

A blueprint for a
new Church?
– see pg 8

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Nice room this... the older brother of one of 16 infants being baptised by the pope on 7th January – the feast of the Baptism of the Lord – sits contentedly on the floor of the Sistine Chapel, admiring the view... See page 15

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IN COMPANION
Controlling the weeds
as nature intended



Pope adviser questions priests' celibacy rule

Archbishop says we should learn from Eastern Churches and allow men to be married prior to becoming a priest – first leading Vatican official to say celibacy should become 'optional'

The Catholic Church should revise its celibacy requirement for Latin-rite priests, a key adviser to Pope Francis has said.

"If it were up to me, I would revise the requirement that priest(s) have to be celibate," Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta, adjunct secretary of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, told the *Times of Malta* on 7th January. "Experience has shown me this is something we need to seriously think about."

The archbishop said that the phenomenon of Catholic priests engaging in hidden, long-term sentimental relationships – something, he said, which "happens everywhere" – is a "symptom" of priests "having to

cope with" their celibacy requirement.

A man who feels called to the priesthood "may mature, enter in relationships, love a woman, love another person, and they have to make a choice," he said. "Right now, they have to make a choice."

Archbishop Scicluna said the Latin-rite Church "should learn from the Catholic churches of the Oriental rite," which have a tradition of married priests.

In many of the 23 Eastern Catholic churches, men are allowed to get married prior to being ordained but cannot become bishops.

Celibacy, Archbishop Scicluna pointed out, "was optional for the

first millennium of the Church's existence, and it should become optional again."

The First Lateran Council in the 12th century forbade marriage for Latin-rite Catholic priests, deacons and subdeacons. From 1951, Pope Pius XII gave special permission for Lutheran ministers who converted to Catholicism to be ordained priests as married men, beginning a normalisation of former Protestant clergy becoming married Latin-rite Catholic priests. Priests who are members of the Ordinariate are also allowed to be married.

Archbishop Scicluna said that the Church has "lost many great priests – or potential priests – because they

chose marriage."

"Why should we lose a young man who would have made a fine priest just because he wanted to get married?" he asked.

The archbishop acknowledged that "the decision doesn't depend on me."

But he told the interviewer that it was the first time he was discussing his position publicly and he knew his comments would "sound heretical to some people."

While he insisted "there is a place for celibacy in the Church," he said priests should have the option of remaining celibate or getting married just as in Eastern Catholic churches. **Continued on page 2**

Eastern clerics reject allowing same-sex blessings: 'It is a Western thing' – see page 18

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CAFOD tells Sunak to drop expansion plans for oil and gas and stick to COP28's goals

Andy Drozdziak

CAFOD has called on Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to drop a new oil and gas Bill which appears to contradict promises made at COP28.

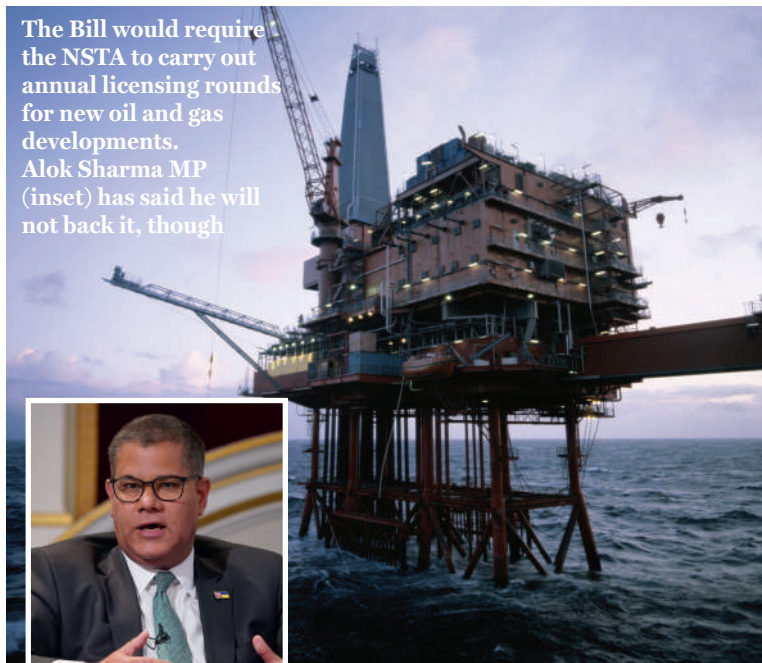
In an historic agreement, Governments, including the UK, agreed to “transition away” from fossil fuels for the first time at the COP28 climate talks in Dubai in December. However, the Government’s proposed Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill would require the North Sea Transition Authority (NSTA) to carry out annual licensing rounds for new oil and gas developments.

Former net zero tsar Chris Skidmore has already submitted his resignation as an MP in protest at the oil and gas drilling plans.

The Bill’s second reading took place on Tuesday, with Neil Thorns, CAFOD’s Director of Advocacy, sharing his concerns. “Forcing MPs on their first day in Parliament in 2024 to vote for more fossil fuel drilling sends a worrying signal about the Government’s climate aspirations,” Mr Thorns said.

“The Government seems to be failing to join the dots between the floods that are wreaking havoc on communities here in the UK, the weather disasters that devastated so many communities overseas in 2023 and its own responsibility to

The Bill would require the NSTA to carry out annual licensing rounds for new oil and gas developments. Alok Sharma MP (inset) has said he will not back it, though



fight the climate crisis.”

Several prominent Conservative MPs have already said they will not support the Bill, including former Cop26 president Sir Alok Sharma. Mr Thorns said this was evidence the Bill needs scrapping. “The Prime Minister needs to drop his oil and gas Bill fast if he’s serious about acting on the pledge he made at

COP28 to transition away from fossil fuels,” he said.

Douglas Ross, who represents the Moray seat at Westminster as well as leading the Tories in Scotland, confirmed that he will back the Bill. Mr Ross said: “(The Bill) is about ensuring that we have a supply of oil and gas as close to home as possible rather than importing that at higher cost to the environment in terms of CO₂ levels and at greater costs.”

Archbishop challenges celibacy rule

Continued from page 1

Archbishop Scicluna has led the Archdiocese of Malta since 2015 and was appointed adjunct secretary of Vatican’s doctrinal office in 2018. He continues to hold both positions and is seen as one of Pope Francis’s most trusted lieutenants

Pope Francis has previously appeared to rule out any change in the celibacy rule for priests. In January 2019 he said: “Personally, I think that celibacy is a gift to the Church. I would say that I do not agree with allowing optional celibacy, no.”

In 2020, Pope Francis forbade the ordination of married men in the Amazon in order to address a shortage of priests.

In December 2023, Pope Francis confirmed that position, though before that he had appeared to contradict himself, telling Argentinian journalist Daniel Hadad in March of the same year that “there is no contradiction for a priest to marry.”

In a message sent on the pope’s



Archbishop Scicluna with Times of Malta journalist Pedro Salinas

behalf to seminarians in France, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, wrote that celibacy is at the very heart of the priestly identity.

“Priests are celibate – and they wish to be – simply because Jesus was celibate. The requirement of celibacy is not primarily theological,

but mystical: may this be understood by he who is able,” he wrote.

“No one has the power to change the nature of the priesthood and no one ever will, even if the ways in which it is exercised must necessarily take account of changes in today’s society and the serious vocational crisis we are experiencing.”

Catholic groups jockey for position as UK enters a General Election year...

Church groups want to see the focus on ending poverty as politicians eye election

Andy Drozdziak

Catholic leaders have joined Christian leaders and major charities in urging politicians to eradicate extreme poverty in the UK as a General Election looms.

Bishop John Arnold, CAFOD Director Christine Allen and Kate Nightingale of the SVP signed a joint statement released last Friday, in which the leaders stated: "This year must mark the beginning of the end for poverty".

The leaders, including the General Secretary of Churches Together in England, the President and Vice-President of the Methodist Conference and senior leaders of development agencies Christian Aid, CAFOD and Tearfund, said: "We believe that poverty is a scandal, the root causes of which have been neglected by our political leaders in the UK Parliament for too long.

"As this new year begins, the cost-



The rise in use of foodbanks is causing concern among signatories of the letter, who included CAFOD Director Christine Allen (inset)

of-living scandal is clearly not over for the poorest people in the UK. Around the world, poverty holds too many individuals and communities back from fulfilling their potential."

In his recent budget, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt made no mention of

any further help from the Government to offset household energy bills. A £94 increase to the average household energy bill came into effect on 1st January after Ofgem increased its price cap in response to rising wholesale prices.

The leaders called on politicians to make tackling poverty a priority, outlining how decisions can help people escape poverty and that it is 'not inevitable.'

"We know that poverty is not inevitable – it's a consequence of political choices and priorities," the leaders said.

"With a General Election on the horizon, we call on our political leaders to make tackling poverty a priority." They added a call for political leaders to set out 'clear plans to eradicate extreme poverty and reduce overall poverty by at least half, in both the UK and globally by 2030.'

The leaders said their Churches were determined to tackle poverty, and urged politicians to follow suit.

"This year, our Churches and Christian charities are committed to putting poverty on the agenda

through practical action, prophetic words and courageous campaigning. Our elected politicians need to take responsibility too. Now is the time for action," they said.

Patrick Watt, CEO of Christian Aid, explained the timing of the letter, and lamented the lack of discussion about poverty from all political parties in the lead up to the General Election.

"The choices we make collectively about how to tackle poverty, both domestically and internationally, matter," he said.

"As we approach a General Election, we're hearing far too little from political parties about their ambition to end poverty, and build the common good.

"We must not let another year slip by while poverty rises. That's why we're coming together at this moment, to call for urgent action to address the causes of poverty, here and around the world."

Funding needed as Pact backs switch to community sentences

Andy Drozdziak

Catholic prison charity Pact is calling for big changes in the Criminal Justice System in 2024 with a general election on the horizon.

With the numbers of people incarcerated across England and Wales is growing, Pact is calling for justice measures to support the increasing number of children and families who will be affected by imprisonment.

Pact CEO Andy Keen-Downs underlined his commitment to "make change happen." "This is a particularly important year for Pact to speak truth to power," Mr Keen-Downs told the *Universe*.

"We, together with our many supporters and friends, intend to make change happen for prisoners' children and families and across the justice system.

"Key government manifesto pledges remain unfulfilled; to hold a Royal Commission on criminal justice and to reform mental health legislation so that prisons are no longer used to hold people experiencing mental health crises."

Pact welcomed recent Government announcements aimed at alleviating serious prison overcrowding, such as early release schemes and a reduction in the use of short prison sentences.

As well as keeping families together, community sentencing are known to be significantly more effective than short prison sentences at reducing the chances of someone returning to crime. However, Andy Keen-Downs warned that the measures will not be effective without sufficient funding.

He said: "The Government is quite rightly moving towards a presumption against short prison sentences. However, without the right funding, that will simply mean more pressure on probation, more unpaid work going uncompleted and more people failing to complete their community orders."

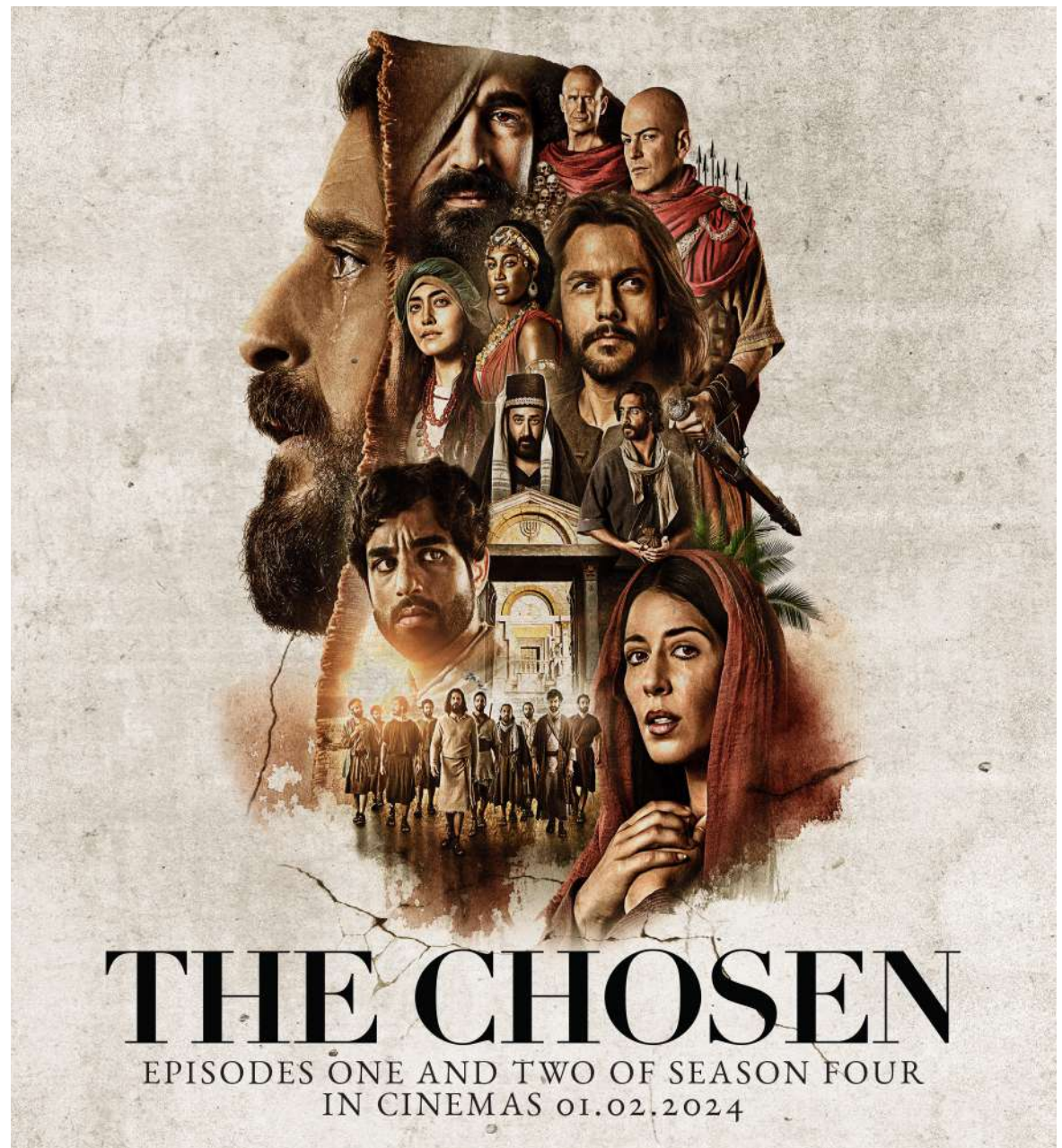
As well as calling for change, Pact is also calling for volunteers to support their work.

"This is a work of the common good and perhaps 2024 is the year in which you will get involved," Pact said.

"Do think about whether you might work or volunteer with Pact, treating people with dignity and respect whatever they may have done and helping to support families affected by imprisonment.

"We'd love to have you and there are lots of different ways you can be part of our work."

To get in touch email: parish.action@prisonadvice.org.uk



In Brief

Postmasters' appeals may be 'fast-tracked'

Ministers hope to "fast-track" the appeals of hundreds of sub-postmasters caught up in the Post Office IT scandal, said the BBC. More than 700 people received criminal convictions after faulty software made it look like money was missing but just 93 convictions have been overturned so far. Senior legal figures said MPs should act quickly to pass legislation quashing the convictions of all victims of the Post Office computer system scandal.

Sunak restores levelling up pledge

Rishi Sunak will revive Boris Johnson's "levelling up" promise to win over voters in the North and the Midlands. The PM will visit a number of towns in the coming months to argue that the Government is investing in them directly after decades of channelling economic development mostly through big cities, he said. On Monday he spoke in Accrington, Lancashire, one of the pivotal 'Red Wall' areas won by the Tories in 2019 after years of Labour control.

'Trendy' CD sales up at Christmas

CD sales rose last year for the first time in 20 years. Sales of the old-fashioned format rose 2 per cent as the value of all formats – including streaming, vinyl, CDs and downloads – rose 9.6 per cent in 2023 to reach £2.2bn, just 0.08 per cent short of the record 22 years earlier. CDs are "battling with vinyl" as the format favoured by trendy students and middle-aged music fans, retail analysts said after exploring current music listening trends.

Knights rally their troops to take pro-life message into community

The Knights of St Columba, in partnership with pro-life group SPUC, have launched a Spiritual Bouquet to pray for life from conception to natural death and make abortion unthinkable.

The year-long prayer initiative, titled 'Let Life Flourish', was launched – appropriately – on the Feast of the Holy Innocents (28th December). A website will be launched later this month to inform participants about prayer activities they can get involved in. Each month will have a special intention.

A Spiritual Bouquet is the gift of prayers and/or devotional acts on behalf of someone else.

At the end of 2024, books listing these spiritual gifts will be presented to the Bishops' Conferences of Scotland, and of England and Wales, as well as to the Papal Nuncio.

Speaking to SPUC's Catherine Mockler, Supreme Knight Harry Welsh said it is "important for us to be able to stand up and say this is an abhorrent situation... the amount of children that we [the UK] have been killing over the years [through



Supreme Knight Harry Welsh speaking to SPUC's Catherine Mockler and CEO John Deighan about the group's involvement in the prayer campaign

abortion]... It's just not acceptable."

Mr Welsh added: "If you're going to stand up against abortion, you've got to put your head above the parapet and you have to let as many people know as possible. We have over 300 councils in the UK who will be taking part in this.

"We're a Catholic organisation, and in the Catholic Church we are told that Jesus (knew) you before you were even in the womb. That is where we are coming from as an or-

ganisation."

There were 123,219 abortions in England and Wales between January and June 2022, up 17 per cent compared with 2021. Scotland saw an even bigger increase, when over 16,584 abortions in the whole year.

A SPUC spokesperson said: "Prayer is a meaningful act of witness and invocation for millions of people around the world. This simple and inclusive act, which can take many different forms, is as vital as

ever as we work towards making abortion unthinkable.

"The Knights encourage all SPUC supporters to pray towards this end. Every loving prayer and charitable act, complementing SPUC's pro-life actions, will strike a blow against abortion."

Founded in 1919 in Glasgow, the Knights of St Columba is a spiritual order of Catholic laymen dedicated to the service of the Church and their fellow brothers and sisters.

Abuse campaigner sees parallels in Post Office scandal

An advocate for Church-related abuse has compared the mission of abuse survivors to the battle faced by Post Office staff.

A campaign for justice, inspired by ITV drama *Mr Bates vs The Post Office*, has resulted in the Government introducing legislation to ensure those convicted as a result of the Horizon scandal are, in the words of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, "swiftly exonerated and compensated". He called the scandal "one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in our nation's history."

However, the journey to justice has been slow, with hundreds of subpostmasters being wrongfully convicted while the Post Office, led by former CEO Paula Vennells, refused to take responsibility.

Martin Sewell, an advocate for survivors and a member of the Church of England's General Synod, told Premier Radio that some abuse survivors have spoken out for years in the same way as the Post Office workers.

He said: "If ever you want to believe in providence, the broadcasting of this story makes our life so much simpler because those of us who have been trying to get justice for the victims of the Church of England can say, look at the Post Office story, and I promise you that for every feature that disturbed you in the Post Office story, I can show you an exact parallel in the Church of England. The leader-

ship of the two bodies are the same"

He continued: "There's nothing that you have seen in the Post Office story that does not have a reflection in the Church of England's treatment of its survivors and the difficulties that we have in getting these stories out there."

Paula Vennells handed back her CBE this week after a petition for her to hand back the honour attracted more than a million signatures.

Paula Vennells (left) was ordained as an Anglican priest in 2006 and served at three churches in Bedfordshire. She reportedly stepped back from ministry in 2021.

Comment: pg 6



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Church worried by lack of clarity in new law

Fear that rights of faith bodies to counsel their flocks will fall foul of conversion therapy ban

Andy Drozdziak

The Catholic Church in Scotland has said that a lack of clarity in Government proposals to ban so-called conversion therapy of gay people could have a “chilling effect” on religious life.

The Scottish Government launched a consultation document on its proposals this week, and while the Church was quick to stress that it supports measures which protect people from physical and verbal abuse, a Church spokesperson said “the state must respect the right of religious bodies to teach their beliefs and to support, through prayer, counsel and other pastoral means, their members who wish to live in accordance with those beliefs.”

The proposals detail ministers’ plans to criminalise the practice, which sees people attempt to change or suppress the gender identity or

sexual orientation of another.

But the proposals “lack of clarity”, the Church said, particularly by what is meant by the term ‘conversion practices’. “It may criminalise advice or opinion given in good faith... it could have a chilling effect.”

“We would urge the Government not to criminalise mainstream, religious, pastoral care; parental guidance; and medical or other professional intervention relating to sexual orientation.”

The Government said those accused would have a defence if their actions could be proven to be “reasonable in the circumstances”.

The law would create new criminal offences of engaging in conversion practice, which can include both providing such a service and engaging in a course of coercive behaviour – as well as taking a person out of Scotland to engage in conversion practices.

Equalities minister Emma Roddick said: “Conversion practices, which aim to change or suppress a person’s sexual orientation or gen-

der identity, are damaging and destructive acts that violate people’s human rights.

“Sadly, these practices still happen today and they have absolutely no place in Scotland.”

The Church spokesperson said there was serious concern about the nature and scope of the legislation and emphasised the importance of religious bodies and organisations having the freedom to teach and counsel their beliefs and tenets.

The Church “will consider the consultation document with a view to submitting a response.”

The Catholic Parliamentary Office said it will publish a guide on how to respond to the consultation, which closes on 2nd April.

Cardinal José Cobo of Madrid pauses on the altar at the St. Mary the Royal of the Almudena Cathedral in Madrid on Jan. 3, 2024, ahead of Epiphany, commemorating the visit of the Three Wise Men in Bethlehem to meet the Newborn Christ. Cardinal Cobo welcomed the kings as children with their parents filled the cathedral. Photo: Ignacio Arregui



Northern Ireland rejects imposed RSE lessons

Andy Drozdziak

Northern Irish pro-life group Precious Life is calling on the UK Government to remove its RSE programme from Northern Ireland schools, after a public consultation on the programme revealed that more than 7 in 10 respondents opposed compulsory abortion lessons in NI schools.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Heaton-Harris, imposed new RSE lessons on Northern Ireland last year as the Stormont Parliament continues to be closed because of Unionist complaints over the Northern Ireland Brexit agreement.

A consultation on the programme received 13,461 responses, with 73.17 per cent of respondents opposing compulsory lessons on abortion in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).

Director of Precious Life Bernadette Smyth said the results show the depth of feeling on the issue. “We demand the Government listens to Northern Ireland and remove this abortion-promoting RSE programme from our schools.”

But despite overwhelming opposition, the new lessons are set to go ahead, with guidance on what must be taught published last week.

The guidance provides template emails for parents of children to opt out of abortion lessons.

Mark Lambefrom the Campaign Against RSE (NI), a collection of parents and teachers from across Northern Ireland who oppose RSE lessons, said it was clear “that parents reject outright the changes to RSE that have been imposed by the Secretary of State,” he said.

“The Department of Education has not developed a curriculum that reflects the intentions of both [the UK Government] and the CEDAW committee.”

Mr Lambe also shared his fears ‘that the Secretary of State will pass further regulations to impose an even more extreme RSE curriculum in the coming months.’

Bernadette Smyth argued that parents should be the ‘first educators of their children, not the Government’ with regard to teaching about abortion and sexuality.



NI Secretary of State Chris Heaton-Harris



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COMMENT

The decision by Paula Vennells to hand back the CBE she was awarded for 'services to the Post Office' was certainly the right thing to do and a necessary acknowledgement of the harm caused to hundreds of staff during her time in charge of the company.

Mrs Vennells, however, has become the very public face of what has been called the most widespread miscarriage of justice in British history but she is by no means the only individual who should be held to account.

There were other senior executives involved in the purchase of the Horizon IT system who failed in their duty to ensure it worked properly. One is Sir Ed Davey, leader of the Liberal Democrats and the minister in charge of the Post Office in the Coalition Government. He was approached five times by Alan Bates, who masterminded the Justice for Postmasters Campaign, but did nothing. He said at the time that a meeting would not "serve any purpose".

How would Sir Ed know that until he talked to Mr Bates?

This affair has naturally reinforced a widespread belief that no one in positions of authority ever listens to their concerns.

Others who need to be held accountable include Fujitsu employees who suspected something was awry with the Horizon system but kept quiet even as clients for their software were dragged through the courts.

Then there are the lawyers who brought the prosecutions on a private basis but failed to disclose relevant evidence. Is there a case for perverting the course of justice here? What happened to the money paid by sub-postmasters to make good shortfalls in their accounts? Did no one ask where it had come from when it appeared on the Post Office books?

Progress to right this huge injustice should not await the outcome of the on going public enquiry. The police should get on and investigate any suspected crimes while the Government should order the payment of proper compensation, and seek recompense from Fujitsu.

It mustn't be allowed to drag on.

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Sunak's hint at October vote sets us up for a year of politics

UK POLITICS

Gemma Loomes



Should we believe Sunak's hint that the election will be in October? What the evidence tells us

So now we know. After weeks of speculation, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has said he is "working on the assumption" that a general election will take place in the second half of this year. That's just a few months before the latest possible date of 28th January 2025.

The choice of an autumn election does make sense for Sunak and the Conservatives. With the polls showing the Labour opposition on a stable and substantial lead, it makes sense for the Conservatives to buy some time. The idea would be to try to make inroads into Labour's lead before setting an election date.

Much rests on the fate of the economy. A year ago, Sunak promised to halve inflation, grow the economy and get debt falling. Independent analysis shows that inflation has halved, but there has been less success on economic growth and falling debt.

Between now and the autumn, Sunak will hope that the economy shows signs of recovery. An autumn election will also give voters time to feel the economic benefits of the tax cuts that are anticipated in the spring, which could potentially provide the Conservatives with a boost in the polls.

Why 'autumn' means 'October'

There are other reasons why an autumn 2024 election makes sense. During the post-war period, October has proven to be a popular month for elections – even though the last time an election was held in October was 1974. Although over recent decades, most general elections have taken place in the spring, between 1950 and 1974, four of the nine elections were held in October, with only one taking place in May.

No post-war general election has been held in August, September or November. If an election is held in the autumn, October would seem the most likely month if history is anything to go by.

There is also the British weather to consider. While there isn't strong evidence to show that voters are less likely to turn out in bad weather, it is very much the



received wisdom in the UK that this is the case, and given the decision comes down to Sunak, he may not think it worth risking winter weather. This would imply October over, say, November or December.

Historically, turnout in October elections has been similar to turnout in spring elections – and turnout is a major factor for the Conservatives. Age is now the most significant predictor of voting behaviour in UK general elections and age is linked to turnout.

The group most likely to vote for the Conservatives are those aged 65 and over – which is also the group most likely to vote at all. A higher overall turnout should therefore be a strategic goal for the Conservatives.

The 18-24 group is most likely to vote Labour but least likely to vote overall so an October vote is again a sound move. With hundreds of thousands of students returning to universities away from home in the autumn, and potentially not yet

registered to vote at their term-time address, there is potential to minimise the younger vote.

A clash with the US election

An October election would mean the UK vote would take place just weeks ahead of the US election on November 5. The prospect of two of the world's leading democracies going to the polls within weeks of each other is an exciting one for election enthusiasts.

On the other hand, there is the prospect of two new administrations coming into power around the same time, needing to find their feet quickly in an unstable geopolitical environment, following two elections that may be heavily influenced by polarisation and misinformation.

With the eyes of the world focused on a potentially divisive US election, Sunak may feel that a low-key campaign plays in to his hands, focusing on re-electing the incumbent to ensure stability.

But don't rule out a spring election yet...

The date for the election is not yet set in stone, however. Following the repeal of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, the choice of election date lies in the hands of the Prime Minister.

The rollercoaster of British politics in recent years has shown us that much can change in six months. It would therefore be unwise to rule out a spring election, even after Sunak's heavy hint.

The Labour opposition has accused Sunak of "squatting" in Downing Street and claims he is running scared, knowing that the polls show him on course for a loss. Sunak may therefore instead opt to call Labour's bluff, signalling an autumn election in public but preparing for a May election in private.

Sunak's words do leave the door open for a spring election, as "working assumptions" can easily be changed.

Those who still think May is a possible election month will point to the announcement of an earlier than expected spring budget date.

Headline-grabbing tax cuts, along with some positive economic forecasts may embolden the prime minister to take a gamble and move sooner rather than later.

Gemma Loomes is a Lecturer in Comparative Politics, Keele University

"The 18-24 group is most likely to vote Labour but least likely to vote overall, so an October vote is again a sound move. With hundreds of thousands of students returning to universities, and potentially not yet registered to vote at their term-time address, there is potential to minimise the younger vote..."

Anti-slavery chief says linking up with Catholic charity will defeat trafficking

Andy Drozdziak

The UK's new Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) is targeting collaboration with Catholic charity the Medaille Trust to tackle modern slavery, amid mounting criticisms that the Government is neglecting the issue.

Eleanor Lyons, who took on the role of IASC in December, visited Medaille staff and residents at its London West safehouse before Christmas, and declared that "Medaille's approach is a good example of how we can effectively tackle the issues of modern slavery and trafficking and best support victims and survivors."

She added that she is looking forward "to working collaboratively with them on these shared goals."

MPs blasted the Government before Christmas for neglecting the fight against human trafficking in favour of curbing irregular migration. The Home Affairs Committee chairwoman, Labour's Dame Diana Johnson, accused the Government of an "unnecessary and unjustified" choice to sacrifice its focus on human trafficking as part of its response to irregular migration.



Eleanor Lyons, the UK's new Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) (second right), with members of the Medaille Trust during her visit

This approach, Dame Diana said, has led to some UK-born victims falling through the gaps, amid a persistent narrative that support systems for victims of human trafficking are centred around migrants.

The Medaille Trust is one of the UK's leading providers of survivor support services for victims of modern slavery. Through a network of safe houses and community-based

projects, the organisation supports over 600 survivors annually.

It was this work that Eleanor Lyons commended: "It was good to visit the team at Medaille, to hear directly from survivors, and to see first-hand their important contribution against modern slavery and human trafficking through the 'Protect, Prevent, Pursue' strategy."

The charity's Victims' Voices initiative aims to train selected case-

workers to undertake interviews with survivors of modern slavery that meet 'achieving best evidence' (ABE) standards. This means the evidence gathered can be used in criminal proceedings on behalf of police and law enforcement. Responding to survivor's struggles to give evidence, the project aims to empower more victims to seek justice through providing opportunities to tell their story in a comforta-

ble environment by using experienced case workers, at their own time and pace.

Eleanor Lyons highlighted Medaille's outreach programmes, particularly Victims' Voices. "Their outreach programmes across the UK provide essential foundational care, safety and support, and the Victims' Voices initiative demonstrates how important it is for individuals with unique lived experience to have agency during their own recovery journey," she said.

"I was also encouraged by Medaille's partnership work within communities to raise awareness of the risks to vulnerable groups and to equip them with important information and knowledge."

Thanking Eleanor Lyons for her visit, Medaille CEO Garry Smith said: "It was great to welcome Eleanor to see our London West service, and we're particularly grateful for the time she took to speak directly to our service users."

"We look forward to seeing how Eleanor's vital work as the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner develops in the coming months, and we will support her all the way."

Failed Eccles Catholic Club looks set for housing switch

A former Catholic club in Eccles could be transformed into an 11-bedroom house of multiple occupation (HMO) under new council plans.

The unoccupied Talbot Catholic Club is situated in a residential area. A HMO has at least three tenants to form more than one household, and the sharing of some facilities.

A council report submitted as part of an application said that the Catholic club's previous owners "desperately tried to keep the club open" but that there was no interest in keeping it open.

Referring to Eccles, the Salford Council website said: "Eccles has found recent years hard, particularly in terms of job opportunities, housing that doesn't meet people's

needs, empty shops in the town centre and an overall lack of investment."

The developer said that the club had a "high trading debt" with its brewery supplier, and the property was listed for sale in May 2018 because it was left without trade and an increasing debt.

The Salford Council website states that HMOs with five or more people who form two or more households must possess a mandatory HMO licence. Properties with three or four people who form more than two or more households need to apply for another HMO licence.

Eccles is located within the city of Salford, which 'has a bold vision to deliver 40,000 new homes and 40,000 new jobs by 2040.'



Photo: Google maps



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‘Slow down we move too fast’

Sir John Battle



As Simon and Garfunkel sang ‘Slow down, you move too fast’. No sooner is Christmas over than the shops start selling Easter eggs! This year Christmas seemed to be squeezed in. Advent was a week shorter as we lit the fourth candle quickly followed by Christmas Eve. Christmas Day on a Monday is always a liturgical crush for Christmas Masses and for some meant going twice on the same Sunday, but that’s just a quirk of the calendar of fixed dates. Then the feast of the Baptism of Jesus comes the day after the Epiphany.

It all seemed so time compressed. The American theologian and civil rights activist Howard Thurman wrote ‘When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins; to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people, to make music in the heart.’

Significantly, Jesus’s public ministry, officially opened with his baptism by John the Baptist, followed some 30 years of working at home and spending significant time in the local synagogue, as the early stories in the Gospels recount. In reality he did not just rush into public action as a young man despite the serious challenges of his times and the community around him.

This week’s daily scripture readings ‘taking us into the first week of ‘Ordinary time’, start out with the story of Hannah in the book of Samuel praying to God for a child. Her prayer is answered. The struggles and worries of ordinary daily human living of life and death are taken up again.

As we move too rapidly into 2024 with all its daily, local, national and international challenges, dominated currently by daily reports of wars and deaths, my new year resolution is to tune in to fewer 24/7 news bulletins (especially on the mobile prompts, to which I fear I am becoming addicted) and press the ‘pause button’ literally and metaphorically, with more personal ‘time breaks’.

And there’s good advice in Howard Thurston’s very last line (which in my mind I never really reached), suggesting we take time out ‘to make music in the heart.’

So this year it’s ‘less news; more music’ and better listening, not background.

Arundel and Brighton’s radical plan could be the blueprint for the renewal of our Church

CATHOLIC COMMENT

Caroline Farrow



Arundel and Brighton diocese has published its long-awaited pastoral plan, entitled, *The Word who is life: Call to mission*. It is designed to deal with the significant decline in Catholic clergy expected over the course of the next 10-15 years.

It would be easy to look at this as some kind of management consultancy exercise and to some extent it is, because in 2030 the diocese, going by current numbers, which don’t take into account infirmity or unexpected deaths, will only have 25 priests under the age of 60, with many others approaching the canonical retirement age of 75. With over 100 active parishes, clearly something has got to give.

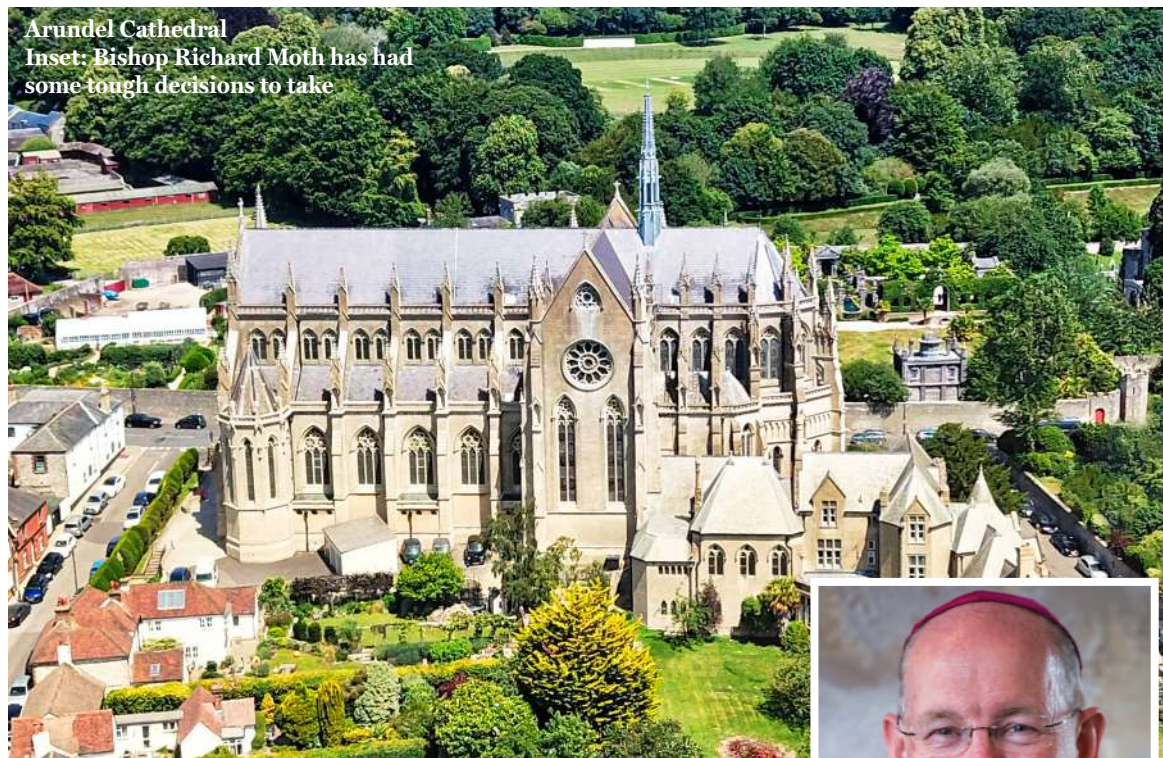
Clearly, no bishop wants to take the unpopular step of having to shut down parishes, therefore the model proposed by Bishop Richard Moth is to amalgamate parishes within each deanery, into giant ‘super-parishes’, served by a group of clergy, one of who will act as the moderator, namely the leader of the parish. So for example, the 11 separate parishes and university chaplaincy in Brighton and Hove will all become one entire parish, consisting of individual church communities.

The Pastoral Plan document says these new parishes ‘will truly become a community of communities’.

Inevitably the plan has generated a lot of comment, questions and concerns in terms of how these new enormous parishes are going to work logistically. The plan states that ‘it is inevitable that there will be some church buildings that will cease to have Mass every Sunday, or even on any Sunday, which is clearly challenging and a source of pain and sadness.’

That said, there are no current plans to close any church buildings; provided that the local community can sustain the financial responsibility for the building, the diocese will continue to support the local community to use the buildings for the mission of the Church even though the community may attend Sunday Mass elsewhere.

Much of the detail has yet to be thrashed out but all of the changes are timetabled to be implemented by the Summer of 2025 when the diocese of Arundel and Brighton



Arundel Cathedral
Inset: Bishop Richard Moth has had some tough decisions to take

celebrates its 60th anniversary.

From a personal point of view, while I share in the sadness and pain of the bishop and various communities who may see Sunday Mass cease, I also believe that it is a sensible and pragmatic way forward given the situation with declining numbers of clergy.

I also strongly believe that far from bemoaning the situation, it is actually an opportunity for mission, because if Catholics are serious about their faith then the laity is going to have to step up to the plate, starting, of course, with prayer. Over the last century, thanks to increasing regulations needed to combat previous failures, the role of parish priest has morphed into something that resembles a corporate managerial role, with priests necessarily having to embroil themselves in huge amounts of administration and regulation responsible for maintaining parish finances, buildings, safeguarding paperwork, health and safety issues. It’s all far removed from the Gospel ideals of Preaching the Word, celebrating the Sacraments and pastoral care for the people.

I’m sure few young men who hear God’s voice calling them to the altar, envisage a life of making sure that the volunteer who kindly strims the hedges or sets up the brazier for the Easter Vigil, has completed his health and safety certificate for climbing a ladder or lighting matches, or checking that the insurance is all up to date after a slate tile flew off the roof in the

wind and narrowly missed the sacristan!

What the new model envisages is all of the necessary administration and bureaucracy work being undertaken by laity, along with some of the pastoral roles including catechesis, hospital visiting and school chaplaincy, much of which is already done by volunteers. A team of priests living across a wider community (formerly known as a deanery) will then be freer to carry out their core roles, aided by deacons, who will also be well placed to share in the pastoral care of the communities they already serve.

While Arundel and Brighton may be the first diocese to have announced this radical new structure, it looks as though others will follow suit. The Diocese of Brentwood has also published a Vision Document and implemented a consultation process along similar lines to Arundel and Brighton.

As you will have read a few weeks ago in the *Universe*, this is not a problem that’s unique to England. In Ireland, the diocese of Clogher has trained 40 lay funeral ministers to lead the liturgy for reception for the deceased in church and also the rite of committal at the graveside, to address its own shortage of clergy. A report found that in 20 years time, at current rates of ordinations and retirements/deaths, there will be fewer than 10 priests to cover the diocese’s 85 parishes.

With such a dramatic decline in clergy numbers there is no other



choice than for the laity to become ever more involved; if we want to pass our faith down to the generations yet to come, something that we are compelled to do, then we have to start playing a much larger part in our local Catholic communities instead of hoping that someone else will come and take up the slack.

Equally, if the Catholic Church is going to require far more intense involvement of the laity, we need to look to and support initiatives such as this newspaper, which gives an informed Catholic take on current affairs in both the secular and ecclesiastical worlds, and other media projects, like Radio Maria, as well as Catholic organisations such as Cafod, the St Vincent de Paul Society, the Good Counsel Network and Mary’s Meals.

We need now, more than ever, an educated and informed laity who are ready to respond to their primary vocation as children of God.

And above all, to be getting on knees and praying for new vocations, as well as for the restoration of Mary’s Dowry.

SVP admits to ‘toughest year in Ireland’ as soaring bills pull more into cash crisis

The SVP in Ireland has revealed that 2023 was the charity’s busiest – and toughest – in 10 years.

Rose McGowan, national president of the anti-poverty charity, has been involved in the organisation for several years, and said the noticeable change is the number of people with jobs going to the charity.

She said parents are put under pressure all year round, and will cut down on their food to make sure their children can eat.

Elderly people sometimes go to bed early to stay warm during the colder months, she added.

“Really, what we find is that people juggle; this week they’ll say, ‘I’ll pay my rent because if I pay something off the rent, or pay the rent, at least I won’t be evicted or homeless,’” she said.

“Next week, they get an energy bill, and say ‘I need to pay something off that so that I won’t be dis-



Rose McGowan at SVP House on Sean McDermott Street in Dublin. “We are seeing more people pulled into the crisis.”
Photo: Grainne Ni Aodha

connected. In the meantime, how am I going to afford food?”

“So they would come to us looking for food, and people are cutting back on food, there is no doubt about that.

“Parents are not going to see children hungry, but they cut back themselves.”

Ms. McGowan said that 2022 was the charity’s busiest in 10 years, with 230,000 calls for help being

made, but in 2023 that number was exceeded by the end of November.

The SVP defines its mission as ‘respond (ing) to the call every Christian receives to bring the love of Christ to those in need: “I was hungry, and you gave me food” (Matthew 25).’

Ms. McGowan said there are “huge issues” in how the stress of finances is affecting people’s mental health.

“I suppose the biggest change is that it’s not just people on social welfare. People are coming who are working and who are on low pay, mortgages are huge, rents are huge,” she said.

“So there’s a spectrum of people and we have lots and lots of people coming for the first time.”

During one house call, her colleague remarked that the woman aged in her 70s was in bed to keep warm.

“She come down (in a) dressing gown, and I could feel the cold air coming out of the house. And I said: ‘have you no heat on?’ and she said: ‘It’s costing me 70 euro a week in the meter’. She said: ‘I just can’t afford it’.

“So she gets into bed early, she puts it on an hour in the morning, an hour in the early evening. Now she’s an elderly woman in her 70s, and she has emphysema – she should have heat.

The good news was that “we were calling that night with energy vouchers for her, she was so grateful. She’s on an old age pension, she’s getting the fuel allowance.”

Ms. McGowan praised the Irish people for their generosity, saying: “We couldn’t survive, we can’t do what we’re doing without donors and without volunteers.

“The Irish public are fabulous when it comes to supporting us.”

Lord Deben to link Gospel with action on climate in Ampleforth lecture

Lord Deben, former Chairman of the UK’s independent Climate Change Committee, will deliver a flagship lecture at Ampleforth College.

The lecture is a joint initiative between the Catholic Union, The Ampleforth Society and Ampleforth College. It will take place on Friday 1st March at Ampleforth College, the independent Catholic school in North Yorkshire.

Lord Deben has been a Conservative peer since 2010. He served as Environment Secretary under John Major and until June 2023 was Chairman of the Climate Change Committee.

Catholic Union Director, Nigel Parker, welcomed the announcement of Lord Deben as speaker. “The Catholic Union is dedicated to the defence of Catholic values in Parliament and public life as well as the promotion of the common good. We could not want for a better speaker at this joint event in the splendour of Ampleforth,” Mr Parker said.



Lord Deben

Lord Deben will use his lecture to talk about the Gospel Imperative for Climate Action. The event will bring together a wide section of the Catholic community with a passion for saving the planet as highlighted in Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*, on caring for our common home.

Ampleforth Headmaster Peter Roberts shared his delight at the prospect of hearing Lord Deben. “We are delighted that Lord Deben will be addressing the Ampleforth community. His wealth of experience and insight into arguably the most important issue facing this, and future generations, will be of interest to all,” Mr Roberts said.

“Stewardship is a core tenet of our Benedictine ethos at Ampleforth College, where our staff and students are inspired by the Holy Father’s call to act. The importance of stewardship of the natural beauty around us is something that unites the generations across the Ampleforth family. We look forward to the event and welcoming guests.”

Lord Stafford, Chair of Trustees of The Ampleforth Society, said: “As a global community of Old Amplefordians, parents and friends of Ampleforth we have all been inspired by the beauty of the natural environment at Ampleforth and many members of the Ampleforth Society are advocates for sustainability and preservation of the environment. To hear such a respected speaker address this important issue will be of great interest for our members and guests.”

The event will be held at Ampleforth and will also be live streamed. To book a ticket for this event please visit the website of The Ampleforth Society: <https://society.ampleforthcollege.org.uk/events>



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In Brief

Shops exploiting dry January

Leading UK supermarkets have been cashing in by increasing the cost of low and no-alcohol drinks during Dry January, said *The Grocer* magazine. As 8.5m Britons pledge to take part in the annual campaign, the average price of nine brands, such as Birra Moretti Zero and Guinness Draught 0.0, have increased by 22.3 per cent cent at Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, Morrisons and Waitrose since the start of December.

Beckenbauer tributes pour in

Tributes have been paid to the German football legend Franz Beckenbauer, who has died aged 78. Germany manager Julian Nagelsmann said Beckenbauer was “the best footballer in German history”, Gary Lineker said he was “one of the absolute greats of our game”, and German star Thomas Muller said “we will never forget what you have done for football in Germany”.

He won the World Cup as captain of West Germany in 1974 and lifted the trophy again as manager in 1990.

Child-on-child abuse rising

More than 50 per cent of child sexual abuse offences recorded in 2022 was committed by other children, data has shown.

Researchers said a four-year-old child, who uploaded an indecent image of a sibling to the internet using a smart phone, was the youngest reported to the authorities. The rise of child-on-child abuse is “fuelled by access to violent pornography and smart phones”, detectives have told Sky News.

Long postal delays continue

NHS letters and Christmas cards sent early last month have still not arrived as a result of continuing Royal Mail delays.

According to industry sources, postal workers were made to prioritise parcels over letters in the run-up to the Christmas break, meaning lengthy delays for letters.

This has resulted in vital letters from the NHS, banks, HMRC and mortgage providers being among the post “caught up in the delays”, said the outlet.

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Zelensky needs to articulate a clear vision – and not just demand more men to enlist

WORLD AFFAIRS

Stefan Wolff & Tetyana Malyarenko

After the failure of Ukraine's 2023 counteroffensive, Kyiv finds itself at a major crossroads and with no easy options.

The demand late last year by the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, for the mobilisation of an additional 500,000 troops over the next few months, signals both resolve and desperation. It will make Ukrainian domestic politics more fractious but it could also buy Zelensky time to reconsider his own endgame – and how to get there.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine's armed forces have had a strength of around a million soldiers, with continuous regular mobilisation compensating for losses on the battlefield.

Against this background, the target of an additional half a million troops constitutes a significant increase of 50 per cent above the current baseline. There are several possible reasons for this.

First, it could be an indication of the real scale of losses at the front over the past year. Ukraine suffered high rates of attrition as a result of relentless Russian counter-attacks, including along the long stretch of frontline in Donbas.

There is also increasing concern over the sustainability of western support. Kyiv may be anticipating a need to compensate for an expected decrease in western supplies of arms and ammunition by increasing human resources on the ground.

Russia's recent mobilisation of 170,000 new troops brings the total strength of its armed forces to around 1.3 million. So Zelensky's announcement may simply be an attempt to level the playing field in terms of troop numbers.

Taken together, all three of these possible explanations also indicate a concern about the likelihood of a new Russian offensive in 2024. Whatever the ultimate Russian war aims might be, Moscow's territorial claim to the whole of the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia is one of the more concrete – and hitherto unachieved – objectives.

With the Kremlin's relative military strength growing, denying Putin this success – which he is likely to want to achieve before his all-but-certain re-election in March and likely inauguration in

Addressing the estimated 600,000 Ukrainian men living abroad, Zelensky didn't mince his words: “You need to decide whether you are a refugee or a citizen.”



May – will require a serious Ukrainian defence effort.

In turn, this implies that the Ukrainian leadership is currently less concerned about strategic prospects, but is motivated by the need to mobilise all available resources for this effort.

The two complementary bills regarding mobilisation which were submitted by the Government to parliament on December 30 of last year indicate that Zelensky and his inner circle are serious about this. At the same time, if adopted and implemented, the new approach to mobilisation will also add significant strain for already stretched the Ukrainian state institutions and society.

Running out of men to mobilise?

As publicly confirmed by senior Ukrainian officials, large numbers of volunteers for frontline service simply no longer exist. So the Government proposes coercive measures to ensure continuing enlistment. These range from high fines for draft dodging, to seizure of real estate and the freezing of private bank accounts, to the cancellation of passports of Ukrainian refugees abroad.

The latter group in particular, including an estimated 600,000 fighting-age men living in the EU, will become a key target of Kyiv's mobilisation efforts. Addressing them directly in his new year's speech, Zelensky didn't mince his words: “You need to decide whether you are a refugee or a citizen.”

In parallel, there will be further efforts to put Ukraine's economy on a war footing, as announced by Ukraine's prime minister, Denys Shmyhal. The planned mobilisation

will be accompanied by a new economic strategy to increase the tax burden on individual citizens and small and medium-sized businesses, while social spending will be radically reduced.

Deepening social divisions

These measures are undoubtedly necessary from a strategic perspective – especially if Ukraine wants to regain the initiative on the battlefield. But taken together, these actions by the government have revived potentially divisive discussions in Ukrainian society about social justice, corruption and the social contract between elites and society. The level of public trust in elites is already low, and decreasing further, and the war is increasingly seen as a “war fought by the poor”.

What is more, the demographic trends in Ukraine's society further exacerbate the unfavourable long-term prospects of the ever-increasing number of people living in poverty. Life expectancy of men has reduced from an already low 65 years in 2021 to 57 years in 2023.

Birth rates remain very low, with some demographers estimating a fall to 0.55 babies per family in 2023. Meanwhile, emigration of the most skilled and economically active population has accelerated since the war began. This leaves predominantly the poor to do the fighting while seeing their living standards further decline.

Forced mobilisation, the reduction of the rights and freedoms of the population, further economic disruption and social hardship contrast sharply with what is widely perceived as the corruption-fuelled lifestyle of

an entrenched and unaccountable elite. Zelensky himself may not (yet) be directly associated with this – and his relative lack of success in rooting out corruption has yet to significantly harm his own popularity.

But several people in his inner circle have been associated with corrupt practices. If nothing else, more fractious domestic politics, including between military and political elites, will undermine Ukraine's resilience and combat effectiveness from the inside, further playing into Russian hands.

Thus, Ukraine needs a new social contract between elites and society as much as it needs a re-assessment of its military strategy. Yet, neither are likely. Zelensky and his foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, insist that there is a path to victory and that they “do not have a plan B”. This uncompromising position is reflected in mobilisation plans.

More men, however, do not constitute a strategy. At best, they can be part of a strategy. To justify the undoubted sacrifice that Zelensky is asking of Ukrainian society, he needs to articulate a clearer purpose and direction. Simply reiterating the desirable – Ukraine's complete liberation – will sooner or later come to be seen in Ukraine and in western partner capitals as a fantasy dangerously detached from realities on the ground.

Stefan Wolff is a Professor of International Security, University of Birmingham
Tetyana Malyarenko is a Professor of International Relations, Jean Monnet Professor of European Security, National University Odesa Law

Luther's Idris praised for bringing star power to fight knife crime

Andy Drozdziak

Catholic peace campaigner Barry Mizen has backed Hollywood star Idris Elba and Arsenal FC to drive a campaign to change thinking about knife crime in London.

Luther star Elba, 51, has launched the Don't Stop Your Future campaign, calling for the immediate banning of machetes and so-called zombie knives.

Several high-profile knife crimes, including the killing of Christian schoolgirl Elianne Andam, have recently taken place, continuing a worrying trend.

The 15-year-old was stabbed to death on her way to school in Croydon, south London, in September 2023, with what is believed to be a large zombie knife. A 17-year-old boy has been charged with murder.

Speaking about the campaign, Elba, who is also releasing a song called *Knives Down*, said: "I can't stay silent as more young lives are lost to these brutal and heartless crimes.

"As school returns, too many young people will not be joining their classmates and too many grieving families have lost a young person they love in recent years.

"Young people are our future, their potential deserves to be met, not taken away by violence."

Arsenal wore the No More Red white shirt in their 2-0 defeat against Liverpool in the third round of the FA Cup at the Emirates Stadium last Sunday to campaign against

knife crime and youth violence.

The unique shirt was first launched in January 2022 by Arsenal and Adidas to raise awareness of the issue and "keep young people safe from knife crime and youth violence".

Barry Mizen MBE, whose 16-year-old son, Jimmy, was the victim of violence when he was murdered in a London bakery in 2008, told the *Universe* that Arsenal's campaign was "fantastic", while the attention that a high-profile figure like Idris Elba is drawing "needs to be constant and expanding."

He added that knife crime violence "is as bad as it's ever been."

"I think most people are either dismissive of the issue, as it doesn't affect them, or simply reiterate ever loudly that something must be done," he said.

"The issue is as bad as it's ever been and I wonder if the only answer is to keep the issue in the news, to constantly highlight each and every loss?"

Pointing to the recent ITV drama *Mr Bates vs The Post Office*, which has brought public attention to the Post Office scandal, Mr Mizen suggested that producing something similar on knife crime might have an impact.

"Perhaps an example of a change public attention can bring is the horrendous miscarriage of justice that's happened to sub post masters and the impact a powerful TV portrayal has had," he said.



Actor Idris Elba launches his Don't Stop Your Future campaign in Parliament Square, Westminster.

"Could a combination of celebrities and professional sport drive a similar change in thinking? (It) would need a huge 'buy in'."

"Ultimately there needs to be a huge shift in thinking, for the idea of carrying a weapon of any sort as being 'not cool'."

London-born Arsenal star Eddie Nketiah highlighted the importance of the campaign. He told Sky Sports News: "It's a lovely campaign, one that I really support.

"Keeping kids occupied and keeping them busy always helps lower the rate of crime. I think it's really important."

Downing Street conceded "there is more to do" on tackling knife crime in response to Elba's campaign.

Right, Arsenal's Bukayo Saka wears the white 'No More Red' shirt in the game against Liverpool.



Harry stabbed with 'hunting knife', court heard

Andy Drozdziak

Catholic schoolboy Harry Pitman was stabbed to death with a hunting knife "within yards" of emergency service workers, a court has been told.

A 16-year-old boy appeared at the Old Bailey on Tuesday over the killing, which happened as Harry waited to watch fireworks in Primrose Hill park, north London, just before midnight on New Year's Eve.

The youth, who cannot legally be named because of his age, was not asked to enter pleas to charges of

murder and having an offensive weapon in public.

He held his head down for much of the time and was tearful when the judge addressed him.

The murder happened during "some sort of altercation" as crowds gathered to watch the fireworks, the court was told. Harry was stabbed with a "hunting-style" knife "within yards of members of the emergency services who were visibly present", it also heard.

Harry, a Catholic, received the sacrament of confirmation at St John Vianney church, Haringey,

last Easter. He was a pupil at St Thomas More Catholic School, Wood Green, whose headteacher Alex Rosen paid tribute to Harry as "a bright and promising young soul."

Catholic peace campaigner Margaret Mizen, whose son Jimmy was killed in 2008 in a violent attack in London, sent a message of condolence to Harry's family. She wrote: "My thoughts and prayers are with the family of Harry Pitman – another 16-year-old whose life has been taken far too soon. We must never give up trying to bring peace to our troubled streets."

Judge Sarah Whitehouse KC remanded the accused into youth detention before he appears at the same court for a plea hearing on 26th March. A provisional trial has been set for 2nd September.

The police said: "Officers provided first aid before paramedics arrived but, despite their efforts, Harry sadly died at the scene shortly before midnight."

A 17-year-old boy arrested on Thursday has been bailed. No further action will be taken against three other boys who were held over the killing.

Scorsese vows that an ‘accessible Christ’ will be at the centre of his next film

Andy Drozdziak

Martin Scorsese has shared his desire to “make religion more accessible” by making a new film about Jesus.

The film will be adapted from the book *A Life of Jesus*, written in 1978 by Shūsaku Endō, and described as ‘a simple and powerful retelling of the life of Christ as seen through the eyes of a Japanese novelist.’

The veteran Catholic filmmaker, 81, was inspired to make the new film after meeting Pope Francis at a two-day conference in Rome, ‘The Global Aesthetics of the Catholic Imagination,’ in May 2023.

During the conference, Pope Francis asked the artists “not to ‘explain’ the mystery of Christ, which is ultimately unfathomable, but to enable us to touch him, to feel his closeness, to let us see him as alive and to open our eyes to the beauty of his promises. Because his promises appeal to our imagination: they help us to imagine in a new way our

lives, our history and the future of humanity.”

Martin Scorsese said that he had “responded to the pope’s appeal to artists in the only way I know how: by imagining and writing a screenplay for a film about Jesus.”

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Scorsese shared his intentions for the film, which will be just 80 minutes long – far removed from his usual lengthy three-hour movies. “I’m trying to find a new way to make it more accessible and

take away the negative onus of what has been associated with organised religion,” he said.

“Right now, ‘religion,’ you say that word and everyone is up in arms because it’s failed in so many ways. But that doesn’t mean necessarily that

the initial impulse was wrong. Let’s get back. Let’s just think about it. You may reject it. But it might make a difference in how you live your life – even in rejecting it. Don’t dismiss it offhand.”

Scorsese has often dealt with religious themes in his films, such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and *Silence* (2016), which dealt with the persecution of Japanese Jesuit missionaries. He shared that his films deal with “redemption and the human condition” and “how we deal with the negative things.”

He said: “Are we decent and then learn to become indecent? Can we change? Will others accept that change? And it really is, I think, a fear of a society and culture that’s corrupted because of its lack of grounding in morality and spirituality. Not religion. Spirituality. Denying that.”

Production for Scorsese’s new film about Jesus is scheduled to begin later this year.



Pope Francis greets Martin Scorsese and his wife, Helen, at the conference, at the Vatican in May 2023



Charlie’s praying for a sign of who’s a traitor

A participant on BBC programme *The Traitors* spoke of her Christian faith in a conversation with another contestant.

The popular reality TV show, hosted by Claudia Winkleman, is described as ‘the ultimate reality game of trust and treachery’. Over three million people tuned in for Wednesday’s first live episode.

It involves the Faithfuls trying to find the Traitors among the group and banish them all before the end of the game. The aim of the Traitors, meanwhile, is to stay undetected and escape being banished. Each evening, the traitors gather in secret

to vote to eliminate one of the ‘faithful’. The final player remaining takes home £120,000.

Mental Health Area Manager Charlie, who is from Bristol, shared at breakfast on episode 2 how she had been praying the previous night.

She said: “I’m a Christian so I was like ‘please’, but I don’t know whether God really watches *The Traitors*.”

Fellow contestant Ross, 28, a video director from Lancashire, said: “I’m sure he does... well, he or she!”

Charlie is described by the *Radio Times*

as someone who ‘likes to analyse everything and so, for her, *The Traitors* seemed like the perfect fit.’

The Bristolian explained that everywhere she goes, she’s constantly “thinking, looking at people’s body language [and] trying to work people out.”

Charlie admitted that she would struggle to be a Traitor, and admires anyone who is one in the new season, but noted that there’s an equal amount of pressure on being a Faithful, because “you’ve got to constantly defend yourself” in the face of others’ accusations.

Rwanda ‘showdown’ is looming for PM

The Prime Minister faces a “fresh headache” over his Rwanda policy when Tory rebels table amendments to prevent European judges and human rights laws blocking deportation flights.

After the latest talks between rebel MPs and Government officials failed to reach a compromise, more than 30 right-wingers backed the rebel amendments, setting up a “showdown” with the government when the Safety of Rwanda Bill returns to the Commons.

Fry bearskin cap call

Stephen Fry has called for an end to the use of real fur in the bearskin caps worn by the King’s Guard. “Tradition is never an excuse for cruelty,” said the broadcaster, as he backed an animal welfare campaign calling for fake fur to be used rather than real bear fur.

One month countdown for Columban Schools Competition entries

Ellen Teague

The 2024 Columban Schools Media Competition on ‘Biodiversity Matters’ has one more month to run. Take up in Britain and Ireland has been good over the past four months, and our dedicated website has had more than 5,000 page views, while entries of Images and Writing submissions are coming in through the website.

The title of this year’s competition, ‘Biodiversity Matters’, picks up on a core aspect of Columban mission being justice, peace and ecology, and it is engaging young people.

Cash prizes are awarded to the winning entrants and the first prize is an impressive £500 or 500 euros.

Image entries so far show bees, flowers, trees and sealife, alongside dangers from climate change,



pollution, habitat loss and overexploitation by humanity. Positive titles in written entries include: ‘Why biodiversity matters’ and ‘Building a sustainable future’.

Some entries have highlighted that concern for creation is a theme of Catholic Social Teaching. Pope Francis is quoted for his stark words in *Laudato Si’* that “because

of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God ... we have no such right”.

More recent words in *Laudate Deum* are also highlighted: “The world sings of an infinite Love: how can we fail to care for it?”

The competition is aimed at students aged between 13-18 years old. It is looking for entries that demonstrate an awareness and understanding of the issue of Biodiversity and highlight people, communities and organisations trying to build a sustainable future.

Catholic experts on environmental protection and education - including Columban eco-theologian Fr Sean McDonagh, Mary Colwell and Jane Mellett - are among the judges.

There is an increasing awareness of the importance of biological diversity, says James Trewby. In his

role as Columban Education Worker in Britain he has run workshops, retreats and assemblies in many schools to promote justice, peace and the integrity of creation. He said: “In a world of increasing globalisation and environmental degradation, management of biological diversity is one of the most important and critical challenges facing humankind today and the Columbans are keen to provide an opportunity for young people to engage with this issue.”

The closing date is 17th February 2024 and winners will be announced on Columban media on 21st March 2024, the International Day of Forests. Website with information and entry details can be found at: <https://www.columbancompetition.com/>

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Pope Francis with the diplomats in the Apostolic Palace

No divisions - just unity in love of Christ

Instead of splitting into ideological groups, Catholics need to put God front and centre, not their own personal ideas and plans, Pope Francis said.

“We need to let go of ecclesiastical ideologies in order to find the meaning of the Holy Mother Church and to support its true vocation,” he said.

“Let us set out anew from God; let us seek from him the courage not to lose heart in the face of difficulties, the strength to surmount all obstacles, the joy to live in harmonious communion,” the pope said while celebrating Mass on the feast of the Epiphany.

“We need this in the church, where, instead of splitting into groups based on our own ideas, we are called to put God back at the centre,” Pope Francis said.

Referring to the three kings who visited Jesus in his manger, the pope said the wise men “are directed to find him in man, in a little child lying in a manger.”

“We find the God who comes down to visit us, not by basking in some elegant religious theory, but by setting out on a journey, seeking the signs of his presence in everyday life, and above all in encountering and touching the flesh of our brothers and sisters,” he said.

Finally, he said, the wise men “have hearts bowed in adoration” before the baby Jesus.

Unfortunately, Pope Francis said, “we have lost the habit of adoration, we have lost this ability. Let us rediscover our taste for the prayer of adoration. Let us acknowledge Jesus as our God and Lord, and let’s adore him.”

“In the child Jesus, we see God made man. And so let us look at him, let us wonder at his humility,” the pope said at the Angelus.

“Adoring him is not wasting time, but giving meaning to time” and rediscovering life’s direction.

Pope urges diplomats to respect life and work for global peace

Carol Glatz

Pope Francis called on the international community to ban surrogate pregnancy, calling it “deplorable” and a “grave violation of the dignity of the woman and the child, based on the exploitation of situations of the mother’s material needs.”

The path to peace requires respecting every human life, “starting with the life of the unborn child in the mother’s womb, which cannot be suppressed or turned into an object of trafficking,” the pope told diplomats accredited to the Holy See during his annual New Year’s address on 8th January.

The pope told the ambassadors gathered in a formal, frescoed hall of the Apostolic Palace that greater efforts are needed to prevent conflict and war through dialogue, disarmament and respect for human rights.

“We must not forget that grave violations of international humanitarian law are war crimes, and that it is not sufficient to point them out, but also necessary to prevent them,” he said.

Speaking to representatives of the 184 countries that have full diplomatic relations with the Vatican, the pope said, “There is a need for greater effort on the part of the international community to defend

and implement humanitarian law, which seems to be the only way to ensure the defence of human dignity in situations of warfare.”

International conventions aimed at “curbing the savagery of war” must be honoured, he said.

The pope renewed his condemnation of terrorist acts and extremism and expressed his hopes for an end to bloodshed and tensions in a number of countries, including the Holy Land, Lebanon, Syria, Ukraine, the South Caucasus, sub-Saharan Africa and Nicaragua.

“Dialogue requires patience, perseverance and an ability to listen, yet when sincere attempts are made to put an end to disagreements, significant results can be achieved,” he said.

“Perhaps we need to realise more clearly that civilian victims are not ‘collateral damage,’ but real people with names, faces and lives, he said. Perhaps then “we would see war for what it is: nothing other than an immense tragedy, a ‘useless slaughter.’”

The pope condemned “the enormous stock of available weapons” and called on all nations to pursue a policy of disarmament. “Weapons create mistrust and divert resources,” which are better spent pursuing “genuine global security,” eliminat-

ing hunger and promoting sustainable development for the entire planet.

“Wars, poverty, the mistreatment of our common home and the ongoing exploitation of its resources, which lead to natural disasters, also drive thousands of people to leave their homelands in search of a future of peace and security,” and often at great risk to their lives, he said. Many victims include unaccompanied minors, he added.

Migration should be regulated, he said, so people on the move can be welcomed, accompanied and integrated in a way that promotes their human dignity and respects the culture and security of host communities. People also have the right to remain in their homeland, which requires “the conditions for the effective exercise of this right.”

The path to peace also requires respect for human rights, as defined by the “self-evident and commonly accepted” principles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the pope said.

“Regrettably, in recent decades attempts have been made to introduce new rights that are neither fully consistent with those originally defined nor always acceptable,” he said, highlighting gender theory, which is “extremely dangerous since

it cancels differences in its claim to make everyone equal.”

“These instances of ideological colonisation prove injurious and create divisions between states, rather than fostering peace,” he said.

The path to peace also requires increased dialogue, including on the political and social level, he said.

All citizens, especially young people, should consider voting to be “one of their primary duties to contribute to the advancement of the common good through a free and informed participation in elections.”

Interreligious dialogue remains key, he said, and it includes “the protection of religious freedom and respect for minorities.”

He decried the rise in antisemitism and the increase in persecution and discrimination against Christians, especially over the last 10 years.

An emerging challenge, he said, is the ethical use of new technologies so they can serve as “a source of encounter and mutual exchange, and a vehicle for peace,” rather than being “a means of spreading division or lies, ‘fake news.’”

He also urged all nations to redouble their efforts in support of the UN’s COP programme, as it aims to curb the damage caused by climate change.

Giving to the poor not enough: we need to ‘touch’ poverty

Giving to others in need is not enough; people must look those they help in the eyes and be willing to touch their poverty with their hands and hearts, Pope Francis said.

Meeting with members of the Unicoop supermarket co-operative, which is based in Florence, the pope said Christians must “be close to the people we help.”

When hearing confessions, he said, he asks people if they give to the poor, to which people often answer “yes.”

“And tell me, when you give to the poor, do you look in the eyes of the person, touch their hand, or throw the money there?” the pope said he asks in reply.

“Touch, touch poverty, touch,” he told the group, encouraging them to

develop “a heart that touches, to look and to understand.”

Pope Francis told the group that caring for consumers entails going beyond tending to their commercial needs, it should also recognise and support their humanity, Pope Francis said.

“Safeguarding the good of a person means not only taking care of some of their interests” in a particu-

lar sector, but also promoting the full realisation of their dignity, he said.

The pope praised the cooperative’s projects promoting cultural initiatives in Florence and throughout Italy, as well as the work of its charitable foundation, ‘Il Cuore Si Scoglie’ (‘The Heart Melts’), which supports humanitarian projects abroad.

Pope's gift to new-borns is baptism into the faith

Cindy Wooden

Pope Francis celebrated the feast of the Baptism of the Lord on 7th January by baptising 16 infants in the Sistine Chapel.

Each one of the babies “give us the witness of how to receive the faith: with innocence and with an open heart,” he said.

In what was a noisy occasion, the pope thanked the parents for bringing the seven girls and nine boys, including one set of twins, forward to be baptised. He assured them, as he always does at services where babies are present, that they should not worry about the babies crying or fussing during the Mass, that they should feel free to feed them if they are hungry or take off some of their baptismal finery if they got warm.

Each parent received a candle lit from the Paschal candle, and Pope Francis encouraged them not to keep the candle stored away but to have it handy to look at “in difficult moments. This candle reminds us of our Christian roots; never extinguish it in our hearts.”

He also them to make sure their children know and celebrate the date of their baptism because “it is like a birthday. In baptism they be-



came Christian. Teach your children to celebrate this every year.”

Later, addressing over 20,000 people in St Peter's Square for the Angelus, he challenged his audience to recall their own baptism date, “the day you were born into the life of grace.”

In baptism, he said, “God comes into us, purifies, heals our heart, makes us forever his children, his people, his family, heirs to paradise.”

Christians should pause, he said, and ask themselves, “Am I aware of

the immense gift I carry within me through baptism?”

Do I acknowledge in my life the light of the presence of God, who sees me as his beloved son or his beloved daughter?”

“God becomes intimate to us and he does not leave us anymore,” the pope said.

He asked the crowd to pray for the 16 babies he baptised that morning, “extending these prayers to all the children who will receive holy baptism in these days.”

Cardinal asks bishops to give priests right to bless same-sex couples

While some bishops may take a cautious approach to the Vatican's guidance on blessing same-sex or other unmarried couples, they should not deny their priests the possibility of discerning and imparting blessings on people who ask for them, the Vatican doctrinal office said.

“Prudence and attention to the ecclesial context and to the local culture could allow for different methods of application, but not a total or definitive denial of this path that is proposed to priests,” said the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

It gave each bishop “a responsibility to discern the local application of *Fiducia Supplicans* on the pastoral meaning of blessings – but it was important a bishop should not deny priests the ability to bless people who come to them.

The message was authored by Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez, prefect of the dicastery from where *Fiducia Supplicans* originated.

The papal decision has caused both outrage and celebration around the world since its releases in December, with bishops' confer-

ences forced to respond to media inquiries as to what guidance they would give local priests.

Many bishops' conferences in the West, underscoring that the declaration did not change Catholic doctrine on marriage, reacted positively to the document. But others, particularly in Africa, were vocal in their opposition. The Zambian bishops' conference is the latest to come out against it, stating that the Vatican document should “be taken as for further reflection and not for implementation in Zambia.”

In Malawi, the bishops' conference directed that “blessings of any kind for same-sex unions of any kind are not permitted in Malawi.”

Bishop Georg Botzing, president of the German bishops' conference, welcomed the document, and was “grateful for the pastoral perspective it takes.”

Bishop Oscar Ojea, of Argentina, said that it would be “inappropriate” to inquire about the moral life of someone asking for a blessing, and to offer one to those who asked.

Eastern bishops challenge same-sex blessings: see page 18

Vatican publishes liturgies for 2024

The Vatican has published the calendar of public liturgies Pope Francis will preside over in January and February.

First will be on 21st January with The Word of God, at which the pope will focus on the importance of the Bible. The theme for this year is taken from the Gospel of St. John: “Remain in my Word.”

That will be followed by: 25th January: Evening prayer at Rome's Basilica of St. Paul Outside

the Walls to close of the Week of Prayer of Christian Unity.

2nd February: the feast of the Presentation of the Lord

11th February: A morning Mass in St. Peter's Basilica for the canonisation of Blessed María Antonia de San José, an Argentine popularly known as ‘Mama Antula.’

14th February: Ash Wednesday: A procession from Church of St. Anselm to the Basilica of Santa Sabina for the distribution of ashes.



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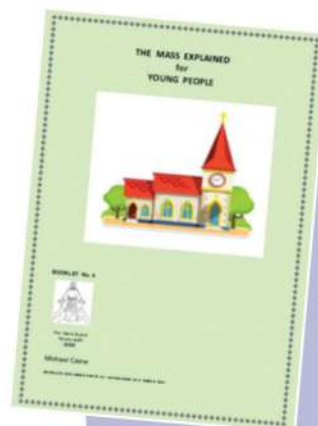
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In Brief

Idaho abortion ban at risk

The US Supreme Court is to hear arguments on Idaho's near-total abortion ban, which was struck down after the Justice Department said it conflicted with a federal statute on emergency medical care. Oral arguments on the ban will be heard in April.

At issue is Idaho's 'Defense of Life Act,' which bans abortion except in cases of rape, incest or where a physician deems the procedure medically necessary to save a pregnant woman's life.

This went into effect following the Supreme Court's June 2022 decision in the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* case, which returned the issue of abortion to the states.

The Justice Department argued Idaho's law conflicted with the Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act, or EMTALA, under which hospitals that receive Medicare funding and have emergency rooms must provide "necessary stabilising treatment for emergency medical conditions and labour."

Several Catholic organisations including the Church have filed support for Idaho.

Cameron voices Gaza concern

Lord David Cameron has said he is "worried" Israel may have breached international law in the Gaza conflict. "If you're asking me am I worried that Israel has taken action that might be in breach of international law," he told the Commons foreign affairs committee, "yes, of course I'm worried about that, and that's why I consult the Foreign Office lawyers when giving this advice on arms exports". However, added the foreign secretary, it was not his job to make a "legal adjudication".

Gunmen invade Ecuador broadcast

Hooded gunmen burst onto a live television set in Ecuador and threatened presenters a day after the president declared a state of emergency over the escape of a notorious drug gang boss from jail.

Employees were "forced on to the floor" during the broadcast by the public television channel TC "before the live feed cut out", said the BBC.

Thousands of police and security staff in Ecuador remain engaged in a "manhunt" to locate drug lord José Adolfo Macías Villamar amid an alarming increase in drug gang-related violence.

Bishop blames 'the children of darkness' for Nigerian massacre

Ngala Killian Chimton

Governor Caleb Mutfwang of Nigeria's Plateau state declared a week of mourning from 1st-8th January as Nigeria came to terms with the latest massacre of Christians at the hands of Fulani Muslim herders.

At least 200 were killed in the killings, which ran from 23rd-28th December across an isolated and rural region

Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah of Sokoto, Nigeria, said the attackers are "children of darkness" and come "from the deepest pit of hell."

The attackers also forced thousands to flee their homes.

It has now emerged that as many as 80 villages in the Plateau state were attacked, and Christian aid group Release International said more bodies are being found all the time as security forces enter the area.

"I urge all citizens to use these days for intense prayers to seek the intervention of the almighty God in defending our territories against wicked men that have risen against us," Mutfwang said.

Muslim prayers last weekend



Mourners gather around an open mass grave at a burial ceremony for some of the victims

were dedicated "to lasting peace to return to the Plateau (region)," he said.

Bishop Kukah strongly condemned the killers as "sons of Satan."

"Those invisible men came to the Plateau again, bearing their gifts of death and destruction," he said, adding that Fulani herders "came from the deepest pit of hell, the habitat of the devils that they are."

Calling the killers "children of darkness," he said they snatched "the light of the joy of Christmas from thousands of people on the Plateau."

"They imagined they would ignite an orgy of blood, seduce the ordinary peace-loving people of the Plateau and set them on a mission of mindless murder of fellow citizens in the name of retaliation," he said.

Bishop Kukah blamed the coun-

try's government and security agencies for failing to protect the citizens.

"Over the years, these murderers have left their footprints of blood and tears across the entire northern states, indiscriminately wrecking destruction," Bishop Kukah said. "In all this, the Nigerian state and its security agencies are blindsided."

He added that "funerals and coffins" are now part of "our landscape."

Nigerians are losing faith in their government and religious leaders to protect them, he added.

"While we religious leaders have continued to use our moral authority to encourage our people not to take the laws into their hands, we risk being swept away by the anger and frustration of our people," he said, adding that Nigeria's "cups of sorrow" are "overflowing."

The semi-nomadic Fulani herders have been attacking Christian farmers for years, claiming that access to their own traditional grazing lands have been denied them by Christians – a claim Christian groups reject.

Gaza's struggling Christians receive second aid package from Catholic charity ACN

Amy Balog

A Catholic charity has announced a second package of emergency aid for Christians who lost their livelihoods because of the war in Gaza.

Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) will be supporting the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem with £430,000 (€500,000) between January and April 2024, bringing the combined total amount of assistance provided since the start of the fighting last October to nearly £600,000 (€700,000).

Of the total amount, (£260,000) €300,000 is supporting about 1,000 Christians remaining in Gaza. The rest of the aid will help Christian families in the West Bank and East Jerusalem who have also been impacted by the ongoing conflict.

ACN's UK office is only able to contribute to the support in the West Bank and East Jerusalem because UK counter-terrorism sanctions prohibit the transfer of funds into Gaza.

The majority of the Holy Land's Christian community work in the tourism sector and have lost all sources of income since almost all pilgrimages to the region have been cancelled.

The newly announced aid package includes life-saving medicine, food coupons, help with tuition fees and housing costs.



Jerusalem's Old City

ACN will also be supporting training programmes to equip young Christians with new skills – boosting their employment opportunities – and offer guidance on starting their own businesses.

Marco Mencaglia, ACN's Director of Projects, said: "From the beginning of this war, we have told our partners on the ground in the Holy Land that we will not abandon them, in terms of material help, or in terms of spiritual aid, and we intend to fulfil that promise."

He added that, despite the fighting taking place in Gaza, "the effects of the war are being felt all over the region, and Christians, who are a

minority but still a significant community – around 45,000 in the West Bank and 10,000 in East Jerusalem – are being affected in a very direct way."

Mr Mencaglia said that the Christian community in the Holy Land is facing severe economic hardship "for at least the third time" within two decades.

He highlighted that Christians have suffered greatly as a result of intermittent fighting between Israel and Hezbollah and "more recently during the COVID pandemic, and now because of the war in Gaza."

He added: "What is more, there is no indication that the war is coming

to an end, and that tourists will begin to return to the Holy Land."

He explained the rationale behind ACN's support for training initiatives for young people. "Rather than give them money, we are helping to provide them with skills and a means to earn a living," he said.

"This is much better in the long run, as it helps keep communities anchored in their homes and dissuades them from emigrating."

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa of Jerusalem expressed his gratitude "to ACN for your ongoing collaboration with the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and your support for our local communities."

Blinken stands by two-state solution as he rejects Israeli plan to eject Palestinians

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has insisted that Palestinians must not be pressured into leaving Gaza, and must be allowed to return to their homes once conditions allow.

He condemned statements by some hardline Israeli ministers who said Palestinians should be forced out of Gaza to live elsewhere in the Middle East. "Gazans must be allowed to return to their homes when the conflict has ended," he said, showing growing US frustration with the way its ally Israel was conducting the war. "We stand by the two-state solution."

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich had called for Palestinians to leave Gaza and make way for Israelis to "make the desert bloom," while National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir said he wanted "to encourage the migration of Gaza residents as a solution to the crisis."

The comments have appalled Gaza's small Christian community who worry the Israeli statements may threaten other small communities in the Holy Land, including theirs.

The official line from the Israeli government is that Palestinians in Gaza will eventually be able to return to their homes, though it has yet to outline how or when this will be possible.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Smotrich and Ben-Gvir have a long history of rhetoric hostile toward Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Ben-Gvir, who is the minister with responsibility for policing, attracted criticism last year after a number of Jewish extremists were arrested for spitting at Christian pilgrims and he questioned whether the arrests were justified.

Spitting at Christians, he had said before being appointed a minister, is "an ancient Jewish custom."

Earlier this year, the most influential Catholic cleric in the Holy Land, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who is the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, warned that the region's



Israel claimed this bomb site was a former Hamas HQ, but locals said it was an ordinary residential area

2,000-year-old Christian community is coming under increased pressure, a phenomenon he linked directly to this government.

"The frequency of these attacks, the aggressions, has become something new," Cardinal Pizzaballa told The Associated Press.

"These people (extremists) feel they are protected... that the cultural and political atmosphere now can justify, or tolerate, actions against Christians," he said.

Israel has said it maintains the status quo of holy sites in the Old City of Jerusalem, where some of the holiest sites for Jews, Christians and Muslims sit virtually side by

side, the patriarch and other Church leaders have voiced growing alarm.

"What we are seeing is that what we call the status quo, the balance between the different communities – Jews, Muslims, Christians – is not respected anymore," Cardinal Pizzaballa said.

"That aspect is problematic for me, that they consider Christians as guests. We are not guests. We are part of the identity of the city," the patriarch added.

The cardinal's high profile gives him the freedom to criticise the current government, and his offer of himself in return for the Israeli hostages seized by Hamas in October

has won him admiration among ordinary Israelis, many of whom know little or nothing about the 2% of citizens who are Christians.

But one elderly Christian resident of Jerusalem, who spoke under condition of anonymity, said that he was "surprised by nothing from this new government."

"They are the worst in Israel's history, and they do not want us (Arabs) here in Jerusalem or in any part of the Holy Land," he said.

Any move to stop the people of Gaza returning home "would inevitably lead to another intifada" or uprising in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The last – in 2000-2005 – saw more than 4,000 Israelis and Palestinians killed in a wave of violence.

Meanwhile, the Congo has been forced to deny reports that it is in talks with Israel about resettling residents of the Gaza Strip in the Central African nation.

There has "never been any form of negotiation, discussion or initiative" between Kinshasa and Israel about Palestinian migrants on Congolese soil, government spokesperson Patrick Muyaya said.

The claim was made on the Zman news website, but described as "baseless" by the Israeli Government.

Russia labelled terrorist state by all-faiths group

The Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, which represents the various Christian, Jewish, and Muslim bodies of Ukraine, have called on the world to recognise Russia as a terrorist state and provide Ukraine with the means necessary to protect life.

For the second time in a row, Ukraine welcomed a new year with a series of Russian attacks on major cities, including the capital, Kyiv, and the western city of Lviv. At least 49 people died in the most recent air strikes, which led to demands for more air defence weapons to be supplied by the West.

The Council of Churches urged the world "to condemn the actions of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, recognise Russia as a terrorist state, and provide Ukraine with the necessary means to protect life, including air defence equipment, aircraft, and all that is necessary for the defence and restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity."

Russia hit Ukraine with a new wave of airstrikes just ahead of New Year's in what was some of the heaviest aerial bombardment since Russia's invasion in 2022.

UN Assistant Secretary-General Mohamed Khaled Khiri said in his

A teenage girl sits on a swing in the middle of devastation



remarks to the emergency Security Council meeting on Ukraine that "as we look to the New Year in the hope of avoiding further escalation, we recall the Secretary-General's appeal to all concerned to do their part to help lay the foundations for sustainable peace in Ukraine."

The Council of Churches also asked the world "to consider the issue of the moral and other forms of responsibility of the Russian Orthodox Church, which through all conceivable means supports the Russian aggression against Ukraine, incites ethnic and interfaith hatred, and, through preaching of the ideology of the 'Russian world,' incites an ongoing genocide of the Ukrainian people."

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Public Engagement by Catholics for the Common Good

Eastern bishops cite catechism and canon law as they reject same-sex blessings

Gina Christian

Two Eastern Catholic bishops have issued statements with in-depth theological and canonical reasons for their rejection of a controversial Vatican document on pastoral blessings for same-sex couples and other unmarried couples.

Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and Bishop Kurt E. Burnette of the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Passaic, New Jersey, USA, provided separate detailed responses on behalf of their respective sees to *Fiducia Supplicans* (Supplicating Trust), which was released on 18th December by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The declaration concluded that priests could offer 'spontaneous' and 'non-liturgical' pastoral blessings upon request to those in same-sex unions or couples in 'irregular situations'. At the same time, the text, which was approved by Pope Francis, affirmed the Church's teaching on marriage.

The declaration followed up on the pope's response to 'dubia', or questions, posed by cardinals in a letter released in early October.

Since its release *Fiducia Supplicans* has garnered a range of reactions among Catholic clergy and faithful – from praise to confusion to anger. The row prompted its author, Cardinal Fernandez to urge people to give the text "a full and calm reading".

But Major Archbishop Shevchuk – who leads one of the 23 Eastern Catholic churches that, together with the Latin Church, comprise the universal Catholic Church – said



Bishop Kurt E. Burnette



Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk

the declaration "applies solely to the Latin Church, not the Eastern Catholic churches."

He cited as the basis for his decision Canon 1492 of the Code of Canons for the Eastern Churches (abbreviated as CCEO in its Latin title), which was promulgated under St. John Paul II in 1990. That code, along with the 1983 Code of Canon Law, form the Catholic Church's primary governing documents.

The Canon specifies that laws enacted by the pope that do not expressly indicate otherwise affect Eastern Catholics only "insofar as they treat matters of faith or morals or declarations of divine law," or if "they grant a favor which contains nothing contrary to the Eastern rites."

"The declaration ... interprets the pastoral meaning of blessings in the Latin Church, not the Eastern Catholic churches," said Shevchuk. "It does not address questions of Catholic faith or morality, refer to any precepts of the Code of Canons for the Eastern Churches, or refer to Eastern Christians."

"The declaration ... interprets the pastoral meaning of blessings in the Latin Church, not the Eastern Catholic churches," said Shevchuk. "It does not address questions of Catholic faith or morality, refer to any precepts of the Code of Canons for the Eastern Churches, or refer to Eastern Christians."

Stressing that the CCEO safeguards the unique "liturgical, theological, canonical and spiritual heritage" of the Eastern Catholic Churches, he noted that "the meaning of 'blessing' in the UGCC (Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church) and the Latin Church is different."

While *Fiducia Supplicans* allows for a 'non-liturgical' variant, in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church "the blessing of a priest or bishop is a liturgical gesture that cannot be separated from the rest of the content of the liturgical rites and reduced to the circumstances and needs of private piety," he added, referencing *Christ Our Pascha*, the catechism of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

This was published in 2011 by Major Archbishop Shevchuk in response to St. John Paul II's call for the development of additional local catechisms for the Eastern Catholic churches, following the pope's 1992 publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Major Archbishop Shevchuk also noted in his statement that "according to the traditions of the

Byzantine rite, the concept of 'blessing' means approval, permission, or even an order for a specific type of action, prayer, and ascetic practices, including certain types of fasting and prayer."

Since "the blessing of a priest always has an evangelising and catechetical dimension," he said, "pastoral discernment urges us to avoid ambiguous gestures, statements, and concepts that would distort or misrepresent God's word and the teachings of the church."

For his part, Bishop Burnette released a four-page message titled *Some Thoughts and Guidance on the Publication of Fiducia Supplicans*. He echoed Major Archbishop Shevchuk's point that the declaration, as a liturgical guideline, was not applicable to the Byzantine rite according to canon law.

The bishop also underscored the distinction between the Eastern and Western Catholic understandings of the sacrament of matrimony. "In the West, couples marry each other by the exchange

of consent," said Bishop Burnette. "By ancient tradition and by current laws of the Church, in the East, a couple is married sacramentally by the blessing of a presbyter/priest."

He noted that Eastern Catholic Churches of the Constantinopolitan tradition also employ a crowning ceremony to signify the priest's blessing upon the sacrament of matrimony (or at times upon a renewal of vows), and warned that "a crowning ceremony performed for a couple that cannot be married in the Catholic Church is a crime under canon law," known as "simulating a sacrament."

"All parties are guilty of the crime, but the priest will be hurt the most," said Bishop Burnette. "Please do not be misled. Even without a crowning, one might commit the crime of simulating a sacrament by giving the appearance of blessing an unlawful union."

Bishop Burnette said that "presbyter/priests in recent years in our (Eastern) Churches have been excommunicated and involuntarily laicised for attempting to marry two males."

He urged laypeople to "take care not to compromise a priest by encouraging him to do something he is forbidden to do by the Church or by Divine Law or by his conscience."

"God gave us His Law because He loves us and desires to protect us," said Burnette, adding that he recently saw parents telling their small children to hold their parents' hands while crossing a busy street.

"When God gives us His Law, He is saying, 'Hold my hand. I don't want you to get hurt,'" said the bishop.

Poland's Church looks for dialogue as liberal Tusk gets tough

Poland's bishops have pledged dialogue with their country's new liberal government, amid warnings that Prime Minister Donald Tusk's plans for rapid secularising change could spark conflict as the ruling coalition plans to limit religious classes in public schools and abolish a key state Church Fund.

"While social and economic pledges will prove costly, moves to limit the Church's influence cost nothing. It's like the old saying from ancient Rome: 'If there's no bread, you lay on circuses', in this case at the Church's expense," said Fr Henryk Zielinski, editor of Catholic weekly *Idziemy* (*Let's Go*).

He was reacting to the news that Tusk was abolishing the state Church Fund as part of its reforms. The fund pays social security payments on behalf of clergy, but doesn't pay the priests directly.

Since he took office in December

Tusk has vowed to liberalise much of Poland's institutions and to improve ties with the EU, which were strained under the leadership of the previous PiS Government, while pressing ahead with a raft of reforms, including "separating Church and state."

In addition, Tusk will finance IVF treatment and restrict religious lessons in schools to an hour a week.

The president of the Polish bishops' conference, Archbishop Gadecki of Poznan, said he was watching events "with great concern." Tusk said the Church fund would be replaced by a "voluntary tax deduction system" for "those who want to support their Church."

The secretary-general of the bishops' conference, Auxiliary Bishop Mizinski of Lublin, said the Church was "open to dialogue" on new financial arrangements, provided they are in accord with



Donald Tusk addresses Parliament

Poland's 1998 treaty with the Vatican, as well as the "principle of consensually regulating relations."

Archbishop Gadecki criticised elements of the press who were spreading false news over the Church's finances. He stressed that it's not true that clergy don't pay taxes, and that "a whole mythology has been created related to the financing of the Church."

Fr Dariusz Walencik said that, despite popular opinion, "no

clergyman directly receives any money from the fund." "The fund does not pay them in any way."

Jan Zaryn, a professor of history at Warsaw's Institute for the Legacy of Polish National Thought, said Tusk was already starting to look authoritarian. His comments came after Tusk closed down a Polish public TV channel, state-run radio and the PAP news agency. The move was denounced by President Andrzej Duda as a "flagrant

violation of the constitution and the principles of a democratic state of law" – which were claims Tusk repeatedly made against the previous regime.

Tusk has also struck out at former ministers in the previous Government. Former interior minister Mariusz Kaminski and his deputy, Maciej Wasik, were arrested after the Supreme Court upheld claims that a pardon given to Kaminski in 2015 so that he could become Interior Minister had been granted unlawfully.

Jan Zaryn warned that some of the governments plans were "reminiscent of communist rule in the late 1950s."

"Conditions are already tense and unstable here, with the political sides bitterly divided," the Catholic historian said.

"Poland looks like it is taking sides once more."

Milei targets Church finances first as he withdraws state funding in cuts package

The controversial outsider tasked with bringing order to Argentina's chaotic public finances has chosen his first target for spending cuts – and after his harsh words towards Pope Francis in the run-up to his electoral victory, perhaps it's no surprise that it is the Church. David Agren reports.

Argentina's Catholic Church will no longer receive public funding, concluding a process established by the country's bishops' conference for the Church to provide its own financing.

The withdrawal of funds coincides with newly sworn-in President Javier Milei pushing a programme of spending cuts, privatisations and deregulation as Argentina confronts an economic crisis, which has triggered soaring inflation and deep poverty.

The Argentine bishops' conference said in a statement just before New Year that it had concluded "the process of renouncing funds for archbishops, diocesan bishops and auxiliary bishops (provided) monthly," according to law.

The prelates previously received a monthly stipend from the public purse of approximately \$67 (about 55,000 Argentine pesos) – a sum eroded by inflation of more than 200% in 2023 – according to press reports. Diocesan seminarians will also stop receiving stipends in the coming months, along with parishes serving border regions, Argentine newspaper La Nacion reported.

Some retired prelates will continue to receive a stipend of \$120 per a 2023 agreement with the federal government, however. Catholic schools will also continue receiving some public funding – similar to other schools. Government subsidies previously provided roughly seven per cent of the Church's annual budget in Argentina.

"It won't have much of an impact because many bishops have already

renounced the state contribution in recent years," Mariano De Vedia, religion writer at La Nacion, said; "it is the fact that the Church has been targeted at all that says a lot." OSV News.

Financial support for the Catholic Church stemmed from its historically privileged position in Argentina – while the withdrawal of funds reflected its declining stature in an increasingly secular country.

Article 2 of the Argentine constitution reads: "The Federal Government supports the Roman Catholic Apostolic religion," though requirements such as the president having to be Catholic have been discarded.

Argentina's Catholic population shrunk from 77 per cent of the population in 2008 to 63 per cent in 2019, according to a survey from the research council CONICET.

"The money was part of the understanding of the role of the Catholic faith in the national Catholic identity," said Rodolfo Soriano-Nunez, a Mexican sociologist who studies Latin American Catholicism.

The Argentine bishops' conference renounced public financing in 2018, after reaching a deal with the government of then-President Mauricio Macri to reduce funding by the end of 2023. The public financing totalled approximately \$4.6 million according to the 2018 exchange rate for 130 million pesos – but it was a financial package that faced criticism from different sectors of society.

The subsidies sometimes proved polemic, according to Soriano-



Milei's reforms have prompted widespread anger across Argentina

Nunez, and, at times, were used by Argentine presidents in attempts to control the Church or win support from the bishops for their initiatives.

"You see the same in the countries where those subsidies still exist," he said.

Milei, who took office on 10th December, issued a decree of more than 300 measures in December meant to rapidly deregulate the Argentine economy – triggering street protests and promises of a general strike by unions. His government also devalued the peso by 54 per cent.

The decree formally began "to dismantle the Argentine state," El Pais wrote, allowing for the future privatisation of state companies such as the oil giant YPF, and opening the door to operations in dollars. Milei is also aiming to make the labour market and the health system more flexible.

"There is no more money," Milei and his functionaries have repeatedly said.

Argentine Church leaders have mostly remained silent on the new president, who previously accused Pope Francis of preaching "communism." Bishop Riscar Ojea of San Isidro, the Argentine bishops' conference president, said in a statement released on social media site X, that he prays "to the Lord to enlighten the new elected authorities."

Some Catholics working with the poor have spoken out against the decree, which a trio of diocesan social ministries in southern Patagonia called "an attack on our democracy."

"We cannot allow the division of powers to be ignored in this way, to continue imposing an economic model that continues to concentrate wealth in privileged monopolistic groups," said the

statement from social ministries in the Dioceses of San Carlos de Bariloche, Viedma and Alto Valle del Rio Negro.

"As a Church we have been denouncing the advance of liberalism with its deregulation of the market, because it proposes a society based on individualism and competition, and not on social justice, solidarity and fraternity.

"This (decree) hits the hearts of our families hard," the statement said.

In his Christmas message, Bishop Ojea expressed concern over rising poverty in Argentina, especially as rising prices threatened to take food off the table of many families.

"We are truly and seriously concerned that food reaches all the children of our country," he said.

The Social Debt Observatory at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina put the poverty rate at 44.7 per cent in December.

Investigation demanded after hundreds give fascist salute at Rome rally

Frances D'Emilio, Associated Press
Opposition politicians in Italy have called on the Government, headed by far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, to explain how hundreds of demonstrators were able to give a banned fascist salute at a Rome rally without any police intervention.

The rally on Sunday in a working-class neighbourhood was to remember the killing in 1978 of two members of a neo-fascist youth group in an attack later claimed by extreme-left militants.

At one point in the rally, participants raised their right arm in a straight-armed salute that harks back to the fascist

dictatorship of Benito Mussolini.

Under post-war legislation, use of fascist symbolism, including the straight-armed salute also known as the Roman salute, is banned.

Democratic Party chief Elly Schlein, who heads the largest opposition party in the legislature, was among those demanding that Ms Meloni's interior minister appear in Parliament to explain why police apparently did nothing to stop the rally.

Ms Schlein and others noted that last month, when a theatre-goer at a La Scala opera house premiere shouted "Long live

anti-fascist Italy", the man was quickly surrounded by police from Italy's anti-terrorism squad.

"If you shout 'Long live anti-fascist Italy' in a theatre, you get identified (by police); if you go to a neo-fascist gathering with Roman salutes and banner, you don't," said Ms Schlein. Then she added: "Meloni has nothing to say?"

Rai state television said on Monday that Italian police were investigating.

Leaders of Italy's tiny Jewish community also expressed dismay.

"It's right to recall the victims of political violence, but in 2024 this can't

happen with hundreds of people who give the Roman salute," Ruth Dureghello, who for several years led Rome's Jewish community, tweeted.

Mussolini's anti-Jewish laws helped pave the way for the deportation of Italian Jews during the German occupation of Rome in the latter years of the Second World War.

Meloni, whose Brothers of Italy party has its roots in neo-fascism, has distanced herself from Mussolini's dictatorship, declaring that "the Italian right has handed fascism over to history for decades now".

Pope Benedict XVI on love: ‘it is always necessary... whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man’

Pope Benedict XVI died just over a year ago, on 31st December, 2022.. Nicknamed the ‘professor pope’ Benedict XVI lived a life devoted to placing the truth in the service of love.

A keen defender and teacher of the Church’s doctrines, he had a deep confidence that the truths handed down by Jesus Christ would never detract from our ability to carry out his commandment to love. Rather, they would help us fulfill it.

As a young priest, as cardinal, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, as pope and, finally, as pope emeritus, Benedict spoke words that encouraged and inspired – but also corrected and clarified.

Below is a collection of quotes from the late Holy Father that show his inimitable way of speaking – and living – the truth in love.

On theology

“Every theologian now seems to want to be ‘creative’. But his proper task is to deepen the common deposit of faith as well as to help in proclaiming it, not ‘to create’ it. Otherwise faith will be fragmented into a series of often conflicting schools and currents to the grave harm of the disconcerted people of God.”

(From *The Ratzinger Report*, 1985)

On the liturgy

“Are we not interested in the Cosmos anymore? Are we today really hopelessly huddled in our own little circle? Is it not important, precisely today, to pray with the whole of creation?”

“Is it not important, precisely today, to find room for the dimension of the future, for hope in the Lord who is to come again, to recognize again, indeed to live, the dynamism of the new creation as an essential form of the liturgy?” (From *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 2000)

On faith

“Faith is not a mere intellectual assent of the human person to specific truths about God; it is an act with which I entrust myself freely to a God who is Father and who loves me; it is adherence to a ‘You’ who gives me hope and trust.” (General audience, October, 2012)

On hope

“Man was created for greatness – for God himself; he was created to be filled by God. But his heart is



too small for the greatness to which it is destined. It must be stretched.” (Encyclical letter *Spe salvi*, November, 2007)

On love

“Do not desire anything less for your life than a love that is strong and beautiful and that is capable of making the whole of your existence a joyful undertaking of giving yourselves as a gift to God and your brothers and sisters, in imitation of the One who vanquished hatred and death forever through love (Rv. 5:13).”

(*Message to the youth of the world on the occasion of the 22nd World Youth Day*, 2007)

“Love – caritas – will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the state so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such.” (Encyclical letter *Deus caritas est*, 25th December, 2005)

On truth

“The truth comes to rule, not through violence, but rather through its own power; this is the central theme of John’s Gospel: When brought before Pilate, Jesus professes that he himself is The Truth and the witness to the truth. He does not defend the truth with legions but rather makes it visible through his Passion and thereby also implements it.” (*Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times – A Conversation with Peter Seewald* 2010)

“A Christianity of charity without truth would be more or less interchangeable with a pool of good sentiments, helpful for social cohesion, but of little relevance. In other words, there would no longer be any real place for God in the world.” (Encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 7th July, 2009)

On freedom

“The freedom of a human being is the freedom of a limited being, and therefore is itself limited. We can possess it only as a shared

freedom, in the communion of freedom: only if we live in the right way, with one another and for one another, can freedom develop.” (Homily for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 8th December, 2005)

“As Son, Jesus brings a new freedom: not the freedom of someone with no obligations, but the freedom of someone totally united with the Father’s will, someone who helps mankind to attain the freedom of inner oneness with God.” (*Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, 2012)

On the Second Vatican Council

“[T]here was the Council of the Fathers – the real Council – but there was also the Council of the media.

“We know that this Council of the media was accessible to everyone. Therefore, this was the dominant one, the more effective one, and it created so many disasters, so many problems, so much suffering: seminaries closed,

convents closed, banal liturgy ...” and the real Council had difficulty establishing itself and taking shape; the virtual Council was stronger than the real Council.

“But the real force of the Council was present and, slowly but surely, established itself more and more and became the true force which is also the true reform, the true renewal of the Church.” (*Address to the clergy of Rome*, Feb. 14, 2013)

On the Eucharist

“[The Greek word] ‘Eucharistomen’ harks back to the reality of thanksgiving, to the new dimension that Christ imparts to it. The cross, suffering, all that is wrong with the world: he transformed all this into ‘thanks,’ and therefore into a ‘blessing.’

“Hence he fundamentally transubstantiated life and the world, and he has given us and gives us each day the bread of true life, which transcends this world thanks to the strength of His love.” (*Address on the 65th anniversary of his priestly ordination*, 28th June, 2016)

PRAYER AND SCRIPTURE

ALLEGRA MUTANDA

Rooted in Christ, we grow: A call to a deepening life of prayer

Pope Francis has designated 2024 as a Year of Prayer in preparation for the 2025 Jubilee Year 'Pilgrims of Hope'. The Year started with Advent and its particular focus is on the 'Our Father'. The call is to encourage us all to go deeper in our commitment to prayer and in our love of God. Here Allegra reflects on this call to prayer.

I have been working in the Catholic Church – and more specifically in evangelisation – for almost 20 years.

Early on in that time, the Lord taught me a lesson that has stayed with me these past years, and which continues to act as reminder for me. I did not know then that my life would be this work of evangelisation and mission – of bringing others to know and experience the Lord, both through proclamation of the Word and through prayer, helping others grow closer to the person of Christ.

Stop!

At the time, I had been living in the Sion community house in Brentwood. The day before a parish mission, the Friday, was also a day of prayer and fasting for the community. But there was so much to prepare ahead of mission that I often felt there was little time to stop, even for those precious times of adoration and intercession.

One Friday, as I was rushing around yet again, getting things ready. I was about to pass the prayer room where Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament was taking place when I suddenly heard: 'STOP!'

This not only took me by surprise, but it shook me. Was it my imagination or had I really, audibly, heard the command to... stop?!?

Yet, I stopped. And then I heard: *"How will you know what to do unless you ask Me; unless I tell you? How will you know UNLESS you stop and listen [to Me]?"*

I count this as one of the very few times I believe I have heard the voice of God in an audible way. Was it really Him or was I dreaming? Deep down, somehow, I just knew. In fact, the words I heard did not take me by surprise; I had been neglecting to take time out with the Lord because of my busyness.

True; how was I to know what to do or what God was calling me to if I had no time for Him - to ask Him, listen to Him or simply be with Him?

Choosing for God

I had become so busy with the works of the Lord that I had been

forgetting the Lord of the works. And for some of you, as you read this, it will resonate with you. Because, sometimes, we can find ourselves doing so much for God (or simply doing too much) that we no longer have time for Him because, after all, 'I am busy doing work for you, God.'

Yet the Lord was reminding me not to forget to choose the better place. It was a 'Mary and Martha' story: everything in the right order so that everything else would flow from it accordingly.

It is always worth remembering that prayer benefits us, not God. God does not gain anything from our prayer, for it neither adds nor subtracts anything from HE who is complete in Himself.

But prayer benefits us: it changes us. It can break down walls and change the atmosphere around us. Prayer 'elevates' our perspective of a situation and teaches us to see

'How was I to know what to do or what God was calling me to if I had no time for Him - to ask Him, listen to Him or simply be with Him?'

things with a divine perspective in mind rather than a human one. Prayer brings growth and transformation which enables us to mature spiritually as we grow closer in love and intimacy with Jesus.

As Pope St John Paul II wrote in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001), it 'develops that conversation with Christ which makes us his intimate friends'.

God's promises

Our God is a faithful God who desires for us to live abundant lives. He has plans for each one of us for

peace, not disaster, to bring us a future full of hope. And His promise is that when we call to Him and seek Him with all our hearts, we will not only find Him, but He will let Himself be found (c.f. Jer.29:11-14).

Prayer becomes that place of encounter where we go to meet God and where God meets us; an encounter of God's thirst [for us] with ours [of Him].

As we read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2560), God is thirsting that we might thirst for Him.

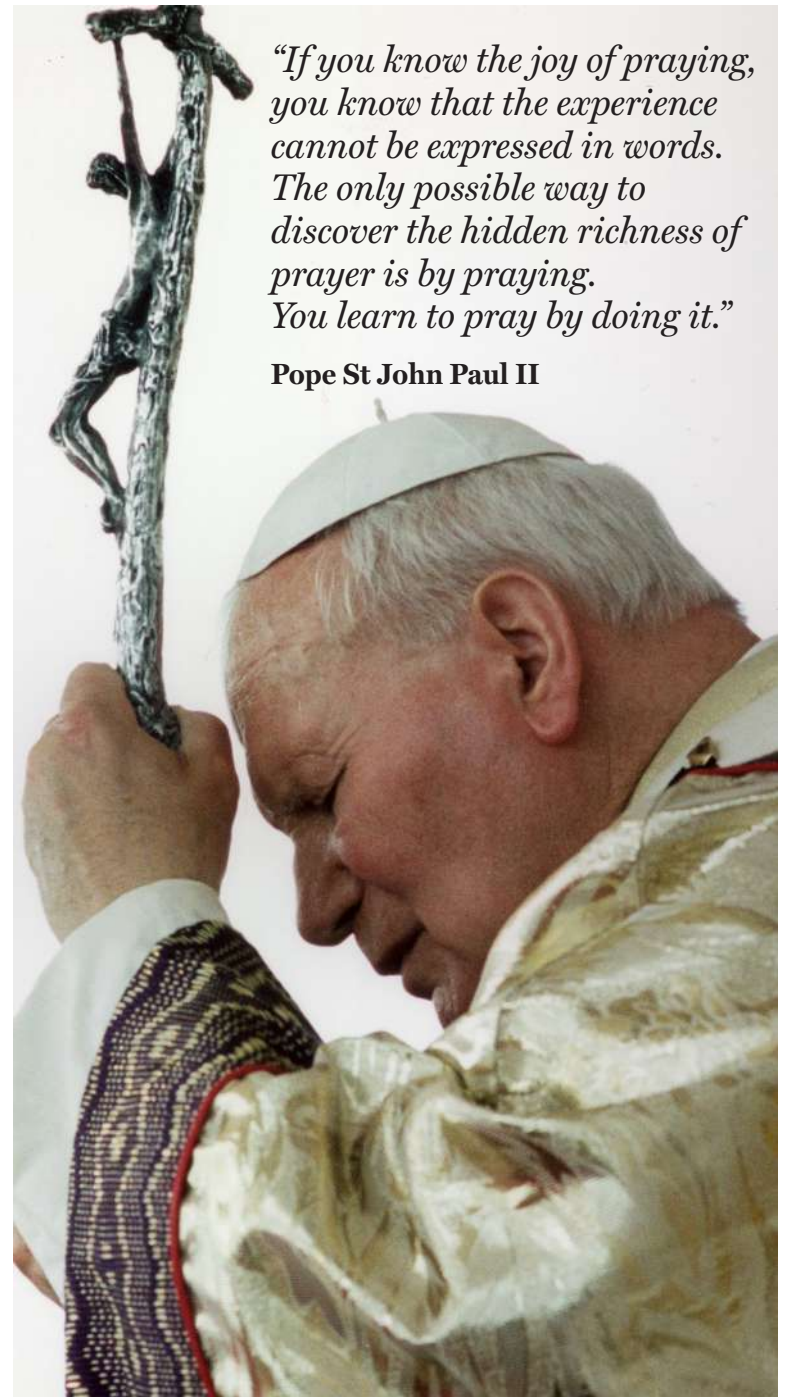
Staying awake

Throughout scripture, we have reminders of the need for prayer, for being ready, on the alert. St Paul asks the Church at Ephesus to pray all the time and never get tired of staying awake to pray (cf. 6:18). To the Church in Thessalonica, he says 'pray constantly' (1 Thess 5: 18). In the synoptic Gospels, we hear Jesus himself ask his disciples to stay awake and watch with him for an hour before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26: 38-41) marking the importance of keeping vigil, of praying.

Prayer in the life of a Christian is not a luxury but a vital necessity and an integral part of it, especially as we navigate the challenges of daily life.

So, as we embark on a new year and with prayer our particular focus in the Church, where is God calling you 'to stop'? Where is He asking you to redress the balance between 'doing' for Him and simply 'being' with Him?

How do you find yourself thirsting for Him? How can you challenge yourself to a disciplined, committed life of prayer especially this year?



"If you know the joy of praying, you know that the experience cannot be expressed in words. The only possible way to discover the hidden richness of prayer is by praying. You learn to pray by doing it."

Pope St John Paul II

Pope St John Paul II wrote that prayer 'develops that conversation with Christ which makes us his intimate friends'.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allegra Mutanda is a lay woman in full-time ministry in the Catholic Church. She is originally from the DR Congo and is a native French speaker. She has lived in the UK since 1995 and holds a BSc (Hons) degree in Business Information Technology and a PGCE but, in the last several years, her studies and focus have been around the New Evangelisation.

Allegra's faith came alive in 2001 after she attended 'Life in the Spirit' seminars in the Diocese of Brentwood. Those seminars had a transformative effect on her personal life and subsequent career path. Allegra has extensive experience both in evangelisation and parish ministry having been involved in evangelisation since 2003. Between 2006 and 2018, Allegra became a full-time lay missionary with Sion Catholic Community for Evangelism whose core charism is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others. Her primary work there was in parish renewal and missions and, in that time, worked with over a hundred Catholic parishes across the UK.

Since 2020, Allegra has been working for the Parish of St Peter and the Winchester Martyrs in Winchester as their Director of Evangelisation and Leadership, where she is helping the parish fulfil its vision of bringing people closer to Jesus Christ in hope and joy. Allegra also organises weekend retreats and is often invited to speak at retreat days, seminars, and conferences.

After a great 2023, Mark 10 Mission has sets its sights on a stunning 2024

The Mark 10 Mission had a momentous year in 2023, from attending World Youth Day in Lisbon and seeing numbers in terms of the children and schools taking part in its popular liturgies rocket.

But with further exposure on Shalom World TV in the offing, and exciting plans for secondary schools, the Catholic charity is not resting on its laurels, and is stepping into 2024 with faith and confidence.

Leading over a hundred thousand children in praying the Rosary and recording with the BBC at World Youth Day were just some of the highlights of yet another momentous year for the Mark 10 Mission in 2023.

The Catholic charity, formed during the pandemic with a simple desire to lead children to Jesus, now shares the Gospel with tens of thousands of school children online each week.

The sheer volume of quality content produced by the Mark 10 Mission has meant it has swiftly become one of the most prominent groups in Catholic education across the UK. In 2023 alone, it crafted 86 videos sharing the Sunday Gospel.

But it has not just been videos that the Leeds-based charity has been producing. In June, it hosted its inaugural 'Encounter Conference' at its offices at Hinsley Hall. The day focused on helping schools become 'places where children meet with Jesus every day.' It was attended by headteachers and school leaders from across the north of England.

In August, The Mark 10 Mission



National Director Greg Finn

Fr Henry Longbottom

was one of the only UK ministries to be represented at the World Youth Day Vocations Fair in Lisbon. It was while standing outside Mark 10's stall in Portugal that founder and National Director Greg Finn was hit by the meteoric nature of the charity's growth.

"We have so much to thank the Lord for yet again in 2023," Mr Finn told the *Universe*. "It was there in Lisbon that it really hit home how mindblowing this journey has been. We'd begun with an iPhone and an idea in an upstairs chapel in Bradford and there we were, less than three years later, in Lisbon, presenting to Catholics from all across the globe."

When asked about his favourite moment of the year, Mr Finn replied: "The Rosary Challenge by a mile! That was such a blessed project for us and the way it all came together was typical of Mark

10. We had created some videos for the Rosary back in October 2022 and they'd gone down well. This year though, I really felt called to film at the National Shrine of Our Lady in Walsingham.

"Our videographer Theo and I trekked down to Norfolk on the last Thursday in July – and we even took my housemate with us to help set up and keep us entertained. We had to wait around until the Shrine closed to the public, then we bundled our way into the Slipper Chapel, set up and filmed late into the evening."

"Like so often has been the case with this ministry, it was a simple idea that became a whole lot bigger than we ever could have anticipated. We edited and released the videos in October and it captured the imagination of schools across the country.

"By the end of that month, we



At World Youth Day

estimate around 140,000 children prayed a decade of the Rosary with us using the videos filmed in the Slipper Chapel."

The Rosary Challenge has been yet another example of how The Mark 10 Mission has taken beautiful elements of the Catholic tradition and presented them in a fresh and engaging way for children. Its 15-minute videos always feature Fr Henry Longbottom, a priest of Leeds Diocese, reading the Gospel in full vestments. The responses and gestures from Holy Mass are always carefully presented in the videos.

Fr Henry laughs as he remembers a question he was asked by one of the children at a primary school in Leeds. "A young boy put his hand up and asked: 'Why do you always kiss the book?' It was a great question which allowed me to explain the importance of holy scripture. It also illustrated to me how perceptive and inquisitive children are about even the small things in our faith."

The future looks bright as The Mark 10 Mission steps into the new year. They have just signed an agreement to have their content

broadcast across the globe on Shalom World TV. There are also exciting plans to launch a weekly video series for secondary school students from September.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for this fast-growing yet fledgling ministry will be to navigate the volume of opportunities which come their way, whilst operating within their means. Despite their influence, they are only a small team sailing in the somewhat uncharted waters of online evangelisation.

The charity has always felt the Lord calling them to keep their content free so that as many children as possible can experience the Gospel. Fundraising is always a priority to keep the mission moving forwards, and the charity will continue to apply for grants and invite donors to partner with them in their quest to bring the children of the UK to Jesus.

What is certain is the impossibility of predicting what the Lord has in store for this passionate group of young Catholics, with a dream to change the spiritual lives of young people in our schools.

• www.themark10mission.co.uk



Schools have responded enthusiastically to the Mark 10 Mission videos

A VIEW FROM THE PEWS

MICHAEL CAINE

ST WINEFRIDE'S PARISH, LYMM, CHESHIRE



The art – and importance – of prayer

Pope Francis has asked for Catholics worldwide to set 2024 as the Year of Prayer. When I heard this, I began to think about praying and what it all meant. I remember when I was a teenager, if adults started to talk about praying, we youngsters would just snigger. It meant nothing to us.

All this changed one day when I was 14, and a friend told me that evening, he'd come home after school to find his aunt and others rushing around the house. He asked her why. She told him that the doctor had been sent for, as his mum had suddenly become very ill.

After a while, the doctor came into the room where they were and said that it was as if she'd given up on living, and she could die. My friend's mum was everything to their family. He was devastated and started crying. His aunt told him he wasn't helping and told him to go to his room. When he got there, he fell on his bed in tears, noticing that it was just a few minutes before four o'clock.

He said he'd never prayed, but at that moment he just started to, asking God to let my mum live. He kept on praying and said he must have fallen asleep doing so. He was awakened by his aunt and noticed that it was now ten past five.



She told him that his mum had suddenly recovered. The doctor noticed that the recovery started at four o'clock and she had steadily recovered over the past hour, and was now awake and feeling a lot better.

My friend said he was so relieved, then thought about the time. According to the doctor, his mum had started recovering just after he'd started praying. He went on to say that when his aunt left the room, he started praying again, this time thanking God, as he believed it was his intervention that had caused his mum's recovery.

I asked him why he believed it to be God's intervention that caused

his mother's recovery. He said because he'd noticed the time when he fell onto his bed crying, why had he done so? He then asked why had his aunt told him about the time of his mother's recovery, and not simply that she was getting better. He believed it was God's way of letting him know his prayers had been answered. It made me wonder too, and since then I've never sniggered at the word praying.

What is praying?

What is praying? I look upon it as a conversation between me and God. I also pray to other beings in Heaven, but it's always a one-way conversation, with me doing all the

talking, which is probably why it's called praying and not a conversation.

When I pray to God, either asking for help or thanking him for the help that's been given, I always remember that the answer to my requests can be yes or no. I also know that whatever his answer is it will be in my best interest if I've prayed honestly.

All this is fine, but being as it's a one-way conversation, how do we pray?

Like any conversation, it's the getting started that's the problem. When praying, should we kneel, stand up, sit down, lie down, all with hands together in the picturesque position? They are all correct, but it's what is said that is important, so long as we say it honestly.

Before looking at what we can say, we should be aware of all the prayers created by Our Lord Jesus Christ, Our Lady and the saints. The words they chose can cover the very reason we are praying, and in many cases using words better than our own. There are many such wonderful prayers. When I'm having a problem starting, I always use such a prayer. It could be the Our Father, The Hail Mary, A Good Act of Contrition, or any other,

sometimes more than one prayer, but how do I say what I want to say?

Before I start praying, I first think about what I'd like to talk about to God or a holy person. Is it a request of some sort, such as for help, or guidance in some matter, or how to deal with a problem, or thanking whoever for some past help? Knowing what I want to talk about helps me to say what I want to say and to think about what I'm saying. Sometimes there's a lot I want to say, so I write it all down.

I always start my prayers by thanking God for all he's done for me, and then I get into my one-way conversation with him or the saintly person I'm praying to, by going through all the things that I want to talk about.

Once I start praying, I close my eyes and imagine what the being I'm talking to looks like. This makes my praying more of a conversation as I'm looking at whoever I'm praying to making it all a lot easier.

Get into the habit of praying. Where it's concerned, there is just one question that I've never been able to answer:

Why do I always feel so much better after it?

JOURNEY IN FAITH

CHRIS MCDONNELL



The Christian roots of modern healthcare – and why we need to all pray that current disputes can be resolved

Medical staff in England have been experiencing a moral dilemma in recent weeks following the call by their professional associations to take strike action in pursuit of a pay claim.

It is not my intention to examine the detail of action but rather to look at the background of hospital care that led to the formation of the National Health service.

Conceived in wartime and finally brought to fruition in 1948, the NHS has long been considered the jewel in the social crown of the country, serving sick people, free at the point of delivery. That those staffing the service should even consider taking strike action would not have been entertained a few years ago.

Hospitals in the Europe are largely coincident with the establishment of Christianity and



the advent of monasteries in the Middle Ages, although small groups concerned with palliative care had existed from an earlier time. Care of the sick became a

recognisable feature of many religious institutions at this time. But the coming of the Reformation in Europe and the dissolution of monastic communities meant that healthcare facilities were lost as well.

During the 17th Century, various individuals re-established caring groups, usually within a religious foundation. So, by 1660, over 40 houses of the Sisters of Charity existed in France with the sick and the poor being treated in their own homes. Gradually through the 19th Century, more and more buildings were designated hospitals with their own staffing to serve their patients needs.

Mid-century and the outbreak of war in the Crimea saw the emergence of the nursing skills of Florence Nightingale, who dedicated her life to developing

good nursing practice, teaching others by her example and leadership.

It was the unfortunate consequence of war that gave rise to the formation of medical units within the armed services as more and medical treatment became specialised. Internationally the Red Cross and the Red Crescent became recognised medical agencies protected from the consequences of hostilities. One of the tragedies of the conflict in Gaza has been that fighting has spread to medical facilities, at a huge cost to the care and treatment that can safely be provided.

The dawn of the health service introduced the right to medical treatment without particular charge, the cost being covered by the payment through taxes, and so the National Health Service came

into being.

Staffed by nurses and doctors who provided diagnoses and offered treatment, we have come to depend on their hard work and dedicated service, and some would say, take them for granted.

That staff now have to consider strike action to achieve a reasonable pay grade is to be regretted. A national service demands on national support and a response that recognises the quality of their work, who were after all our first line of defence during the Covid pandemic. It is of national concern that we have doctors and nurses on picket lines while patients wait for treatment. That they have had to resort to taking this action is a national disgrace.

Let's hope and pray for a resolution to the position as soon as possible for the benefit of all.

Faith is a gift; we do not merit it nor can we impose it upon others

‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’

Matthew 16:16

When Jesus asked his disciples who did people say he was, Peter spoke up and said: “You are the Christ (the anointed One), the Son of the living God.”

That’s when Jesus declared him “blessed” because his profession of faith did not come to him naturally as a creature of “flesh and blood”. It did not come of his own volition nor was it derived from mental argument or exhaustive scientific research. It came from his “Heavenly Father”. (Matthew 16:17) In other words, it was a gift of God.

Faith is a gift; we do not merit it nor can we impose it upon others. It is the sort of gift that is meant to be lived because it imparts meaning to our lives.

I have been privileged to write a book about this incredible gift, titled: *What is this thing called*

Faith? The beauty of faith is that it renews, not only those who have been chosen to receive it, it also renews the world around them.

St James says that “faith without good works is dead.” (James 2: 14) The good works he was talking about were not “the works of the law”, but the healing works and love of Christ for our fellowman. A bell is not a bell ’til it is rung. A song is not a song ’til it is sung. In the same way, faith is not a gift ’til it is lived.

When we declare our faith in Jesus as the Son of the living God, we are committing ourselves to live like him, to do as he says. Before leaving this earth, Jesus said to his followers: “A new commandment I give you, love one another as I have loved you.” (John 13: 34-35)

This love of Christ is not something abstract or unattainable. It is real. And, we will be judged by it on the last day. In Matthew 25, Jesus explains what he expects of us by means of a parable. It is called the parable of the last judgment. We will be divided, Jesus



says, into two groups like sheep and goats. The sheep (the faithful ones) will be on the right whereas the goats (the unfaithful ones) will be on the left, and this is how the Lord will address us. “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was naked and you clothed me; I was homeless and you gave me shelter: I was sick and you comforted me: I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then, the Lord goes on to say that the unfaithful will ask: “When did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or homeless or sick or in prison?” The Lord’s surprising answer: “Whatsoever you do to the

least of my people, that you do unto me.” (Matthew 25:40)

Not every Christian, regrettably, follows Jesus’s new commandment, but those who do (and we’re all commanded to do so) are heroic witnesses to the power of God’s love for all his children.

A few years ago a German nun, Sr Ruth Pfau, who was also a physician, passed away in Muslim Pakistan and was honoured with a state funeral. She took care of people with leprosy in Pakistan, effectively eliminating the threat of this terrible disease there and spread her work into Afghanistan. Muslims loved and accepted her

wherever she went because she had no other purpose, no other agenda than to do as Christ commanded: “Whatsoever you do to the least of my people you do unto me.”

Good example is the best witness. It is also the best form of ecumenism for it unites, as one, people of different persuasions and beliefs.

Thank God for those courageous Christians who reach out in love to their fellowman as Christ commanded.

Faith is a gift. Let it be a living faith, however, that transforms by faithful witness your life, and the world around you.

Epiphany is a beacon of universal truth in our modern world

Last week we revisited one of Christianity’s oldest and most profound celebrations: Epiphany. This ancient festival holds a timeless message.

Ostensibly, it is known as the day when the Magi, or three wise men, visited Jesus in Bethlehem. At its heart, Epiphany is a moment of divine revelation, celebrating the divinity of the Son of God and His message which reached beyond the Jewish community to all of humanity.

It’s a story that has echoed down through centuries, a narrative of inclusivity and universal brotherhood.

The word, Epiphany, means to “shine forth,” and the message of Jesus shines forth as a universal call transcending all borders and distinctions.

But what does Epiphany mean for us today? This ancient truth holds the mirror up to our current culture, where

depth and meaning are frequently eclipsed by a relentless tide of disposability and surface-level engagement.

In a world where the transient overshadows the eternal, where the superficial drowns out the profound, Epiphany stands as a reminder of the enduring power of genuine insight and personal transformation.

It dares us to look beyond a disposable culture that ensnares us, urging us to find deeper meaning in our lives.

Our world is saturated with words — words that often ring hollow, serving agendas rather than truths, creating noise rather than harmony.

In this cacophony, the essence of Epiphany invites us to a different kind of listening, a listening that leads to personal insights.

It calls us to discern not just with our

ears, but with our hearts.

Epiphany challenges us to move beyond a notional assent to religious doctrine to a real, practical assent to Christ, as eloquently distinguished by Cardinal Newman. It’s one thing to acknowledge doctrine superficially, quite another to embody it in the fiber of one’s being.

Real assent is not just agreeing with the gospel message; it’s allowing it to take root in our lives, guiding our actions, and shaping how we treat others. This season of Epiphany inspires each of us to discover a sense of meaning in our lives where the gospel becomes a living, breathing part of our existence, enriching our relationships and guiding our actions.

This discovery is unique to each individual, yet it converges on a common path — living a life that reflects the core

teachings of Christ. It’s about authenticity, where what shines through is not a mere reflection of societal norms, but a testament to a personal understanding and relationship with Christ.

As we step into this New Year, embracing the spirit of Epiphany can be the most rewarding journey of all. It’s a journey towards the self, away from the ego towards a life that is less about consumption and more about contribution, less about what we take and more about what we give.

As we embark on this journey, let’s cherish the truth that every person is significant with unique gifts to offer. May the light of Epiphany illuminate our paths, leading us to live in ways that are uniquely ours, resonating with the message of universal love and inclusion embodied by Jesus.

SUNDAY WORSHIP

ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS



You are called by name to be a friend of Jesus; why not come and see him?

Jesus invites disciples to “Come and see” and they followed him

14th January 2024
2nd Sunday (Year B)

1 Samuel 3:3-10, 19

The call of young Samuel, one of the great vocation stories

Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” and ran to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

Responsorial: from Psalm 39

Resp.: Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will

*I waited, I waited for the Lord and he stooped down to me; he heard my cry.
He put a new song into my mouth, praise of our God. (R./)*

*You do not ask for sacrifice and offerings, but an open ear.
You do not ask for holocaust and victim.
Instead, here am I. (R./)*

*In the scroll of the book it stands written that I should do your will.
My God, I delight in your law in the depth of my heart. (R./)*

*Your justice I have proclaimed in the great assembly.
My lips I have not sealed; you know it, O Lord. (R./)*



1 Corinthians 6:13-15, 17-20
Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit; we should do all for the glory of God

The body is not meant for fornication, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!

Whoever is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication. Every other sin one commits is outside the body; but to fornicate is to sin against one's own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Gospel: John 1:35-42
Jesus invites disciples to “Come and see” and they followed him

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They

said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

Called by name

“I have called you by your name; you are mine.” Remembering people's names — what a problem this can be; even with the best of intentions, even when we are really interested in someone and recall the actual person, the name eludes us. So many methods of mnemonic are advised and tried, just to avoid the disappointing admission, “Sorry, but I just can't remember your name.” Every man and woman (and child!) likes to be recognised by name; when others forget, it is a blow to our person-hood.

God knows each individual by name totally, intimately, always. None of us is ever ignored by him; like the birds of the air, and all

created things, we are forever in God's mind, under his care (cf. Mat. 10:29.) Even the person of no particular significance in his neighbour's eyes, the born loser who lives in the shadows of depression most of the time — even he (or she) is precious in the eyes of God, perhaps more precious than anyone can suspect.

Samuel stands for all the little, forgotten people. Just a boy, with no high illusions about himself, a servant and apprentice to the old man Eli; he slept at night in a little room like an altar-boys' sacristy, at the religious shrine of Israel. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, he heard God calling him by name; eventually Samuel recognises that the call is from God, and not just from the priest, so he submits himself heart and soul to listen to God's word. Only then did Samuel discover his own potential, his new identity, the role he was to fulfil in life.

Some of us may feel a strong, but quite false, sense of our own identity. Our self-understanding derives too exclusively from our own achievements, failures, efforts and ambitions; God's plan for us hardly enters the picture at all or we dismiss it as too uncertain, too “spiritual” and remote from daily life. Biblical faith, on the contrary, insists that God calls us into relationship with himself on a day

to day basis, always offering us life, and always making demands on us to live our life worthily in his sight. Called by name. For Christians, specifically, it is relationship with Christ our Lord that lies at the heart of our identity.

Not only are we called by name to friendship with Jesus — we become “members of his body,” sharers in his spirit. Sometimes, in prayer we can taste the rich privilege of belonging to Christ. More often, it is in the darkness of faith that we simply believe in it. But always, and in ordinary details of behaviour, we are called to live up to the standard of love and truth set by the Spirit of Jesus. That is our real Christian vocation; and only by trying to live that vocation are we worthy of our name.

Later, we all hope, we will discover our full identity in God's presence, when this life is over and he calls us by name into the next life.

Like the two apostles who wanted to know Christ better, we will be invited to “Come and see.” **Published by kind permission of the Association of Catholic Priests, an association for priests who wish to have a forum and a voice to reflect, discuss and comment on issues affecting the Church and society today. See www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie**

Worthy custom of bowing before Christ is important reminder of his sacrifice

Q. We have just read several accounts of the birth of Christ during Masses after Christmas. In reading Luke 2:39-40 and Matthew 2:13-15, it appears that there is a difference as to what happened after Jesus was born. My question is this: Did the Holy Family flee to Egypt or did they return to Nazareth?

A. My answer would be that both things happened: Following the birth of the Christ Child and the visit of the Magi, the Holy Family fled to Egypt to avoid Herod's persecution and then they eventually returned to Nazareth, which was their family's home.

Attempts to find a contradiction in Luke's and Matthew's infancy accounts are based on a false understanding of the Gospels. None of the evangelists claimed to have written an exhaustive chronological account of every event in the life of Christ; they wrote for different audiences (Jewish Christians and gentile Christians) and highlighted different things.

My own view of the sequence of events – and this seems to harmonise the Gospel accounts of both Matthew and Luke – is that Jesus was presented in the Temple a few weeks after his birth; then the Holy Family fled to Egypt and, after the death of Herod, returned to Palestine and settled in Nazareth.

Nowhere does Luke say that they returned to Nazareth “immediately” after the birth of Jesus. Luke 2:39 simply says of Jesus, Mary and Joseph: “When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.”

Each Gospel writer was selective about the details of Jesus' life, according to his purposes. Matthew, for example, does not mention the presentation or the finding of Jesus in the Temple.

Q. I don't understand why, over the last couple of years, I don't see folks bowing at the name of Jesus. It doesn't seem to matter whether they are parishioners, priests or nuns. Is there some new rule on this, or am I just too old-school Catholic?

A. The custom of bowing at the name of Jesus is a worthy one, and it has a long tradition in the Church. It takes its origin from St. Paul, who wrote the following words in his Letter to the Philippians (2:9-10): “God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him



the name that is above every other name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

The practice was reinforced at the Second Council of Lyons, convened in 1274 by Pope Gregory X, which highlighted the special honour due to the sacred name, and noted that “whenever that glorious name is recalled, especially during the sacred mysteries of the Mass, everyone should bow the knees of his heart, which he can do even by a bow of his head.”

Pope Gregory followed up with a letter to the Dominican Order, which became the foremost promoters of devotion to the Holy Name. In that letter, Pope Gregory said: “We wish that at the pronouncing of that name, chiefly at the holy sacrifice (of Mass), everyone would bow his head in token that interiorly he bends the knee of his heart.”

I agree with our letter-writer that, over the past several decades, this practice is followed less widely. I also agree that more people should observe it; it serves as an

important reminder of the reverence we owe the divine and reflects an interior desire to honour Jesus, who revealed the Father's love and died on the cross to redeem us.

Q. Why do some religions say that the Sabbath day is Saturday while others, including Catholics, say it's on Sunday?

A. No, Catholics do not say that the Sabbath is on Sunday. The Sabbath is on Saturday, as it was in the Old Testament when God rested from all the work he had done in creation (Gn. 2:2-3) and as it is observed by Jews today.

Christians, though, celebrate Sunday instead, because that is the day on which Jesus rose from the dead and the day on which the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles.

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains: “Sunday is expressly distinguished from the Sabbath which it follows chronologically every week; for Christians its ceremonial observance replaces that of the Sabbath. In Christ's Passover, Sunday fulfills the spiritual truth of

marriage had to promise (in writing) that the children of the marriage would be baptised and brought up in the Catholic faith. Pope Paul VI, though, in his 1970 apostolic letter *Matrimonia Mixta*, modified that guideline somewhat, and his changes made their way into the current Code of Canon Law that was published in 1983.

The present state of Catholic Church law is as follows. Normally it is the bishop of the diocese of the Catholic party who gives permission for a mixed marriage to take place. To receive this permission, the Catholic party must pledge to continue to practise the Catholic faith and must also ‘make a sincere promise to do all in his or her power so that all offspring are baptised and brought up in the Catholic faith.’

The non-Catholic party doesn't have to promise anything; he or she simply has to be made aware of the pledge that the other spouse has made. Neither spouse is required to sign anything in writing; instead, the priest – in requesting permission for the marriage – attests with his signature that the Catholic party has made the required pledge and that the non-Catholic spouse is aware of it.

None of this guarantees, of course, that things will work out as the guidelines envision. It might happen that, with the arrival of a child, the non-Catholic spouse re-evaluates and objects to a Catholic baptism and rearing.

In such a situation, the Catholic partner may be forced to choose between the harmony of the household and the religion of the child. My view is that the wording of the pledge – to “do all in his or her power” – must be interpreted within the context of the marriage.

No one can be required to do what is practically impossible, and it is the sacred and lifelong commitment to a spouse that must prevail – although the Catholic partner should continue his or her own Catholic practice, and do what is reasonable to share that faith with the children.

But this is exactly why a couple ought to discuss such a matter well before the marriage – preferably in a pre-Cana session with a priest. If the issue of the children's religion forecasts future struggles and strife, one wonders whether the marriage itself is such a good idea.

Unfortunately, this column cannot accept questions from readers

the Jewish Sabbath and announces man's eternal rest in God' (No. 2175).

What Christians are celebrating instead of the sabbath is “the Lord's Day,” and that has been happening since the first century. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles: “On the first day of the week, when we gathered to break bread, Paul spoke to them” (Acts 20:7).

So for Christians, Sunday is the preeminent holy day of the week, the day on which we refrain from servile work, devote ourselves to the Eucharist, to prayer and family gatherings.

Around 110, St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch and disciple of the apostle John, proclaimed: “Let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days.”

Q. If a practising Catholic marries a non-Catholic Christian, do they have to promise to baptise their children and raise them in the Catholic faith?

A. This is a very pertinent question. Under the old Code of Canon Law, both parties to a mixed

LITURGICAL MUSIC

SURESH ABBOODASS

Dr Frederick's passion for composing has left an inspiring legacy at cathedral

Dr. Frederick Stocken, who until recently was the organist in St. George's Metropolitan Cathedral in Southwark, London, says he is inspired by the Holy Spirit in his work as a music composer.

Dr Stocken, who left St. George's Cathedral last year to concentrate more on his passion for composing music, had been the main organist for nearly a decade. He has played the organ for many main and historical events, which included Live BBC One and Radio 4 broadcasts for Christmas nights and the recent 175th Anniversary of the establishment of St. George's Cathedral, for which he composed a special music titled *The Wisdom of Christ*.

He has also played the organ for the funerals of three Archbishops of the Archdiocese of Southwark.

He spoke exclusively to the Universe Catholic Weekly with his reflections on his career.

Frederick began his career in Church and liturgical music as a young chorister, aged only nine, in Southwell Minister, Nottinghamshire. He started learning the piano when he was just six years old, and the organ when he was about 11.

When asked what inspires him to compose music, he replied: "To me composing music is a form of prayer, a chance to get in touch with the Almighty. It is the Holy Spirit that inspires me.

"My head is full of music and I want to get that out. Music envelops me and I get lost in it."

He added: "I normally start my composing early in the mornings when it is very quiet. I have an idea and I work on the piano," said Dr. Stocken, who started composing music when he was only ten years old.

One such idea was *The Wisdom of Christ* – the musical score composed to celebrate the 175th Anniversary of the establishment of St. George's Cathedral Southwark last November.

"I was asked to compose a piece for the occasion of the anniversary," he recalled. "For this I had to set a theme and it had to be something relevant.

"It was at this point I thought of the idea of the late Pope St. John Paul II's homily delivered at the St. George's Cathedral on the occasion of his visit in 1982. In his homily I came across these words: 'Wisdom of Christ'.

"At was these words of Pope John Paul that inspired me to compose



Dr. Frederick Stocken

my music for that occasion," he said.

Frederick was very pleased with how well the score was received.

His music reached an international audience when he was asked to write the *Lament for Bosnia* by the New Queen's Hall Orchestra back in 1993. It was a proud and poignant moment for him, as he also conducted it in front of a big audience in the capital Sarajevo, at the initiative of the Bosnian government in 2000.

This piece is also very close to Frederick's heart, as the whole work was inspired by the memory of his grandmother Rosa who tragically perished in Auschwitz.

Listening to *Lament of Bosnia* is something special. It puts Frederick's composition on a different level, conveying a divine feeling as the listener hears its soothing score.

What has Frederick the composer to say about it?

"I can't put it in words," he said. "I felt something godly at it, a good foreboding; a combination of therapy and self-expression."

Soft spoken and extremely

"Composing music is a form of prayer, a chance to get in touch with the Almighty. It is the Holy Spirit that inspires me. .."

charming, Frederick is proud to talk about his Jewish roots. His parents were Anglican, and it was only in the 1950s that his mother discovered her Jewish roots, and learnt about his grandmother who tragically perished in Auschwitz. "I am still affected by it," he said. Disillusioned by the Anglican Church, as well as by the orthodoxy of his Jewish relatives, Frederick converted to Catholicism in 1996, when he was in his mid-twenties, and has never looked back.

Despite having composed two symphonies, a violin concerto, a ballet, organ and choral pieces, Frederick is a very modest and quiet person who is very careful not to blow his own trumpet.

Fifty-six-year-old Frederick has many achievements to his credit. He has invented a diagrammatic method for learning keyboard scales, which are published as 'Scale Shapes' using the *Stocken Method* (Chester Music) now in its third revised edition.

Frederick, whose Doctorate from the University of Manchester on the 19th century Music Theory, particularly related to the music of Anton Bruckner, has also co-produced a two volume *Graded Keyboard Musicianship* (OUP) and the *New Oxford Organ Method* (OUP) with Anne Marsden Thomas.

For both publications, Frederick composed all the original music.

His long list of commissions (17 in total) include ones for Rikkyo University Tokyo, the Stadttheater in Giessen, Germany, and Southern Cathedrals Festival.

His orchestral works have been performed at the Royal Albert Hall, St John's Smith Square and the Barbican. Orchestras that have played his music include The New Queen's Hall Orchestra, the Sarajevo Symphony Orchestra and

the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

He has also been supporting organ studies in the organ department of the Royal Academy of Music for eight years and still continues to teach organ in the Junior Academy. Frederick's organ works have been performed in recitals in King's College, Cambridge, and his choral music has been sung by the choirs of Chichester Cathedral and the London Oratory.

He can also play the flute and his teacher, Kenneth Beard from the Chethams School of Music, from whom he learned the organ and composing, had a great influence on him.

Frederick said it was a difficult decision to leave St. George's, as he had built a very good working relationship with many of his colleagues, including the director of music, Jonathan Schranz, and also with his predecessor, Norman Harper.

Dr. Frederick's work and music can be accessed in his website: www.frederickstocken.com



AROUND THE PARISHES & EDUCATION

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



Alfie's digital skills make sure everything in his home parish is running smoothly

Computer science student Alfie Anil has helped to revolutionise the way St Edward the Confessor parish in Wigan operates.

Alfie, 19, became part of the St Edward the Confessor parish when Sacred Heart and St Cuthbert churches merged back in 2017.

He always had an interest in the church from a young age.

He said: "I grew up in my local parish, which was Sacred Heart, which has now merged with St. Cuthbert's Church in the St. Edward's parish.

"After my first Holy Communion, in year four, I started as an altar server. While I was an altar server, I would attend daily Mass if possible.

"I learnt more from the parish priest, and I got to understand what happens in church. Different sacraments, I would go to observe baptisms, marriages, funerals".

"I was also quite interested in helping the parish priest and my parish with anything that I could do."

Alfie had an interest in computers and computer science and was able to find a way he could use his interest to help the parish.

He added: "I was interested in IT, computer science, and technology. So, I set up the parish Facebook page – I think I was 11. I built the website as well. And then I oversaw all things online and technology in the parish".

"And then around Wigan, if priests needed any help with the



The St Edward the Confessor Facebook page was set up by Anil (pictured right) when he was just 11... now his digital skills have revolutionised the way his home parish works



technology, they would call me, and I would go and sort it out for them. Or if they wanted help with making an Excel spreadsheet, just simple things. I would go and help them out."

After a couple of years volunteering for the church, Alfie was then able to get a role with his local parish as an administrator. It was from there he was really able to implement his ideas.

He said: "In March, the opportunity came for me to be a parish administrator in my local parish, which I took up because I was familiar with almost everyone in the parish because I grew up there and so and because I was

helping with various activities, I got to know who does what".

"So, I currently work as the parish administrator, managing the finances, funerals, the sacraments like first Holy communions and baptisms.

"We now also have volunteers in what we call the parish hub, which is basically the parish office so I kind of lead them and help them to understand the administrative tasks."

While there, he was able to create an app/software called Parish Navigator, to help both him and volunteers manage the parish efficiently.

He said: "To make parish administration and management

easier, I developed the app which basically allows parishes to manage parish members, track queries, such as contact us forms and sacrament applications.

"I'm studying computer science at university and after working in the parish offices as an administrator for a few months, I understood that software could make some of the admin tasks a lot easier.

"Whenever I had any problems, or things that I thought I could simplify, I would note them down and solve them in the software, and I implemented the software in the parish with the help of the priest.

"Now all the volunteers have

their own account with the lower access level to help them understand the software."

While doing all of this, Alfie is also a student at the University of Lancaster. Despite balancing this with his university work, he hopes to be able to remain with the parish for as long as possible.

He said: "I go to university in Lancaster, so I'm based in Wigan, so what I do is I commute to Lancaster University every day.

"I stay at home and the parish is my home parish. I make the commute because I like my home community, my home parish. I hope to stay within the parish as long as I can."

**Tell your school or parish
story to the Universe
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Submit your stories to Andy Drozdziak

**andy.drozdziak@universecatholic
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**And we love great photos – so send
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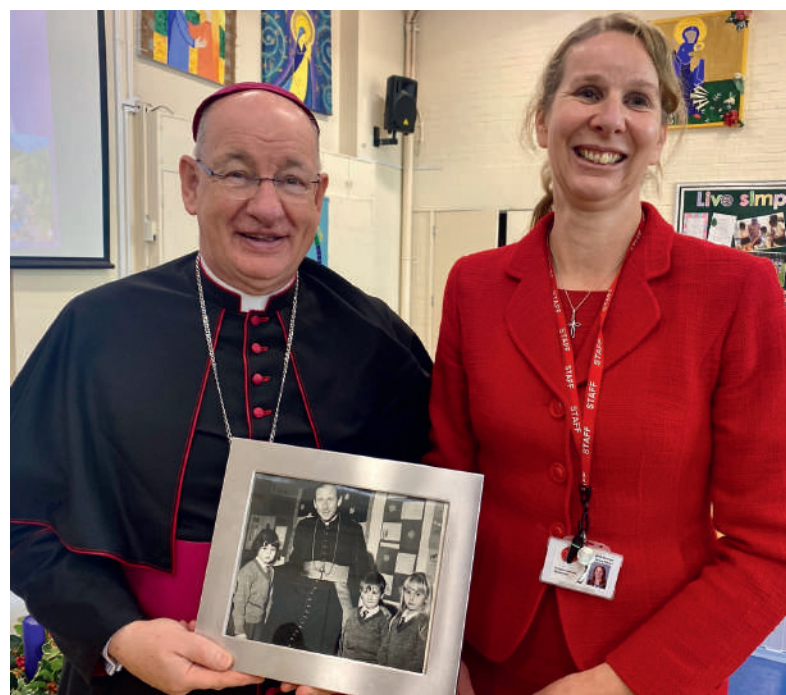
School's golden celebration

The Diocesan Education Service of Arundel and Brighton was delighted to join the 50th anniversary celebrations at English Martyrs Catholic Primary School in Goring in December.

Mass was concelebrated by Bishop Richard Moth, with Fr Liam O'Connor, Fr Chris Ingle and Deacon Mark Woods.

Bishop Richard, pictured with headteacher Dr Helen Townsley, is holding a photograph of the opening of the school by the then Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, Michael Bowen.

The first pupils at the school were among those who attended the celebrations.





Miley B was brilliant as Matilda

Our Matilda's just magic!

St. Paul's *Matilda the Musical* has been hailed as a 'fantastic performance' after the Catholic high school in Wythenshawe brought the captivating West End hit to life.

Matilda is based on the Roald Dahl bestseller about the free-spirited bookish little girl with super-powers who is sent away to a horrible school run by a hideous disciplinarian called Miss Trunchbull.

St. Paul's students captivated their audiences with this magical retelling of the story. Miley B was perfect for the show as Matilda, showing a brilliant range of emotion and feeling and brilliantly capturing her character's defiance, imagination and humour.

David B was incredible as Miss Trunchbull, embodying all the evil and cruelty of the villain headmistress. Timid but heroic Miss Honey was brought to life by Amy-Louise F who captured her kindness and strength wonderfully.

Charlie McWhirter was magnetic as Mr Wormwood, Grace T was hilarious as Mrs Wormwood, with a variety of lavish outfits, and Imogen S played their son Michael wonderfully. Heidi C made a highly entertaining dance partner in the role of Rudolpho and Michael K gave a fantastic performance as Bruce.

The ensemble were consistently enchanting, with Big Kids and Little Kids singing and dancing their way through complex lyrics and choreography with captivating energy and talent.

The production was masterminded by Mrs Kathryn Slater, who said: "What a fantastic performance of this much-loved story of an avid young reader with superpowers trying to make sense of a world run mostly by hideously grotesque adults.

"The pupils' singing, dancing and acting was truly special. I was extremely proud of our students – they worked so hard and put so much energy into the show, making it a huge success."

Headteacher Mike Whiteside paid tribute to 'the talented pupils for another fantastic production.'

"Matilda was a stunning show, delivered by an accomplished cast. There were some outstanding performances and some inspired characterizations," Mr Whiteside said.

"Congratulations to our incredibly talented pupils for another fantastic production. Credit must also go those staff who worked tirelessly to give our pupils this fantastic opportunity. The show was amazing – a real spectacular. It left songs in your head and a smile on your face."

Thanks also went to others involved in the production of the show, including Cameron Ryan and Miss Kevina Cunliffe, for music and choreography, Rebecca Coyle and Caroline McKeeney, who helped with the scenery.

All were supported by help from Ms Holly Lewis and Ms Kija Bowry.

The school would also like to thank Drama MOB for the donation of scenery and props.

New online guide captures the rich tapestry of Suffolk's church history

Keith Morris

A project to assemble all Suffolk church guidebooks online has been launched by the Suffolk Historic Churches Trust (SHCT) which is celebrating its 50th anniversary in December 2023.

Suffolk, with Norfolk, has the greatest concentration of mediaeval churches in Europe – indeed the world – and over the years vicars, scholars and enthusiasts have documented the individual stories of these churches. Now for the first time those histories have been painstakingly collected, scanned and uploaded as a new *Guides to Suffolk Churches Online*, hosted by the Trust. Catholic churches St Edmunds in Bury St Edmunds and Sacred Heart in Southwold are already included, and others are invited to join it.

"The churches think it is a fantastic opportunity, that it will bring people into their churches to look around," said Lynda Aldred, volunteer co-ordinator for the project, and chairman of The Arts Society South East Suffolk. "We've got guides which were written by someone who has since died and their families have been contacted

Sacred Heart church in Southwold.



and, without question, they say it is wonderful that their memory lives on. Some of the guides are very professional but my favourite guides are the older ones with hand-drawn covers, little staple rust marks, or those that have been typed on a typewriter with a dodgy letter."

There are already hundreds of

Suffolk churches on the website and more will be added, including any denomination of church, chapel or meeting house that has a guide.

• The Guides are available, free, via Suffolk Historic Churches Trust website: <https://shct.org.uk/guides-to-suffolk-churches>

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Thank you, Fr Tony

Bishop Philip Egan reflects on the life and career of a recently retired priest, Fr Tony Sultana SDB

Last autumn, a Salesian priest who was well-known throughout the diocese of Portsmouth, Fr Tony Sultana SDB, retired after 28 years as parish priest of Our Lady and St Dominic, Farnborough.

He is now living not too far away in the Salesian Community House.

Fr. Tony wrote me a nice email the other day in which he said it had been “a privilege working for 32 years in the diocese.”

His career took him “first for four years at Our Lady Help of Christians as assistant priest, and then for 28 years as parish priest for Our Lady of Lourdes. After the merger with St Dominic Savio in 2003, I was as parish priest of Our Lady and St Dominic.”

He was first as a priest by Bishop Crispian in 1995, taking over from the Benedictines of Farnborough Abbey who had withdrawn from the parish. “I also had the opportunity to work as part-time school chaplain at All Halls, from 1993 to 1996, and was visiting priest at Farnborough Hill from 1992 to 2022,” Fr Tony added. “I was governor at St Patrick’s for three years and at St Bernadette’s for 25 years, besides being priest responsible for St Bernadette’s for 28 years.”

Sadly, Fr. Tony found things difficult after Covid and over the last two years, his mobility problems worsened. He had a bad fall in church during the Maundy Thursday Mass and so decided it was time to move on.

“Happily Fr Provincial found a priest in Fr Anthony Lobo SDB,” he said.

On all our behalf, I express our great gratitude to Fr. Tony for his years of generous service, and prayers for his good health and strength in retirement.

Fr Tony said: “I thank God for the opportunity to work for so many years as a priest in the diocese. I promise my prayers for you and the Portsmouth Diocese and ask for your blessing.”

Let us continue to remember him our prayers. His ministry will continue to be greatly appreciated, and we will miss his Maltese smile.

St Cuthbert’s ‘Outstanding’ pupils praised in Ofsted report

Children at a Chester-le-Street Catholic primary school have ‘outstanding’ behaviour and attitudes according to a recent Ofsted report. St Cuthbert’s Catholic Primary School has been rated as ‘Good’.

Part of the Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust, the Ofsted inspectors said that during their time in the school, ‘pupils demonstrated consistently high standards of behaviour.’

The report went on: ‘Pupils’ attitudes to learning are exemplary. They demonstrate tolerance and respect for others.’

‘The school’s mantra, ‘Be yourself, but be it very well’, is lived out by all who are part of the St Cuthbert’s family. It is clear that everybody matters here,’ it added.

One area highlighted by the Ofsted inspector was the school’s personal development curriculum, which ‘encourages pupils to make a

positive contribution to the wider community. Pupils value the range of opportunities to broaden their horizons and extend their interests, such as through the school’s work with the Junior Duke Award.’

‘Staff feel well supported by leaders, governors and the trust,’ the inspector noted. ‘Staff appreciate the professional development opportunities they receive and leaders’ consideration for their workload and wellbeing. Staff are highly motivated and morale is high.’

The experience was summed up when one staff member stated, “There is a clear enjoyment to working in the school.”

Headteacher Angela Garrity said: “We have been graded as overall ‘good’ but with outstanding behaviour and attitudes. This is a true reflection of our lovely school, the children and the commitment of the staff.”



Good news for the planet – and good news for parish finances as solar panels installed

In a progressive step towards sustainability, Our Lady of Perpetual Succour and St Edmund Church, Hunstanton, has embraced solar energy, underscoring the parish’s commitment to environmental stewardship and economic foresight.

Stuart Grant, parish treasurer, who is involved in the initiative, explained the dual motive behind the investment. “To simply reduce the electrical costs to the Church and the Church house, and also from an environmental standpoint, as encouraged by Pope Francis, we believe it is right that we make whatever contribution we can to the achievement of Net Zero carbon emissions,” he said.

With a total investment of £27,000 – without any grant assistance – the parish has demonstrated its confidence in the long-term viability of solar energy. Chris Davey added: “We have the finances available, and we felt this was the best way to use it.”

The project includes 27 solar panels, which will greatly contribute toward the electrical usage of the parish. The innovative addition of battery storage enhances the system’s flexibility, a key feature given the church’s variable energy needs. “That gives us the opportunity to store any power when the excess is there, and then use it as and when, particularly for the church,” Stuart said, highlighting the system’s adaptability.

The planned transition from gas



Stuart (left) and Chris (right) with some of the solar panels as they were being fitted.

to electric heating is a strategic move towards greater energy efficiency and cost savings. Chris pointed out the practical aspect of this shift. “Our intention is to try and maximise the way that we use whatever power is available,” he said.

Despite their commitment to solar energy, the parish retains a pragmatic approach by keeping the gas heating system as a back-up,

ensuring no disruption to church services.

The financial aspect of this venture is equally promising. Stuart revealed: “The calculations that we made so far indicate that we should get a return of investment over about 10-12 years”.

Funding for this significant undertaking has come directly from parishioners’ contributions over the years, without specific fundraising

efforts for the solar system. Stuart said: “Our parish has a relatively elderly demographic and they are incredibly generous towards the Church and the local community.”

Installed by Solar Energy Solutions Norfolk, the solar panels are expected to last around 25 years, potentially even longer. This longevity ensures sustained benefits for the parish, both environmentally and financially.

Jan's work for peace rewarded by Pax Christi

At the AGM of Pax Christi England and Wales, Jan Harper was one of the four recipients given the Pax Christi Peace Award by Archbishop of Liverpool Malcolm McMahon, President of Pax Christi England and Wales.

The Pax Christi Peace Award was created to honour people who faithfully, without reward or recognition, do the work that keeps peace issues alive in our Church and in the world today.

Jan has been a member of Pax Christi for 40 years, working in the parish of St. Michael and Sacred Heart and in the wider city of Liverpool, and has also served on the national executive.

For over 10 years, Jan has co-ordinated the Pax Christi Merseyside Group in work for nuclear and conventional disarmament, and for peace in Palestine/Israel. Her work has taken many forms: inviting speakers, holding film nights, signing petitions, writing letters to

MPs, holding stalls, and activities challenging injustices, plus so much more.

Jan has frequently protested outside Liverpool University where research and development is funded by arms companies. There she distributed leaflets and encouraged people to sign petitions to stop this funding in warfare.

Much of Jan's work with the group has been out on the streets of Liverpool. She co-ordinates the annual Ash Wednesday Walk of Witness through the city centre. This event attracts much attention and includes the distribution of ashes and prayers of repentance for the collective sin of nuclear weapons.

This year, a letter was handed in to Liverpool City Council asking them to support the Treaty for the Prohibition of nuclear weapons, known as 'The Nuclear Ban.'

Recent actions of Pax Christi Merseyside have included a commemoration for Conscientious



Jan is pictured at the Pax Christi AGM where she received her award. Right is Archbishop McMahon

Objectors' Day and for the 78th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Jan said: "I was very touched to receive this peace award as my father was active in the trade unions and I was brought up to think that working for justice was a normal part of being a Catholic.

"As a teenager, I was an active

member of Young Christian Workers and I learned the importance of 'prayer, study and action,' which is also integral to Pax Christi.

Gospel nonviolence is at the heart of all we do, whether supporting conscientious objectors, working for ethical investment in Palestine /Israel, or campaigning

for Liverpool to support the nuclear ban.

"Over the years, I have come to realise that working and praying for peace is my vocation. I value being a member of Pax Christi - an international community of peacemakers, who work closely with people who share our values, whether Christian or not."

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The Universe Catholic Weekly's guide to the more leisurely side of life

GARDENING

Controlling the weeds... the way nature intended

So how do you know if that plant you are looking at in the ground is really a weed? Pull it up. If it comes out easily, it wasn't a weed!

Although that's not really the true definition, it seems to be the case, more often than not. So just what is a weed anyway? The most widely accepted definition is simply "a plant out of place".

I get many questions about how to control weeds in lawns and gardens organically and selectively. Honestly, that presents a challenge, but with a little patience and dedication satisfactory results are achievable.

First, the best defence is a good attack. Take lawns, for example. Beyond manual methods, such as hand pulling, once weeds are present, organic controls are unavailable to selectively eliminate only the weeds. Promoting the health and vigour of the lawn is also the best way to starve off, shade out and out compete the weeds too.

But when you're ready to manage weeds with organic controls, there are several options. The following is a listing of some of the most popular methods using eco-friendly options.

Manual controls

Hand-pulling or manual extraction has an element of satisfaction that no other weed control method can offer. If you like instant gratification, manual extraction is the only way to go. It's also one of the few ways for selective control.

Although highly satisfying, I realise it's not always a practical solution to the problem. Time and ambition are usually the two most important assets to taking on a manual project. However, hand weeding in any size garden is easiest after a soaking rain. The soil is soft and roots easily yield to even the gentlest tug.

But be aware of one caveat. Tap rooted weeds must be pulled out in their entirety, making sure to get the entire root! Otherwise, any remaining piece will provide sufficient energy for that weed to regenerate a new plant.

Mulch

One of the most effective organic weed control techniques available and certainly one of the most environmentally friendly, is to provide natural barriers to weed formation.

A layer of mulch two to four inches thick is a very effective means of preventing most weeds from germinating.

I've used just about every type of mulch barrier available, including traditional bark and straw mulch, plastic sheeting and wet newspapers with additional mulch on top of that.

Here's one caveat; if you want to know that



"Tap rooted weeds must be pulled out in their entirety, making sure to get the entire root! Otherwise, any remaining piece will provide sufficient energy for that weed to regenerate a new plant..."

the bagged mulch you buy is free of potentially harmful contaminants, such as arsenic from treated wood, be sure each bag has the certification seal of the Mulch and Soil Council. For more information, go to www.mulchandsoilcouncil.org.

Sprays and Drenches

These methods affect plants on contact by burning or desiccating the cell structure of the plant.

Boiling Water works well at killing most weeds with one application. Some weeds, especially those with tap roots such as dandelions may need multiple applications.

Acetic Acid (vinegar) works but common

household vinegar at 5 per cent concentration is not effective for mature weeds. Minimum concentrations above 7 per cent are needed to manage tougher weeds and multiple applications may be necessary with tap-rooted weeds such as thistle.

Use caution when using acetic acid as it can burn skin and eyes on contact. Approved sources for herbicide use can be found online or at farm supply stores.

Plant-based ingredients such as citric oil, clove oil, and garlic are non-selective post-emergent herbicides also. Use caution as they will injure or kill all vegetation they come in contact with. Tougher weeds usually require multiple applications for complete control. Ready to use products are available through organic gardening supply sources online and in some garden centres.

Granular pre-emergent

Corn Gluten is a granular corn-based product that is most commonly used as an organic pre-emergent control in lawns. Although effective, this product takes several seasons to exhibit results as comparable to synthetic options.

Corn gluten also has the added benefit of containing about 10% nitrogen by volume for natural fertilization as well. This product is becoming more popular but is not yet widely available in retail garden centres.

Flame Weeders are those devices that use the intense heat of a concentrated flame to destroy the cell structure of the plant. Typically powered by a propane canister, these devices are portable and effective. Simply pass the flame over the weed for several seconds. It is not necessary to visibly burn or ignite the weed. A few seconds of intense heat is all that is necessary.

Like the other methods listed above, because the roots are unaffected, the toughest weeds may require multiple applications. Use extreme caution when working with this tool.

No matter which methods of weed control you prefer, prevention is still the best way to make sure you keep the weeds from spreading next year.

Although they can still come into your garden through other means, eliminating weeds on your property before they go to seed will save you many hours of work next year and beyond.

HEALTH

In the bleak midwinter... we often need a little help with our Vitamin D levels

Vitamin D supplements can keep bones strong – but they may also have other benefits to your health. Martin Hewison explains more

Most of us don't worry about getting vitamin D when the weather's warm and the sun is shining. But in the depths of winter, with overcast days and long nights, you may be wondering if it could be useful to take a vitamin D supplement – and what benefit it might have.

During the summer, the best way to get vitamin D is by getting a bit of sunshine. Ultraviolet rays (specifically UVB, which have a shorter wavelength) interact with a form of cholesterol called 7-dehydrocholesterol in the skin, which is then converted into vitamin D.

Because vitamin D production is dependent on UVB, this means our ability to make it declines in the winter months. Vitamin D production also depends on where you live, with people living nearer to the equator making more vitamin D than those living nearer the poles.

Vitamin D deficiency is a problem in the UK during the winter months. This is due to its northerly position and cloudy weather, and lack of time spent outdoors.

One study of over 440,000 people in the UK found that 18 per cent were vitamin D deficient during the winter months. Vitamin D deficiency was even higher in certain ethnic groups – with the data showing 57 per cent of Asian participants and 38 per cent of black participants were vitamin D deficient. This is because the melanin content of skin determines a person's ability to make UVB into vitamin D.

Given the prevalence of vitamin D deficiency in the UK, and the importance it has for our health, in 2016 the UK's Science Advisory Council on Nutrition outlined recommendations for the amount of vitamin D people should aim to get in the winter.

They recommend people aim to get ten micrograms (or 400 IU – international units) of vitamin D per day. This would help people avoid severe deficiency. This can be achieved either by taking a supplement, or eating certain foods that are rich in vitamin D – including fatty fish such as herring, mackerel and wild salmon. A 100 gram serving of fresh herring, for example,



"Although rickets isn't very common in the UK today, it can still occur in children if they lack vitamin D. In adults, vitamin D deficiency can cause bone pain, tenderness and muscles weakness, as well as increased risk of osteomalacia – often called 'soft bone disease' "

would have approximately five micrograms of vitamin D.

The clearest benefit of taking a vitamin D supplement is for bone health. In fact, vitamin D was first discovered 100 years ago because of its ability to prevent the disease rickets, which causes weak bones that bend.

Although rickets isn't very common in the UK today, it can still occur in children if they lack vitamin D. In adults, vitamin D deficiency can cause bone pain, tenderness and muscles weakness, as well as increased risk of

osteomalacia – often called "soft bone disease" – which leads to weakening or softening bones.

The reason a lack of vitamin D can have such an effect on bone health is due to the vitamin's relationship with calcium and phosphate. Both of these minerals help keep our bones strong – but they require vitamin D in order to be able to reinforce and strengthen bones.

Other health benefits

In addition to its effects on the skeleton, a growing body of research is beginning to indicate that vitamin D supplements may have

additional benefits to our health.

For example, research shows there's a link between vitamin D deficiency and increased risk of catching certain viral illnesses, including the common cold, flu and COVID.

Similarly, several studies – including my own – have demonstrated in cell models that vitamin D promotes immunity against microbes, such as the bacteria which causes tuberculosis. This means vitamin D may potentially prevent some types of infections.

Vitamin D may also dampen inflammatory immune responses, which could potentially protect against autoimmune diseases, such as multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis.

One 2022 trial, which looked at over 25,000 people over the age of 50, found taking a 2,000 IU (50 micrograms) vitamin D supplement each day was associated with an 18 per cent lower risk of autoimmune disease – notably rheumatoid arthritis.

Vitamin D supplements may also be linked with lower risk of cardiovascular disease. A major Australian study, which looked at over 21,000 people aged 60–84, found that participants who took a 2,000 IU vitamin D supplement a day for five years had a lower risk of suffering a major cardiovascular event (such as stroke or heart attack) compared to those who didn't take a supplement.

It's currently not known why vitamin D may have these benefits on these other areas of our health. It's also worth noting that in many of these trials, very few of the participants were actually vitamin D deficient. While we might speculate the observed health benefits may be even greater in people with vitamin D deficiency, it will be important for future research to study these factors.

While it's too early to say whether vitamin D supplements have broad health benefits, it's clear it's beneficial for bone health. It may be worthwhile to take a supplement in the winter months, especially if you're over 65, have darker skin or spent a lot of time indoors as these factors can put you at increased risk of vitamin D deficiency.

The research also shows us that we should be rethinking vitamin D supplementation advice. While in the UK it's recommended people get 400 IU of vitamin D a day, many trials have shown 2,000 IU a day is associated with health benefits.

Martin Hewison is a Professor of Molecular Endocrinology, University of Birmingham



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FOOD

A scramble like no other:

Combine bacon, jalapeno peppers, red onion and spinach scramble with Queso Fresco for the perfect kick-start to any day

This delicious meal is sure to energise your mornings and set a positive tone for the day – and year – ahead. If you can't use Queso Fresco, try fresh ricotta.

Prep time: 10 minutes

Cook time: 10 minutes; serves 4

Ingredients

- 8 large eggs
- 6 thick slices of bacon
- 4 cups baby spinach leaves
- 1/2 cup red onion, slivered
- 1 jalapeno chilli, stemmed and thinly sliced, seeding optional
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher or sea salt, to taste
- 1/4 teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/4 cup crumbled queso fresco, farmer's cheese or mild feta

Method

1. Set a large skillet or frying pan over medium-high heat. Once hot, add the bacon and cook for 3–4 minutes, stirring occasionally until browned and crispy. Using a slotted spoon, remove bacon and reserve it in a bowl. Remove all bacon fat from the pan and add 1 tablespoon of vegetable oil. Add the onion and jalapeño and cook for 2–3 minutes, until wilted but not browned. Incorporate the spinach, mix, and continue cooking for a couple of minutes until completely cooked and wilted.

2. Meanwhile, in a small bowl, beat the eggs and season with salt and pepper.

3. Reduce heat to medium-low, pour eggs over the spinach mixture and as they cook, scramble with a wooden spoon or spatula. Cook to desired doneness. For tender eggs, cook them for 2–3 minutes. Top with the browned bacon bites and queso fresco.

Visit EgglandsBest.com.



Take on the new year with these 4 simple tips

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After a season of parties and entertaining, it's time to get back into our wellness routines and take on the new year ahead. It can be easier than you think to make 2024 a year of positive changes. To help you create some healthy balance, Registered Dietitian Nutritionist Dawn Jackson Blatner shares a few helpful tips.

1. Prioritise self-care through sleep

Self-care isn't just a buzzword or trend. If you want to improve your well-being after the holidays and beyond, it's time to double down on self-care, especially sleep. Just one night without enough sleep can leave you feeling drowsy, low energy, slow and irritable, according to Sleep Foundation.

This year, make your life easier and invest in your whole health by setting and maintaining a consistent sleep schedule. Aim for seven to nine hours of sleep each night so you can wake up refreshed and ready to take on the day. It's helpful to create a relaxing bedtime routine, like reading a book or taking a warm bath, to let your body know it's time to wind down.

2. Set clear, achievable goals

You may be thinking of how you can achieve your ambitions and change your habits in the new year. When setting goals, make sure they're clear and achievable. When you set unrealistic expectations, it's easy to get overwhelmed and abandon your resolutions.

So, this year, be realistic so you're more likely to achieve your goals and reap the benefits. Start by breaking your goals down into small, manageable steps. For example, if you want to work out more, don't start by hitting the gym every day. Instead, start small by aiming to get active two to three times a week. Once you meet this goal, you can build on it!

3. Add nutrient-rich foods

After the holidays, you don't need to overhaul your entire eating routine. Simply give your health a boost by adding foods rich in essential vitamins and nutrients to each of your meals and snacks. For example, add berries into your morning oatmeal, put extra veggies on a sandwich, or grab mixed nuts and hard-boiled eggs instead of processed chips for a quick snack on the go.

Eggs are great for not only snacks, but also for meals like scrambled



'Aim for seven to nine hours of sleep each night so you can wake up refreshed and ready to take on the day.'

eggs for breakfast or shakshuka for dinner.

4. Try new flavours

With a new year comes new responsibilities, new activities and overall busy times. It can be easy to fall into the habit of the same boring meals for breakfast, lunch and dinner that neglect wholesome ingredients.

To expand your palate and try new flavours, consider unique, better-for-you recipes when meal planning. Set a goal to cook a new recipe every week, inspired by a culture or nationality that you've been wanting to test out.

Why not try the delicious scramble with Queso fresco? (see above)

FILMS

Iron Claw: proof that not all sporting dreams come true in the way you'd want

Joseph McAleer

A cautionary tale unfolds in *The Iron Claw*, (A24) based on the true story of the rise and fall of an all-American wrestling family.

In the expanding universe of professional wrestling in the 1980s, the Von Erich clan from Texas was the stuff of legend. Patriarch Fritz (Holt McCallany), a one-time champion, built an empire around his four strapping sons: Kevin (Zac Efron), David (Harris Dickinson), Mike (Stanley Simons) and Kerry (Jeremy Allen White). *The Iron Claw* leaves out a fifth son, Chris.

Success in the ring does not come easy, and Fritz more than earns his 'Nazi heel' moniker. In fact, he changed the family name from Adkisson to Von Erich to project an evil atmosphere.

Domineering and relentless, he pounds his sons into submission, playing favourites, hurling insults and encouraging sibling rivalry.

His God-fearing wife, Doris (Maura Tierney), refuses to intervene, turning instead to prayer. She is still mourning the tragic loss of their first-born son, who drowned at six years old.

Fritz's motivation is a selfish one—to acquire for the family the world championship title he never won. He teaches his sons his signature move, the 'iron claw', a vice-like grip of the opponent's head, applying pressure to the skull and temples until, writhing in pain, he submits.

Initially, Fritz's sinister methods bear fruit, and

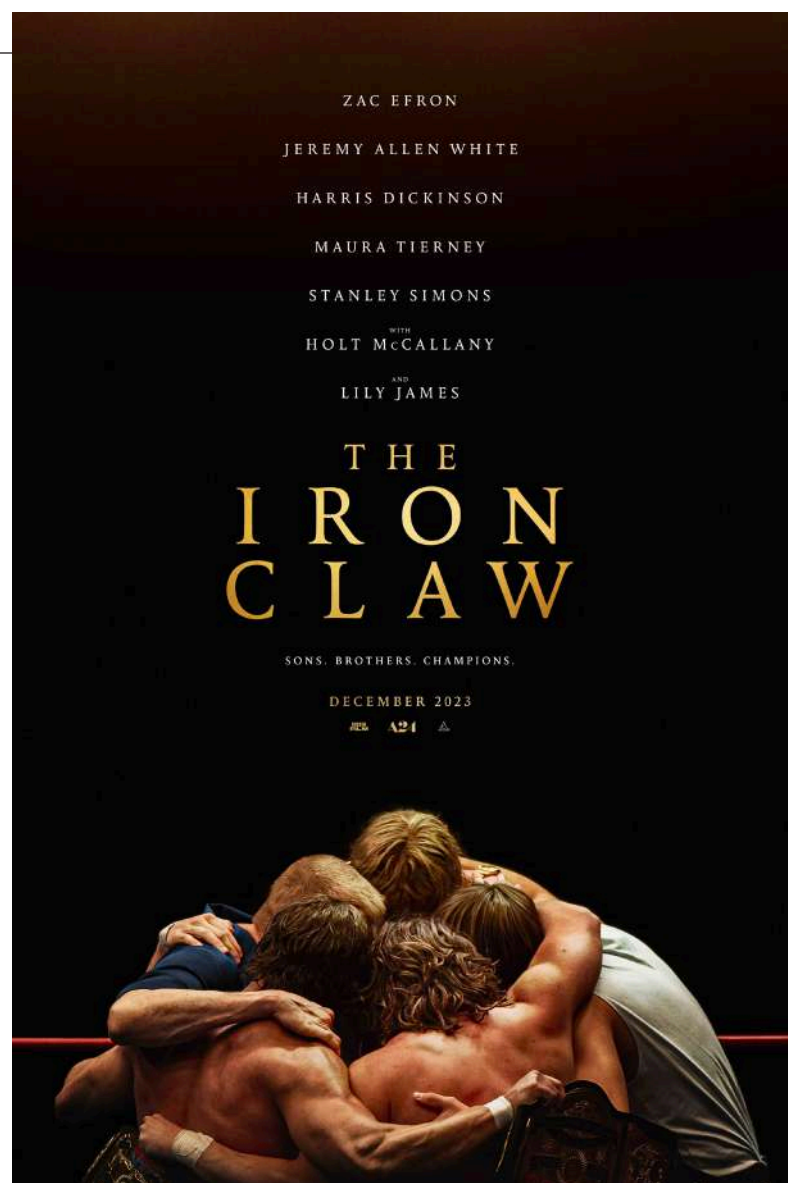
the script follows the progress of the four brothers on the professional circuit. David and Kevin are a successful double act, until Fritz chooses the less-talented David to wrestle for the championship, to Kevin's dismay.

Sensitive Mike, who prefers music to sport, is a reluctant entry into the family business, bullied into joining up by his father.

Meanwhile, Kerry has chosen a different path, becoming a successful discus thrower. When his hopes for Olympic glory are dashed due to the 1980 embargo, Kerry honours his father and enters the ring. His rise is meteoric, even after his foot is amputated (amazingly, knowledge of his prosthetic foot, inside a boot, is hidden from the public).

At the heart of the story is the now-popular myth of the 'Von Erich Curse'. As narrator, Kevin tellingly explains: "Ever since I was a child, people said my family was cursed. Mom tried to protect us with God. Dad tried to protect us with wrestling. He said if we were the toughest, the strongest, nothing could ever hurt us. I believed him. We all did."

They were wrong, as writer-director Sean Durkin reveals in heartbreaking detail, and championship belts are acquired at unfathomable personal cost. Of all the brothers, only Kevin eventually begins to see the truth and a way out, thanks to his perceptive new wife Pam (Lily James).



Viewers should be warned that *The Iron Claw* showcases every one of the Seven Deadly Sins in excess, and it is not for the squeamish. However, the film has its merits, with important life lessons for thick-skinned grown-ups, from the over-glorification of sports heroes to the consequences of greed, envy and pride.

High School Musical star Zac Efron, who plays Kevin, told W Magazine how he prepared for the role, and how his background in dancing helped prepare him for wrestling scenes.

"Dancing and wrestling are surprisingly similar," Efron said. "There's a choreographed element to both, and the more you do it, the better you get. Also, just the sense of moving with a partner: Sometimes you lead, and sometimes you're holding on to the other guy. The learning curve for wrestling is you just go for it."

"For stuff like climbing up on the ropes and jumping off, you've just got to nut up and go for it. There's no real practicing."

A new cinematic warning to keep out of the water!

John Mulderig

Long ago, when the world was young, psychedelic pop band the B-52s' frontman Fred Schneider warned his listeners to stay away from "a pool fraught with danger."

The virtually bloodless but uneven horror yarn *Night Swim* (Universal) – which is possibly acceptable for older teens as well as grown-ups – offers a similar caution.

In this case, the potential victims of the problematic amenity are the members of a close-knit family already facing more down-to-earth challenges. Dad Ray Waller (Wyatt Russell) is a celebrated baseball player recently forced off the field by multiple sclerosis.

Supporting Ray in his battle with the disease are caring wife Eve (Kerry Condon) and their two children, adolescent Izzy (Amélie Hoeferle) and preteen Elliot (Gavin Warren). Though Eve initially favours moving into a care home, Ray convinces her that buying a nearby suburban home they happened to pass will enable the clan to lead a more normal life.

Ray also hopes that the pool with which their new house comes equipped will provide him with a venue for helpful aquatic therapy. And so,



The pool looks nice... no it isn't, is the clue

after a few dips, he starts to make a remarkable, almost inexplicable, recovery.

At the same time, however, Izzy and Elliot are gradually discovering that theirs is a cement pond with a spirit all its own. A backstory concerning the mystical spring by which the pool is fed leads to a potentially intriguing but not especially well-handled exploration of the nature of propitiation and the many varieties of

sacrifice that can be made, from the self-serving to the altruistic.

In expanding to feature length the eponymous 2014 short he helmed with Rod Blackhurst, writer-director Bryce McGuire serves up some suspenseful sequences. They culminate in a frightening game of 'Marco Polo' Eve plays with Ronin (Elijah Roberts), the schoolmate she would like to make her

boyfriend.

Yet the briefly glimpsed personification of the pool's evil genius is straight out of a low-budget 1950s monster movie while over-the-top moments, especially toward the end, lend a daft feel to the proceedings as a whole. In fact, as soon as black liquid starts running out of the eyes of possessed characters, it's a pretty sure sign that this gothic pool party has gone out of bounds.

Director Bryce McGuire recently told thewrap.com about the importance of the pool – and how it is almost becomes a character in itself in the film. "There's got to be a bigger mystery, a bigger idea there, that anchors that was not really until I realised what the pool could do, what it represented for this family – a chance to start over," he said.

"And then also I knew I wanted the pool to be the villain. But I also knew there needed to be more than just scary water, there had to be something in that water that wanted to harm you. And that certainly, you know, took a little bit of developmental. Like how far do you go with that? What are those things? And what is that thing?"

Anti-vaxxers aren't new – and in Victorian times, they brought down a government

HISTORY

**Derek Gatherer,
Alice Deignan &
Chris Sanderson**

As the 1906 UK general election results rolled in, it became clear that the Conservative party, after 11 years in power, had suffered one of the most disastrous defeats in its history.

Of 402 Conservative MPs, 251 lost their seats, including their candidate for Prime Minister, defeated on a 22.5 per cent swing against him in the constituency he had held for two decades.

Rising food prices, unpopular taxes and an opposition that promised to spend heavily on an expanded welfare state all contributed to the Tory downfall that year.

But something else had tipped the opposition Liberal landslide over the edge – compulsory vaccination.

Anti-vax campaigners

Anti-vaccination campaigner Arnold Lupton had taken Sleaford in Lincolnshire for the Liberals on a 12 per cent swing and immediately started his parliamentary campaign to abolish compulsory vaccination against smallpox, a public health policy that had been in place in England and Wales since 1853 (with Scottish and Irish legislation following suit in later years).

Hardly a single Conservative MP was an anti-vaccinator, but 174 of the 397 Liberal MPs in the new parliament signed Lupton's petition.

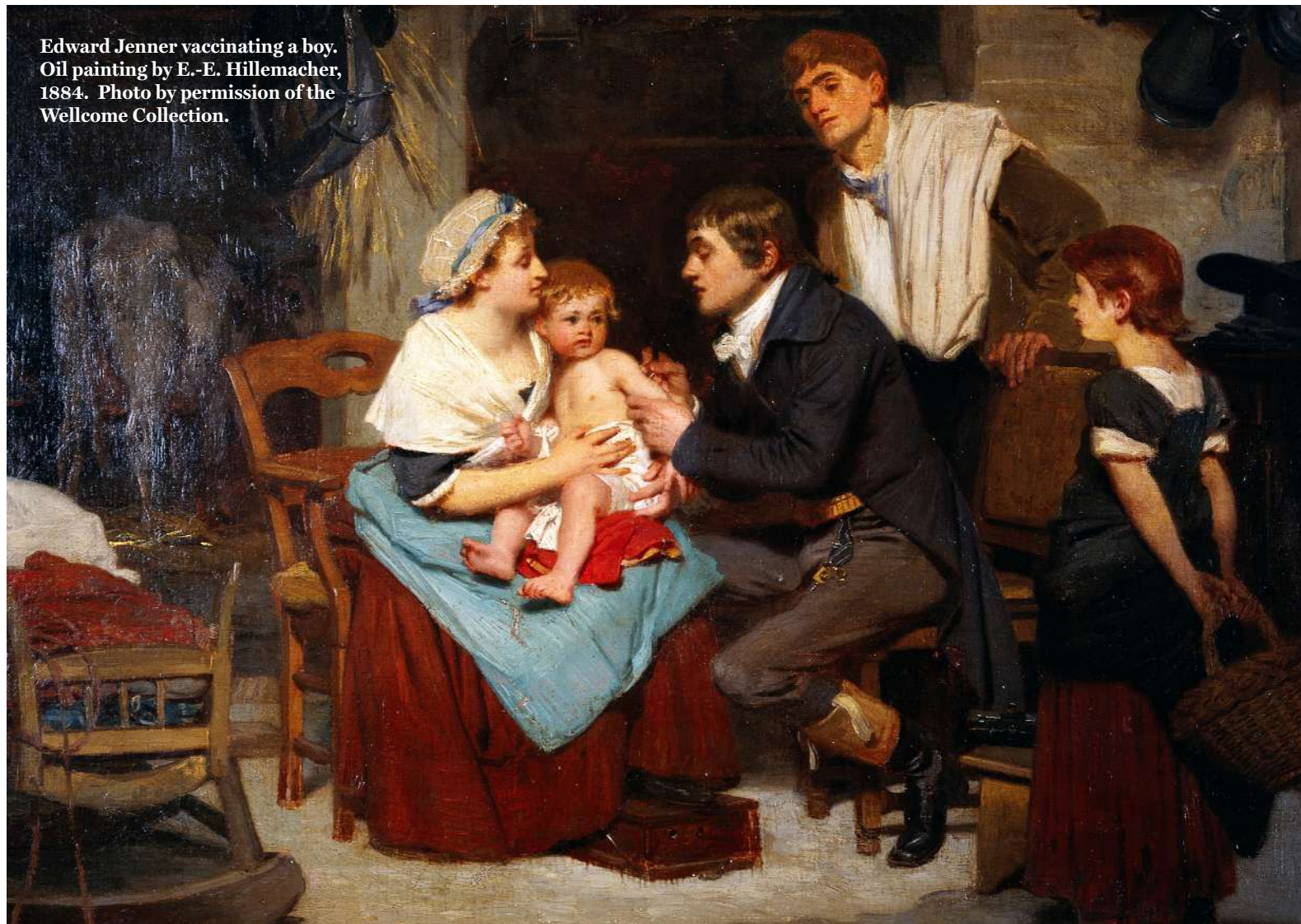
Their attempt at changing the law was unsuccessful, but this flexing of parliamentary muscle by the anti-vaccinators persuaded the new Liberal government that the most expedient option was to reach a compromise with its backbench rebels.

In 1907, the law was changed to permit quick and easy opt-out by parents. Vaccination of all babies against smallpox remained theoretically compulsory until 1946, but in practice, it was now optional. A five-decade-long campaign, in the streets, the courts and finally parliament, had resulted in victory for the opponents of vaccination.

This is a sobering story for those of us who are researchers, medical professionals or public health activists campaigning against the spread of vaccine hesitancy in the modern world.

The success of vaccination in saving millions of lives, not just

Edward Jenner vaccinating a boy.
Oil painting by E.-E. Hillemacher,
1884. Photo by permission of the
Wellcome Collection.



from smallpox but a host of other diseases, seems so obvious that the case scarcely needs to be made. And yet it does, as just a cursory glance at social, even at times mainstream, media will reveal.

In response to this tide of dangerous disinformation, vaccine advocacy work often focuses on issues such as the lack of public comprehension of scientific concepts of “relative risk” and “efficacy”, and the connections of the anti-vaccine activists to more general conspiracy theories and extreme religious or political movements.

The conclusion of many vaccine advocacy pieces is often that we must simply educate the public better while simultaneously cutting the flow of disinformation, yet this has often proved to be an uphill struggle. Why? Can vaccine advocates learn anything from the historic defeat of 1906?

Social media of the Victorian era

A recently published resource of Victorian anti-vaccination ‘street literature’ seeks to contribute to this effort by providing free access to 3.5 million words from 133 documents, ranging from short pamphlets to longer publications

over the period 1854-1906.

What the 133 sources have in common is that they were all produced for public consumption, designed to strengthen or maintain the beliefs of the converted while reaching out for new converts. Existing outside the conventional publishing industry, this street literature was the social media of the Victorian era.

Computational analysis of these texts reveals anti-vaccination themes that are very similar to those of today. For instance, doubts about the effectiveness of vaccines, what they're made of and their safety, feature prominently.

Other common themes include complaints that civil liberties are infringed by compulsory vaccination, alongside conspiracy theories of government cover-ups,

general distrust of the medical profession, and an orientation towards alternative medicine.

What changes is the detail. For instance, fear of the inadvertent introduction of syphilis, tuberculosis and skin diseases, as very occasionally happened in Victorian times, may be compared to the blood clots issue with the COVID vaccine.

Other more spurious scare stories, such as an association between vaccination and tooth decay or mental illness have their parallels in the discredited autism claims of the present day. Likewise, modern conspiracy theories about big pharma have their Victorian parallel in allegations of medical profiteering from vaccination fees.

This study of the Victorian anti-vaxxers shows us that there are

indeed recurrent fears more than two centuries old. But it also teaches us that some of the motivations of vaccine hesitancy stem from social, political and religious beliefs that are equally deep in time and often deeply held.

For example, William Tebb, one of the most prominent anti-vaxxers of Victorian times, campaigned with equal energy on a whole raft of causes, from women's suffrage to the abolition of slavery via vegetarianism, animal rights and mystical religion.

For Tebb and many of his followers, these were intimately connected causes. To reach the root of the problem, we need to untangle these connections in sensitive ways that go beyond conventional public engagement.

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Science, Lancaster University

“Computational analysis of these texts reveals anti-vaccination themes that are very similar to those of today. For instance, doubts about the effectiveness of vaccines, what they're made of and their safety, feature prominently...”

Discofoot – a marvellous addition to the beautiful game ... or just plain mad?

SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

Apparently, the FIFA World Cup attracted an average of 3.2 billion viewers in 2010 and 2014, making it the most watched overall live event on television worldwide in the 21st century. However, two of the other 4.8 billion on our planet thought that soccer just isn't fancy-footed enough, and set about inventing a new derivative of the beautiful game. Introducing... Discofoot

As a Yorkshire character would say: 'there is now't so queer as folk'. For some, like the inventors of Discofoot, European football is just too dull. It needed to be spaced up with dance, its aggression neutered and each team to be gender plural.

These creative geniuses have taken the general principles of the game and made them – to their mind – significantly more beautiful.

Discofoot is not something you, dear reader, can probably play but, if serious 'soccer' – or European football – appears to you too dull and not your cup of tea, you can watch it on video. Just Google 'Discofoot'.

Discofoot is a modern dance piece launched by Petter Jacobsson – born in Stockholm – and Thomas Caley – born in the USA, and first performed by the Ballet de Lorraine, at the Place Stanislaw, Nancy as a side-show for the UEFA Euro 2016 competition.

Choreographers Jacobsson and Caley said: "We often work with the starting point of finding new angles and expressions within dance itself. The idea and concept of Dancefoot is already an experimental performance, since we're combining two components with very separate basic principles.

"Sport and dance have always been enemies in a way, so why not put the two together and tone down the macho tone and view on football?"

Ditte Feuk, Head of Theatre, Opera and Dance at SVT Drama, said: "Whenever uplifting playfulness and original expressions present themselves, the right thing is to embrace them. Discofoot is such a fun choreographic idea. To us, it was an artistic offer we couldn't refuse."

The match/performance is played using the basic forms, placement and rules of European football. However, to move, the players must dance. Never at rest, a continuous improvised dance not



only follows the ball but also pays close attention to the team's artistic merit.

The performance/match uses the rules and organisation of professional football as its choreography. The main and dividing rule from European football is that you may not run. Your only way to advance on the pitch is to dance. But not just any dance! Your teams' skills are judged and, like in figure skating, given scores by a panel of judges. The goal is not only to score a goal, but to dance with finesse.

Choreographic beauty is even more important than a ball in the back of the net.

There is certainly less falling and acting then in a real FIFA game,

This finesse is judged by three artistic judges twice during the match – the first at half time, the second after the end of the game.

These two rounds of scores are added to eventual – if any – goals. The side that receives the higher

artistic score, wins.

Discofoot is soccer, but with gold hot pants, spicy disco music, free-form dance moves, and zero gender divisions. The end result is, it seems to me, more of an entertaining dance than a game of football.

Fighting to get control of the ball just seems undignified when there are splits to be done, ponytails to be whipped, and booties to be bounced.

In Discofoot, football's rules are twisted and thrashed by dance. Let the choreography of the ball take you on a ride that passes the unknown and spectacular possibilities of this dead serious performance of a football match...

You will never look at a pair of golden shorts and a "discofied" football the same again.

"We make fun of everything," Petter Jacobsson said, adding that he wanted to create enjoyable entertainment where genders are

mixed in every team.

The rules are simple. Two teams perform swirling, expressive dance moves while adhering to the strict regulations of football. Men and women are equally involved. The gold micro-shorts are a social commentary on gender.

The Game has five parts.

1. The Start (5 min.)

The match begins with the usual ceremony of a typical football match: announcements, warm-up, handshake, anthem, team photo opportunity.

2. The First Half (10 min.)

Starts with a 2 min. choreographed 'stretch' sequence. After, artistic scores, a maximum of 6.0, are awarded to each team from a panel of professional judges. These points are tabulated with eventual goals. The announcement of scores is made.

3. Halftime (5 min.)

4. The Second Half (10 min.)

Runs on similar lines to the first half, with more dancing and, hopefully, goals.

5. Finally, the winning team is announced and a trophy given.

With the United States, Mexico, and Canada hosting the World Cup in 2026, aficionados have a couple of years to get their Discofoot teams formed and fabulous. It will be interesting to see how many, if any, nations develop and bring along their Discofoot performances. Next Summer, Ballet de Lorraine are due to perform in Morocco. How their performances might be seen by the guardians of Islamic morality will be interesting.

Participants : 1 Referee & 3 artistic judges with 24 dancers - in two teams of 12 - from the CCN Ballet-de-Lorraine/

Discofoot is seriously controversial. Lovers of soccer see it as a mickey-take lacking respect for a game that has spread around the world and a sad sign of our culture's journey towards decadence.

The supporters of Discofoot see it as a serious step in the right direction towards gender equality and reduction of aggression where the quality of beauty is more important than the quality of goals scored.

For them, "Discofoot is the World Cup antidote we've been waiting for."

This entertainment might – one day – end up as a TV appendix to Match of The Day. It is worth taking a look at the videos. Google that new word and see what you think.

One thing's for sure: you'll never watch *Match of the Day* in the same way again



A pictorial round-up of the past seven days



Authentic replica outfits as worn by actors who played members of the Royal Family in the Netflix series *The Crown* go on show at Bonhams auction house in London, ahead of being sold next month.



A series of rare medieval wall paintings have been uncovered by builders working in a roof space at Christ's College, Cambridge University. They are believed to date from the 16th century



Ex-Bath Rugby player Iestyn Lewis hangs on to the ball while skydiving at 24,000 feet, just below Mount Everest in the Himalayas. The former centre was raising money for Bath Rugby Foundation, which supports vulnerable and disadvantaged children.



Historical entertainers Sam Wall (left) and James Tanton polish and clean Warwick Castle's suits of armour, during the attraction's brief annual closure.

One of four barn owl chicks who defied the odds to be born - and survive - in November, at Ulster Wildlife Park. The four are one of the latest broods the nature conservation charity has encountered



Fields on the outskirts of Gloucester sit under water after heavy rain prompted flooding. Inset, Michael Kneafsey uses a paddle board to get around his flooded garden in North Town, Maidenhead.



LITURGICAL CALENDARS

Ordinary Form

Ordinary Form Liturgical Calendar Sunday Year B, Weekday Cycle II
Sunday, January 14: 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time 1 Sam. 3:3-10, 19; Ps. 40:2, 4, 7-10 r. 8,9; 1 Cor. 6:13-15, 17-20; Jn. 1:35-42

Monday, January 15: 1 Sam.15:16-23; Ps.50:8-9,16-17,21,23; Mk. 2:18-22

Tuesday, January 16: 1 Sam.16:1-13; Ps.89:20-22,27-28; Mk.2:23-28

Wednesday, January 17: St Anthony, abbot 1 Sam.17:32-33,37,40-51; Ps.144:1-2,9-10; Mk.3:1-6

Thursday, January 18: 1 Sam.18:6-9,19:1-7; Ps. 56:2-3,9-14; Mk.3:7-12

Friday, January 19: St Wulstan, Bishop (E) 1 Sam.24:3-21; Ps.57:2-4,6,11; Mk.3:13-19

Saturday, January 20: W St Fabian, Pope, Martyr, or St Sebastian, Martyr 2 Sam.1:1-4,11-12,17,19,23-27; Ps.80:2-3,5-7; Mk.3:20-21



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Ο Α

Ω

ΑΝΤΩ

ΝΙ

Ω

St Anthony the Great

St Anthony the Great was a Christian monk from Egypt, revered since his death as a saint. He is distinguished from other saints named Anthony, such as Anthony of Padua, by various epithets: Anthony of Egypt, Anthony the Abbot, Anthony of the Desert, Anthony the Anchorite, Anthony the Hermit, and Anthony of Thebes.

Born: 12th January 251 AD, Herakleopolis Magna, Egypt

