with some 25,000 visitors in St. Peter's Square, Pope Francis praised the release of Armenian and Azerbaijani prisoners and expressed hope that peace will soon be achieved in the Southern Caucasus.

An Azerbaijani military offensive in September ended a decades-long conflict in the Nagorno-Karabkh region of Azerbaijan, where thousands of ethnic Armenians live.

In a joint statement published on 7th December, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to release 34 military servicemen held in custody and expressed their desire to reach a peace treaty.

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Photography by Tom Bradley

Africa desperate for ‘loss, damage’ fund to combat climate change impacts

The first big decision taken at the COP28 summit in Dubai was to set up a ‘Loss and Damage’ fund to compensate poorer nations for the harm they face from climate change. In this report from Africa, Doreen Ajiambo highlights why this fund is badly needed – and why its creation may already be too late for some communities

Jere Mirhichan recently stood near the wooden fence of his flooded homestead in the northern Kenyan town of Marsabit. He looked at his dead livestock then turned to his sympathisers as if one of them could miraculously resurrect his cows, goats and sheep.

Mirhichan’s livestock died on 23rd November after they were swept away by raging floodwaters that also have killed hundreds of people, displaced thousands, and destroyed crops and other properties.

In some ways the manner of their deaths was painfully ironic: Just a few months earlier, Mirhichan lost dozens of his livestock due to a drought that had hit the region for more than four successive years.

“I have now lost everything. During the drought, I lost more than three-quarters of my livestock, and now the floods have killed the remaining livestock,” lamented the 50-year-old father of eight, a pastoralist. “As I speak, I have nowhere to sleep with my family. We are taking shelter in different schools and churches around here.”

Mirhichan mourned that the effects of climate change have left him and millions of other residents homeless and in poverty, as livestock and crops are their only source of livelihood. In Africa, for example, at least 15,700 people have lost their lives to extreme weather disasters this year, according to the latest report from Carbon Brief. At the same time, another 34 million have been affected.

“The world leaders should now come to our rescue because we suffer both in rain and drought season,” he told Global Sisters Report, noting that the humanitarian aid will help communities recover in the aftermath of disaster. “We are poor because of the effects of extreme weather events. We have no food to eat and cannot even pay school fees for our children.”

Mirhichan is one of millions of victims of climate and weather-related disasters globally, especially in Africa, who are decrying the neglect by world leaders as they continue to suffer from adverse effects of the El Nino rains, droughts, wildfires, storms, hurricanes and other climate-related shocks.

The victims urged world leaders to immediately distribute loss and damage funds after it was created at the UN Climate Change



Corn withers on the plant after drought hits Zimbabwe

Conference, or COP28, in Dubai, which ended on Monday.

During last year’s United Nations COP27 climate summit in Egypt, countries adopted an agreement that established a fund to help developing countries cope with the extreme weather events caused by global warming. According to the CDP Africa Report, Africa accounts for the smallest share of global greenhouse gas emissions at 3.8 per cent, in contrast to 23 per cent in China, 19 per cent in the U.S. and 13 per cent in the European Union.

Yet, it faces some of the most severe challenges due to climate change.

Many countries pledged millions of dollars at COP27 to fund loss and damage, which is referred to as the costs of recovering from climate impacts that several developing countries cannot afford, thus advocating for global financing. But little money came forward. The United Nations announced in October it had raised \$9.3 billion, falling short of a \$10 billion target after the United States and other wealthy nations failed to fulfill their climate finance pledges.

More hopeful were the moves by the UK and Germany, among others, to kickstart the fund while at COP28: the UK offered £60m,

Germany and the UAE \$100 million each toward the fund.

The failure of wealthy nations to fulfill their pledges has prompted victims of climate change to put more pressure on those nations’ governments to make good on their promises to help vulnerable countries prepare on how to deal and cope with climate change.

“We want to see these funds so that lives can be saved now. How many people do the wealthy nations want to see dying as a result of climate change for them to act?” asked Violet Chirwa, an advocate for climate justice who was affected by Tropical Cyclone

Freddy that struck Madagascar, Malawi and Mozambique early this year.

Chirwa, a resident from Zomba, a city in southern Malawi, told Global Sisters Report that she lost three of her family members in February when the deadly storm swept by home in the middle of the night. The cyclone killed over 500 people across southern African countries and displaced more than 1.5 million people as it washed away homes, livestock, crops, roads and other infrastructure.

“We don’t want talks. We want action to come out of COP28 because climate change makes cyclones more intensive and destructive,” she said. “It’s unfair to us because wealthy people, mostly from rich countries, cause pollution, which affects poor people from poor countries. They should be responsible and compensate these poor people who are suffering as a result of their actions.”

Maryknoll Sister Susan Nchubiri warned governments and businesses that failing to implement the pledges they made during COP27 on loss and damage funds would lead to more deaths and suffering for those vulnerable to climate change.

“We need to act now for our own sake and the future generations,” Sister Nchubiri told Global Sisters Report from Expo City in Dubai. “Governments and corporations that have highly contributed to the current global climate crisis should be accountable and responsible for its healing by not only changing the way they operate but also supporting the less economically able countries to produce and consume green energy and technologies.”

Sister Alice Jurugo Drajea, superior general of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, said the need for a loss and damage fund was urgent since the communities her congregation serves in South Sudan were already experiencing floods caused by heavy rains that have swept away entire villages and farms, drowned livestock, and destroyed roads and other infrastructure. “We urgently need those funds to help those affected by floods and to help us mitigate climate change through planting trees,” she said. “More delays will be too late for many communities; they are already paying too high a price. Do the wealthy nations care?”

Meryne Warah, global organising director for GreenFaith, said her



A boy plays in flooded fields after heavy rains lashed Kenya. Hundreds died in the flooding at the end of November. The East African nation had been in the grip of an unprecedented drought in the months leading up to the rains

organisation has been at the forefront of meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement of keeping the global temperature rise to below 2 degrees Celsius, and preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels. She said for their goal to be achieved, they have been advocating for the conservation and restoration of forests, the use of renewable energy, reforestation and building climate-smart livelihoods.

“The benefits of acting on climate change now are important because if we act in making sure that we mitigate the effects of climate change, then we are sure of tomorrow,” she said, urging African leaders to speak with one voice while asking for the distribution of funds from loss and damage. “We need to have a tomorrow where our economic stability at the household level is to some extent assured, a tomorrow where we are food secure because we know what is coming and we are prepared for it. A tomorrow where we would not have homes destroyed because of floods.”

However, climate experts observed that those demands will likely be delayed because climate negotiators at the United Nations are still ironing out details of the funds.

The stumbling block is who will benefit and how the funds will be distributed: the World Bank is acting as the interim host of the funds, but eligibility criteria could take months to establish.

“While it is clear that the fund still needs operationalising to receive funds accordingly, this is only perceivable as a delay tactic, particularly by the historical emitters not to take responsibility,” suggested David Munene, a programmes manager of the Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa, or CYNESA. “This, I say, because we have seen countries with somewhat humane climate sensitivity and acknowledgment of their share of contributions to climate-induced loss and damage emissions take action.”

Munene warned that choosing

the World Bank as the interim host of the funds was risky as those funds will not reach those affected by climate change and may lack transparency and accountability.

“The loss and damage fund should be channelled directly to the countries hit by climate loss and damage without in-between donor controls,” he urged. “The demands of all vulnerable communities are legitimate, godly and as urgent as yesterday.”

Meanwhile, Mirhichan and other victims hope and pray that those details around the funds will be immediately solved and adopted at COP28.

“We have nothing because we have lost everything,” he said. “We want to recover from the effects of climate change but have no money. We appeal for that fund or humanitarian agencies to help us with relief food and restock our livestock.”

Doreen Ajiambo is the Africa/Middle East correspondent for Global Sisters Report based in Kenya.



“We urgently need those funds to help those affected by the droughts and the floods, and to help us mitigate climate change”

Synod update

Canon Law reform planned as part of Church’s mission

The council of the Synod of Bishops has asked Pope Francis to authorise studies on the need to update Canon Law, revise the rules for priestly formation, deepen a theological reflection on the diaconate – including the possibility of ordaining women deacons – and consider revising the norms for the relationship of a bishop with religious orders in his diocese.

“These are matters of great importance, which need to be considered at the level of the whole Church in collaboration with the Roman Curia,” said the Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod.

The council said the list of study topics it will ask the pope to approve was requested by members of the synod assembly in October.

Studying the topics and their theological implications was an important part of responding to questions and concerns raised by Catholics in listening sessions before it began, as they sought to discern ways to ensure the gifts of all baptised Catholics were recognised and welcomed.

“Experts will work on the topics indicated by the Holy Father,” the report said. “This work will be presented at the second session in October 2024.”

With the synthesis report as “the reference point for the journey of the people of God in the time between the two sessions,” it said, dioceses and bishops’ conferences are asked to engage in further consultation,

specifically looking at ways they could or should institute some of the synod recommendations for bringing more people together in the evangelising mission of the Church.

“We are called and sent by the Risen One to proclaim the Gospel to the world today,” the council said. “Growing as a synodal Church is a concrete way to respond to this call and this mission.”

While dioceses and bishops’ conferences are not being asked to repeat the listening sessions they carried out before October’s synod in Rome, they are asked to gather people to reflect on the synthesis report.

In particular, the synod council asked them to discuss, “How can we be a synodal Church in mission?”

“The objective of these new reflections is to identify the paths we can follow in order to enhance the contribution of each baptised person and of each Church in the one mission of proclaiming the Risen Lord and his Gospel to the world today,” it said.

The council said it was not looking simply for “technical or procedural improvements to make the Church’s structures more efficient, but rather an invitation for reflection on the concrete forms of the missionary commitment to which we are called that express the dynamism between unity and diversity proper to a synodal Church.”

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Hi-tech boost helps Jasna Góra prayer draw a million Catholics to Mary

Filip Mazurczak

Each day at 9 p.m., numerous Poles become spiritually united through the prayer unique for the shrine of Jasna Góra. Last Friday (8th December) marks the 70th anniversary of praying the Call of Jasna Góra daily at Poland's most famous Marian shrine, home to the image of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, to which many miracles have been attributed throughout the centuries.

The Call of Jasna Góra's composition is intimately linked with Poland's dramatic twentieth century. Its pioneer was St. Jozef Sebastian Pelczar, Bishop of Przemyśl, who, on 21st May, 1910, decreed that the bells in his see ring for 15 minutes each day at 9pm in union with the Blessed Virgin and in anticipation of the re-coronation of the image of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa.

Another major event in the prayer's history is the miraculous salvation of Captain Wladyslaw Polesinski. A pilot, Polesinski heard an internal voice tell him to land during a test flight at exactly 9 pm in July 1930. After landing, his plane exploded.

Upon returning home, Polesinski told his wife about his brush with death. Upon learning that this occurred at 9 pm, she revealed to her husband that she had asked Mary to intercede for him at exactly that time.

Previously at loggerheads with God, Polesinski subsequently experienced a major conversion and founded the Cross and Sword organisation of Catholic officers who would stop every day at 9 pm and pray to Mary.

During the darkness of the German-Soviet occupation of Poland – which claimed the lives of Polesinski, among many others – his prayer became popularised by Fr Leon Cieslak, a Warsaw Pallottine, who clandestinely taught Polish university students and worked with the Sodality of Our Lady. He composed the words: 'Mary, Queen of Poland, I am close to you, I remember you, I keep watch.' Since then, verses and music have been added.

It was under communist rule, however, that the call's popularity exploded. The tradition of praying the Call of Jasna Góra at 9 pm each day at Poland's most famous shrine dates to 8th December, 1953, when Polish pilgrims gathered in Czestochowa to pray for the release of Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, Poland's 'Millennial Primate' who had been imprisoned in a then-publicly-undisclosed location for courageously speaking out against the abuses of the Stalinist regime.

Provisionally, on that day, the



Captain Wladyslaw Polesinski founded the Cross and Sword organisation for Catholic military officers after a miraculous escape from his plane
Left, the Marian shrine at Jasna Góra

Góra, Church historian, and the director of the Jasna Góra Marian Institute, said that thanks to the spread of technology, on some days up to a million Catholics participate in it, as the prayer from Czestochowa is broadcast on radio, television, and the monastery's YouTube channel.

"Every couple of months or so, I have the privilege to lead the call," he said. "Many Paulines find this task challenging because they must compose something that is brief but relevant for the call's reflections."

He quoted the late Pauline Fr Zachariasz Jablonski who said that he wrote reflections for the call with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other so that they are relevant to the problems of the day.

Whereas social and political realities constantly change, the Black Madonna of Czestochowa will always be of central importance to Polish Catholics, the friar said.

imprisoned cardinal made an Act of Personal Dedication to Our Lady; given the state of technology in 1953 and the fact that Poland was a police state that persecuted the church, there was no way Wyszynski could have been aware of the fact.

St. John Paul II visited Jasna Góra on six occasions as pope. During these visits, he led the prayer and reflected on its importance. During his 1979 visit, he asked that every Polish family pauses to venerate Mary at 9 pm each day and reflected on the call's words: "How greatly these words correspond to the invitation which we hear so often in the Gospel: 'Be watchful!' By answering this invitation of Christ Himself we desire today, as every evening at the hour of the call of Jasna Góra, to say to Mary: 'Mary, Queen of Poland, I am close to you, I remember you, I watch,'" he said during a historical first visit to Poland on 5th June, 1979 – a visit believed to start the democratic

"Mary, Queen of Poland, I am close to you, I remember you, I watch,"
Pope St John Paul II

changes in Poland and the fall of communism.

Although Poland today enjoys freedom, the Call of Jasna Góra remains popular. While a Marian prayer, it has a special focus on

asking graces for Poland. At pilgrimages, retreats, and other Catholic events, Poles often pause at 9 pm to sing the prayer.

Fr Grzegorz Prus, a member of the Pauline order that runs Jasna



A VIEW FROM THE PEWS

MICHAEL CAINE

ST WINEFRIDE'S PARISH, LYMM, CHESHIRE



Deacons play vital role in church today

Our parish does not have a deacon, and I've often wondered what our parishioners know about them. The following is a simple explanation of their role and standing.

Deacons and priests are ministers of religion, and both are ordained by a bishop. A deacon's role can be either Permanent or Transitional.

Permanent ones are ordained to remain in that role.

Transitional ones continue their training before being ordained into the priesthood.

Unlike a priest, a permanent deacon can be married, have a family, and have a separate job outside the Church.

When a man feels the call to be a priest, he's first assessed by a vocations director of a diocese. It is then the bishop who finally decides if a particular man is suitable.

After about two years of training, all candidates are first ordained as a deacon, then into the priesthood after a further five years.

Permanent deacons are men of faith and prayer, with a desire to serve others for the sake of God's kingdom.

Some of their main activities involve using the local church to serve the poor and the vulnerable and support parish groups. During



Deacons can be distinguished from priests by their distinctive stole: 'It hangs around the back of the neck and across the shoulder to the front. It then crosses the chest from the left shoulder to the waist on the right.'

to the front. It then crosses the chest from the left shoulder to the waist on the right. A priest's stole does the same but hangs down the front in two straight lines.

The colour of the Dalmatic will vary with the type of feast day in the same way a priest's vestments are coloured.

If you went to a parish you'd never been to before to attend a service that only required vestments such as an alb and stole, how would you know if the person officiating at the service was a deacon or priest?

Look at the stole. If it's hung from the left shoulder across the body to the right waist, it's a deacon.

If it's a priest, it will hang down the body in two straight lines.

If you have a deacon in your parish, remember he's given up much to help your parish and its members.

Show your appreciation for what he does by giving him all the help you can.

If you are male, Married or not, have you ever thought about becoming a deacon ?

If you have, contact your parish priest.

Mass, a deacon can assist the bishop or priest.

They help the parish priest in many of his administrations and may officiate in place of a priest for services such as baptisms, weddings, funeral and burial services outside the Mass. They can also distribute communion and preach the homily after the readings at Mass. In addition they can preside as the leader at the

special service called the Celebration of Word and Communion when a priest is not available.

There are some services they can not officiate at, however:

- Confirmation (bishop).
- Holy Eucharist (priest).
- Sacrament of Reconciliation (priest).
- Anointing the Sick (priest).
- Holy Orders (Bishop).

■ The Mass (priest).

During many religious services, deacons wear:

- An alb (A full-length white vestment) over normal clothing.
- A stole over the Alb (It's like a broad stiff scarf).
- A dalmatic, which covers them all.

The stole hangs around the back of the neck and across the shoulder

JOURNEY IN FAITH

CHRIS MCDONNELL



Words to lighten our darkness

Several years ago in our small parish church, a number of parishioners arranged a Festival of Light and invited the wider community to share some time in prayer.

With the Blessed Sacrament exposed, a gradual carpet of light grew across the sanctuary floor, a focal point for prayer as each person who arrived lit and placed a small candle in front of the altar.

At a very low volume, the sound system gave a background of meditative chant, unobtrusive, just there. It was a simple yet beautifully meditative occasion that brought many through the doors of our church.

Advent hurries on apace and leads us to Nativity, the birth of the Jesus Child and the fulfilment of prophecy. It was a time of peace. This year it is very different, with the pain and strife of terrorism and war giving rise to an unending ache across our planet.

Hostages are still held captive in Gaza, fighting continues in the

Ukraine, relief trucks are held up at the Border crossings.

Yet it is into this confused and troubled world that we again invite the light of Christ to shine among us. Advent days are drawing to a conclusion, they will shortly bring us face to face with the newborn Child in a stable.

May the light that shines upon us be the light of compassion and love rather than the flash of explosives in conflict. Let there be life-giving in place of life-taking.

The words of W.H. Auden that conclude these few lines were written in the early months of the Second World War. We still haven't learnt the lesson.

Sundays of Four Candles

The song of the colder days is sung in words of Waiting from one dark day to the next, each one closing days of expectation, till finally time is come.



December dawns, spreading a chill, raw sky of washed out greens and faded blues, sunrise breaking the nothingness of night early light beyond the immediate houses.

Final year-end days, the hurrying crowds, the Sundays of Four Candles and the Coming Birth, the telling of wars and harsh anger caught in the cradle of conflict, till all time slips away.

*"Time will say nothing but I told you so" **

***W H Auden: If I Could Tell You: October 1940**

God's power is perfected in weakness

“Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.” Gospel of Mark, 10 : 47

Today I want us to consider the blind beggar, Bartimaeus. In the Gospel he comes across as a vulnerable seeker. Everybody in the neighbourhood, it seems, knew this blind son of Timaeus. People advised him to quiet down, not to be upsetting himself and others who were quietly going about their business. All the while, Bartimaeus ignored their admonitions and boldly called out, “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!”

Eventually, the same people who

were fed up with Bartimaeus helped him on his way to Jesus. Sometimes it works like that. We are helped and led to the Lord by people we would never expect to help us. The Lord works in strange ways, indeed.

When Jesus called Bartimaeus to come forward, the blind beggar asked for the obvious: that he might see. His faith drew forth the miracle of sight and his eyes fell on the One who brought him wholeness of body and spirit. Then, Jesus told him: “Be on your way! Your faith has healed you.”

Bartimaeus chose to follow the

way of Jesus. This following of Jesus “on the way” refers to much more than Bartimaeus’ new-found ability to walk better, now that he could see. It focuses on a new Bartimaeus entirely, one who has become a disciple of Jesus.

This is following of a different kind; this is a more challenging walk for Bartimaeus. From then on this new-sighted man became a faithful man. Bartimaeus not only got his eyesight back; he gained the kind of foresight, hindsight and insight that conforms to that of Christ who called him forth from his original blindness.

The journey of Jesus led to Jerusalem (The place of his full and final self-giving) and to the glory of the Resurrection. Bartimaeus – vulnerable, stumbling and seeking – had to learn this as he went along.

So do we. We are also asked to take in the whole journey. How do we set out? We set out with the assurance of Faith which tells us that this journey is not our own. We will know we are on the right way if and when we conform our lives to that of Christ who called us forth out of darkness into the brightness of the kingdom of heaven.

In contrast to the rich young man, who belonged to a higher social status than Bartimaeus, but rejected the invitation of the Lord to follow him, Bartimaeus encountered Jesus “on the way,” and followed him. There is an important lesson here. You don’t have to be important or distinguished to follow Jesus. Bartimaeus makes it clear that those at the bottom of the social order are just as favoured, in the eyes of God, as those at the top? Bartimaeus is a clear case of where God’s “power is perfected in weakness.”

Purple candle signifies the joy of advent

Third Sunday of Advent: Joy!

The third Sunday of Advent is about one thing and one thing only: Joy. The pink/purple candle in the Advent Wreath for this Sunday represents joy. This is our time to withdraw from the hustle and bustle of Christmas preparations, to pause a little, and consider what Christmas really means. It is about joy.

How often I’ve heard parents complain to me about being drained over the Christmas season! How their children didn’t appreciate what they gave them for Christmas! How their expectations and hopes for a warm and uplifting family get-together went up in smoke, only to be replaced by bickering and discontent and disillusionment. What went wrong?

They did not experience the joy of Christmas because they took too much upon themselves. They set out to please others by giving them things rather than the gift of joy itself which they have been called upon to receive. If you don’t possess the gift of joy, how can you share it with one another! This gift of the soul is priceless for it comes from God.

Jesus makes it very clear that his mission is not only to give us joy, but to complete it (Gospel of John, 15:11). On this third Sunday of Advent, which is called Joyful Sunday, we need to ponder Jesus’s



‘The pink/purple candle in the Advent Wreath for this Sunday represents joy. This is our time to withdraw from the hustle and bustle of Christmas preparations, to pause a little, and consider what Christmas really means. It is about joy.’

sublime message of joy.

The joy of the Christian is a sharing in the joy of Christ who overcame suffering, opposition, rejection, fear and even death itself. The Gospel is all about this kind of joy. It is the joy that never fades for it gives energy to faded hearts, rejuvenates the prematurely old, restores life to arid souls, and finds joy in everything, even suffering. What a gift!

This joy wells up from the deep recesses of the human soul. It is not to be achieved by living on the surface but by penetrating the deepest truths of ourselves through the grace of God. It is not the same as happiness which is a fleeting thing. Joy is deeper and more

permanent. It is a quality of the soul that finds rest in the beauty of the Lord’s kingdom.

The joy the Lord gives us is the grace to go beyond appearances, to examine our life styles with a view to making them more Christ-like. The sacrifices we make to follow Christ in order to enter into his joy is worth it for he gives us a new spirit: the Holy Spirit. To experience this new spirit we must be prepared to put aside old ways and old habits that are selfish, dysfunctional, joyless. What a blessing it is to be able to do this! What joy we bring to others when we show them love instead of hatred or jealousy or anger or pride or greed!

The gift of joy is one of the most valuable gifts God has given us. It manifests itself and flows out into an unlimited variety of experiences and new awakenings. Our renewed spirits can shake with joy again at the many experiences of new life: the incredible beauty and interconnectedness of nature, the joy of people celebrating their unions together, the special beauty of dedicated and unselfish lives, the joy of watching innocent children frolicking on sandy beaches or in schoolyard playgrounds, the graceful appearances of those who possess this gift without fear of life or death. Nothing in this world can deprive you of this joy which you can carry with you wherever you go

and enjoy wherever you are.

This is the joy which the Lord gives. It is the joy of the soul which He calls “complete” because it encompasses and transcends every other kind of joy. It is the joy that never ends because it is an interior quality that never fades away.

So, make it your special project this third week of Advent to spread joy wherever you are, wherever you go, and with whomever you meet. Do not hide it “under a bushel basket” but let it shine for all to see. Take the day off. Bring the children to the mall to see the Christmas lights. Celebrate this joy in Church and out of Church.

That is why St. Paul tells us, in **Philippians 4 : 4** to rejoice always.

SUNDAY WORSHIP

ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS



Follow John the Baptist and use your voice to proclaim Christ as the light

17th December 2023 – 3rd Sunday in Advent, B
1st Reading: Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11
The Messiah, guided by God's Spirit. This text describes Jesus' ministry

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Responsorial: Luke 1: 46-50, 53-54

R./: My soul rejoices in my God.

My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour.

He looks on his servant in her nothingness; henceforth all ages will call me blessed. (R./)

The Almighty works marvels for me.

*Holy his name!
His mercy is from age to age, on those who fear him. (R./)*

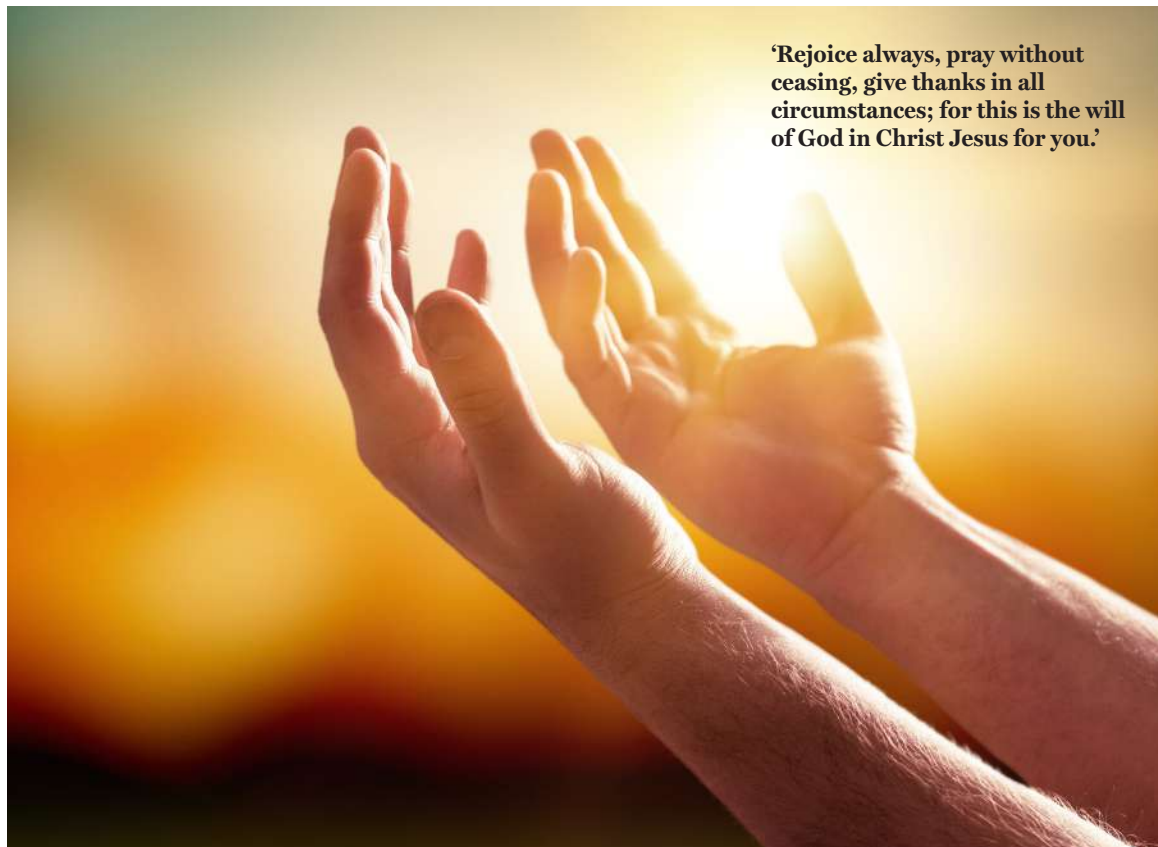
*He fills the starving with good things,
sends the rich away empty.
He protects Israel, his servant, remembering his mercy. (R./)*

2nd Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

The spirit of fervour encouraged among the early Christians

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself



'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.'

sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Gospel: John 1:6-8, 19-28
John the Baptist's testimony to Jesus

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,

the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Finding our personal truth

Children are great with questions. As any parent knows they can ask the most profound questions in the simplest of ways. We all ask questions because, at heart, we have an instinct for seeking and searching after truth. This is a life-long search. We can never get to the point in this life where we can say, 'I now have the total truth.' The Gospel declares that God is truth — and God is always beyond us. We can never fully grasp God with our minds or our hearts. Yet we have to be faithful to the search for truth, even if along the way we find ourselves making painful discoveries that involve letting go of long-held and cherished convictions. We keep trying to come closer to the truth, the truth about our world, about each other, about ourselves as individuals, and about God. We keep questioning in the hope that our questioning will bring us closer to the truth.

In our search for our own personal truth, two of the big questions that drives us are, 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I doing what I am doing?' We seek after our identity, in the broadest sense of

that term, and we try to clarify for ourselves the ultimate purpose that drives all we do and say. In today's gospel, those two big questions are put to John the Baptist by the religious authorities, 'Who are you?' and 'Why are you baptizing?' In answer to the first question, John began by declaring who he was not. He was clear that he was not the Christ, the Messiah. John did not try to be more than he was. Later on in the gospel of John, using an image drawn from a wedding celebration, he would say of himself that he was not the bridegroom, only the friend of the bridegroom who rejoices at the bridegroom's voice. In today's gospel John declares himself to be the voice crying in the wilderness; he is not the Word, only the voice; he is not the light, only the witness to the light. When John was asked why he was doing what he was doing, why he was baptizing, he declared that he baptised to make known the 'one who stands among you, unknown to you.' He did what he was doing to open people's eyes to the person standing among them, to the Messiah who was in their midst without their realising it. There was a great light shining among them that many were unaware of, and John had come to bear witness to that light. John did what he did because of who he was. The answer to the question, 'Why are you baptizing?' flowed from the

answer to the more fundamental question, 'Who are you?'

'Who are you?' is a question we can answer at many different levels. We can simply give our name, or give our parents' names; we can answer it by giving our professional qualifications, or by naming the role or the position we have in life. Yet, the deepest level, the most fundamental level, at which we can answer that question is the spiritual level. Who am I at that deepest, most spiritual, level of my being? Who am I before God? Who is God calling me to be?

Here, John the Baptist, the great Advent saint, can be of help to us. He articulates for us who each one of us is in virtue of our baptism, who God is calling us to be. No more than John the Baptist, we are certainly not the Messiah. We are not the light. We know only too well the areas of darkness in our lives and in our hearts. However, like John the Baptist, we are a witness to the Light. Even though we are all far from perfect, we are, nonetheless, called to be a witness to Christ.

John the Baptist says in today's gospel, 'there stands among you, unknown to you, the one who is coming after me.' The Lord stands among all of us, but he remains unknown to many. Our calling is to make him known, to allow him to shine forth in our world through our lives.

John spoke of himself as a voice crying in the wilderness. John used his voice to make known the light. We too are asked to use our voice to make Christ known. It does not mean that we stand in the main street and preach. Rather we use the gift of communication that we have, the gifts of speech and writing, to proclaim the person of Christ, his world view, his values and his attitudes. In what we communicate and how we communicate it, we allow the Lord to communicate through us. Who we are as witnesses to the light, as the voice for the Word, shapes how we live and explains why we live the way we do. The answer to the question, 'Who are you?' grounds the answer to the question, 'Why are you doing what you are doing?' Advent is a good time to reclaim our fundamental identity, our Christ identity. If Jesus is to be born anywhere today, it will be in each one of us.

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Confusion at Christmas: does Vigil Mass count as both my days of obligation?

Q: Since Christmas is on Monday this year, can I go to a Christmas Vigil Mass on Sunday and have it fulfill my Sunday and Christmas obligations?

A: As you note, Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday. And like all Sundays, Catholics are required to attend Mass in person, unless there is some legitimate reason (like illness or inclement weather) which makes attending Mass unduly difficult or impossible.

Of course, Monday is Christmas Day, which is also a holy day of obligation. Because there are two days of obligation – Sunday and Christmas – this means that there are two distinct obligations to speak of. Each separate obligation needs to be fulfilled by attending a separate Mass. That is, you cannot “double dip” by attending a Christmas Eve Mass that happens to be on Sunday and have this one Mass fulfill two obligations. (In years when Christmas Day falls on a Sunday, Christmas essentially replaces the Sunday liturgically, which means there is only one obligation.)

Now for the part that can get confusing: Even though you must attend two Masses to fulfill the two obligations, all this means is that you must go to Mass on that calendar day or attend a vigil Mass the evening before. The readings and prayers do not necessarily need to match the day whose obligation you are fulfilling. So, you could go to a Christmas Vigil Mass on Sunday, 24th December and have it count as your Sunday obligation this year; but if you intend for this to fulfill your Sunday obligation, then you must also attend another Mass on Christmas Day to fulfill your obligation for the holy day.

Of course, if you were to attend a vigil Mass on Saturday for Sunday, and then the Christmas vigil Mass on Sunday (Christmas Eve) for Christmas day, then you have it all covered.

Q: I am a member of our Altar Society and was told we must not use artificial flowers/plants to decorate the altar. Yet, during the Christmas season, artificial trees with elaborate shopping mall decorations are displayed on the altar. Please explain the rationale and guidelines. There seems to be a contradiction.

A: As far as I can find, there is nothing in the Church’s universal law which strictly prohibits using artificial plants or flowers as



sanctuary decorations.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal does not discuss silk versus natural flowers, but in paragraph 305 it does specify this: “During Advent the floral decoration of the altar should be marked by a moderation suited to the character of this time of year,” and that “During Lent it is forbidden for the altar to be decorated with flowers. Exceptions, however, are Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent), Solemnities, and Feasts.”

But even in places where natural plants are strongly preferred, practically speaking, I imagine that Christmas trees, wreaths and other evergreen garlands are one case where it might be reasonable to make an exception and use artificial greenery.

As anyone who has ever had a real Christmas tree in their home knows, the regular shedding of dead pine needles can create quite the on-going clean-up project, which might become overly burdensome to Altar Societies or those charged with care of the sanctuary.

Q: My cousin is getting married soon and will need to obtain a copy of her baptismal certificate for inclusion in the pre-nuptial enquiry. As a newborn baby, it

wasn’t clear if she would survive and so she was baptised in emergency at the hospital. To whom should she write, in order to obtain her baptismal certificate?

A: The short answer is that she should write to the parish in whose geographical territory the hospital in question is located.

In canon law, it’s clear that sacramental record-keeping in general is intended to happen in a parish context. For example, canon 535 tells us that: ‘Each parish is to have parochial registers, that is, those of baptisms, marriages, deaths...The pastor is to see to it that these registers are accurately inscribed and carefully preserved.’

Of course, marriages and baptisms can and do happen outside of parish churches. But even when a wedding or baptism is celebrated at a non-parochial space, such as a shrine, university chapel, or the chapel of a religious community, or even a hospital, the local parish must be informed so that it can be recorded properly in that parish’s record books.

We read in c. 878 (which actually seems to envision an emergency baptism scenario, like your cousin’s): ‘If baptism was administered neither by the pastor nor in his presence, the minister of baptism, whoever that was, must

notify the parish priest of the parish in which the baptism was administered, so that he may register the baptism.’ Therefore, the hospital’s local parish should have your cousin’s baptismal record.

Granted, sometimes it can be hard to determine exactly which parish’s territory the hospital was located, especially if it was part of a large urban area with several nearby Catholic churches. If your cousin runs into this issue, the best thing to do would be to contact the relevant diocese.

The diocesan chancery office would have access to maps of parish territorial boundaries, and would also be familiar with any “quirks” of local sacramental record-keeping.

Q: When I was a child, I often heard adults say, particularly at funerals, that when a long term and chronically ill person finally passed, they would go “straight to Heaven,” as God counted their years of suffering as sufficient to pay for their sins, and required nothing further from them. Could you comment?

A: Short of a formal canonisation process or a clear case of martyrdom, there is no way to know for sure how long or short a particular person’s stay in purgatory will be – much less

‘In 2023 Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday. And like all Sundays, Catholics are required to attend Mass in person, unless there is some legitimate reason (like illness or inclement weather) which makes attending Mass unduly difficult or impossible.’

whether they have been able to skip purgatory altogether. Purgatory is not about “serving time” for sins committed so much as it is a time of purification and becoming ready to enter fully into God’s presence. The degree to which an individual needs this kind of purification is something which is only truly known between that soul and God.

That said, the Church does teach that suffering in this life can be redemptive. As we hear in one of the prayers which a priest might use to conclude the sacrament of penance: “May the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of all the saints, whatever good you do and suffering you endure, heal your sins, help you to grow in holiness, and reward you with eternal life.” The clear implication here is that suffering, when patiently endured, can help heal the wounds caused by sins. So, I think it’s reasonable to hope that a generally virtuous person who suffered through a long illness could have had their time in purgatory at least shortened—although it’s important to still pray for the repose of their soul, regardless.

Jenna Marie Cooper, who holds a licentiate in canon law, is a consecrated virgin and a canonist. Send your questions to CatholicQA@osv.com.

The mystery behind it makes Our Lady's *Magnificat* all the more powerful a prayer

Kenneth Craycraft

Anyone who says evening prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours regularly recites the Magnificat from the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Named for its first word in Latin, this canticle is one of only four places in the Gospels where the Blessed Virgin's words are recorded.

And the Magnificat contains more words than the other three passages combined. The rarity and brevity of Mary's words, however, should not diminish their importance. Indeed, the Magnificat is among the most theologically powerful speeches in the entirety of the New Testament. Given its place in the narrative of the birth of Our Lord, the commencement of Advent is the perfect time for meditating on Our Lady's words.

A newly pregnant Mary travels to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. When Mary greets Elizabeth, John leaps in his mother's womb, prompting Elizabeth's own contribution to the Christian liturgical tradition. "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," exclaims Mary's cousin (Lk 1:42).

"Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled," (Lk 1:45).

This elicits Mary's response, that begins, "*Magnificat anima mea Dominum*" – "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed."



The Visitation, a panel of the Arras altarpiece, painted by Jacques Daret between 1434 and 1435

things," (Lk 1:53).

Like Isaiah, Mary's prophetic voice puts the poor and hungry in the center of theological consideration. To those whom mercy has been denied, mercy now has come.

A song for a fallen world

Some commentators have suggested that the Magnificat may be a traditional early Christian hymn, put in the mouth of Mary as a kind of early creedal confession. Part of the explanation for this theory is that the hymn makes no direct reference to Mary's pregnancy, or the expectation of the coming of the saviour. The broader message, these scholars contend, makes it more likely that the hymn came later, and was retroactively put into the mouth of Our Lady.

While the theory has some merit, I believe that it misses the overall messianic tone of the canticle. The song is not simply about Our Lady's pregnancy, but rather about what that pregnancy means to a fallen world. Just as the birth of Christ is about much more than a baby in a feeding trough, so the Magnificat accounts for the expansive – indeed, eternal – message of the Incarnation. A lowly birth to a lowly woman ushers in the magnificent fulfillment of God's offer and promise of salvation.

This puts the Magnificat squarely in the context of the Incarnation, which has commenced in Mary's womb.

Kenneth Craycraft is an associate professor of moral theology

Echoing the prophet Isaiah

Mary's pregnancy represents our own liturgical experience in the season of Advent. The Lord has arrived in her womb, yet she awaits the fulfillment of his appearance. So, too, we live under the lordship of Christ, while we wait in hopeful expectation of his return. And John the Baptist, who will become the voice from the desert proclaiming the coming of the saviour, has already made his presence felt to Elizabeth. The incarnational details of the scene draw our minds to the God who became flesh so that we may become like God.

Echoing the hopeful words of the prophet Isaiah, the Magnificat could be called a primer on the

Church's doctrine of solidarity. Here, at the commencement of the Blessed Virgin's mysterious and wonderful gestation of Our Lord, she proclaims that this birth will upset the order of things. God calls lowly Mary as the exemplar of humility and selfless service. And in that humble submission, her soul is exalted. The last has been made first. Considering all these things, the Magnificat may be the perfect Advent prayer.

"A voice proclaims: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord!" exclaims the prophet Isaiah. "Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God," (Is 40:3).

From the disorder of wilderness will come the order of restoration.

"Every valley shall be lifted up," the prophet continues, "every mountain and hill made low." The rugged and rough shall be made smooth and plain. And having made all things level, the Lord "like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, leading the ewes with care," (Is 40:11).

Isaiah's prophecy of God's mercy echoes through from age to age until it finds its renewed articulation in Mary's canticle, in which the Lord "has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy," (Lk 1:54).

God, "has lifted up the lowly," Our Lady proclaims (Lk 1:52). "The hungry he has filled with good

Weeping Mary is sign of her motherly love, pope says

Cindy Wooden

Commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Weeping Madonna of Syracuse, a plaster image of Mary hung in the bedroom of a newlywed couple in southern Italy that began shedding tears, Pope Francis said the miraculous sign is a reminder of Mary's maternal presence and her desire that all people would know the love and peace of her son.

"Mary's weeping shows her sharing in the compassionate love of the Lord, who suffers for us his children, ardently hopes for our conversion and awaits us as a merciful Father to forgive us everything and always," the pope wrote in a message to the people of the Archdiocese of Syracuse on the island of Sicily.

The image of the Sacred Heart of Mary, a wedding gift for Angelo Iannuso and Antonina Giusto, dripped tears for four days in 1953. After an investigation, local church authorities said there was no natural explanation for what happened, and tests on

the liquid determined they had the same composition as human tears do.

Pope Francis' message, published on 7th December, said Mary continues to cry "when the weakest are discriminated against and when violence and wars, which claim innocent victims, are rampant."

"In the face of the trials of life and history, especially in the face of today's troubling scenarios of war, let us not tire of invoking the intercession of Mary, Queen of Peace and Mother of Consolation," he said. "May her motherly solicitude stir believers to build and tread paths of peace and forgiveness, and to be close to those who are sick in body and spirit, those who are alone and abandoned."

Pope Francis ended his message with a prayer: "O Virgin Mary, accompany the path of the Church with the gift of your holy tears, give peace to all the world, and guard your children with your maternal protection. Sustain us in fidelity to God, in service to the Church and in love toward all our brothers and sisters. Amen."



Pope Francis prays in front of a reliquary containing liquid from the famous Weeping Madonna of Syracuse, Sicily, in the Domus Sanctae Marthae at the Vatican in this file photo from 25th May, 2018



AROUND THE PARISHES & EDUCATION

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



St John Fisher pupils praised for behaviour in Ofsted report

St John Fisher Catholic Voluntary Academy in Derby is celebrating after being rated 'Good' in all areas by Ofsted.

The quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, leadership and management and early years provision were all assessed as part of the two-day inspection.

Inspectors said: "St John Fisher is a warm and welcoming school. Pupils enjoy their learning and are happy. They feel safe."

There was extensive praise for their behaviour of the children: "Pupils behave sensibly in class and around the school. Children learn the routines they need to follow as soon as they join the school. This helps them to be ready for learning. Staff, including those in the early years, are ambitious for what they want pupils to achieve."

Pupils show respect towards staff and each other; they are polite, well-mannered and they enjoy their lessons, the report said.

Inspectors said that parents and carers valued the work that the school did to support their children.

One parent said: "I would highly recommend this school to any other parent."

The school is ambitious for all pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), to learn as much as possible, the report said.

Reading was described in the

identifying and assessing the needs of SEND pupils," which coincides with the arrival of Kirsty Campbell, the new SENDCo and deputy headteacher.

The report said that the curriculum for children in the early years was "well sequenced".

The school works closely with families to promote pupils' attendance and adds to pupils' personal development in many ways, according to the report.

Saul Ratcliffe, headteacher at St John Fisher, said: "I am thrilled to be able to share this report with our children, parents, parish and wider school community. The report showcases everything that we have worked so hard on. None of this would have been possible without the dedication and support of all the staff and governors of St John Fisher."

Inspectors said that safeguarding arrangements at the school were effective and the St Ralph Sherwin Catholic Multi Academy Trust and governors were committed to giving pupils the best possible experience.

Kevin Gritton, chief executive of the St Ralph Sherwin Catholic Multi Academy Trust, said: "We are delighted for the community at St John Fisher and would like to thank the staff and governors for everything they do, every day, to give the pupils there the very best education and care."



"Children learn the routines they need to follow as soon as they join the school. This helps them to be ready for learning. Staff, including those in the early years, are ambitious for what they want pupils to achieve."

School's mental health strategy rewarded

A Catholic school in Burton-on-Trent has won a pioneering award for outstanding mental health and wellbeing provision.

Blessed Robert Sutton Catholic Voluntary Academy has been awarded Gold standard by the Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools.

The school provides a wide range of activities to boost the wellbeing of pupils and staff. These include rolling out a universal programme of mental health support which means that every pupil has a 1:1 conversation about wellbeing each term.

Form time takes place at the start and end of the day to allow for pastoral support to be given during both sessions.

Laura Wilson, Blessed Robert Sutton's assistant headteacher and senior mental health leader, said: "I am extremely proud of the holistic approach we've embraced towards the well-being and mental health of our students."

"Our carefully crafted practices not only nurture their academic growth but also ensure a supportive and flourishing environment, embodying our commitment to their overall well-being."



"The impact of working towards this award has allowed us the opportunity to review our current practice and enhance it further, ensuring that we support all pupils with their mental health and wellbeing".

Headteacher Laura O'Leary said: "We are delighted to be recognised

for the work we have been doing to support our pupils.

"We are committed to ensuring pupils receive an excellent education and part of that is making certain that students are supported with knowledge of how they can look after their mental health."

All hands pull prayer garden together

The school community around St Gabriel's Catholic Primary School in Leigh have come together to create an outdoor prayer garden.

The garden, which is reachable by an arch just outside the school, was built thanks to the work of volunteers and parents who donated items, as well as local company Cheshire Gates, which donated both equipment and time to help build the garden.

Sarah Kidman, RE and music lead at the school, said that the school's actions had been inspired by the teaching of Pope Francis on caring for 'our common home' in encyclicals like *Laudato Si* and *Laudate Deum*.

"To enhance our children's spiritual school life and follow in the Pope's message, we asked our school community for any donations to create the outdoor space," she said.

"We were inundated with support and items from the local

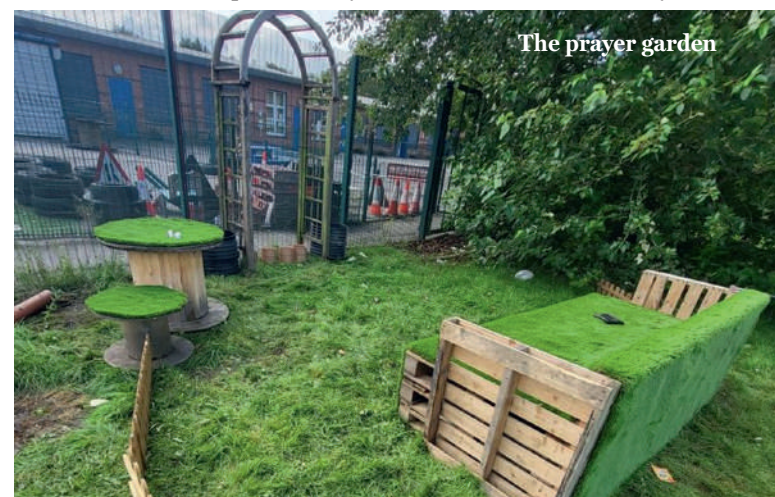
community: pallets, wheels, pots, plants, artificial grass, and even an arbour.

"I then put out a request for any community help to build the garden, since I have no skill with a drill!"

"Again, parents and volunteers came to our aid and spent a sunny

day turning the donations into an amazing space. Local company Cheshire Gates donated their time and equipment to build it.

"We had a vision to create a small oasis of calm for our children, and we have been blown away by the commitment and support we have had from our community."



The prayer garden

Alex sees off competition to land St George's role

St George's Cathedral, Southwark, has appointed Alexander Wilson as cathedral organist, succeeding Dr Frederick Stocken. He will take up the role in January 2024.

Alex joins from St Cyprian's Church in Marylebone and has held previous positions at St Mary's Bourne Street and Worcester College Oxford. He is the school organist at St Paul's School and Organ Teacher at King's College School Wimbledon, and maintains a busy freelance career as a recitalist, accompanist, and jazz saxophonist.

Diocesan director of music, Jonathan Schranz, said: "After a rigorous audition process, I'm delighted that Alex has agreed to join the music department at St George's. Alex is an accomplished organist who is passionate about education, and I have no doubt that he will be a great asset to the cathedral and wider diocese."

Cathedral Dean, Canon Michael Branch, said: "We were thrilled with the interest in this important role which is central to the major liturgies of the cathedral and

archdiocese. We are excited to welcome Alex into the community at St George's, where he will build on the work of his predecessor Dr Frederick Stocken."

Alex said he was "delighted to be starting as the organist at St George's. It will be a privilege to contribute to the worship in the Cathedral."

"I'm also very much looking forward to working with Jonathan, the music team, clergy and staff, and to meeting the wider community."



Trudy's hard work recognised with award of Diocesan Medal

Trudy Kilcullen, the former Chair of the Southwark Spirituality Commission, has been honoured with the award of a Diocesan Medal for her service to the Church.

The medal is awarded by Archbishop Wilson for exceptional service – most often, but not always, to those who have contributed to and enhanced the life of the archdiocese in a voluntary capacity. She received the medal at a service in her parish of Holy Apostles, Swanley.

Trudy said: "I am delighted to have been recognised for my service to the archdiocese, but in reality, I am accepting the medal on behalf of every single member of the commission – all who give freely of their time in order that people have opportunities to deepen their personal relationship with God".

Trudy has been involved with the Southwark Spirituality Commission for 10 years, and cites the importance of Pope Francis' teaching that "Holiness is a journey". During her tenure, particularly in the last five years,

she has often been inspired by the words of St Clare of Assisi, in the context of encouraging a deeper relationship with God: "*We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become.*"

This statement, she said, has provided inspiration to develop a number of projects promoting spirituality in the Archdiocese of Southwark, including the development of "Ways into Prayer" – a printed and online resource to enable parishes to help people develop their prayer life; and delivering daily online reflections for Advent and Lent via a daily email.

Trudy has also delivered online retreats for Lent to enable people to deepen their prayer life: in 2023, the Lent and Easter retreat 'Renewed in Hope' attracted 1,724 participants.

Trudy has also helped develop the the Southwark Spirituality website, which has remained a focus for spirituality in the archdiocese and as a signpost to resources and activities. The Commission also

responded positively to requests for statutory publication reports.

• The Southwark Spirituality Commission is currently engaged in finding a new Chairperson, but Trudy is enthusiastic about continuing her involvement, albeit in a different capacity.



Trudy with members of the Spirituality Commission

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Canon Michael Hore and Fr Tom Grufferty recently visited the Venerable English College as part of a group of priests from England and Wales celebrating significant jubilees. Both are celebrating their 50th anniversaries of Ordination to the Sacred Priesthood. Here they are pictured with (left to right) Ryan Hawkes, Ryan Browne and Jack Ryan - Portsmouth seminarians at the Venerable English College. *Ad multos annos!*

Artist's stunning painting of Divine Mercy delights parish

St Mark's Catholic Church in Ipswich began its Advent celebrations with a new Divine Mercy painting, commissioned by Fr Luke Goymour, and crafted by his brother, artist Ben Goymour.

The five-foot oil painting replaces a small, faded image of the Divine Mercy, and as Fr Luke says, the new painting "enhances the church building."

He added: "Over the years, I have grown in my appreciation of the Divine Mercy devotion and find the celebration of the feast day of Divine Mercy pastorally very powerful. I spoke to various members of the parish and there was a lot of excitement at the possibility of getting a large image of the Divine Mercy painted."

"When I suggested that my brother might be able to help us out, a couple from the parish, who were familiar with his work, came forward and said that they would like to pay for the painting."

Fr Luke then contacted his brother who came and measured up the space and set about creating the image. Ben Goymour is an accomplished artist, who specialises in seascapes but has proven extremely versatile in painting landscapes, cityscapes, animals, and celebrities. Up until now, however, he had never tackled a religious subject, and never attempted to paint Christ. For him, this would be a new challenge.

Ben said: "I spent a long time working out how to technically paint the subject as it was very different to anything I had painted before. The real technical issues were painting the very thin lines tapering to nothing on the rays coming from Jesus' heart. I had to



build a straight-line painting device and, with the help of my wife, pivot it around so the angles looked right."

Ben enjoyed painting Jesus, but felt the pressure of the task. "I had to get it right. It is such a famous image, and is so important to many people. People pray with this image; it's going in a church, and it's got to look a certain way."

Ben said painting Jesus was an immersive activity. "I spent a lot of time just studying and looking at the image. You have to learn your subject. I probably looked at a thousand different images of Jesus. I had two months preparing for this, even before the brushes came out," he said.

The process of painting Jesus

was a different experience from anything else he had done. "I painted him in stages," he said. "I had to be in the right frame of mind to work on him and couldn't work on anything else while I was painting him. I immersed myself in what I was doing. I couldn't, for example, paint Jesus, and then have a break and paint a seascape. I had to be completely focused on painting him."

When asked what he enjoyed most about the painting, Ben explained: "I absolutely loved doing it. Jesus seemed to materialise on the board, and it was really rewarding."

Ben and his wife, Kerry, came to Mass on Sunday, 3rd December

and presented the image to the parish. After a simple prayer of welcome and thanksgiving, the painting was blessed and installed on the right of the sanctuary. Ben and Kerry stayed after Mass to give people the chance to meet the artist.

The painting was welcomed by the parish, with one parishioner saying it is "Absolutely stunning", while said: "It seems like Jesus is looking into my soul."

Reproductions of Ben's work has been made into prayer cards and distributed to parishioners at Mass and are available from St Mark's. **• For more information on Ben's work, and to read his story, please visit his website: bengoymour.com.**

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GARDENING

Over the last several years, the popularity of live or living Christmas trees has been on the rise. But despite claims to the contrary when they are bought, many don't survive the holiday season. Knowing how to choose, plant, and care for a live Christmas tree will make for a happier Christmas, and a valuable addition to your landscape.

When purchasing your live tree consider the mature height and width of the tree and know where you will plant it in your landscape.

The most common tree species used for living Christmas trees include spruce, pines and firs, although many garden centres market any cone-shaped tree as an option for Christmas. Although these may not be considered "traditional" choices, they may be the best option for your garden. Before you bring the tree home, make sure you're buying healthy stock. Many trees sold for Christmas, could be leftovers from earlier seasons, or could be in poor shape.

Check the tree for good colour and needle retention, soft flexible branching, and a root system, if you can see it, that isn't "bound" by its container. The root area should be moist, and not overly dry from lack of water. Also, look you tree over for any signs of disease or pest damage.

Once your tree makes it home, it needs to stay outside, in a protected area, until a few days before Christmas.

Water the tree immediately and make sure the soil is kept moist, but not wet. It also needs to be sheltered from high winds and full sun. The objective for this time is to acclimate your tree to warmer temperatures over a period of three to four days. Moving the tree onto a covered porch or garage during the interim is a good transitional place.

Many people choose to spray their live tree with an anti-desiccant or anti-wilt product. These products will help retain valuable moisture in the tree, and reduce needle loss, once the tree is moved indoors. If you choose this option, do so before the tree is moved inside, and while it is acclimating to the warmer temperatures. These products are sold under several names, including Wilt Pruf and Cloud Cover.

Avoid the temptation to bring your tree indoors too early. In fact, the less time indoors



Take care and a living Christmas tree can stay healthy for years

the better. One or two days before Christmas is best but no more than a week! Your home is an inhospitable environment for a living tree. Climate controlled homes are warm and dry. Don't place your tree near heat vents, radiators, stoves or anywhere else where heat can dry out your tree, and stimulate new growth.

Be sure to keep an eye on the soil and keep it moist. If the root ball is wrapped in burlap, place it in a large tub, and add mulch up to the top of the burlap to help retain moisture.

After Christmas, move your tree back outdoors as soon as possible. However, don't

immediately plant it. The tree will need to readjust to the outdoors in a protected area for several days. Again, avoid direct sun, high winds, and warm areas when storing your tree. Be sure to maintain soil moisture. In a week or 10 days, move your tree into the planting hole in your landscape.

A good idea is to have already prepared the planting site. This is especially important in areas of the country where the ground may already be frozen. Plant this tree as you would any other, following sound planting practices. The hole should be at least twice as wide as the root ball,

but no deeper. Planting your tree slightly higher than the surrounding soil will help with drainage. It is not advisable to amend your planting hole with organic matter. Rather, backfill with the original soil.

Finally, be sure to water and mulch your tree to retain moisture. Continue to monitor soil moisture. Winter conditions can be very dry, and your plants and trees need water now as well, especially newly planted ones. The proper care and planning, before and after the holidays, will help ensure your tree survives for years to come.



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HEALTH

Christmas tree syndrome: why festive evergreens can make your nose run

Philippe B. Wilson & Samuel J. White

Decorating the Christmas tree is a beloved tradition for many of us during the festive season.

While some people prefer using and reusing an artificial tree as an environmentally friendly way to enjoy the holiday spirit, others hunt instead for the perfect real tree to adorn with ornaments and cluster presents around.

But some people who decide to get a real tree may find that after it has been decorated they begin to experience cold-like symptoms. While many may simply chalk these symptoms up to having caught a cold – or even Covid-19 – the culprit may actually be a little-known condition called Christmas tree syndrome.

Christmas tree syndrome encompasses a spectrum of health issues triggered by exposure to the allergens residing on live Christmas trees. For those who are sensitive to allergens, prolonged exposure to live Christmas trees can lead to respiratory and skin health issues.

The main symptoms of Christmas tree syndrome include a stuffy or runny nose, sneezing, irritated eyes, coughing, wheezing and itchy throat. Asthma symptoms may also worsen. Skin-related symptoms may include redness, swelling, and itching.

This phenomenon happens thanks to the ecology of live trees, which carry microscopic entities – including pollen and fungi. Pollen, a notorious outdoor allergen, may hitch a ride into our homes, while fungi find a cosy haven in cold, damp Christmas tree farms and garden centres.

Live Christmas trees can also carry mould. Notably, a single Christmas tree can host more than 50 species of mould, creating a habitat for these tiny yet potentially troublesome organisms. Many of the mould varieties found on trees are those most likely to trigger allergies, including *Aspergillus*, *Penicillium*, and *Cladosporium*.

Researchers have also closely measured mould counts in rooms containing live Christmas trees. During the first three days the tree is indoors, mould spore counts measure about 800 spores per cubic meter of air. On the fourth day, however, spore counts begin rising – eventually reaching 5,000 spores per cubic metre within two weeks.

Mould grows best in warm, wet and humid conditions. So when the tree is brought indoors, the warmer climate significantly increases mould production.

Pine pollen is not a major issue for allergy-sufferers when it comes to Christmas trees. But Christmas trees can come into contact with other known allergens while they're growing, which can then be carried into the house. For example, grass pollen can stick to the sap in a Christmas tree during the spring. Then, when the tree is harvested and brought indoors, the sap dries out, and the trapped pollen particles are released into the air.

Managing symptoms

Certain people are at higher risk of experiencing Christmas tree syndrome. People with asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary syndrome (COPD) may be more sensitive to allergens – and these allergens may also exacerbate symptoms such as coughing and



wheezing.

People who suffer from allergies are also at greater risk – with research showing 7 per cent of allergy-sufferers experienced a spike in symptoms when they had a Christmas tree in their home. People with skin issues (such as contact dermatitis and itching) may also find that their symptoms worsen around fresh Christmas trees.

Timely recognition of symptoms is crucial to mitigate the impact of Christmas tree syndrome.

Help for sufferers

So if you do suffer from allergies, here's what you can do:

Select your tree carefully: Opt for varieties with lower allergenic potential. Fir trees, such as Douglas and Fraser, are known for producing fewer allergens compared to spruce or pine.

Inspect your tree: Conduct a meticulous inspection for signs of fungi before bringing the tree indoors. Focus on areas where moisture

“This phenomenon happens thanks to the ecology of live trees, which carry microscopic entities – including pollen and fungi... check your tree for signs of the fungus *Aspergillus*...”

may accumulate, as damp conditions foster mould growth.

The most common mould found on Christmas trees is *Aspergillus*, which will look black on the surface and usually white-ish or yellow underneath.

Proper maintenance: Regularly water live trees to prevent dehydration, as this can lead to mould growth. A well-hydrated tree is also less likely to harbour fungus.

And since warm, moist environments increase mould growth, try to keep your house ventilated

while it's up. You might even consider using a dehumidifier to decrease moisture levels in your home.

Minimise direct contact: Try to avoid too much direct contact when decorating the tree. Wearing gloves might be one way of reducing the risk of skin-related reactions.

Go artificial: Consider artificial trees as a practical alternative. These eliminate the risk of allergens and can be reused – reducing their environmental impact.

Christmas tree syndrome can be a nuisance. But by considering the science and taking precautions, you can ensure an enjoyable and allergen-free festive season.

Philippe B. Wilson is Professor of One Health, Nottingham Trent University

Samuel J. White is a Senior Lecturer in Genetic Immunology, Nottingham Trent University

FOOD

Cinnamon makes for a classic Christmas dish

Get ready for Christmas morning and surprise everyone with this showstopping dish – a cinnamon French toast bake with bacon-pecan streusel. It's a bit of a mouthful...

Once thought to be more valuable than gold, cinnamon is mentioned in the Bible as one of the finest of spices. Sourced from the bark of a specific evergreen tree, it has been used for thousands of years as a fragrance and seasoning.

Sweet, woody, warm notes complement sugar perfectly, so cinnamon is found in sweet recipes more than savoury ones. During autumn and winter, the cinnamon jar is sure to get a good shaking for all sorts of baked goods—cookies, pastries, breads and other treats.

Cinnamon is a feature of this showstopping breakfast casserole. For Christmas Day serving, prepare most of it the night before and bake in early morning. If the family has yet to rise, the smell of french toast, cinnamon and smoky bacon will surely get them up and moving.

Start by cooking the bacon ahead. Thick-sliced bacon works best in this dish. Cook it until just crisp and let it drain on paper towels. Once it's cool, chop into rough pieces, throw it into a covered dish or plastic bag and keep in the fridge until ready to bake the casserole.

An egg and butter bread like challah or brioche adds richness to the dish, but you can also use

French bread. Be sure to use whole milk and heavy cream. If you substitute low-fat dairy, you may end up with a watery interior instead of a rich custard-like filling.

CINNAMON FRENCH TOAST BAKE WITH BACON-PECAN STREUSEL

Time: 40 minutes prep, 1 hour baking

Servings: 12

For the custard bread

1 tablespoon softened butter for greasing
Large loaf of brioche, challah or French bread, roughly cut into 1 1/2-inch cubes
8 large eggs
2 cups whole milk
1 cup heavy cream
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon vanilla
1/2 teaspoon salt

For the streusel

1/2 cup all-purpose flour
1/2 cup light brown sugar
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 stick (1/2 cup) cold butter, cut into cubes
5 thick bacon slices, cooked to crisp and roughly chopped
1 cup pecan pieces



Method

If you plan to assemble the casserole the night before, prepare the bacon and the streusel topping and refrigerate both in separate containers. If you make the casserole the same day as baking, allot an hour of time for bread to soak up the egg mixture.

Liberal grease a large, deep casserole or 9-by-13 baking pan, then add the bread cubes.

Whisk or blend the eggs with milk, cream, sugar, cinnamon, vanilla and salt. Pour mixture over the bread cubes and gently press down until bread is submerged. Cover the casserole with plastic wrap and allow to rest for 1 hour in the refrigerator. Alternatively, leave in the

refrigerator overnight.

Prepare the streusel topping by mixing the flour with sugar, cinnamon and salt. Using a pastry cutter, cut in the butter until pea-size crumbs form. Stir in pecan pieces.

Remove the casserole from the fridge. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Uncover the casserole and sprinkle chopped bacon over the bread. Then cover the entire casserole with streusel mix. Bake 45-55 minutes. The casserole should be puffy and nicely browned on top. Remove from the oven and let rest for 10 minutes.

Serve with fresh-brewed coffee and hot chocolate, sugar and maple syrup for the table.

FILMS

A shift in tone makes for tough but welcome faith movie

Andy Drozdziak

There is something refreshing and novel about a film released at Christmas which tackles the tough questions.

One such film is *The Shift*. Based on the book of Job, *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.

McDonough's devil-like performance is masterful, both chilling and charming, while Polaha plays the everyman role admirably, showing grit and determination as his world collapses around him.

The film deals with the difficult question of loss—how to deal with it, how to move on and God's role in suffering. Kevin Garner is initially charmed by McDonough's The Benefactor, but soon grows suspicious of his menacing attitude and overbearing control.

Different worlds and dimensions are visited through the film, and you need to concentrate to keep up, which reminds the viewer of time-travel programmes and films such as *Back To The Future* and *Quantum Leap*. Yet the tone is much darker than a feel good film, and Kevin

Garner is faced with a hopeless reality, without God, without love and no joy, from which people can only escape through visiting a cinema and reliving the past on screen.

However, there are some people who have not abandoned happier ways, such as a happy Christian couple who invite Kevin to teach the scriptures to their children, and they support Kevin as he strives to rejoin his beloved Molly.

The film deals with themes of identity and faith. The Benefactor repeatedly tries to convince Kevin that God 'does not care' and that He is absent, but Kevin insists that he is better than 'the worse thing he has ever done' and refuses to abandon his faith in God. Kristoffer Polaha's Kevin is a potent symbol of faith and hope.

The film is produced by Angel Studios, the makers of hit TV series *The Chosen*. They are determined to shine a light in the darkness and bring hope—especially at Christmas, as producer Ken Carpenter told the *Universe*. "The story says, in essence, that when all is lost, there is hope after loss," Ken said.

"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 in cinemas from 15th December



FILMS

Beyoncé opens up – but keeps the family secrets

Kurt Jensen

Beyoncé Knowles-Carter has a lot she wants to say about her life and art. Interestingly, much of what she wishes to share is not about her music or her recent worldwide concert tour. Rather, it concerns her moral views.

That's the underlying message of the documentary *Renaissance: A Film by Beyoncé* (AMC). Given that, in keeping with the movie's subtitle, the singer and tunesmith both wrote and directed, viewers may brace themselves, going in, for a big-screen ego trip. Fortunately, Beyoncé is far too savvy an entertainer and businesswoman to fall prey to such a temptation.

Instead, she matter-of-factly observes that since she's 42 and the mother of three children and has been touring since she was a teenager, she has some knowledge she's able to impart. Despite the movie's two-hour, 48-minute running time, however, that includes little information about the wellspring of her artistry.

Nor does Beyoncé – 'Queen Bey' to her fans – discuss the origins of all the lavishly choreographed numbers she leads, or the dazzling costumes they showcase. As her tour unfolds from Stockholm in May to Kansas City in October, the glitz and razzmatazz become numbing in the best possible way.

The star explains that her performances are both an escape and a release for her audiences. She wants those who attend the events – up to 71,000 at a time – to feel they're in a safe space as they sing along.

To that end, the terms diversity and inclusion are not, to her, political buzzwords. Rather, they represent the way she proudly, and without fuss, conducts her business. Her backup dancers, particularly, are all shapes, sizes and ethnicities – just like those who come to see them.



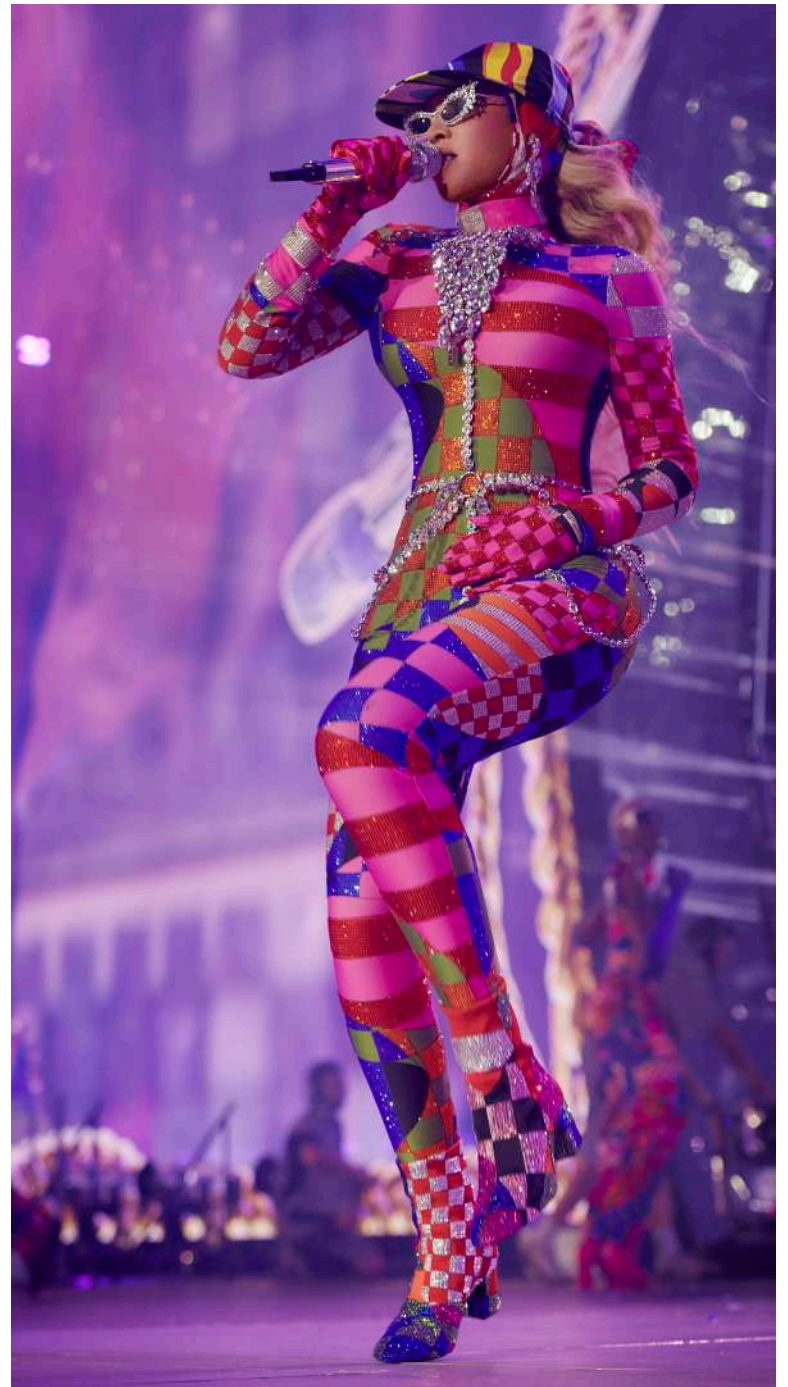
Both photos: Beyoncé singing in the Renaissance World Tour at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London in June

"Diversity and inclusion are not, to her, political buzzwords. Rather, they represent the way she proudly, and without fuss, conducts her business. Her backup dancers, particularly, are all shapes, sizes and ethnicities – just like those who come to see them..."

Backstage group prayers are shown, and at another point, Beyoncé takes a side trip to visit relatives in Houston. Devotion to faith and family do not, however, prevent her from drawing on the drag queen sub-culture known as ballroom.

To undiscerning contemporary sensibilities, of course, this is just another instance of putting out the welcome mat. But the parents of youthful fans will want to be aware of this background in assessing how mature adolescents might be influenced by the picture.

Beyoncé may be a powerful celebrity, but she doesn't win every battle. Thus, most of what had to have been a heated discussion is not shown after daughter Blue Ivy, 11, announces she wants to be part of the show. Mum explains why she had to say no – but not why the child eventually appears on stage with age-appropriate costumes and choreography assigned to her.



Giamatti stars in touching drama that really delivers

Partly a conversion story, partly a study in the triumph of friendship over isolation, the moving comedy-tinged drama *The Holdovers* (Focus) is an intimate, beautifully crafted film.

Yet, while this masterful picture's appeal might potentially extend to teenagers, a barrage of off-colour language precludes recommendation for them.

Director Alexander Payne's emotionally pitch-perfect production is set at Barton Academy, a fictional boarding school in New England, during the Christmas holidays of 1970-71. The plot focuses on three people stranded on campus over the holidays after the vast majority of teachers and pupils alike depart to celebrate with loved ones.

As punishment for failing a student with powerful connections, mean-spirited and universally disliked ancient history teacher Paul Hunham (Paul Giamatti) has been given the task of supervising the handful of children who will not be going home. A change of circumstances, however, soon reduces the number of his charges to one.

Paul's sole remaining protege is Angus Tully (Dominic Sessa). Intellectually promising but



troubled and mildly rebellious, Angus, at the outset, has as low an opinion of Paul as everyone else. He's also grappling with his unsettled family situation in the wake of his mother Judy's (Gillian Vigman) remarriage.

Rounding out the marooned trio is Barton's head cook, Mary (Da'Vine Joy Randolph). Deeply bereaved by the recent death of her son Curtis, a casualty of the war in Vietnam, Mary has chosen to spend Christmas alone rather than face interacting with relatives and friends.

As they get to know each other better, Angus gradually realises that there's more to Paul's personality than the bitterness and petty cruelty he generally projects. Egged on by sensible, well-grounded Mary, meanwhile, Paul softens, relaxes and becomes attuned to insecure Angus' vulnerability.

Paul's acrid initial outlook on life includes aggressively stated atheism. But, far from vindicating this lack of belief, the narrative instead implicitly endorses the critical skepticism with which it's met by the obviously religious Mary, who serves as the tale's moral compass throughout.

Warm in tone and rich in insight, screenwriter David Hemingson's script delves into the personal complexities lying below the surface of the story as he charts the formation of an unlikely but firm bond among the principals. Striking performances, especially from Giamatti, further enhance *The Holdovers*, helping to make it a touching and memorable experience for viewers.

Dominic Sessa's casting was a slow process, and one which director Alexander Payne's was determined to get right. Payne auditioned

around 800 people before finding Sessa which, he believes, was a 'minor miracle.'

"We didn't find this character," Payne told *Indiewire.com*. "Finally, we got around to something we were going to do anyway, even out of politeness.

"I always try to cast in the locations where we're shooting. And so we called up the drama departments of the schools and talked to the drama teachers: 'Oh, yes, we have some students who would be happy to audition for your movie!' And there he was (Sessa). [He needed to be] believable, interesting, able, and ultimately, possess a face of someone whom you would like to see cured, helped, if not saved, by the story that this movie is telling. Finding him, and at the last minute – because if you didn't nail that part, then the movie is going to suck or you can't make the movie – was a minor miracle."

This is a moving and memorable film. It's a shame that some of its content – glimpses of pornography, drug use, more than a dozen swear words, a few milder oaths, frequent rough and crude talk and an obscene gesture – take it out of reach of teens.

The Sycamore Gap, and four other significant historical tree destructions

HISTORY

Helen Parish

The felling of a single sycamore prompted an outpouring of grief a few weeks ago, when the tree known as the ‘Sycamore Gap’ came down.

It had been an iconic landmark and its location, Hadrian’s Wall in Northumberland, is a protected Unesco world heritage site.

The Sycamore Gap was an inspiration to photographers and artists and a focal point for common rites of passage – proposals, family reunions, remembering the dead. Planted in the late 19th century, the roots of the Sycamore Gap tree reached deep into individual and collective memory. The legends associated with such trees connect us with the past and remind us that we live in their shadow.

The emotional response to the loss of the Sycamore Gap is part of a long history of emblematic trees, their destruction and renewal. Here are four other examples of emotional tree fellings from history.

1. The Holy Thorn of Glastonbury

According to legend, St. Joseph of Arimathea brought Christianity to England in the first century AD. After reaching Glastonbury in Somerset, he climbed Wearyall Hill, rested and thrust his staff into the ground.

By morning, a miraculous thorn had apparently taken root. This ‘holy thorn’ bloomed not once, but twice a year. The apparent miracle led Glastonbury to be described as “the holiest erth of Englande”.

Being rooted in the “holiest erth” was no guarantee that the holy thorn would be immune from attack, however. In 1647, the thorn was cut down by a Civil War soldier who deemed it a monument to Catholicism and superstition.

In 1951, a new thorn was planted in its place, but in December 2010 this too was reduced to a stump. In language that echoed the legend of St. Joseph of Arimathea, the perpetrators were described by the director of Glastonbury Abbey, as “mindless vandals who have hacked down this tree” and “struck at the heart of Christianity”.

On 1st April 2012, a sapling grafted from a descendant of the pre-1951 thorn was consecrated and planted, but two weeks later it too was damaged beyond recovery.

In May 2019 the landowner removed what remained of the thorn. But despite its chequered



history, traditions associated with the holy thorn endure. After the damage caused to the Holy Thorn in 1647, cuttings were taken from which a tree now growing in Glastonbury Abbey is believed to descend.

A branch of this thorn in bud has been sent to the British monarch every Christmas since.

2. One Tree Hill

A similarly chequered history belongs to the 125-year-old Monterey Pine which sat on top One Tree Hill or Maungakiekie in Auckland, New Zealand.

Like the Sycamore Gap tree, the pine was an iconic landmark,

dominating the skyline. But it was also a focus of controversy as a culturally and spiritually significant place for the Māori and Pākehā people.

The pine had been planted on the peak to replace a native tōtara tree, chopped down by a European settler.

Twice – in 1994 and 1999 – attempts were made to destroy the tree as a protest against perceived injustices perpetrated against Māori people, before it was finally removed on safety grounds in 2000.

In 2016, at a dawn ceremony, nine young tōtara and pōhutukawa trees were planted on the hilltop, grown from parent trees on

the *maunga* (the ancestral mountains of the Māori people), establishing a line of succession and memory.

3. Newton’s apple trees

There is a proliferation of “Newton’s apple” trees supposedly descended from the tree under which physicist Isaac Newton devised his law of universal gravity.

The original tree in his Woolsthorpe estate blew down in a gale, but scions (as at Glastonbury) were taken and grafted to create clones.

As a result, “Newton’s apple trees” are now found across the world, their roots connecting to create a library of human history and discovery.

4. The Shawshank Redemption white oak

In 2016, strong winds uprooted a majestic white oak in Mansfield, Ohio in the US, made famous by the 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption*. Film fans were distraught and souvenir-hunters rushed to the site, removing parts of the fallen tree.

A local craftsman reached an agreement with the landowner to keep the memory of the tree alive by using its wood to make furniture and fashion mementoes into which quotations from the film were carved.

The tree stump itself has vanished beneath the crops that now grow in the field, but its emotional and cultural memory survives – like the Newton Apple Tree – embedded into objects that have been sold around the globe.

Throughout our history, trees have been assigned a religious and magical meaning, a medicinal purpose, a place in film and theatre and a functional value in agriculture and construction. Their branches and roots connect the brief history of humanity and the deeper history of our planet.

No wonder then, that we feel their loss acutely.



The Holy Thorn of Glastonbury

Helen Parish is a Visiting Professor of History, University of Reading / Worcester College Oxford, University of Reading

Grit, fearlessness and courage are the holy trinity of sporting success

SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

Whenever we are faced with danger, our instinctive response is either fight or flight: to dominate and control or to separate and avoid. Both carry their own risks.

Fear is a vital emotion that can help protect you from danger and prepare you to act. Finding ways to control your fear can help you better cope with anxiety, insecurity and a lack of energy.

Regular readers will be familiar with the PIES – the Physical, Intellectual, Emotional and Spiritual dimensions of life. They underpin our responses to most situations.

Franklin D. Roosevelt started his 1933 inauguration speech as President of the USA with these famous words: “The only thing we have to fear is... fear itself.”

Remember that, though fear is uncomfortable – even petrifying – it is rarely lethal.

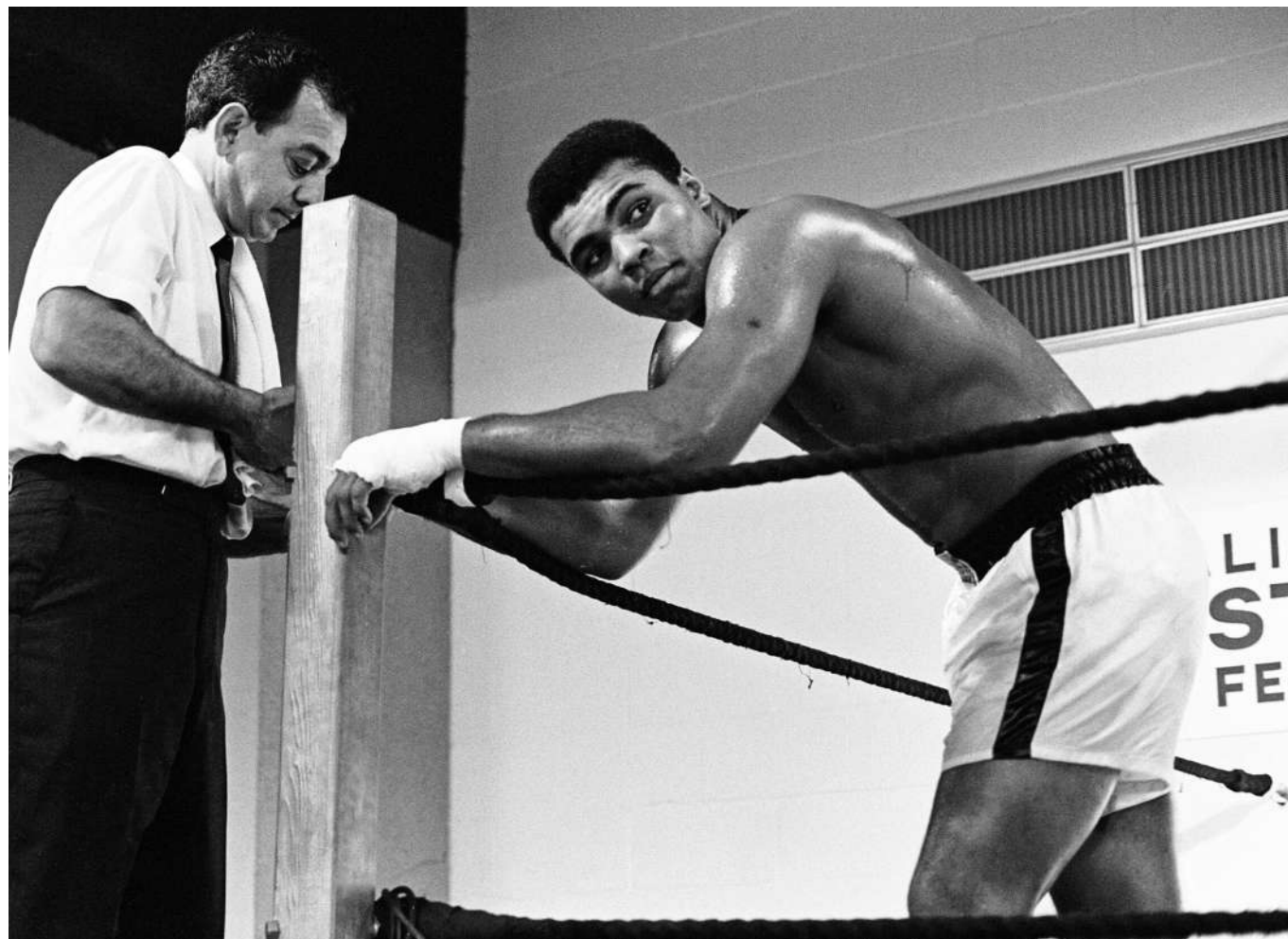
Grit – courage and determination, which has nothing to do with unthinking fearlessness – permits you to face dangers such as the days of Covid, even while feeling fear. Bravery is the ability – some say due to lack of imagination – to confront danger, even pain, without the feeling of fear. Grit, on the other hand, is the ability to take on difficulties and pain, despite the fear.

Grit is not fearless. Having dipped a toe in the water, and felt how cold it is, courage jumps in anyway.

The opposite of fear is joy – or euphoria [Greek for ‘good feeling’]. ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and staff, they comfort me. You have prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.’ [Psalm 23: 4-5] It’s a great feeling when you have overcome your fear – and jumped into that cold water, or stood up for what is right.

“Courage doesn’t mean you don’t get afraid. Courage means you don’t let fear stop you,” stated Bethany Meilani Hamilton, an American professional surfer who survived a 2003 shark attack in which her left arm was bitten off. In 2011, she appeared in the video *I Am Second*, in which she told of her struggle after the shark attack, and how she trusted in God to get her through it.

Ronda Jean Rousey, an American professional wrestler, actress and



Muhammad Ali – aka The Greatest: ‘He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life.’

Photo/Action Images, MSI via Reuters

author, voted the best female athlete of all-time in a 2015 ESPN fan poll, had this interesting take on the issue: “People say to me all the time: ‘You have no fear.’ I tell them: ‘No, that’s not true. I’m scared all the time. You must have fear in order to have courage. I’m a courageous person because I’m a scared person.’”

“If you are afraid of failure, you don’t deserve to be successful!” warned Charles ‘Chuck’ Wade Barkley, who established himself as one of the National Basketball Association’s most dominant power forwards.

“The beautiful thing about fear is – when you run to it, it runs away” teaches Robin Sharma, a Canadian writer, whose sport was the law.

The Courage family has two children: physical courage and moral courage. Physical courage is bravery in the face of physical pain, hardship, even death or threat of death. Moral courage is the ability to follow your conscience in the face of popular opposition, shame, scandal, discouragement, or personal loss. By and large, moral courage is the toughest of the two. [Worth a discussion over a family lunch?]

Physical courage is moving forward in the face of perceived or actual physical danger. Moral courage is more challenging.

Overcoming the fear of emotional pain – perhaps rejection by others

– enables you to stay on the high moral ground and to live with integrity. This is vital in leadership – even of your own family. When you speak your truth to power, focus on what you believe can change. As George Orwell – whose sport was writing – said: “In a time of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.” Long live the revolution!

During World War 2, in Prague, as in any area occupied by the Nazis, the fear of the Gestapo and its torture menu, meant that moral and physical courage – comprehensive grit – had to go hand-in-hand through each day and night.

Talking helps, since thoughts turned into words can change the way you feel. “Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.” (Isaiah 43:1) Because I know God is with me, I can stay calm and care for – as well as seek support from – friends and allies-in-life.

“Success isn’t final, failure isn’t fatal – it’s courage that counts,” declared Alicia Coutts, a swimmer from Australia who won five medals at the 2012 Summer Olympics. In 2012, she won the

“People say to me: ‘You have no fear.’ I tell them: ‘No, that’s not true. I’m scared all the time. You must have fear in order to have courage. I’m courageous because I’m a scared person.’”

Australian Institute of Sport Athlete of the Year Award with sailor Tom Slingsby.

Fear paralyses and inhibits movement. An inspiring team-talk from Pep Guardiola, the Manchester City manager, was caught on camera, with the Catalan urging his players not to feel down as on 4th November 2019 they trailed 1-0 to Southampton at half-time. “Be together this game. Be together until the end,” he said. “Be positive in your minds, be positive. Be together ‘til the end. Be together, be together.” And they were. They had grit. They won.

“Never say never because limits, like fears, are often just an illusion. I know fear is an obstacle for some people, but it is an illusion to me... Failure always made me try harder next time,” declared Michael “MJ” Jeffrey Jordan. The official NBA website states that “by acclamation, Michael Jordan is the greatest basketball player of all time”. He was considered instrumental in popularising the NBA throughout the world during the 1980s and 1990s.

Risks are dangerous. However, the boxer Muhammad ‘The Greatest’ Ali reminded us that “he

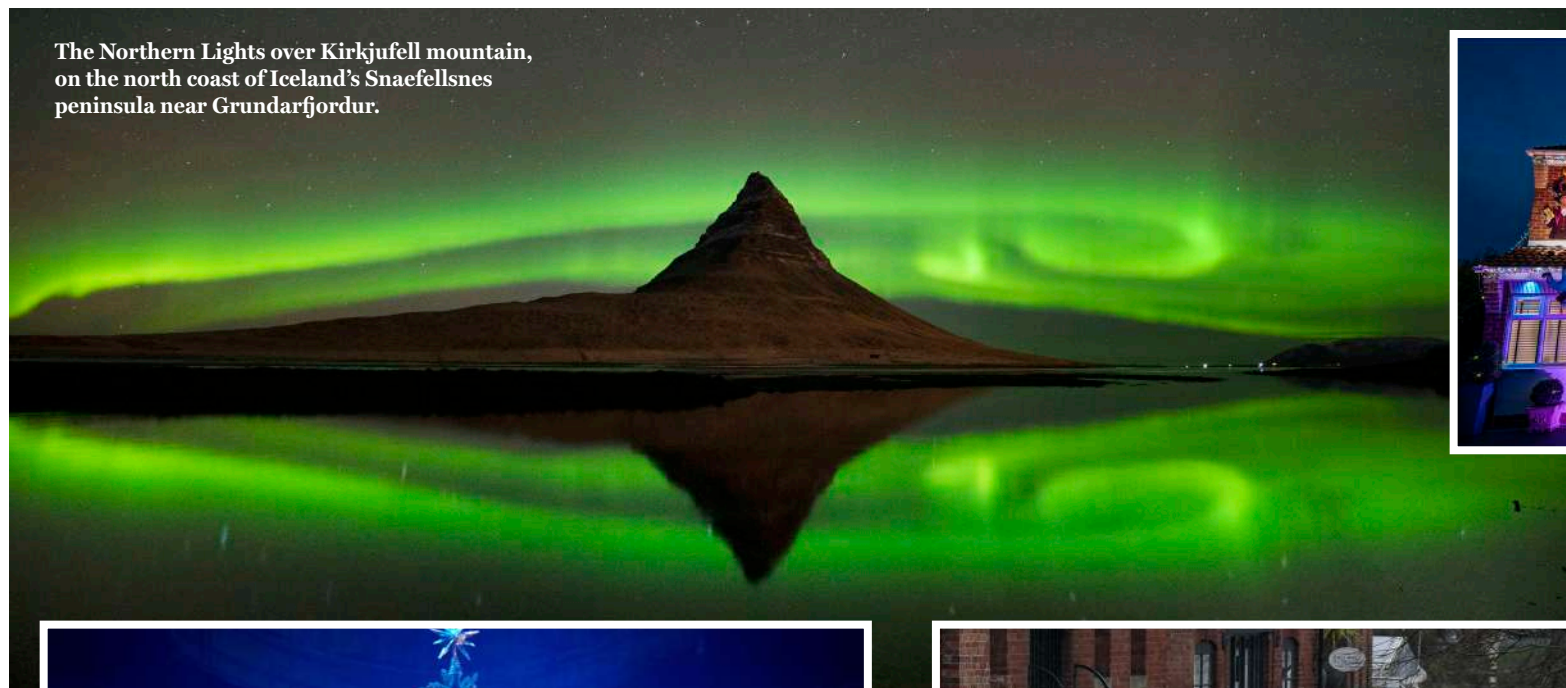
who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life.” Of course, it’s wise to do a risk assessment – and then crack on. Gritfully.

It’s grit that underpins resilience. “You’ve got to have the guts not to be afraid to screw up. The guys who win are the ones who are not afraid to mess up. And that comes right from the heart,” said Frank Urban ‘Fuzzy’ Zoeller Jr, an American professional golfer who won ten PGA Tour events including two major championships. He is one of only three golfers to have won the Masters Tournament in his first appearance in the event. He also won the 1984 U.S. Open, which earned him the 1985 Bob Jones Award.

“You learn you can do your best even when it’s hard, even when you’re tired and maybe hurting a little bit. It feels good to show some courage,” admitted Joseph ‘Joe’ William Namath, nicknamed ‘Broadway Joe’, a quarterback in the American Football League and National Football League during the 1960s and 1970s. In 2019, a survey conducted by the Associated Press of 60 football historians and media voted Namath the league’s greatest character.

In two weeks’ time, approaching Christmas and the new year, with its ‘new resolutions’, I shall suggest a possible – creative – resolution for the new year.

A pictorial round-up of the past seven days



The Northern Lights over Kirkjufell mountain, on the north coast of Iceland's Snæfellsnes peninsula near Grundarfjörður.



Michael Fenning puts the finishing touches to the Wonka-themed decorations on his home in Doncaster, as the latest film version about chocolate supremo Willy Wonka is released in the cinemas

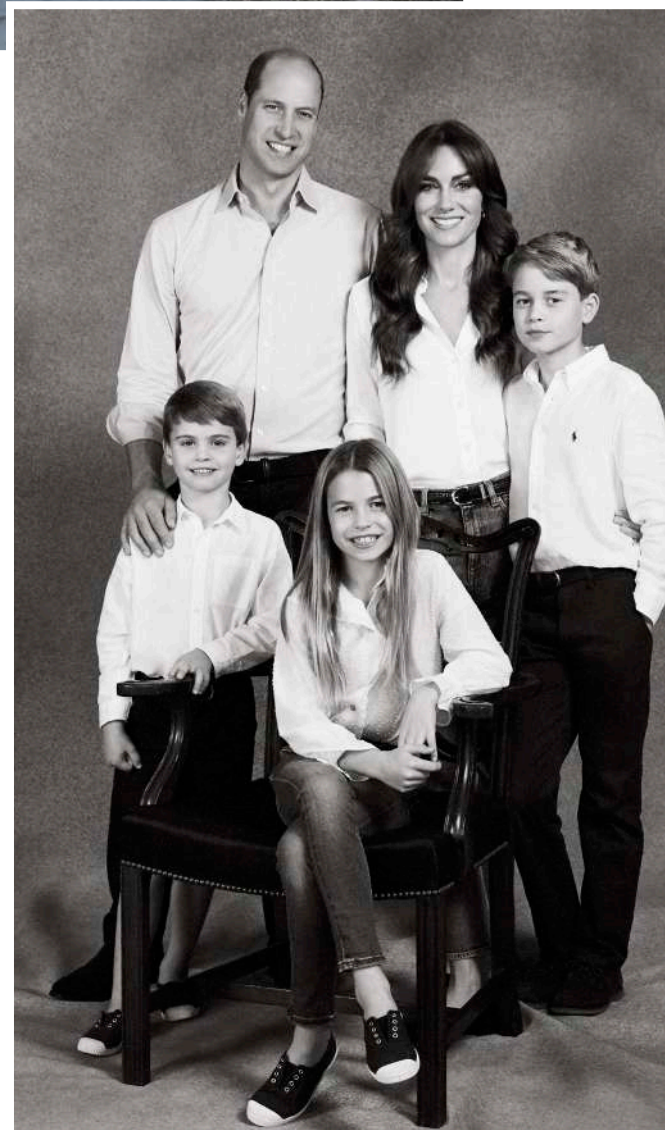


Principal dancers Jessica Fyfe and Bruno Micchiardi on stage for Scottish Ballet's production of Cinders! at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow.



Swans swim down a main road in Worcester after heavy rains forced the River Severn to burst its banks in the city.

The Prince and Princess of Wales, with their children George, Charlotte and Louis, in their official Christmas photo. Courtesy of Josh Shinner.



Sailors line the flight deck of HMS Prince of Wales as it returns to Portsmouth Naval Base following a three-month deployment to the United States, where it has been undergoing trials



Linnea Isén wears a crown of candles symbolising St Lucy as she leads the celebration of Sankta Lucia, based on the bravery and martyrdom of a young Sicilian girl St Lucy who died in the early fourth century, during the Festival of Light at York Minster. Photo: Danny Lawson/PA Wire

LITURGICAL CALENDARS

Ordinary Form

Sunday Year B, Weekday Cycle II
Sunday, December 17: Third Sunday of Advent: Isa. 61:1-2a, 10-11; Lk. 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54; 1 Thess. 5:16-24; Jn. 1:6-8, 19-28

Monday, December 18: Jer. 23:5-8; Ps. 72:1-2, 12-13, 18-19; Mt. 1:18-24

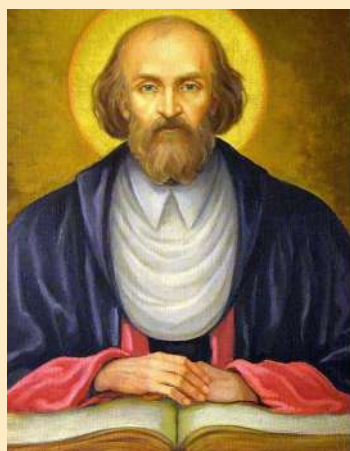
Tuesday, December 19: Judg. 13:2-7, 24-25; Ps. 71:3-6, 16-17; Lk. 1:5-25

Wednesday, December 20: Isa. 7:10-14; Ps. 24:1-6; Lk. 1:26-38

Thursday, December 21: St Peter Canisius, Priest, Doctor of the Church Song of Songs 2:8-14; Ps. 33:2-3, 11-12, 20-21; Lk. 1:39-45

Friday, December 22: 1 Sam. 1:24-28; 1 Sam. 2:1, 4-8; Lk. 1:46-56

Saturday, December 23: St John of Kanty, Priest Mal. 3:1-4, 23-24; Ps. 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14; Lk. 1:57-66



St John of Kanty

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'Grateful thanks to St Jude for favours granted'

MCLBEW



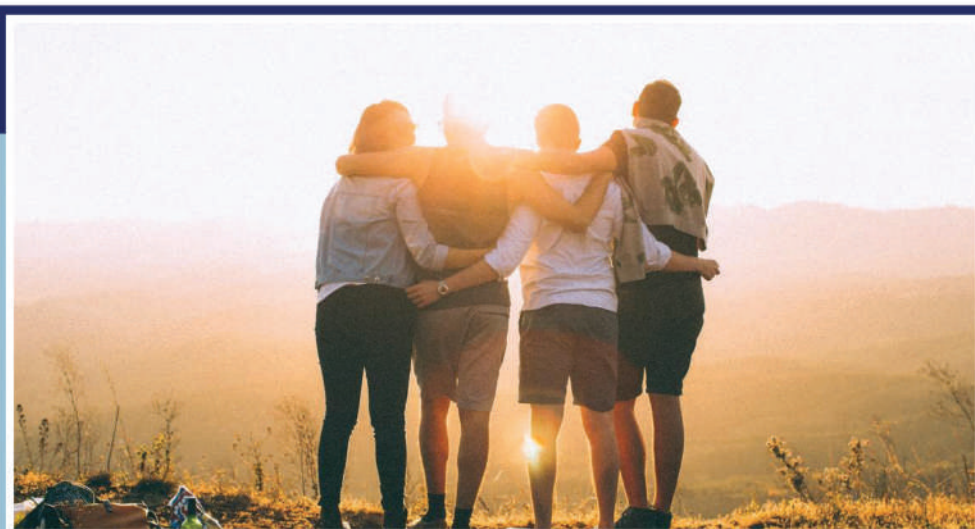
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**Statue of Saint Peter Canisius
holding the crucifix**

On display in the St Peter Cathedral in Augsburg, Germany, a Catholic church founded in the 11th century. Peter Canisius SJ was a Dutch Jesuit priest who became known for his strong support for the Catholic faith during the Protestant Reformation in Germany. He is venerated as a saint and as a Doctor of the Church.