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Pro-lifers vow to fight horrific abortion plan

MP's amendment could signal the end of all restrictions on terminations – even up until right before birth

Andy Drozdziak

Pro-life Catholics and MPs have blasted the “horrific immorality” of an extreme amendment which aims to decriminalise abortion and remove any remaining legal safeguards for unborn babies.

Dame Diana Johnson MP is proposing an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill which aims to exempt women who terminate their own pregnancies from being prosecuted by law.

Abortion law currently limits terminations to before 24 weeks of pregnancy and requires the consent of two doctors under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, but Johnson's amendment, if passed by MPs, would effectively end all restrictions and allow abortion at any stage in a pregnancy, even up until birth.

Pro-lifers have vowed to fight back against the proposals. Catholic pro-life campaigner Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, who has been arrested on multiple occasions for praying silently outside an abortion clinic in Birmingham, dismissed the amendment as a “clever euphemism”.

“Apart from the horrific immorality of aborting viable infants, this shows a serious disregard to women's health, both physically and

The pope calls the scaffolders in ...



mentally,” she told the *Universe*.

“Let's be clear, ‘decriminalisation’ is just another clever euphemism – in reality, what this means is abortion up to birth for any and every reason, which is not a position supported by the general public.”

Conservative MPs have also reacted with anger and spoken out against the amendment, vowing to ignore a party whip in the third reading, which could jeopardise the entire Criminal Justice Bill.

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Above, a spectacular shot of mount scaffolding around the 100-foot-tall baroque sculpted bronze canopy, or baldachin, over the high altar of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. The scaffolding was erected in preparation for a major restoration project to clean the baldachin – the first time it's been cleaned since the late 1700s. A wooden shroud will cover the project while the restoration is under way, which will be raised for major religious ceremonies, including Easter Sunday Mass. The project should be completed by December. See pages 20-21. Photo: Yara Nardi, Reuters

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Rescuers search through the wreckage of an apartment block in Khan Younis, Gaza Strip. Inset, Cardinal Pierbattista
Photo: Friends of the Holy Land

Patriarch says only forgiveness can bring an end to Gaza conflict

Andy Drozdziak

The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem has said that the only way to end the violence and desire for revenge in the current conflict in the Holy Land is to keep reconciliation and forgiveness alive.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaball told a meeting of Friends of the Holy Land that Lent themes of forgiveness and reconciliation were vital to building peace. “Without reconciliation and forgiveness, things will not change. We will remain in the cycle of violence,” he said. “Even in this terrible situation, it’s possible to talk about hope and reconciliation.”

His call comes as hopes for a ceasefire were raised before the start of the Islamic season of Ramadan on 10th March. President Biden said that he hoped the ceasefire would be

in place by next Monday. The Patriarch said: “Reconciliation needs time, but it’s very important to keep alive in our hearts the desire for reconciliation and forgiveness.”

Cardinal Nichols has persistently echoed Pope Francis’s appeal for a lasting ceasefire in the Holy Land. He is also calling for the release of all hostages, for aid to be allowed through to Gaza, and for hospitals, schools and places of worship to be protected.

Cardinal Pizzaballa said the landscape of the Holy Land is dominated by “the noise of weapons and the language of hatred,” and underlined the need for silence. “We are not living very well in this desert here in Holy Land. We have a lot of noise – the noise of weapons and the noise of the language of hatred.”

“We need to keep away from all this noise as this is the only way we can hear the voice of God calling us to look to the other as our brothers and sisters,” he said.

“Wherever we are...go to the desert to see the beautiful colours of the Judaeian Desert of today. But also to be far from all the noise of hatred, violence, weapons and mistrust.”

Cardinal Nichols has renewed his call for a day of prayer for peace on 8th March.

Friends of the Holy Land supports Christian communities and families in the West Bank, Gaza, Israel and Jordan. The charity is urging UK residents to contribute to support the Christians in those regions, as well as writing to local MPs to call for a ceasefire.

Pro-lifers to fight abortion plans

Continued from page 1

Conservative MP Miriam Cates was one. She told the *Universe*: “To make it lawful to end the life of a viable baby right up to the moment of birth for no other reason than it is not wanted is morally wrong.”

Nick Fletcher MP said: “Decriminalisation of abortion will no doubt end with abortions happening much later, even up until full term. This cannot be right in a civilised society.”

Pro-life group SPUC backed the MPs’ stance, saying that decriminalisation “is dragging us into an abortion nightmare.”

The increased accessibility to abortion at any stage of pregnancy has been exacerbated by the availability of so-called ‘DIY’ abortion pills, which were introduced temporarily for the Covid lockdown in March 2020 and later made permanent in August 2022.

Carla Foster was jailed last year for illegally obtaining abortion tablets to end her pregnancy. Her sentence was reduced on appeal.

Bethany Cox, from Eaglescliffe, was accused of using poison for

an at-home abortion in 2020. She was taken to court, but prosecutors dropped the charges against her earlier this year.

Isabel Vaughan-Spruce called for the pills by post scheme to be rescinded. Referring to the cases mentioned, she said: “Some women have recently been scrutinised over

‘To make it lawful to end the life of a viable baby up to the moment of birth for no other reason than it is not wanted is morally wrong’



Miriam Cates

illegal, late term abortions – this is because of the appalling pills-by-post scheme which was introduced during Covid and never rescinded.

“That is the law that needs to be addressed here, but abortion providers who have enabled these abortions are deflecting the blame away from themselves and instead pushing for even more liberality around abortions.”

Dame Diana Johnson believes

abortion should be treated as a health issue rather than a criminal one, dismissing the current law as “Victorian”. However, some MPs have countered her amendment by launching a bid to reduce the abortion time-limit from 24 weeks to 22 weeks.

Led by Tory MP Caroline Ansell, the amendment has already been co-signed by 25 MPs, including two from the Labour party.

Spokesperson for Right To Life UK, Catherine Robinson, called on MPs to ignore Diana Johnson’s amendments and to back that proposed by Caroline Ansell.

“Diana Johnson’s extreme abortion amendment will ruin the entire Bill,” she said.

“Instead, MPs from across the political spectrum should support Ansell’s amendment to lower the abortion limit to 22 weeks. Polling demonstrates widespread public support for a time limit reduction, with support for this reduction strongest among women.”

Diana Johnson’s amendment is due to be voted in the House of Commons later this month.

Kind and compassionate move for bereaved parents welcomed

Pro-life campaigners point out confusion over allowing some babies in womb to be killed, while others' death is marked

Andy Drozdziak

The Catholic bishops' conference has welcomed the Government's decision to issue baby loss certificates for parents who have lost children before 24 weeks.

However, one pro-life group, while welcoming the move, questioned how a baby's existence was acknowledged before 24 weeks, yet a baby of the same age could legally be aborted. The current abortion time-limit stands at 24 weeks – unless MPs back a controversial amendment (*see page 1*).

Last week, the Government launched the voluntary scheme which parents can access for free. Introducing the scheme, Health and Social Care Secretary Victoria Atkins said: "Losing a baby can be a

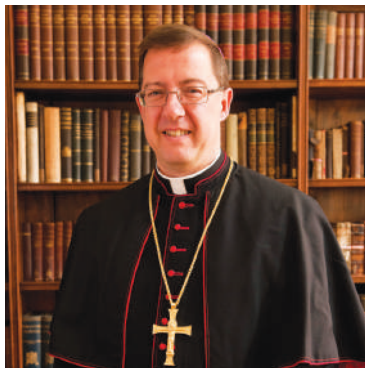
hugely traumatic event and the introduction of certificates to formally acknowledge the loss of life is a positive step towards better supporting women and parents affected."

Welcoming the scheme, Bishop John Sherrington, Lead Bishop for Life Issues, spoke of the support the Church offers to "parents in grief" over the loss of their unborn child.

"I welcome the introduction of the option for parents to be given baby loss certificates. The loss of every child is a source of immense pain, and sometimes also anger or solitude for the parents and other family members," Bishop Sherrington said. "The Church stands close to parents in grief and surrounds them and their children with prayer, including through funeral rites. We entrust these babies to the mercy of God for He calls all children to Himself.

The bishop added a call for parishes to consider how they can support those who have lost a baby prematurely. He also included a suggested prayer.

"These certificates are a firm rec-



ognition of the deep grief that parents suffer after miscarriage or stillbirth and the humanity and dignity of every child in the womb. We hope that this will be a significant step towards better support and care for parents who experience miscarriage or stillbirth," he said.

Louise Davies MBE, who is CARE'S director of advocacy and policy, welcomed the "just and compassionate" move and shared her own experience of loss.

"I know the pain of baby loss deeply, having experienced two miscarriages myself. Both were profoundly difficult experiences for my-

self and my husband, and more so because our society often fails to give preborn babies the dignity of personhood," she said.

"These certificates are just and compassionate, recognising the trauma that accompanies baby loss, and the fact that miscarriage involves the loss of a precious human life – whatever stage it occurs at during pregnancy."

However, Right To Life UK, while welcoming the scheme as a "step in the right direction", was among those who highlighted the irony of marking a baby's demise in the womb, and allowing other babies of the same age to be killed.

Spokesperson Catherine Robinson said: "The new Government scheme is a step in the right direction as it recognises the loss suffered when an unborn baby dies, regardless of the gestation of the child.

"While we welcome the introduction of the baby loss certificate scheme, it highlights the dissonance between recognising that a baby exists before 24 weeks, and allowing a baby of the same age to be aborted."

Bishop Sherrington's prayer for babies who are lost in the womb

"Lord God, ever caring and gentle, we commit to your love this little one, who brought joy to our lives for so short a time. Enfold him/her in eternal life. We pray for these parents who are saddened by the loss of their baby. Give them courage and help them in their pain and grief. May they all meet one day in the joy and peace of your kingdom. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen"

Saint Gianna Beretta Molla and Saint Catherine of Sweden, patrons of the unborn and those who suffered miscarriage, pray for us.

”

Safeguarding report slams C of E handling of abuse claims

Michael Kelly

A new report has revealed what it describes as conflicts of interest in the handling of allegations of sexual abuse in the Church of England.

The report said that despite numerous reviews, the Church cannot be trusted to investigate allegations of sexual abuse without outside involvement.

Alexis Jay, the former chair of a Government-ordered Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, said policies around the protection of children and vulnerable adults within the Anglican Church were "flawed" and "cannot be sufficiently improved while it remains within Church oversight."

The report concluded: "The Church needs to fundamentally change in order to restore the confidence of victims, survivors and others, including clergy. This can only be achieved by being delivered by a fully independent body."

The report proposes establishing two separate charities, independent of the Church, one with operational responsibility for safeguarding and the other to provide scrutiny and oversight. Both need to be funded by the Church.

Anyone complaining of abuse should be referred to these bodies

as soon as possible.

"Further tinkering with existing structures would not be sufficient to make safeguarding in the Church professional, accountable and trusted by those who use its services," she said.

Jay also criticised conflicts of interest in several aspects of safeguarding which undermine trust.

Alexis Jay was called in by the Church of England last year after bishops disbanded their own Independent Safeguarding Board after panel members accused the hierarchy of obstructing their work.

Her research also included experiences of those who had made abuse allegations. Some survivors talked of feeling like the system had been "weaponised against them," and many respondents reported an "all-time low" in relations between the bishops and survivors.

Archbishop Justin Welby and Archbishop Stephen Cottrell of York welcomed the report's "wisdom, expertise and meticulous proposals," adding that they recognise her criticisms. For the sake of all those who come into contact with the church, particularly victims and survivors, we welcome the plans that are in place to take forward this work as swiftly as possible."

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In Brief

Owners ordered to rebuild wonky pub

The owners of Britain's wonkiest pub have been ordered to rebuild Crooked House after it was unlawfully demolished.

South Staffordshire Council served an enforcement notice to the owners of the pub after a fire and subsequent demolition of the building in August last year.

Despite engaging with the owners since the demolition, the council said formal action was deemed necessary. The notice requires Crooked House to be restored to its original state within three years. Its owners have 30 days to appeal.

Woke rebrand cuts term 'marksmen'

The Royal Air Force Air Cadets (Rafac) has been branded "over-sensitive" after ordering members to stop using the word marksman as part of a "gender-neutral" rebrand.

Teenage cadets and instructors have been ordered to stop using the centuries-old term as part of an overhaul of shooting badges that members can earn.

An internal Rafac document issued this month says: "The new nomenclature is gender-neutral; the terms 'marksman' and 'marksmanship' must not feature when referring to the new shooting badges."

Windsors face death tragedy

Thomas Kingston, the husband of Lady Gabriella Windsor, has died aged 45.

Lady Gabriella, the daughter of Prince and Princess Michael of Kent, paid tribute to the financier, who she wed in 2019, saying he was "an exceptional man who lit up the lives of all who knew him". She said his death had come as a "great shock to the whole family".

Bishop raises new concerns over future of religious broadcasting

Ahead of the second reading of the new Media Bill in the House of Lords on 28th February, Bishop John Arnold, Lead Bishop for Communications, has voiced his concerns about the impact the Bill could have on religious broadcasting to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

The Communications Bill of 2003 had obligations for public service broadcasters (PSBs) to provide programmes about religion or belief, but the new Media Bill which will replace it does not have this requirement, leading to fear that religious programming will die out.

Bishop Arnold told Lucy Frazer that he thought the loss of these obligations was dangerous when still so much of the country is motivated by religious beliefs, as well as much



Bishop Arnold is concerned that religious broadcasting could be lost

of the world's population.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), published in 2021, almost half of the UK popula-

tion are Christian (27.5 million), and another 6.5 million declare a religious belief.

According to Bishop John, in an

increasingly multicultural and multi-religious country, religious broadcasting is crucial to creating harmony among different communities and promoting a deeper mutual understanding.

The bishop also said that religious literacy is increasingly important as recent events have shown that human action is still shaped and motivated by religion and religious identity.

He argued that, in this context, it was a bad time to be allowing religious broadcasting to die out.

He ended by saying that religious broadcasting raises awareness of diversity, challenges stereotypes, improves understanding of different cultures and traditions throughout the world, and therefore removing protections is misguided.

New vice presidents appointed to Catholic Union

Andy Drozdziak

The Catholic Union has announced the appointment of three new Vice Presidents as it prepares to host its next 'Pub Talk'.

They include serving MPs Mary Glindon and Alexander Stafford, and former MP, Stephen Pound.

Vice Presidents are honorary positions designed to bolster the work of the Union in the public sphere.

Catholic Union Director Nigel Parker called the appointments "very exciting."

"We have been fortunate over the years to count on the support of so many dedicated lay men and women to serve as office holders of the Catholic Union," he said.

"Our newest Vice Presidents are no exception, and we are delighted to welcome them on board. These new appointments are very exciting."

The vacancies were created by the death of John Barrie, the appointment of Baroness Hollins as President of the Catholic Union – who previously served as a Vice President – and the creation of a new post.

The appointments are designed to give the work of the union even



Alexander Stafford MP said: 'I am delighted to have been appointed as a Vice President...'

greater reach and profile in a General Election year.

Alexander Stafford MP said: "I am delighted to have been appointed a Vice President of the Catholic Union, one of the most important voices for Catholics in the UK. I look forward to continuing to speak

up for British Catholics, both inside and outside Parliament."

Meanwhile, the Catholic Union is preparing for its next Pub Talk, which is being sponsored by the *Universe Catholic Weekly*. Jon Cruddas MP is delivering the next talk in conjunction with Catholics for Labour on 20th March.

Mr Cruddas, Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham, will consider politics of the common good, and the contribution of the Church's to Labour Party's development.

Described as one of the Labour Party's leading intellectuals, Jon Cruddas has recently published *A Century of Labour* to mark the 100th anniversary of the first Labour Government.

Catholic Union Director, Nigel Parker, said: "We are really looking forward to hearing from Jon Cruddas. Having been in Parliament

since 2001, he has a huge wealth of knowledge and experience."

The talk will be a joint event with Catholics for Labour and will take place at the Morpeth Arms in Pimlico, London, on Wednesday, 20th March. It is free to attend, but spaces are limited and those wishing to attend need to sign up on Eventbrite to secure a space.

The Catholic Union's "Pub Talks" are informal gatherings that give people the opportunity to hear about a matter of interest to UK Catholics. Previous speakers have included former Conservative party leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith, Ruth Kelly MP, Lord Alton and Professor Stephen Bullivant.

Doors will open at 6pm, with the talk due to start at 6.30pm, subject to parliamentary business.

Book your places via
<http://tinyurl.com/3d6tk3yj>

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PM vows free vote on assisted suicide

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has said that MPs should continue to have a free vote on assisted suicide.

Mr Sunak said: “When it comes to assisted dying it’s an issue on which people have strong opinions about, always have. But it’s important for everyone to understand, it’s not a party-political issue.

“It’s a free vote in parliament. Governments don’t take a view, political parties don’t take a view and MPs vote according to their own conscience.”

His comments come after Dame Esther Rantzen, the *Daily Express* and the campaign group Dignity in Dying launched a petition demanding a parliamentary vote on the subject, which has amassed 120,000 signatures.

Dr Gordon Macdonald, from campaign group Care Not Killing, which opposes the legalisation of assisted suicide, argued that doing so would place “huge pressure” on terminally ill and disabled people, real or perceived, to end their lives exactly as we see in the handful of places that have legalised assisted suicide or euthanasia.

“The more important debate is how to extend high-quality palliative care to all those who need it,” he said.

Student says pro-lifers have right to be heard after university row

Andy Drozdziak

A student who faced a backlash after an all-male pro-life society was launched at Manchester University believes that pro-life societies in universities have a vital role.

Since the age range between 20-24 is statistically the most likely to have an abortion, medical student Jacob Karinatan, 20, said: “Pro-life societies in universities have an important role in directing vulnerable women in these situations to get the help that they need.

“It’s important to be able to stand up for these beliefs in our society.”

As reported in last week’s *Universe*, the creation of the university’s new Pro-Life Society, to which Jacob Karinatan belongs, led to over 15,000 people signing a petition calling for it to be banned, with accusations of misogyny accompanying calls for a ban.

Manchester Students’ Union quickly confirmed the new society’s right to exist, adding that it had gone through all the registration processes.



Jacob told the *Universe*: “We have our own views on abortion and we’d like to discuss them with other people who want to engage with us. We haven’t had protests or marches challenging abortion.

“We’ve just started and set ourselves up.

“It’s important to have a society where both sides of the arguments are civilly discussed. No one is going around saying it is only a women’s

issue. Anyone has a right to have an opinion on this.”

The aim of the society is ‘to create a pro-life culture on campus and support the dignity of every human life from conception.’

A major criticism levelled at the group was that it initially comprised of men only. Since the petition spread, two women have voluntarily joined the leadership team, but Jacob believes it is important for men to have a voice in pro-life debate.

“It is a woman’s issue but everyone has the right to an opinion,” he said. “Often the issue of abortion means that a father can avoid responsibility and can just push it on the woman, which strikes me as being anti-woman.

“It’s not right for the man to avoid responsibility.”

Jacob is inviting those interested to “come along to our events.”

“You can raise awareness, stand up for the right of the unborn and make that known to your friends and colleagues.”

Jacob also underlined the impor-

tance of sharing the pro-life message in the face of such pressure. He said: “It’s important to have a voice for the unborn – the most vulnerable. I believe the pro-life cause answers questions in terms of providing that support, that guidance for all parties affected.”

He ended by thanking *Universe* readers for their prayers and urged them to continue to pray.

The new group has been welcomed by fellow pro-life group Right To Life, whose spokesperson, Catherine Robinson, affirmed that Manchester University pro-life society has “as much right to be heard as anyone else”.

“Student pro-life groups are often the first opportunity people have to hear the pro-life view and this should not be denied by other students making spurious accusations about ‘harm,’” she said.

“A pro-life group that intends, among other things, to discuss abortion and make the case for opposing it has as much right to be heard as anyone else”.

All online games need stake limits – CARE

Christian social justice charity CARE is warning that new limits on online slot machines fall short of what is required to truly protect vulnerable gamblers.

The Government has announced a maximum stake of £2 for under-25s playing online slot machines, with over-25s limited to a £5 max stake, but Tim Cairns at CARE, said all online games need to be subject to the same rules and stake limits.

“By focusing on slot-type games alone, ministers have ignored other online games that are also addictive by design, and which pose serious risk of causing gambling harm,” he said. “Online casinos generate £4 billion in revenue for gambling companies annually. The majority comes from slots – £3 billion – but this still leaves almost £1 billion that will not be covered by a stake limit. All online games need to be subject to the same stake limits.

Mr Cairns also emphasised the need for other, significant reforms.

“The Government must outline a range of substantive measures that confront gambling harms,” he said.

“Big gambling has spent 20 years making its product more addictive, easier to play, and available 24/7 whilst ignoring pleas from suffering individuals. This has led to endemic levels of problem gambling. If gamblers are to be kept safe, advertising



needs to be cut and the gambling industry needs to be placed under a levy that is sufficient to properly meet the public health crisis it has inspired. At least five per cent of industry profits.

“The Government propose a levy of 1% for online gambling and 0.4% for traditional high street bookies and casinos.

“Gambling companies make almost £15 billion per year from British punters, so the Government’s proposed levy would bring in about £100 million.

“It is estimated that the average cost of treatment for a person with a gambling disorder is just over £600. Britain has around 400,000 people who need treatment, making the annual cost of treatment in excess of £240 million. It is clear this proposal falls far short of a fair share of gambling profits.”

Mr Cairns demanded a 5% compulsory levy to be placed on gambling companies which would subsidise treatment for gambling addicts, as well as research and prevention. “A 5% levy is required to match the scale of gambling harms.”

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CATHOLIC WEEKLY

COMMENT

Words matter
in court cases
and public life

Scarlet Blake, who was jailed this week for life for murdering a stranger, was tried as a woman and yet has now been sent to man's prison. During the case, Blake was referred to as 'she' even though there was no evidence of any gender reassignment.

The BBC's main news bulletin referred to Blake as a 'woman' in its report and used the pronoun 'she', as did Sky and many newspapers. Why was Blake allowed to present in the court as a woman without any of the legal documents required for gender reassignment, let alone having undergone any physical and surgical transformation?

The jury might have been more sympathetic to a woman than a man, though in the end it did not sway their verdict. Indeed, the judge said it was all "part of an elaborate attempt to rationalise what you had done and shift responsibility to others".

While those who genuinely struggle with their identity deserve our sympathy and support, it is absurd that anyone can simply claim to be a woman, and in a court of all places.

Blake spoke of how coming out to relatives at the age of 12 led to an "emotional rift" within the family and mental-health issues, which the judge said were spurious and "and had no particular relevance to the case and doesn't make it any more or less likely that she is guilty of the offence with which she is charged."

But referring to the killer as "she" might have been a factor that weighed in a juror's mind.

Defendants should be required to present the same gender recognition documents that would be needed to obtain a passport or be tried on the basis of their sex at birth.

As J K Rowling observed, "words matter".

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Starmer and team start election countdown as civil service 'teaches' them their cabinet jobs

POLITICS

**Leighton
Andrews**

Six key skills that should be on every Labour MP's mind

Keir Starmer's shadow cabinet has now started "access talks" with the civil service as they prepare for the possibility of forming the next Government. Being in Government is different from being in opposition and Labour has been in opposition in Westminster for a very long time.

New ministers will have to perform their new role from the moment of their appointment, and few in Starmer's team have any ministerial experience. There's no manual for the job, though these days some training is available.

Since 2015, former ministers have been telling the Institute for Government (IfG) what makes for an effective minister. I've tried below, based on research for my new book, *Ministerial Leadership*, to distil some of that advice to highlight five skills Labour MPs hopeful of a role in a future government will need to hone.

1. How to ask stupid questions

First, ministers have to remember they are politicians and that their value lies in their political judgement. What seems obvious to a politician may be a revelation to a civil servant, who may not have direct experience of how policies play out on the ground.

But ministers aren't the technical experts, so that also means new ministers mustn't be afraid to ask the stupid questions. Unless they understand something fully, they won't be able to explain it to their colleagues, let alone the public.

2. How to move from solo operator to team player

Incoming ministers must remember they're part of a team, both in their department and as a member of a governmental team overall. Everything they do in Government depends on teamwork, Labour MP Margaret Beckett told the IfG. Cabinet structures – committees, policy sign-off, the Cabinet Manual – reinforce that, as does the doctrine of collective responsibility spelt out in the ministerial code. This is about more than formalities. It's



also a question of how ministers project themselves as part of a governmental team, advancing the government's overall narrative.

That means that MPs who become ministers need to ask themselves regularly how what they are doing in their department contributes to the Government's programme, performance and perception. Teamwork isn't always the most obvious attribute in an ambitious political world, but it's key in government.

3. How to make use of (and respect) civil servants

The civil service is not the enemy of ministers. Most civil servants want to help ministers get things done in an appropriate way. They have skills, systems and networks.

These can be made to work for a minister's benefit if the minister can be clear about what they want. Old hands still praise the quality of the civil service – some still call it a Rolls-Royce. But as Conservative peer Michael Heseltine says, the minister needs to drive it.

The civil service isn't perfect. There's now a consensus on the challenges it faces, including the loss of institutional memory, accentuated by frequent churn as officials move jobs, and a failure to think deeply about future challenges.

4. How to schedule thinking time

Protecting space in your diary has been part of ministerial folklore

since Gerald Kaufman wrote *How to be a Minister* in 1980. Ministers have hectic schedules but everyone needs thinking time to focus on their priorities, sometimes away from the routine of briefings and meetings.

Former Labour minister Hilary Benn now says: "If I had my time again, setting aside time to think [is what I'd do]. Because if you're in the moment, going from engagement to engagement, box to box, you don't always get the time to think and you need to do that."

So ministers need to know whether they are on track. What isn't working out? What should they or the department stop doing to allow other things to flourish? These are the types of questions a minister must ask themselves to ensure their diary is packed in the right way.

5. How to find the way back to Parliament

When they become ministers, politicians don't stop being MPs. They have to continue representing their constituents. The department is not their only job.

In fact, the institutional embrace can be suffocating so, as former Labour minister Jack Straw puts it, time spent in the House of Commons is never time wasted. Parliament gives a minister intelligence on how policies are being received and potential problems that need tackling.

6. How to deliver

Having a policy isn't enough for a minister. They need to know how it is going to be delivered and what the critical stages of that delivery are – as well as how to keep track of them. If legislation is needed, policies can take years to implement.

Ministers need to have a view of the critical path to delivering the policy: its legitimisation through a bill in parliament, the drafting of administrative rules for implementation, the actual rollout of the policy in practice. There are many steps along the way which need to be tracked.

My research suggests that ministers have become a lot more conscious of the need to follow a policy through to its delivery and implementation on the ground on the last 25 years.

They know that the practicalities of a failed policy on the ground can haunt them and the government for years after.

Meanwhile, successive prime ministers have become more obsessive about delivery since Tony Blair established his prime minister's delivery unit in 2001, so ministers know that the centre is watching. They have developed their own practical steps to check policy implementation. Former Conservative cabinet minister Eric Pickles, for example, implemented a tracker system in his department to "ruthlessly" monitor progress on the 40 most important items on his to-do list.

So you're a government minister now?

Being a minister demands performance every minute of the day in an environment that is more scrutinised – through social media – than ever. Many feel like an imposter on first arriving. Sometimes the pressures can overwhelm. But it's all temporary.

The ministerial life is relatively short so it's not unreasonable for a minister to think about what they will do after they've left government. They will be aware that political parties can be particularly brutal to those who no longer have the status they once did.

Those who survive best afterwards are often the ones who maintain external friendships. Knowing how to keep a hinterland is perhaps the most important skill of all. There is a life after politics. **Leighton Andrews is a Professor of Public Service Leadership, Cardiff University**

Youth rally at conference to protect unborn

Hundreds of young pro-lifers gathered at SPUC's annual Youth Conference to champion the pro-life cause and learn how to make abortion unthinkable.

The SPUC Youth Conference, which followed the theme "Call to Courage", took place between 23rd -25th February in Staffordshire.

The Conference saw hundreds of young pro-life advocates gather to learn effective strategies and fuel their passion for defending the lives of vulnerable unborn babies.

During the conference, attendees engaged with speakers and thought leaders who have dedicated their lives to championing the pro-life cause.

Through a series of presentations and workshops, young pro-lifers acquired in-depth knowledge about the challenges the pro-life movement currently faces and were inspired with effective ways to address them.

Dr Miriam Sciberras was the 2024 keynote speaker. Dr Miriam is chief executive officer of Life Net-

work Malta, a coalition of pro-life groups that has fought to keep abortion out of the country.

Dr Miriam spoke about how her nation is resisting international pressure to legalise abortion.

Conference attendees were also provided with a variety of diverse workshops which provided in-depth insight into key areas of the pro-life mission.

Delegates at the Youth Conference gained valuable insight from SPUC's services co-ordinator, Margaret Akers, who spoke about the failures of the UK's 'pills by post' abortion policy and provided practical steps to help end it.

SPUC's advocacy and development manager Josh Coghill delivered a dynamic address that called into action each young pro-life advocate, inspiring them to leave the conference with a renewed sense of courage and empowerment, which would allow them to be the driving force behind impactful change.

Conference co-ordinator, SPUC's Louise Grant said: "SPUC's 2024



Youth Conference encouraged attendees to step out of their comfort zone, speak up for the voiceless and fearlessly advocate for the rights of the unborn.

"The Youth Conference provides young pro-lifers with the opportunity to learn hands-on advocacy skills that empower them to make a difference.

"It also provides the space for young pro-lifers to surround themselves with a supportive network of

likeminded young people.

"In a world where the sanctity of life is under constant threat, commitment to the pro-life cause is more crucial than ever.

"It is our aim that each young pro-lifer walks away from SPUC's Youth Conference with a renewed sense of purpose and the tools necessary to take meaningful action. It is the courage of pro-lifers that will contribute to building a culture where abortion is unthinkable."

ONS accused of boosting pandemic excess deaths

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been accused of overestimating excess deaths in the first year of the Covid pandemic.

The statistics body announced it was updating its methodology for calculating excess deaths to include current death rates, as well as the growing and ageing population – a change that many experts said was "long overdue".

UK withdraws from treaty that stopped net zero ambitions

Britain has pulled out of an international investment treaty it said had posed a threat to its net zero ambitions.

Alongside nine EU member states, including France, Spain and the Netherlands, the UK will withdraw from the Energy Charter Treaty.

The agreement dates back to 1994 and was designed to protect fossil fuel investors and encourage the development of infrastructure in post-Soviet countries.

However, more recently it has been used by fossil fuel companies to challenge climate policies that threaten their projects.

SVP calls for Budget welfare rise as millions turn to food banks

Andy Drozdziak

The SVP is joining calls for the introduction of an 'Essentials Guarantee' after new figures revealed that 780,000 people (12 per cent) who claim Universal Credit were forced to use a food bank in the last month.

The figures, conducted by YouGov for the Trussell Trust, also showed that over half (55%) ran out of food in the last month and were unable to afford more.

An 'Essentials Guarantee' would mean the basic rate of Universal Credit is enough to cover life's essentials and support can never go below that level, which SVP England and Wales CEO Elizabeth Palmer backs.

"We support calls by the Trussell Trust and others to introduce an Essentials Guarantee by raising the basic rate of Universal Credit," she told the *Universe*. "This would go a long way in ensuring people can at the least meet their basic needs such as food and gas."

The Trussell Trust criticised Universal Credit as inadequate, as the figures showed that one in four people missed an essential appointment, such as visiting the doctor or travelling to work, because they



were unable to afford the cost of transport in the last three months.

In the same period, approximately 2.7 million people on Universal Credit skipped meals to keep up with other essential costs like utilities or rent. Two in five were unable to keep their home warm.

Elizabeth Palmer confirmed the statistics through the SVP's experiences. She said: "We are seeing a worrying increase in the number of people accessing our projects and services. Since October 2023, our centres alone have provided more than 8,200 emergency food parcels and hot meals to families."

Emma Revie, chief executive of the Trussell Trust, said it was time for the Government to act.

"This research emphasises the stark truth about poverty across the UK and the Government cannot stand by and let this continue. They must act now to implement permanent solutions that alleviate the hardship faced by so many," she said.

In particular, "the Chancellor must extend the Household Support Fund in his Spring Budget. This has provided a lifeline for so many people and it is at risk of losing its funding from March, leaving a huge gap in support that neither councils nor charities can fill."

Elizabeth Palmer backed the call for the extension of the Household Support Fund which, she said, 'has been a lifeline for thousands of people we supported through our centres.'

The proposal to introduce an Essentials Guarantee has already been backed by over 100 organisations across the charity and business sectors, as well as dozens of celebrities and faith leaders who signed an open letter in January demanding politicians address the growing levels of poverty in the UK.

The spring Budget will take place on 6th March.



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Spoils of war

Sir John Battle



The reality and fear of war has returned to haunt us, not least for young people, with the new fear of a nuclear war in Europe and rumoured possibilities of being called up to serve and fight. Daily reports from the Ukraine and Gaza, not to mention the neglected conflicts in Yemen and Sudan, only reinforce a desperate fear. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 500,000 soldiers on both sides have now been killed or wounded. Over six million Ukrainian civilian refugees have fled the country and an estimated seven million have been displaced internally. The images from the front resemble the trenches of the First World War.

Gaza has been reduced to rubble, with 30,000 killed as a consequence of the terrible initial murder of over 1,700 innocent Israeli civilians by Hamas.

A report of Britain's direct involvement spelt out that seven out of 18 Houthi drones were shot down by HMS Diamond using Sea Viper/Astor missiles; these cost between £1-£2 million each, while drones cost a few hundred pounds. It is not just that war is now involving indiscriminately and disproportionately a greater loss of civilian casualties. It is a mixture of cheap lethal drones drawing out expensive technological defences.

As a report in the *Financial Times* set out last week, the Ukraine war is transforming the fortunes of European defence contracts. Defence industries and their suppliers are booming. Global defence spending hit a record \$2.2 trillion last year and in Europe it reached a record \$388bn, boosting investment and shares in the major defence manufacturing industries. Traditional producers of ammunition and armoured vehicles, artillery shells, rocket launchers, air and missile defence systems are doing well, as are the manufacturers of drones, robotics, software, radar and comms equipment.

From sensors to gear boxes, the supply chains are revived in industries previously run down as false and wastefully destructive investment. The Leeds tank producing factory Barnbow and the tank axle factory Kirkstall, which employed thousands, closed decades ago as we thought they were redundant.

As our catechism spells out 'all citizens and all governments are obliged to work for the avoidance of war' and 'the power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily' as we get trapped in the 'ancient bondage of war.' (2307)

Welcome news on baby death certificates marred by move to axe abortion restrictions

CATHOLIC COMMENT

Caroline Farrow



In a much welcome move, bereaved parents who have experienced the loss of a baby before 24 weeks in pregnancy can now receive a certificate which recognises their loss. Sadly the scheme is only open to those who have experienced baby loss after September 2018, but it means that anyone over the age of 16 who was living in England at the time of the loss and is one of the baby's parents can apply for a certificate.

The scheme is even open to surrogate parents and as one bereaved mother explained, the certificate recognises that an actual baby existed, irrespective of the length of the pregnancy.

While the certificate is not a legal document as babies who die before they reach the 24 week gestation marker will still not need to be recognised, an official recognition that a life existed will be an enormous comfort and help for bereaved parents in their journey as they begin to process, heal and recover from what is undoubtedly a bereavement. The certificates may help women in the workplace show employers what they have been through and also open up the general conversation, because early baby loss is still seen as taboo and because it is commonplace, something that women should just 'get over'.

A certificate is often the only tangible thing that is left when a baby is lost early in pregnancy; just eleven years ago when I lost a baby, I had to fight tooth and nail for the hospital to retrieve the tiny remains so that they could be respectfully interred instead of being incinerated as 'hospital waste'. The only thing we have left is the scan picture which I had the foresight to ask for, while reeling in shock over the news my 15-week-old baby had no heartbeat.

One minute I was staring excitedly at the screen, not having noticed the uncharacteristic silence of the sonographers and the next, a voice was telling me, "I'm sorry there's no heartbeat", before the screen was immediately shut off and I was asked if I understood what the news meant and was told that I would be referred to a gynaecology nurse in order to discuss the next steps.



I don't know why I even asked for a photo, all I can remember is that my mind was reeling. Of course, the sonographer complied without question, but had I not done so, then there would be no other physical reminder.

Every single expert in women's health, including England's chief midwifery officer has praised this development, which is also being extended to Wales, (in Scotland an online memorial book where people can record their losses is in place), and yet at the same time, various feminist politicians, such as Stella Creasy and Diana Johnson are agitating for a total decriminalisation of abortion, also citing women's health.

The two positions are totally incoherent; you cannot on the one hand support a woman experiencing baby loss, while at the same time advocate for a process that refuses to admit the humanity of all unborn children and allow for

their killing for any reason right up until that moment when they leave the birth canal.

Fortunately, there is some hope on the horizon. A cross-party group of MPs has tabled a landmark amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill that would lower the current abortion limit from 24 weeks to 22 weeks, to bring the law into line with advances in medicine. In the 34 years since the original time limit was lowered from 28 to 24 weeks, there has been a significant increase in the survival rate of babies born at 22 and 23 weeks. It is a horrifying inconsistency that in one room of a hospital a team of clinicians may be desperately trying to save the life of a premature baby born at 23 weeks, but in another, injecting potassium chloride into the heart of another, because their mother does not feel able to finish her pregnancy.

The abortion limit in the UK is already incredibly liberal and over

double that of most European countries, and reform is long overdue. While this amendment is far from ideal, in that it does still allow for the legal killing of unborn children and further entrenches the culture of abortion, it does at least take a welcome step in accepting that there should be some limit to the taking of unborn life and acknowledging the particular cruelty of late-term abortion, in which it is highly likely that the baby is able to feel pain.

Right to Life is running a 'little fighters' campaign to build support for this very positive amendment and urging people to send postcards to their MPs, an initiative which the Catholic Bishops' Conference is backing. Hopefully you may have even seen some of these postcards at the back of your Church.

Please visit the website and consider sending a postcard to your MP or even order a batch of them to give to friends and family. This could be a historic moment in terms of making a much-needed step forward when it comes to the defence of the unborn, and, as I said last week, if your MP does not do the right thing when it comes to this crucial vote, you can let him or her know what you feel about that at the forthcoming election.

"Every single expert in women's health has praised this development ... and yet at the same time, various feminist politicians are agitating for a total decriminalisation of abortion, also citing women's health."

NJPN hears call for systemic change to avoid climate change destroying planet

Andy Drozdziak

A call for action on systemic change to tackle the Climate Crisis was made at the quarterly meeting of the National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN) last Saturday.

Around 40 representatives of diocesan commissions in England and Wales heard four speakers address the theme: ‘Live or Let Die – A call to care for the poor and for the Earth’.

Michael Chambers of Brentwood diocese highlighted the results of a survey of young people’s views on climate: “We want systemic change - not just individual action,” he said. “We’re doing other things less important - we need funds for protecting biodiversity and climate.”

Young people warned against becoming desensitised to the full impacts of climate change and urged that Christians advocate for urgent action and stay hopeful, especially for the sake of future generations.

In a presentation on ‘Environmental Justice’, Ellen Teague of the Columban Justice, Peace and Ecology Team showed images from the 10-day 24 hour ‘No Faith in Fossil Fuels’ Vigil at parliament which ended as the NJPN was meeting.

She quoted from *Laudate Deum* where Pope Francis said, “groups



Participants in the 10-day Vigil ‘No Faith in Fossil Fuels’, which concluded at Downing Street last Saturday as NJPN was meeting. Photo: Christian Climate Action

negatively portrayed as ‘radicalised’... are filling a space left empty by society as a whole,” (LD 58).

The key advocacy points of the vigil were to call for the UK’s move away from the use of oil and gas, reparation payments for damage caused by climate change in the Global South, and investment in green policies.

Ellen called for the UK Government to honour its climate commitments, promising to bring all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050. She also called for the COP process to speed up international action to stop rising too far beyond

the 1.5 degrees threshold which has already been breached.

NJPN members were urged to lobby the nine Catholic dioceses still investing in fossil fuels to disinvest, which, according to Operation Noah, includes promising never to invest in them in the future. There was a reminder that FaithInvest offers courses for investment managers and that the NJPN Environment Group keeps the network up to date with campaigns, events and resources.

Andrew Jackson, chief executive of Pax Christi England and Wales, spoke on ‘Environmental issues as a

cause of conflict’. Climate change causes conflict because it intensifies competition over land and water, affects food production, and forces migration.

“Environment is the silent victim of conflicts,” Andrew said, adding that wars can destroy landscapes as well as communities-military emissions are around 5.5 per cent of total global emissions.

In her presentation, Colette Joyce of Westminster Justice and Peace Commission said there is a need for greater appreciation of and engagement with the natural world and for personal carbon reduction. But she

stressed her belief in collective action and systemic change. Colette is working with Westminster diocese for carbon neutrality by 2030. She supported the Christian Climate Action Vigil outside parliament and is preparing for the *Laudato Si’* anniversary on 24 May, the next Season of Creation in the Autumn and COP29 in Baku during November.

Future plans from the Northern and Southern Area Environment Groups include a strategy for building up to the Season of Creation and pushing for all Catholic Dioceses to shun fossil fuels. The Scarborough parishes of Middlesbrough diocese are considering including environmental reflections in their weekly bulletins.

There was also support for monitoring carbon emissions from church buildings and the LiveSimply programme. At a macro level, all agreed to support the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.

Anne Peacey, the Chair of the NJPN, said speakers and workshops for July’s NJPN Conference will be announced soon. The theme of the 19-21 July conference in Derbyshire is ‘Just Politics’.

NJPN 2024 Conference:
<https://www.justice-and-peace.org.uk/conference/>

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In Brief

Crisps and fizzy drinks off menu

Shop and cafes' meal deal offers are to be stripped of crisps and fizzy drinks in Scotland under SNP plans to tackle an obesity crisis.

Proposals unveiled this week state that the popular supermarket offers, as well as temporary price reductions on unhealthy food and drink, will fall within the scope of a new junk food crackdown north of the border.

Options in a consultation for "rebalancing meal deals towards healthier options" include banning any food or drink classed as being high in fat, sugar or salt from the promotions in meal deals.

Elderly man killed in unprovoked attack

An elderly man was killed in the early hours of Tuesday outside a railway station in an "unprovoked and despicable" attack.

British Transport Police (BTP) said the victim was found "badly hurt" by a member of staff outside Harold Wood Station in Havering, east London at around 4:30 am.

Despite the best efforts of paramedics, the victim, who has not been formally identified, was pronounced dead at the scene.

A man has been arrested in connection with the incident and remains in police custody.

Board to charge for music certificates

For decades they have enjoyed pride of place on the family mantelpiece, celebrating the musical achievements of school children across the world.

But soon the certificates announcing whether youngsters have made the grade on their chosen instrument are going to come at a price, after the examination board decided to "go digital".

This week the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), which delivers over 650,000 music exams and assessments every year in 93 countries, announced it will start charging £3 for paper certificates in a bid to "further safeguard our certificates against fraud and maintain standards and confidence in our exams".

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Macron's sabre rattling exposes deep flaws in Nato's strategy

POLITICS

Kenton White

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, has said sending western troops to fight in Ukraine "could not be ruled out". After hosting a meeting of 25 European leaders in Paris on 26th February, Macron said that there was "no consensus" on committing ground troops to the conflict in Ukraine but added: "Nothing should be excluded. We will do whatever it takes to ensure that Russia cannot win this war."

Until now, Nato has confined itself to training Ukrainian military forces and supplying them with defensive weapons. Member states fear that directly confronting Russian forces in Ukraine would risk a massive escalation. And Vladimir Putin and his senior ministers have regularly issued threats that Russia could resort to using its nuclear arsenal in the case of a larger conflict.

At present, Nato is also conducting its largest military exercise since the Cold War. Steadfast Defender runs from January until May and involves all 31 member states. Aimed at enhancing the alliance's collective defence capabilities and readiness, it is the largest exercise since Reforger in 1988, which involved 125,000 troops from the US, Germany, Canada, France and Denmark.

General Christopher Cavoli, Nato's supreme allied commander for Europe, said: "Steadfast Defender 2024 will be a clear demonstration of our unity, strength and determination to protect each other, our values and the rules-based international order."

Importantly, one aspect of the exercises is the involvement of US and Canadian forces, which is designed to demonstrate the speed and size of Nato's reinforcement capabilities. It acts both as a reassurance to European Nato member states and as a demonstration to potential enemies of the ability Nato has to put large forces into the field. Exercises are part of the communication of deterrence.

The exercise is meant to simulate an, "emerging conflict scenario with a near-peer adversary". This is a thinly disguised reference to Russia, which shows that Nato is beginning to take the threat of direct conflict with that country seriously.



The British Army's contribution to Operation Steadfast Defender, the largest Nato field exercise since 1988

During the cold war, Nato undertook regular large-scale exercises. For example, Exercise Lionheart, led by the UK in 1984, involved nearly 58,000 British soldiers and airmen of a total force of 131,565, including troops from the US, the Netherlands and what was then West Germany.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, Nato has searched for a new identity. Its focus shifted in the 1990s from protecting common territory to protecting members' common interests, as it did by intervening in the wars in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999, when it officially approved this new strategic concept.

Need for unity

A demonstration of Nato unity and military capacity is important, coming after two years of disunity over how to respond to the war in Ukraine and amid wrangling over supplies of arms by Ukraine's western allies. It has become more significant following recent remarks by former – and possibly future – president Donald Trump, that Nato members who did not meet the spending guidelines would no longer be protected by the US.

Members are supposed to spend at least 2 per cent of their annual GDP on defence – but it's more complicated than that. Some

nations' defence spending is wholly allocated to Nato. Others, meanwhile, might set their defence spending at less than 2 per cent, but their spending per head is greater than that of those who meet the Nato guideline.

For example, Luxembourg falls short of the 2 per cent, spending only 0.72 per cent. But in per head terms it spends US\$921 (£726), which is more than Poland (3.9 per cent) or France (1.9 per cent).

The US may spend 3.5 per cent GDP on defence, but not all of that is allocated to Nato. Much of the US's strength is deployed in the Pacific and on its home territories. So it's misleading to judge the value of Nato membership in these terms.

Their key clause in the Nato treaty is article 5, which governs collective security and compels members to respond if a fellow member is attacked by a hostile third party. The US is the only Nato member state to have invoked article 5, following the 9/11 attacks. It received assistance from other Nato members in Afghanistan and more widely in the 'war on terror'.

Is Nato battle ready?

A significant problem Nato faces, however, is not in deploying the troops it has, but in supplying them. As has been demonstrated by the efforts to provide equipment

and ammunition to Ukraine, Nato has neither the stockpiles nor the manufacturing capacity to supply a lengthy modern war.

This is because Nato has long planned on what's known as a "come as you are" war, which means it has the capacity to fight for only as long as the equipment and supplies last. For this reason, Nato's strategy has always been, in the event of a conflict, to bring it to a conclusion as quickly as possible.

Admiral Rob Bauer of the Royal Netherlands Navy, Nato's most senior military commander and military adviser to its North Atlantic Council, spoke at the Warsaw Security Forum in October 2023. He said: "We need large volumes. The just-in-time, just-enough economy we built together in 30 years in our liberal economies is fine for a lot of things – but not the armed forces when there is a war on going."

A number of European countries have already distanced themselves from Macron's remarks, including Poland, the Czechia and Sweden, whose Nato membership has finally been approved by Hungary and which is set to become the alliance's 32nd member.

But Russia has seized on Macron's remarks, with Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov telling reporters that even discussing the idea of western troops being sent to fight in Ukraine represents a "very important new element".

He added: "In that case, we would need to talk not about the probability, but about the inevitability (of a direct conflict)." **Kenton White is a Lecturer in Strategic Studies and International Relations, University of Reading**

A significant problem Nato faces, however, is not in deploying the troops it has, but in supplying them. As has been demonstrated by the efforts to provide equipment and ammunition to Ukraine, Nato has neither the stockpiles nor the manufacturing capacity to supply a lengthy modern war.

Ton up for CAFOD's LiveSimply schools

Andy Drozdziak

CAFOD is celebrating a landmark achievement after 100 Catholic schools across England and Wales achieved the LiveSimply Award.

CAFOD's LiveSimply Award recognises schools and parishes that pledge to live simply, sustainably and in solidarity with the world's poorest communities.

To achieve the award, schools displayed a commitment to live simply by undertaking a variety of activities, including creating prayer gardens, working with foodbanks, campaigning against global injustice, and participating in CAFOD's 'Big Lent Walk'.

CAFOD explained the origins and purpose of the award. "The LiveSimply Award is rooted in Catholic Social Teaching and inspired by Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* and encourages personal transformation," the charity said.

"Pupils learn not only about the actions they undertake but also understand the reasons behind them, the impact they have and how faith inspires their involvement."

Siobhan Farnell, CAFOD's LiveSimply for Schools co-ordinator, praised the schools. "It's so inspiring to hear about the actions the schools have taken and how much the young people have enjoyed them-



St Patrick's school, Coventry, celebrate their LiveSimply award.

selves, embracing the ethos and sentiment of LiveSimply," she told the Universe.

"We're thrilled that 100 schools have now achieved the LiveSimply Award."

Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Primary School, Birkdale, were the first school to achieve the Award in October 2017, while St Cuthbert's Catholic High School, Newcastle

Upon Tyne, followed suit as the first secondary school in November 2018. Over 100,000 pupils are currently working towards the LiveSimply Award across 20 dioceses in England and Wales.

Siobhan Farnell shared some of the ways the schools have worked towards achieving the award. "The schools have demonstrated living in solidarity when they stood side by

side with Salina, a small-holder farmer from Bangladesh, by signing a letter to the World Bank to fix the broken food system," she said.

"They campaigned by writing letters to the Prime Minister about climate change and how the world's poorest communities are most impacted – despite being the ones who have done the least to contribute to it."

Pupils have also engaged in environmentally conscious practices, such as walking and cycling to school, creating allotments, and participating in community clean-up initiatives.

The 'living simply' element is a chance to slow down, spend more time in prayer and reflection, spend time in nature and quality time with others.

The inclusive nature of the Award has led to strengthened community ties, with parents, families, local parishioners, businesses, MPs, governors, and councillors actively participating.

David Harris, Adviser for Catholic Education (Primary) at Birmingham Diocesan Education Service, said: "The LiveSimply award has been well received by Primary and Secondary schools within the Archdiocese of Birmingham.

"Children have been enthused and inspired to live out Catholic Social Teaching through living simply, sustainably and in solidarity with others."

Josh Marshall, RE Co-ordinator and Year 5 Teacher at St Patrick's Catholic Primary School, Wigan, described the LiveSimply Award his school received as "the most inclusive Award we've ever done at St Patrick's."

Priest's album is a call to put God first

Andy Drozdziak

A priest has released an album which he hopes will help people on their faith journey.

Fr Joseph Gulliford, Catholic priest and songwriter from London, has released his first album called *'Seek You First'*. It contains 11 original praise and worship songs, which Fr Joseph describes as a 'simple but profound call.'

"The album is called *'Seek You First'*," he told the *Universe*. "This is a very simple but profound call to all of us in faith – to put God first and, knowing all of our struggles and sins and failures, to nonetheless seek and desire that He be first in our hearts and lives."

"Putting this into action is, of course, difficult but we receive from God, spending time and abiding in His presence, the grace to do what He calls us to do – even the grace to pray and to praise itself which is His gift. One of the songs, *'By Your Gift Of Grace'*, is expressing this truth."

Having been ordained in 2022, Fr Joseph currently serves as assistant priest at St Thomas More parish, Dulwich, in Southwark. Recording took place in intervals over a few months in the spring and summer period of 2023,



working with sound engineer, mix engineer and producer Thomas Aston.

Fr Joseph said he hoped the album would help people to deepen their own faith. "I'm delighted to share this album and really hope that it would be a blessing to many – that they would be helped in prayer through the songs and drawn closer to our Lord and His heart," he said, adding that prayer was a big influence in his songwriting.

"One or two of the songs were older songs, (which I) went back to and prayed with, and then rejuvenated as such, but most are generally new within a year or months before recording," he said.

'Seek You First' is available on all major platforms including Spotify, Amazon and iTunes.



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Mending bridges

James Somerville-Meikle
Deputy Director, the Catholic Union of Great Britain

It is fair to say that the last couple of weeks have not shown Parliament at their best.

Wranglings about parliamentary procedure over a vote on the conflict in Gaza have turned into a much wider row at home about racism, community cohesion, and the role of MPs.

In the run up to the debate, which ended in chaotic scenes in the House of Commons, many commentators said that the carefully crafted motions and speeches by MPs would not have any impact on the situation in the Middle East.

In large part they are right, although it somewhat misses the point. What MPs say, or do not say, in Parliament is picked up by their constituents. The most important audience in almost any House of Commons debate is the electorate, especially in a General Election year.

MPs can use their positions to inflame debate and increase tensions, or to reach across the divide and seek the common good. The former seems more appealing than the latter for many these days.

The Catholic Church is no stranger to debates and disagreement. I am always struck that the Pope's title as *Pontifex* comes from the Latin word for bridge-builder – *pont facere*. The task of building bridges in the Church is a continuous one.

Bridge builders are also needed in our politics today; men and women who are committed to pursuing the common good above narrow interests. With a General Election coming up later this year, we will get to choose the people who represent us in Parliament.

The Church has much to contribute to the election campaign, whether its notions of common good and virtue or the experience gained by countless hours of charity work carried out by Catholics here and around the world.

At the Catholic Union, we have launched a General Election survey to give people the chance to have their say on the issues that matter most to them. We will use this to inform our work with parliamentary candidates so that they know and understand the contribution of the Church to national life.

It can be tempting to despair at the state of our politics, but our duty to participate in public life exists in good times and bad. The contribution that the Catholic Church can make to politics seems particularly needed this year. There are many bridges in need of repair.
www.catholicunion.org.uk

Letters to the Editor

The Universe Catholic Weekly welcomes letters from our readers. Send your thoughts to Michael Winterbottom, at michael.winterbottom@universecatholicweekly.co.uk. Please endeavour to keep your letter short and provide a name and address with all letters, though we are happy to anonymise your thoughts in print.

What is God like? Perhaps we should ask a baby

Years ago, I heard a story which intrigued me. A family just had a new baby and her older brother, still very young himself, was always trying to be with the baby. The reason was revealed thanks to a bit of technology. The parents had an intercom set-up in the baby's room in case she woke up and they would be able to hear her cries elsewhere in the house.

One evening as the parents sat in the living room, they heard their son talking to the baby through the intercom; he said to his baby sister "tell me what God is like; I can hardly remember."

It was the word 'remember' that caught my attention. It points to the intimacy of the act of creation; like in Jeremiah 1:5 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you'. And in the Psalm 139:13 and 16, 'For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. and your eyes saw my unformed body.'

I wonder, as our Father created our immortal soul and incorporated body and soul, did we catch a glimpse of Him? Did He pause to gaze on His handiwork as He loved us into existence for His own purposes?

The veil between the spiritual world and the

physical is thin but quickly becomes blurred. I know of a family who when they used to pray the rosary together the toddlers could see their Guardian Angels but as they grew older their vision of the invisible world was lost.

The ache in the human heart to return to God is helpful as it is unsettling. It points to the possibility of union or reunion with our heavenly Father, with the One who made us. We can have that intimacy again; fill the God-shaped hole in our being again by means of prayer.

We knew Him once, we can know Him again. With open, persevering hearts, all of us can be made new, and we can grow in the experiential knowledge that we are truly His sons and daughters, beloved and precious to Him and utterly dependent on Him.

Stephen Clark
Manila, Philippines

Ukraine deserves our continuing support

Thank you for your coverage in the Universe, of the second anniversary of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine.

I was reminded this week of a memorial near to Mylor Bridge in Cornwall, where,

below a white cross, a plaque reads: 'This symbol of faith in God was erected by Ukrainians who, escaping from Russian communists, found refuge in England'. It is dated 7th June 1948.

This should strengthen the determination of all the democracies of Europe and elsewhere that wish to preserve their liberty. They must be wholly supportive of the Ukrainian people as their country seeks to retain its freedom as a democratic state.

Percy Gilbert, Salisbury

Slogan was offensive – so where were the police?

The recent projection of the anti-Israeli slogan 'from the river to the sea' on to Big Ben, and the Metropolitan Police's dismissal of the event as not a criminal offence, sent a clear message that the anti-Israel, anti-Semitic movement can now act with impunity in the UK as it seeks to use the pretext of Israel's response to the heinous attack on 7th October to further its aims.

Is it not time for people to declare that this has to stop? Terror and hatred should never be allowed to win.

George W. Johnson, Scunthorpe

Recover the dignity of prisoners, for the benefit of all in society

Theresa Alessandro

While you are reading this, more than 87,000 people are in prison across England and Wales, a number which continues to rise.

According to the latest Bromley Briefing data published by the Prison Reform Trust, at weekends more than 60 per cent of prisoners will spend at least 22 hours of each day in their cell, the majority in a prison which is overcrowded. An estimated 100,000 children will spend this weekend without their mum or dad because they are in prison.

Pact is the national Catholic charity supporting people in prison and their children and families. We work with the people behind these statistics every day, in almost 70 prisons and in communities in many parts of England and Wales.

Our vision is of a society in which justice is understood as a process of restoration and healing, in which prisons are used sparingly and as places of learning and rehabilitation, and where the innate dignity and worth of every human being is valued. Our work to strengthen and maintain family bonds, where appropriate, reduces the chances of someone returning to crime after prison by 39 per cent, making our communities safer.

The data tells us that 41 per cent of people in prison observed violence in the home when they



Pact works with prisoners and their families to help improve rehabilitation
Photo: Andy Aitchison

were children, much higher than the experience of the general population. Mental health problems are common and self-harm is at a record high for incarcerated women - while half of women leave prison without settled accommodation.

In Pact's Stations of the Cross liturgy, one prisoner says: "All my life I'd been in this defeated place. I thought I was just a bad person; a bad apple and I was going to be like that for the rest of my life."

Pope Francis, in his book *Let Us Dream*, writes: 'In interpreting and praying over events or trends in the light of the Gospel, we can detect movements that reflect the values of God's Kingdom or their opposite.' For Pact, the current trend which imprisons more and more people

and leaves more children and families serving a 'hidden sentence', does not reflect the values of God's Kingdom.

In this General Election year, we have a chance to radically change the direction of travel for our criminal justice system. The Pope advises us 'to recover the dignity of the people we need to go to the margins of our societies to meet all who live there. Hidden there are ways of looking at the world that can give us all a fresh start.'

Pact's trustees, staff and volunteers include people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. We walk in solidarity with people who are often isolated by the stigma of imprisonment, on the margins of our society. We also advocate for

transformational change in the criminal justice system. As an example, we are supporting Lord Farmer's amendment to the Victim and Prisoners Bill regarding children whose primary carer is sent to prison.

You can help us to drive changes which will give our prisons, the people who live and work in them, affected children and families, and the whole criminal justice system, a fresh start. This Lent, please pray for those among us affected by imprisonment and consider supporting the life-changing work of Pact by contributing to the Lent appeal. We appreciate the steadfast support of Catholic people, helping, in Pope Francis' words, to "recover the dignity of the people."

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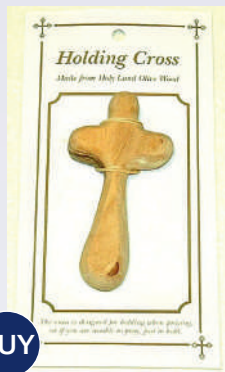


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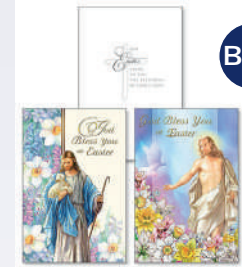


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Easter Card pack – Last Supper/Good Shepherd

Pack of 12 small Easter Cards, Gold Foil, Embossed, featuring 2 Designs: Last Supper and Christ the Good Shepherd. Inside Text: 'May the Peace and Blessings of this Easter Season remain with you through the year'.
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BUY

... and St Patrick's Day



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Irish Blessing Pewter Key ring, with circular medallion, featuring Celtic Cross design on one side, and Irish Blessing on the reverse: 'May your troubles be less, your blessings be more, and nothing but happiness come through your door!'
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In Brief

Same-sex blessing in Madrid cathedral criticised by bishop

After two men married in a civil ceremony inside a Catholic chapel at a private estate near Madrid, the Archdiocese of Madrid reprimanded organisers of the service. The Catholic hermitage of the Holy Trinity in which the ceremony took place is located in the municipality of El Escorial northwest of the Spanish capital. The Madrid archbishopric said that “it was neither informed nor consulted about the possibility of such a celebration... it was a unilateral act of the estate that will have canonical effects in this regard.”

In no case “is it permitted to perform a civil marriage within a religious enclosure,” the statement added.

Family hermitages “can only be used for the purpose granted them by the Church and cannot be a place for public religious celebrations, unless expressly authorised by the Bishopric.”

In a video that was widely shared on social media in Spain and around the world, two men dressed in suits walk out of the chapel holding hands. The clip ends with a picture from the marriage ceremony itself, where the men stand in front of what looks like the altar covered with plants, before the men are wrapped in a white cloth while holding a cross.

Masons still a no-go for Catholics

An Italian bishop has reaffirmed that Catholics who belong to the Masons are in a “serious state of sin” and cannot receive Communion, after reports said he had met three of Italy’s most senior Masonic lodges.

Bishop Antonio Stagliano, president of the Pontifical Academy of Theology, participated in the seminar with the leaders of Italy’s three main Masonic lodges.

News that the seminar was taking place behind closed doors made headlines across Italy, particularly because the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith only recently reaffirmed Church teaching that being a Freemason is incompatible with being Catholic.

“Being a Mason is forbidden because of the irreconcilability between Catholic doctrine and Freemasonry,” the doctrinal office said.

Archbishop Delpini said the meeting was not about reconciliation but “about fostering conversations between people to get to know each other’s points of view, to record their convergence or distance.”



People hold up rainbow banners with the word ‘Nonviolence’ written in Italian and English as they join Pope Francis for the recitation of the Angelus prayer in St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican on 25th February – two years and a day since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Pope in call for humanity to oversee Ukraine peace talks

Pope Francis marked the second anniversary of Russia’s full-scale attack on Ukraine at the Angelus prayer last Sunday with a wholehearted appeal for a touch of humanity to enter the lives of those leading both nations, and for talks to begin to bring the conflict to a close.

“How many victims, people wounded, destruction, anguish, tears in a period that is becoming terribly long and whose end is not yet in sight,” the pope said, reminding 20,000 visitors in St Peter’s Square that Russia launched its offensive on 24th February, 2022.

“It is a war that not only is devastating a region of Europe but is unleashing a global wave of fear and hatred,” Pope Francis said.

Although his voice seemed deeper than normal, the pope showed no signs of feeling unwell after cancelling a number of meetings the previous day after going down with what Vatican doctors said was a mild case of the flu.

While he made his comments about Ukraine, dozens of people in the crowd held up rainbow banners bearing the word ‘Nonviolence’ in Italian and English.

“While I renew my deepest affec-

tion for the tormented Ukrainian people and pray for all, especially for the numerous innocent victims,” the pope said, “I plead for that little bit of humanity to be found that will allow the creation of the conditions for a diplomatic solution in search of a just and lasting peace.”

Pope Francis also asked the crowd to pray “for Palestine, for Israel and for the many peoples torn apart by war, and to concretely help those who suffer! Think of all the suffering; think of the wounded children – innocents.”

Casting his gaze even wider, the pope said he is concerned about the

increasing violence in eastern Congo, and he joins the nation’s bishops in asking everyone to pray for peace, “hoping for a cessation of the fighting and the search for a sincere and constructive dialogue.”

Pope Francis also joined the bishops of Nigeria and the leaders of the Dicastery for Evangelization in denouncing “the increasingly frequent kidnappings in Nigeria.”

“I express my closeness in prayer to the Nigerian people, hoping that efforts will be made to ensure that the rapid spread of these incidents be curbed as much as possible,” the pope said.

This Lent, keep your eyes on Jesus and the light

Justin McLellan

This Lent, Christians should become “seekers of light” by keeping their sights set on the light of Jesus through prayer and participating in the sacraments, Pope Francis said.

“This is a good Lenten resolution: cultivating a welcoming outlook, becoming ‘seekers of light,’ seekers of the light of Jesus, both in prayer and in people,” he told visitors in St. Peter’s Square before praying the Angelus with them Feb. 25.

Reflecting on the day’s Gospel reading from St. Mark, Pope Francis said that Jesus’ transfiguration – when he radiated before his disciples in a dazzling white light – “reveals to them the meaning of what they had experienced together up to that moment.”

“The preaching of the kingdom, the forgiveness of sins, the healings



and the performed signs were, indeed, sparks of a greater light, namely, of the light of Jesus, of the light that Jesus is,” he said. “And from this light, the disciples are never to direct their eyes away, especially in moments of trial, like those of the Passion which was near at this point.”

Pope Francis said that the mes-

sage of the Transfiguration is that Christians should “never direct your eyes away from the light of Jesus,” and he encouraged them to be like farmers who keep their eyes fixed on a distant point to stay in a straight line when plowing fields.

“This is what we are called to do as Christians while we journey through life: to always keep the lu-

minous face of Jesus before our eyes,” he said.

The pope told Christians to “be open to welcome the light of Jesus, who is love and life without end.”

“Along the roads of existence, which can be tortuous from time to time, let us seek his face, which is so full of mercy, fidelity and hope,” he said.

Prayer, listening to the word of God, and participating in the sacraments – especially confession and the Eucharist – “help us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus,” the pope said.

“Do I make space for silence, prayer, adoration?” Pope Francis encouraged Christians to ask themselves. “Do I seek out every little ray of Jesus’ light, which is reflected in me and in every brother and sister I encounter? And do I remember to thank him for this?”

Deacons are part of the choir, not soloists in life of the Church

Life as a parish priest is a “Eucharistic adventure” that involves serving God’s people under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Pope Francis told a meeting of transitional deacons.

It is about living “This is my body, given for you” each day, he said, and it requires “a constant attitude, made up of acceptance, compassion, tenderness, a style that speaks with deeds rather than with words, expressing the language of proximity.”

The pope’s remarks were part of a speech for deacons preparing to be ordained priests of the Diocese of Rome. Unfortunately, the pope had to cancel his audience after feeling unwell with flu-like symptoms. His speech was given to the deacons in writing instead.

It stressed how priestly ministry has three essential elements: being faithful co-workers with others; being in the service of the people of God; and being under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The pope told the deacons: “The Holy Mother Church first of all does not ask you to be leaders, but co-workers,” that is, “those who work with others and are a witness to the mystery of communion of the Church.”

This implies “fraternity, fidelity



Brave nuns rewarded for work in Ukraine

Basilian Mother Danyila Vynnyk, Sisters Lucia Murashko, Joann Sosler and Teodora Kopyn, and general superior Mother Marcela Runcan accept the Catholic Extension’s Lumen Christi Award at a gala hosted by the Ukrainian Educational and Cultural Center in Pennsylvania. The global award was in recognition of their tireless work on the frontline in their native Ukraine. Photo: Gina Christian

and docility.”

Priests are part of a choir, “not soloists,” he wrote. They are “brothers in the presbyterate and priests for all, not for their own group; ministers always in perpetual formation, never thinking of being autonomous and self-sufficient.”

The pope wrote that “the diaconate does not disappear with priesthood: on the contrary, it is the foundation on which it is based and they

must remain in the service of the people of God.”

“To serve means to be available, to renounce living according to one’s own agenda, to be ready for God’s surprises that manifest themselves through people, the unexpected, changes of plan, situations that do not fit into our schemes and the ‘rightness’ of what one has studied,” he wrote.

Pastoral life is “a daily offering; it

is not a desk job, but rather a ‘Eucharistic adventure,’” he wrote.

“It is not about caring for people for ulterior motives, but about recognising in them the unique and wonderful gifts that the Lord has given to serve them.”

With God’s grace, the pope wrote, one can overcome “bitterness and dissatisfaction with things that do not go as we would like, when people do not meet our expectations.”

Modern martyrs a blessing for all

Christians who never renounce their love for Christ and are faithful to the point of death are a blessing for everyone, Pope Francis said.

“There will always be martyrs among us. This is a sign that we’re on the right path,” the pope told the Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network, formerly known as the Apostleship of Prayer.

The pope’s prayer intention for March is dedicated to modern martyrs as witnesses to Christ.

“The courage of the martyrs, the witness of the martyrs, is a blessing for everyone,” he said, noting that there are more martyrs today than during the time of the early Church.

“Let us pray that those who risk their lives for the Gospel might imbue the Church with their courage and missionary drive,” he said.

The pope shared a story from a Muslim man about how his Christian wife was murdered in front of him when she refused to denounce her faith when confronted by a mob.

He said the man told him terrorists had confronted them “and asked what our religion was. They approached my wife with a crucifix and told her to throw it on the ground. She didn’t do it, and they slit her throat in front of me.”

The pope said the man “held no grudges.”

“He was focused on his wife’s example of love, a love for Christ that led her to accept, and to be faithful to the point of death.”

Vatican moves to ease anger over archbishop resignation statement

The Vatican has moved to shut down an escalating row over how it explained the resignation of Polish Archbishop Andrzej Dzięga.

Poles were incensed when the Vatican gave no explanation as to why the archbishop’s request to resign at the age of 71 – four years earlier than the usual 75 – had been accepted by the pope, with the archbishop himself citing “health grounds.”

However, Polish media has carried a number of stories in recent months that accused the archbishop of ignoring the victims of sexual abuse. Dzięga then compounded the anger by apologising to the priests for his “weaknesses,” but not mentioning the victims of sexual abuse.

Under pressure from Poland’s bishops, the nunciature released another statement on 26th February specifying that Dzięga’s departure followed ‘an investigation by the Holy See into the management of the diocese, and in particular the negligence referred to in the papal document *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*.’

“Couldn’t this be said right away?” asked Polish theologian Father Grzegorz Strzelczyk.

“So he was hypocritically lying!” said Tomasz, a survivor of abuse by

a priest of the Szczecin-Kamien archdiocese, about the official reason the archbishop gave for his resignation.

The Vatican investigation was never made public, but the Polish magazine *Wież* reported in 2021 that at least four complaints about the archbishop were sent to the Vatican. *Vos Estis* allows for the removal of bishops and superiors for serious negligence or ‘lack of diligence’ in the exercise of their office, in particular with regard to abuse claims.

Survivors in Poland have demanded transparency in Archbishop Dzięga’s case, as they say official reasons announced by the archbishop himself only deepen their pain and anger at the church.

“I don’t know whether you want to quote me in a story, because I would have to swear a lot,” Robert Fidura, survivor of sexual abuse, told reporters. “The new statement makes things a little better, but the fact that the Vatican, five years after publishing *Vos Estis*, cannot immediately communicate those cases will only mean the scandal will continue and the anger will grow,” he said.

Five years on from journalist’s anger: see page 37

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Public Engagement by Catholics for the Common Good

WORLD

Editorial: Andy Drozdziak – news@universecatholicweekly.co.uk

Caritas to back Ukraine ‘for the long haul’

After two years of supporting communities in Ukraine since Russia's invasion, the Vatican charity confederation Caritas Internationalis is shifting to a long-term response plan to address the humanitarian fallout from the prolonged conflict.

“The war could last a decade. We need to be ready to provide long-term assistance to address the significant humanitarian crisis unfolding in Ukraine,” said Fr Vyacheslav Grynevych, executive director of Caritas-Spes Ukraine.

Since the invasion in 2022 Caritas Ukraine and Caritas-Spes Ukraine have provided humanitarian aid to more than 3.8 million people – food and non-food items, shelter, health and hygiene items as well as cash.

Now Caritas is preparing “a long-term response plan despite the difficulties and uncertainties caused by the protracted conflict.”

The statement noted the increasing attacks on civilian infrastructure, such as the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in June which led to devastating flooding in southern Ukraine. More than six million Ukrainians fled the country and some 40 per cent of its population remains in need of aid.

Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, major archbishop of Kyiv-Halych, said that the Ukrainian Catholic Church has developed a pastoral sense of “grief” to accompany the many Ukrainians who have experienced hardship and loss.

“We are dealing with a completely different challenge: we experience the tragedy of the destruction of our country, of our cities, every day; we see death with our eyes.”

The archbishop asked of Catholics: “Don't forget Ukraine, don't abandon us in our grief and in our pain. We will fight on; will you be by our side?”



US President Joe Biden holds talks in San Francisco with Yulia and Dasha Navalnaya, the wife and daughter of Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition leader who died in suspicious circumstances in a Siberian prison camp on 16th February. Mrs Navalny has vowed to continue her husband's opposition to Russia's autocratic leader, Vladimir Putin.

Photo: White House handout via Reuters

Gaza peace hopes rise but Israel still intent on attacking Rafah

Hopes are rising of a possible ceasefire in Gaza after US President Joe Biden said “we're close” to stopping the fighting.

Biden and others have their eye on 10th March – the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan – as a date by which the fighting has to have stopped, and is pressurising Israel to agree terms with Palestinians.

A deal brokered by France would see the remaining Israeli hostages – thought to number around 100 – released in exchange for Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails.

Biden has told Benjamin Netanyahu that he risks losing global support if he continues to bombard Gaza civilians. “They [the Israelis] have already squandered much of the sympathy they gained after the Hamas attack on 7th October; hitting further targets just looks like a

collective punishment,” said a White House spokesman.

But Netanyahu rejected this claim, pointing to a recent opinion poll in the US that suggested 80 per cent of Americans are still behind Israel's attempt to deal with the Hamas terrorist group that attacked it in October, killing over 1,200 and capturing 253. Of these, around 40 are confirmed dead.

Any ceasefire would allow desperately needed aid into Gaza where the UN says people are in a humanitarian crisis. “There is no shelter and food supplies are running out.”

The Qatari foreign ministry spokesman, Majed al-Ansari, said Doha was “going to push for a pause before Ramadan” and felt “hopeful, not necessarily optimistic”.

The Hamas-run health ministry in the Gaza Strip says at least 29,878

people have been killed in the territory since October, and 70,215 wounded.

But it is noticeable that Israeli air strikes are petering out.

“We're close,” President Biden told reporters in New York. “We're not done yet. My hope is by next Monday we'll have a ceasefire.”

He added: “Ramadan's coming up and there has been an agreement by the Israelis that they would not engage in activities during Ramadan, in order to give us time to get all the hostages out.”

Last week, the US – Israel's main ally – was widely criticised for vetoing a UN Security Council resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Instead, it proposed a temporary ceasefire “as soon as practicable”, which also warned Israel not to invade the southern

Gazan city of Rafah.

Israel has faced mounting international pressure not to attack Rafah, where 1.5m Palestinians are sheltering, most having fled fighting further north in the territory.

“There are too many innocent people that are being killed,” Mr Biden said. “Israel has slowed down the attacks in Rafah. They have to. And they've made a commitment to me they're going to see to it that there is ability to evacuate significant portions of Rafah before they go and take out the remainder of Hamas.”

But Netanyahu told CBS in the USA that he would order an attack on Rafah “as soon as the military has plans in place. This is the last Hamas stronghold; we can't leave the last Hamas stronghold without taking care of it.”

15 Catholics murdered at Mass after gunmen storm Burkina Faso church

At least 15 people were killed in an attack by gunmen on Catholics gathered for Sunday Mass in a Burkina Faso village last Sunday.

Twelve Catholics were dead at the scene in the village of Essakane, with another three dying while being treated at a health centre. Two others were wounded, Bishop Laurent Birfuorè Dabirè of the Dori in northern Burkina Faso, which includes Essakane, said.

“In these painful circumstances, we invite you to pray for the eternal rest of those who have died in the faith, for the healing of the wounded and for the consolation of sorrowful hearts,” the bishop added.

“We also pray for the conversion of those who continue to sow death and desolation in our country. May our efforts of penance and prayer during this period of Lent bring



peace and security to our country, Burkina Faso,” the bishop said.

According to AP, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack, but jihadis who have perpetuated similar violence are suspected of carrying it out.

Christians in Burkina Faso have been increasingly targeted in recent years by terrorist groups amid political and social upheaval.

Burkina Faso is located in Africa's Sahel region, which separates North Africa from Sub-Saharan Africa and

has one of the largest Christian communities in the region.

Aid to the Church in Need notes that the West African nation was long “considered an example of peaceful co-existence between religions.” Of its population of 21 million, about 25 per cent is Christian, and 60 per cent is Muslim.

“Since 2015, however, the northern and eastern parts of the country have become a hotspot of violent extremists,” ACN reports, adding that “Burkina Faso is now the main theatre of jihadist terror in the Sahel,” the band of savanna that spans the width of Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea.

The violence and upheaval, which escalated following two coups in 2022, has resulted in more than one million people fleeing their homes, parishes and schools being deserted, and children

forcibly recruited to be child soldiers.

The latest attack came a week after Burkina Faso's bishops publicly expressed concern about the country's “situation of persistent insecurity” at the end of their weeklong plenary assembly in the Diocese of Kaya.

“Overall, some 30 parishes and associated structures (presbyteries, religious communities, health and education, etc.) remain closed or inaccessible,” the Catholic Bishops Conference of Burkina and Niger said in the statement. “The result of this is the decline of employment in some places, the casualisation of workers, the impoverishment of the population, especially in rural areas, and the continuing phenomenon of internally displaced persons, which is causing socio-demographic upheavals in a noxious social climate,” the statement said.

Haiti's agony continues as six religious kidnapped amid gangland anarchy

The wave of violence tormenting Haiti continued last weekend, with six male religious, a lay teacher and a priest kidnapped in two separate incidents in Port-au-Prince, the country's capital.

The six religious were all members of the Congregation of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. They were abducted on their way to the John XXIII School, which is run by the order. A teacher who was with them was also taken.

Only a few hours later, a priest also was kidnapped in Port-au-Prince. He was taken from his parish church, alongside some of the faithful, soon after celebrating morning Mass.

Security in Haiti continues to be very poor, as its society deals with the total breakdown of the state and regular institutions. Despite the tireless work of the Church, clergy and religious have not been spared the violence of armed gangs.

The latest kidnappings took place five weeks after a group of six religious sisters were abducted, only to be released the following week.

As reported in last week's *Universe*, Bishop Pierre-André Dumas of Anse-à-Veau and Miragoâne was badly injured in an explosion while visiting Port-au-Prince in what was claimed to be a targeted attack, though that is yet to be confirmed.

Archbishop Max Leroy Mesidor of Port-au-Prince, president of the Haitian bishops' conference, told Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) that the situation in the country was close to anarchy. In 2023, armed groups were accused of killing 4,000 Haitians and of carrying out



at least 3,000 kidnappings, but the Associated Press said the actual number for both could be far higher.

In addition, more than 310,000 people have been left homeless as gangs estimated to control up to 80 per cent of Port-au-Prince keep warring over territory, AP said.

"Priests and religious are risking their lives in serving the poorest and most vulnerable people in Haiti," said Edward Clancy, director of outreach of ACN USA. "Their courage is an expression of Christian charity. It is an abomination that gangs target them for kidnapping."

"For several years now, violence has plagued the peaceful Haitian people, and not even those who dedicate their lives to the vulnerable are spared. May the civilized world unite with the Haitian people," said the Congregation of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart.

The US Government has reiterated its support to help restore peace and calm to Haiti, saying it will provide money, equipment and logisti-

cal support to a multinational force whose deployment remains uncertain.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US ambassador to the United Nations said the U.S. is playing its part in rallying global support for a UN-backed Kenyan police force to be sent to Haiti.

The US Government already has pledged \$200 million and will work with stakeholders on restoring peace ahead of general elections that have yet to be held.

IVF row puts Trump at odds with Church again

Donald Trump's pro-life credentials took another blow last week after he launched a spirited defence of IVF – only for the US Bishops' Conference to remind him that the use of embryos in the procedure was against Church teaching.

The row began when Alabama's Supreme Court classed embryos as children under the state's Wrongful Death of a Minor Act. The ruling means that parents can sue over the death of an unborn child.

Immediately the state's IVF providers stopped work, fearing the legal consequences of embryos dying under their care.

Trump, who is in the midst of his third bid for the White House, condemned the ruling. "Under my leadership, the Republican Party will always support the creation of strong, thriving, healthy American families," Trump said. "We want to make it easier for mothers and fathers to have babies, not harder! That includes supporting IVF in every state in America."

But the Alabama legal ruling, while limited in scope, aligns more with the position the Catholic Church has staked out against IVF.

In 1987's *Donum Vitae* the Church set out its opposition to IVF and related reproductive practices, in part because 'the connection between IVF and the voluntary destruction

of human embryos occurs too often.'

The teaching named 'the child's right to be conceived' as behind the Church's moral objections to artificial methods of human reproduction.

One outspoken US cleric, Bishop Joseph E. Strickland, said ... "This decision by Alabama's court was correct. We must support the sanctity of life in all its forms."

This is the second time in as many weeks that Trump's pro-life position has been questioned, after he said he would support abortion up to 16 weeks. When President he had moved closer to a pro-life position on abortion without outwardly stating he wanted to outlaw abortions.

The Alabama ruling has been met with a backlash, and many Republican candidates running for office this year have distanced themselves from the ruling.

"As someone who struggled to get pregnant, I believe all life is a gift. IVF allowed me, as it has so many others, to start my family," said Michelle Steel, a Republican House representative from California.

"I believe there is nothing more pro-life than helping families have children, and I do not support federal restrictions on IVF."

The Biden campaign said the ruling was tied to the Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade*.



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- Why do we say Amen?
- What's God's Grace?
- What's Communion about?

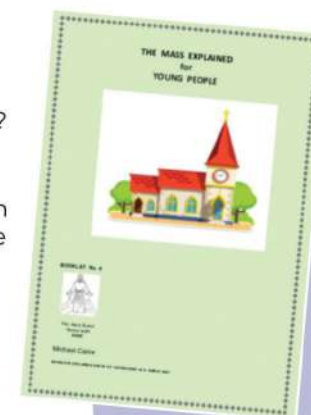
and many, many more...

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Church officials urge US migration crisis to be approached with human dignity

Marietha Góngora V

Instead of hyper-politicising the US border and those who try to cross it, officials should find humane and workable solutions that can protect the dignity and human rights of migrants, said experts who work with migrants at the border during a webinar.

The webinar – *Telling the Truth About the Border: A Humane View of Border Management* was organised by the Center for Migration Studies of New York. It included interventions by those who live and have lived along the US-Mexico border and could offer first-hand perspectives about the current situation.

Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Texas, who is the U.S. bishops' migration committee chair, opened the discussion. "Immigration is looked on by many as an enforcement issue, a legal issue or a social issue. From the Church perspective, immigration is a human issue, specifically about the human rights and human dignity of the person," he said.

"The recent border agreement, which weakened asylum protections for asylum-seekers, among other items, would have violated human rights from the Church's perspective," he said, referring to a recently-proposed bipartisan bill in Congress that was ultimately rejected. "It would have made it more difficult for *bona fide* asylum seekers to even qualify for a hearing before a judge," the bishop added, adding that such an agreement "would also have increased deportation powers for law enforcement."

The bishop said that combining fewer protections with increased law enforcement is a "dangerous formula" that would lead to the return of the persecuted to the dangerous situations from which they fled.

"We believe that there are ways to manage our southern border without sacrificing human rights," he said. "The border would stabilise if our elected officials looked at all aspects of our broken immigration system. An emphasis on legal avenues would protect migrants and asylum seekers, weaken smuggling networks and help meet our labor needs."

The bishop also said that the United States and other countries need to make a concerted effort to address the root causes that compel them to migrate, so that migrants and asylum-seekers can remain in their home countries and raise their families in safety.

Bishop Seitz suggested three principles when addressing migration: The right to asylum is enshrined in national and



Migrants gather on the Mexican side of the US border.

international law and cannot and should not be restricted; migrants should be treated with respect and dignity; and border control and management should be done in a way that protects human rights,

"Without proper means to claims asylum and sanctuary, people will continue to seek entry by unorthodox means" said Bishop Seitz

human dignity and the right to due process.

"I encourage our elected officials to return to bipartisan immigration reform talks that repair an immigration system that is outdated and unworkable," he said. "Instead of using immigration as a political issue, they should show their statesmanship and find humane and workable solutions which serve both the interests of our nation and those who seek to migrate here."

Joanna Williams, executive director of the Kino Border Initiative, provided an overview of the current situation along the border. She commended the great welcome and co-ordination between local governments and nonprofit organisations along the corridor of the border she works with. But she warned that many of

these reception infrastructures "are at the risk of collapsing because of the lack of funding to continue to support that."

On the Mexican side of the border, she said, Kino is working mainly with people who are stranded in the city of Nogales, and although migration along the border is very diverse and international, they are still seeing mainly Mexican people trying to migrate to the US. In 2023, 76 per cent of the migrants served by her organisation were Mexican, and half of those came from Mexico's southwestern state of Guerrero, where factors such as insecurity, crime and corruption generate more forced displacement among the population, she said.

Guerline Jozef, founder and executive director of the San Diego-based Haitian Bridge Alliance addressed problems faced by migrants fleeing from Haiti and countries, such as Guinea or Congo, on other continents.

"We all know what's happening in the Congo right now. We see people fleeing slavery in Mauritania. We see people fleeing war in Kenya and in Cameroon. In addition, we are also receiving people from Pakistan, people from Eritrea, people from Palestine right now. We are receiving people from Afghanistan," she said.

Jozef stressed that "people will flee their country of origin. Most of

them will end up in South America, mostly in Brazil or in Ecuador, and they will walk – and I repeat, they walk – from Brazil, from South America, and they make their way to the US."

Most go by way of the Darién Gap, "one of the most dangerous places on earth," where "people are dying as we are speaking," she said, adding that her organisation has gone to Darién.

"I can share a few stories with you so that you can really understand the impact of our policies and how we in the US continue to push our borders all the way down to Panama, to Colombia, and other places, forcing people to have no other choice but to put

"People will flee their country of origin ... end up in South America, mostly in Brazil or in Ecuador, and they will walk – and I repeat, they walk – to the US."

their lives in the hands of human traffickers and smugglers in turn that kidnap them and sometimes even kill them," Jozef said.

Dylan Corbett, executive director of the Hope Border Institute of El Paso, Texas, said the CBP One smartphone app – which migrants

seeking protection at the border are required to use to set appointments to present themselves at a US port of entry – was "a real systemic failure" that "it's just not cutting it for everyone who needs protection."

"CBP One is not working. The Government needs to make it more flexible and make sure that we're prioritising the vulnerable.

"Because right now, although it's working for many, it's not working for all. And that's why too many people are dying," he said.

Corbett also stressed that "the politics are not working." The border has become hyper-politicised, he said, and "is an obstacle to all immigration reform efforts, Republican and Democrat."

"The actions of Texas in recent months, are truly demonic and fanning the flames of this politicisation. And it's all political," he said. "When you get stuck in that logic of crisis, you can no longer see solutions."

Corbett also said there needs to be "a vision grounded in faith, grounded in hope, a structure and capacity to connect all the points of light between the border and the interior."

"There's no crisis of immigration," Corbett concluded. "There's a crisis of imagination, of vision, of human vulnerability, of inequality, racism and political expediency. That's the crisis. We need to disabuse ourselves of the language of crisis."

THE PRIESTHOOD

DR HANNAH VAUGHAN-SPRUCE



Our churches need ‘divine renovation’ to prepare them for the new age

Everyone knows our priests are currently facing an ever-increasing workload. So how can they avoid burn-out, when there’s just so much to do? Fr David Boyd describes to Dr Hannah Vaughan-Spruce how he thought the stress of running two parishes would force him to leave his priestly vocation all together – until a chance find of a book on his Kindle turned around his way of thinking

Dr Hannah Vaughan-Spruce

Fr David Boyd, a parish priest of two parishes in Erskine in west Scotland, describes the moment when he reached breaking point in his priesthood. Newly arrived at two merged parishes, Fr David had been ‘run ragged’ for months, trying to meet the expectations of parishioners who wanted the same level of service from one priest they had previously received from two. He felt increasingly like a ‘sacrament machine’.

Then on one fateful weekend, he celebrated two baptisms where both families made it clear they would not be coming back to the Church. This was the moment where Fr David describes feeling ‘destroyed’. Leaving for a holiday in Spain, he says he was close to emotionally ‘checking out’ of his priestly vocation.

Today, parish priests with single parishes are a rare species. Few Catholic lay people in Britain are untouched by the decline that has been building for decades and is now being experienced in the closure and amalgamation of parishes.

Fr David’s story is by no means unique: priests find themselves at the sharp end of this upheaval. A 2023 survey of pastors in the USA revealed that more than half had thought seriously of leaving ministry at least once since 2020. The reasons given sound depressingly familiar to those of us reading them in the UK: congregations are smaller, those who remain are elderly, numbers of volunteers are dwindling and increasingly overwhelmed. This is not affecting priests only: lay leaders in Catholic parishes find themselves spread increasingly thin and describe being exhausted.

Unsurprisingly, the words “burnout”, “fatigue” and even “collective trauma” are heard among Catholic parish priests. Joe Jensen, Barna’s Vice President of

Church Engagement, told *Christianity Today* that extensive cultural change is certainly one of the causes of these experiences.

“All the chaos, all the pressure, the magnifying glass of social media, the pandemic, the politics, the hyper-digital context, it makes sense that you have a lot of pastors saying, ‘Is this really what I signed up for? Is this what I was called into?’”

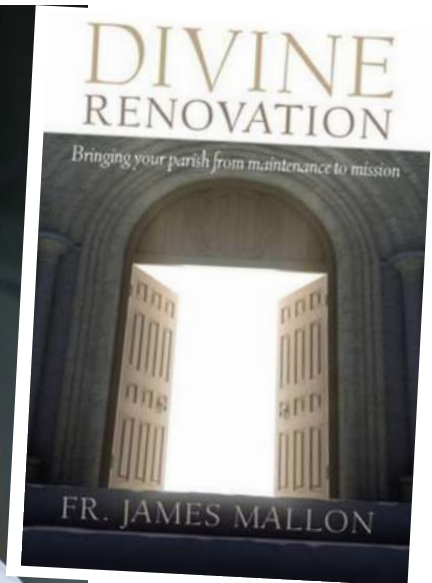
In Fr David’s story, we see ingredients for two types of burnout that are commonly referenced. The first is exhaustion from sheer volume of work. Declining numbers mean that those still active and with any capacity for leadership – a shrinking number – find themselves overburdened not only with multiple parishes but also with multiple diocesan roles.

The second type comes from a loss of purpose. When a priest’s daily experience is one of ‘parish palliative care’ – closing buildings, canonically dissolving parishes, merging bank accounts, and acting as chaplain to remaining parishioners – his sense of meaning centres around a dying Church.

Happily, God had new hope in store for Fr David. On holiday in Spain, he was bewildered on opening his Kindle to find at the



Fr James Mallon



apparatus of age-old systems that greedily consume the little time, energy, and money the Church has left. Simplify, simplify, simplify.

Lead out of a team

We know that the isolation of the pandemic was crippling for many priests. In the slimmed-down Church of the 21st century, we should say “never again”: isolated leadership is a relic of Christendom, an age that no longer exists. When Fr David embraced new principles of parish renewal, he drew a team of five lay people around him to share responsibility for the day-to-day leadership of the parishes. He does not make decisions without them, and he says that this group of people ‘saved his priesthood’.

Approach mission from an emotionally and spiritually healthy place

Even in a parish focused on mission, there is risk of the first type of burnout. But leading out of a team can help ward against this too. Within a team, you start learning very rapidly about yourself. You discover where your strengths and your blind spots are, where you need other people to balance you out or speak into areas you want to grow. A team led in a healthy way (developing trust, vulnerability, and with healthy conflict) becomes a place for emotional and spiritual growth only possible in relationship with others. It allows you to discern what needs to be pruned in the parish to create space and margin. **Dr. Hannah Vaughan-Spruce is the Executive Director of Divine Renovation UK**

top of his downloaded books, *Divine Renovation*, by Fr James Mallon. To this day, he cannot explain how it ended up there: his plan had been to read only fiction. Curiously beginning to read, he grew in astonishment at Fr James’ own parallel experiences in a parish hundreds of miles away in Nova Scotia, and his diagnosis of how parishes needed to change to meet the needs of the 21st century.

Returning to Scotland with new hope and energy, he distributed the book to his closest lay collaborators, and together they began a journey of leading the parish into new life.

When we consider the never-ending task-list of an overburdened parish priest, it might be tempting to strike off leading missional outreach as a non-essential item. However, Fr David’s story demonstrates how new vision and healthy ways of leading offer purpose and hope: they are precisely the cure for the second type of burnout. This is Fr David’s experience who, while still having a

high volume of work, now wakes each day with passion and energy.

So what was the secret? Here are three suggestions to help priests and parish lay leaders to flourish, for the sake of the mission and vitality of the local church.

Don’t let essential maintenance to the ‘sundowning’ Church be the main thing

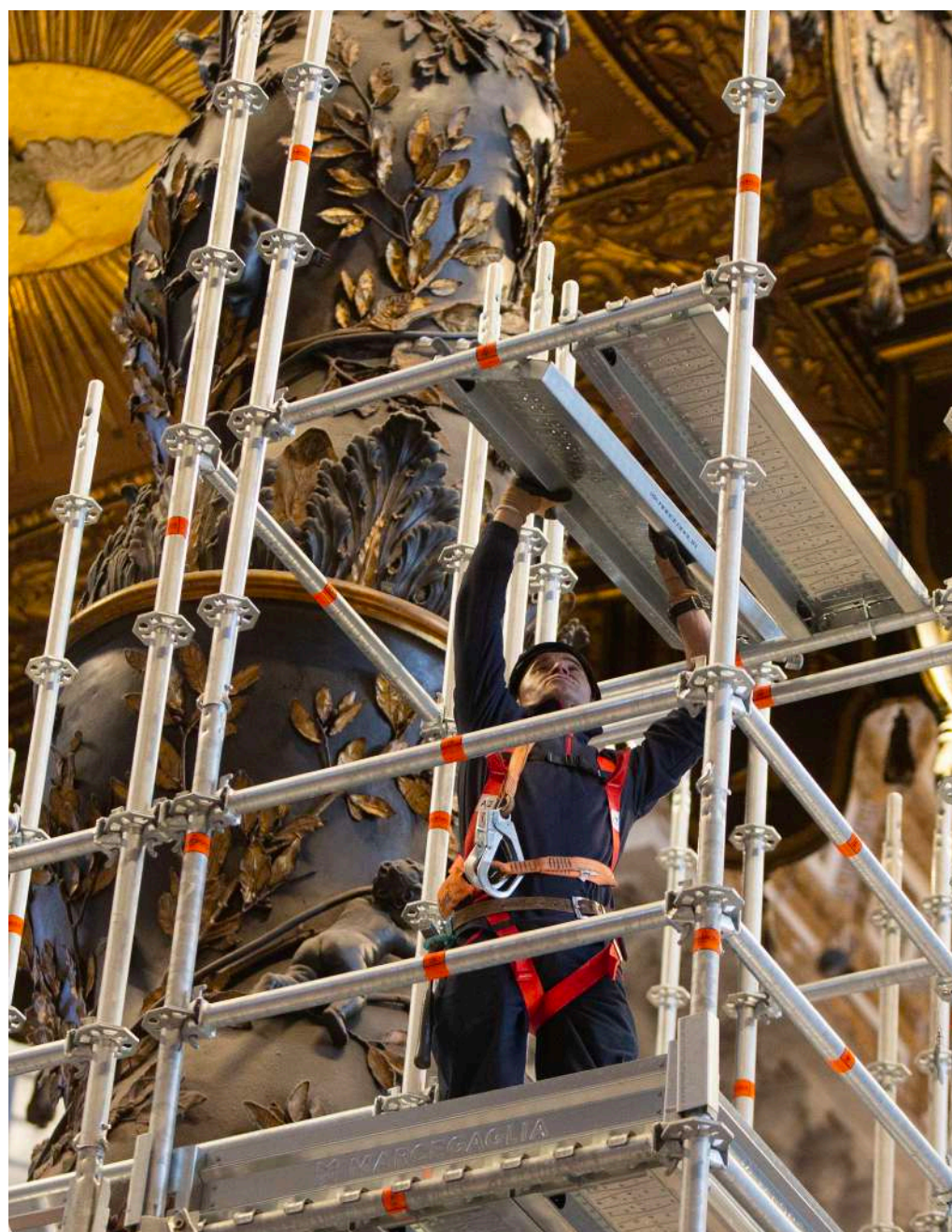
There will always be ‘essential maintenance’ in any parish, however missional and vibrant. However, if that is the ‘main thing’ of what consumes our daily tasks it is the fastest way to disillusionment and the surest way to lose lay volunteers. We can rationalise and streamline all essential maintenance: amalgamating parishes (rather than clustering them) so there is only one administrative burden (bank account, finance committee, etc); centralising administration among parishes and delegating as much as possible to competent laity; ruthlessly decluttering the



Left, the baldachin over the main altar of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. Designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in 1624 and completed around 1633, it was being renovated in 2024 in time for the start of the Holy Year.

Above, one of the gilded angels, 13 feet tall, which stands on top of the wooden canopy

Photos: Fabbrica di San Pietro



A worker connects a metal platform to scaffolding going up around the 100-foot-tall baldachin over the main altar in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. The scaffolding will allow restorers to start cleaning, repairing and revitalising this masterpiece designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in the 17th century. Photo: Robert Duncan

St Peter's linchpin begins first major restoration since the 18th century

Carol Glatz

Like a giant meccano construction, a skeletal tower of scaffolding slowly inched its way up the twisting bronze columns of the baldachin over the main altar of St. Peter's Basilica.

Workers on the ground picked through piles of shiny metal platforms, poles, clamps and couplers to then hoist them up high with pulleys to their workmates above. They had begun erecting the scaffolding after Mass on Ash Wednesday, 14th February, and it now covers most of the structure.

The 100-foot-tall baldachin will be completely covered by metal scaffolding before Easter to allow a team of 10 to 12 restorers to start cleaning, repairing and revitalising the masterpiece designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in 1624 and completed around 1633.

The biggest problem facing the restorers "is getting there, that is, to be close enough" to the bronze and wood structures and many decorative details that need to be restored, Alberto Capitanucci said.

Capitanucci, the head engineer of the Fabbrica di San Pietro – the office responsible for upkeep of the basilica – said the baldachin is a monumental architectural structure that is as high as a 10-story building.

But it is mostly empty space with its four fluted spiral bronze columns, each set

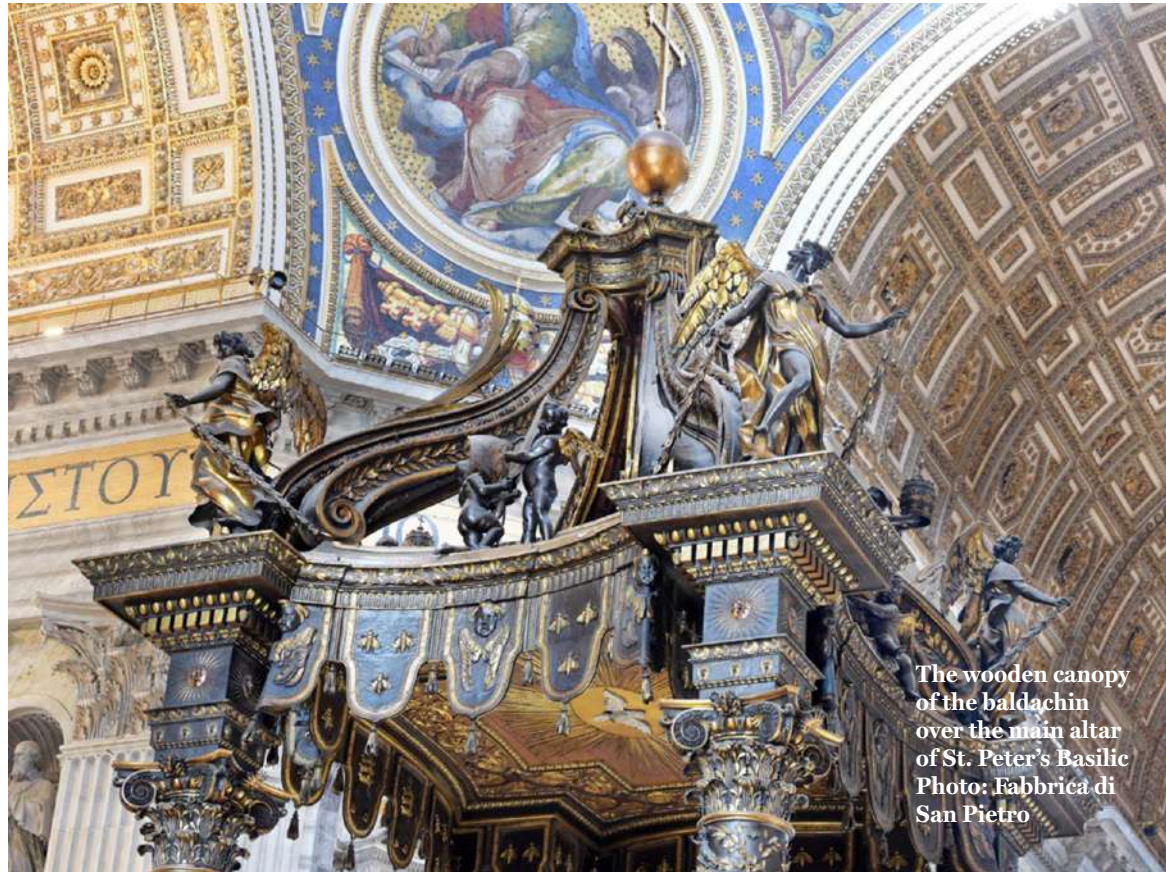
upon a massive marble pedestal alongside the marble steps leading to the main altar over the tomb of St. Peter. The most delicate part of the structure is the canopy above, he said, which is made entirely of wood.

The wooden ceiling "is the size of a vessel, that is, it was designed to be the wooden planking of a boat," Capitanucci said.

Despite its enormous size, Bernini set out to design the baldachin to resemble the light, open and airy cloth-covered canopy used in processions of the Blessed Sacrament. The term 'baldachin' or 'baudekin' comes from a special brocade fabric made in Baghdad and traditionally used for processional canopies.

The twisting pattern on the gilded columns makes them look lighter and draws the eye upward along decorations of snaking branches of olive and laurel, bees and lizards, until it reaches the top which resembles canopy brocade and tassels blowing in the wind, he said. The top of the baldachin is meant to look like a billowing sail of a boat.

The angels holding floral garlands and standing at the four corners are 13 feet high, he said, and four scroll-like ornaments, shaped like dolphin backs, go from the corners up to a globe that supports a cross, which is 40 feet tall. There are four pairs of cherubs holding up the keys of St. Peter, a papal tiara and the



The wooden canopy of the baldachin over the main altar of St. Peter's Basilica
Photo: Fabbrica di San Pietro

sword and book of St. Paul.

What looks small from below is, in reality, enormous in size, Capitanucci said, indicating that the bees on top are as long as a briefcase. Pope Urban VIII, who hired Bernini to design the baldachin, belonged to the Barberini family, whose coat of arms consists of three bees.

Capitanucci said they used drones to take over 6,000 photographs of the hard-to-reach canopy and its inner ceiling featuring the dove of the Holy Spirit surrounded by golden fire. The up-close images will help them plan how to proceed with the restoration, he said.

The entire structure will be covered in sheer cloth to shield workers from the public, he said, and still let in lots of natural light.

And, once the scaffolding is completely up, the wooden box now protecting the main altar will be removed so the altar can still be used for papal ceremonies for the rest of the year. The entire restoration should be completed by the end of December for the start of the Holy Year.

Franciscan Father Enzo Fortunato, director of communication for St. Peter's Basilica, said the baldachin "is the linchpin of the basilica."

It draws attention to the main altar, which is "the heart, where the Eucharistic sacrifice takes place, the Eucharistic celebration that is the source and summit of Christian life," he said.

The current restoration project, funded by the Knights of Columbus, marks only the second restoration since the baldachin was built, he said; the last was in the late 1700s.

When works of art are preserved well, he said, it keeps alive the belief that "beauty leads to God" and it reminds people "what human genius can create."

The baldachin also symbolises that it is possible for all people to work together to create something spectacular, Father Fortunato said. Many other artists worked with Bernini to build the masterpiece, including his fiercest rival, Francesco Borromini.

"This makes us understand that teamwork, working together, always bears beautiful and good fruit," the Franciscan friar said.



Trinity Conference: Reawakening the Catholic vision

Hannah Hayward

Over 150 people from all over the UK gathered at Leeds Trinity University to explore evangelisation in a post-Christendom culture. As part of the university's Catholic mission, the vision for the Trinity Conference – the first was held online in 2021 – is to provide a UK-based platform for the Church to speak on contemporary issues facing those working on the front line of its mission today.

The conference took an honest look at the cultural reality of the Church in the West. We are no longer in a Christian society where certain values, assumptions and privileges are taken for granted. We are, in fact, in a society more akin to the first centuries of the Church, where the Gospel proclamation was a subversive and, oftentimes, dangerous task.

The university's Vice Chancellor, Professor Charles Egbu, opened with a reflection on the critical task of understanding the wider political, social and cultural environment in order to respond effectively to it. To reawaken the Catholic vision across our schools, parishes and families requires a firm grasp on the implications of a post-Christian era.

Delegates were then led in prayer by Archbishop Mark O'Toole, who reminded us of the great adventure of falling in love with Christ.

Keynote address

The keynote address was given by acclaimed co-author of *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission*, Monsignor James Shea. He gave a phenomenal account of the post-Christian reality that the Church finds herself in. He called out the "intellectual wounds" of our time, where our culture has systematically rejected the doctrine of original sin (and therefore the necessity for a Saviour) and has pursued a narrative of self-determination which has no need for God.

He reminded us of the Church as the mystical body of Christ, which takes in to herself all the sufferings of the world and transforms it by the redemptive power of grace. He reminded us that we, though weak, belong to a body made up of saints, a redeemed people, and that we are called to be caught up in that same dynamic of being restored in Christ, bringing the culture with us!

The rest of the day's input was given through this interpretive lens of a post-Christendom age. Dr Hannah Vaughan-Spruce from



Monsignor James Shea

Divine Renovation UK spoke about the spiritual detox that parishes must undergo to become apostolic.

Claire Fernandes from the Celebrate Trust spoke on how parents can be intentional about introducing their children to the person of Jesus at home.

Chris Martin, headteacher at St Thomas Aquinas School in Birmingham, spoke about the unique vocation of Catholic schools today in proclaiming to over 800,000 school children in this country that they are unconditionally loved by God.

Dr Ann Marie Mealey then spoke about the work of the Catholic Mission Directorate at Leeds Trinity University, how young people are keen to engage in the work of social justice and the search for truth, and the importance of deepening our spirituality and prayer life to maintain good mental health as we promote mission in HE today.

Finally, Dr Greg Stacey proposed a great challenge to the traditional catechetical model of 'question and answer', and instead suggested that different groups of people are in Church for different reasons and so building teams of catechists who have proficiency in responding to various lines of enquiry on varying levels is the task of contemporary catechesis.

The day was packed with a feast of high-quality content and so it was good to end the day simply and reverently at the feet of Jesus in Eucharistic Adoration, led by the Youth 2000 mission team.

By bringing our hearts to Jesus at the end of the day, we were reminded that it is the Holy Spirit who evangelises, and He begins with each one of us.

Our God lives and moves and evangelises in every age, including our own.

PRAYER

The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst continues to share its reflections on Christian prayer, according to St Thomas Aquinas. This week's theme is 'Intercession' - the final element of prayer.

Christ's command to love all is fulfilled every time we pray

The fourth part of prayer according to Saint Thomas Aquinas is intercession. This first of all acknowledges that prayer cannot be a singular conversation between me and God, rooted in a mere "personal relationship" with the Lord and divorced from the community of believers.

Rather, intercession acknowledges the shared fraternity of the entire people of God. Christ's command to the disciples to love one another is to be taken seriously, and this mandate is fulfilled every time we pray with and for one another.

Thus, the petitions which we mentioned in the previous reflection cannot only express personal desires; they must ultimately be directed to the good of our family, our friends, and the whole Christian community at large.

Moreover, this notion of community extends beyond the Church here on earth; it also extends to the Holy Souls in purgatory, as well as to the angels and saints in Heaven. We are therefore called to pray for the faithful departed, that their temporary purgation might soon

end; then, with the saints and angels, they will be able to go directly before the Lord's presence and intercede for those of us here on earth.

This is why the Church has always promoted the veneration of saints, knowing that their prayers rise with great efficacy before the throne of God, because their merits — which are the merits of Christ — redound to our benefit here on earth. Prayer cannot be merely personal, but must participate in the unified cry of praise to the God who made all things.

This is illustrated concretely through the chanting of the Litany of the Saints in the Church's most solemn occasions (see below). At baptisms, at ordinations, at the Easter Vigil, at the transfer of a deceased pope's body to Saint Peter's Basilica, at his funeral, and at the Installation Mass of his successor, the Litany of the Saints summons the entire host of heaven to the Church's aid.

In moments of joy and in moments of mourning, we beg the saints for their prayers, knowing that they who now live in perfect communion with Christ are heard

A ceiling painting of St Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, before Our Lady in Heaven, in the Vatican



by him. Thus, as we say in every Mass, with the angels, saints, and our brothers and sisters in Christ, "we join in their unending hymn of praise," "for the praise and glory of God's name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church."

"In moments of joy and in moments of mourning, we beg the saints for their prayers, knowing that they who now live in perfect communion with Christ are heard by him. ..."

The Litany of the Saints

At baptisms, at ordinations, at the Easter Vigil, at the transfer of a deceased pope's body to Saint Peter's Basilica, at his funeral, and at the Installation Mass of his successor, the Litany of the Saints summons the entire host of heaven to the Church's aid.

*All you Holy Saints of God, pray for us.
Lord, be merciful, Lord, save your people.
From all evil, Lord, save your people.
From all sin, Lord, save your people.
From your wrath, Lord, save your people.
From a sudden and unprovided death, Lord, save your people.*

*From the snares of the devil, Lord, save your people.
From anger, hatred and all ill-will, Lord, save your people.*

*From the spirit of uncleanness, Lord, save your people.
From lightning and tempest, Lord, save your people.
From the scourge of earthquake, Lord, save your people.
From plague, famine and war, Lord, save your people.
From everlasting death, Lord, save your people.
By the mystery of your Holy Incarnation, Lord, save your people.
By Your Coming, Lord, save your people.*

*By Your Birth, Lord, save your people.
By Your Baptism and Holy Fasting, Lord, save your people.*

*By Your Cross and Passion, Lord, save your people.
By Your Death and Burial, Lord, save your people.
By Your Holy Resurrection, Lord, save your people.
By Your wonderful Ascension, Lord, save your people.
By the coming of the Holy Spirit, Lord, save your people.
On the Day of Judgment, Lord, save your people.
Be merciful to us sinners, Lord, hear our prayer.
That you will spare us, Lord, hear our prayer.
That you will pardon us, Lord, hear our prayer.
That it may please you to bring us to true penance, Lord, hear our prayer.
Guide and protect your holy Church, Lord, hear our prayer.*

*Preserve in holy religion the Pope, and all those in holy Orders, Lord, hear our prayer.
Humble the enemies of holy Church, Lord, hear our prayer.*

*Give peace and unity to the whole Christian people, Lord, hear our prayer.
Bring back to the unity of the Church all those who are straying, and bring all unbelievers to the light of the Gospel, Lord, hear our prayer.
Strengthen and preserve us in your holy service, Lord, hear*

*our prayer.
Raise our minds to desire the things of heaven, Lord, hear our prayer.
Reward all our benefactors with eternal blessings, Lord, hear our prayer.
Deliver our souls from eternal damnation, and the souls of our brethren, relatives, and benefactors, Lord, hear our prayer.
Give and preserve the fruits of the earth, Lord, hear our prayer.
Grant eternal rest to all the faithful departed, Lord, hear our prayer.
That it may please You to hear and heed us, Jesus, Son of the Living God, Lord, hear our prayer.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, spare us, O Lord!
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, graciously hear us, O Lord!
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, Have mercy on us.
Christ, hear us, Christ, graciously hear us
Lord Jesus, hear our prayer Lord Jesus, hear our prayer.
Lord, have mercy on us Lord, have mercy on us.
Christ, have mercy on us Christ, have mercy on us.
Lord, have mercy on us Lord, have mercy on us.*

A VIEW FROM THE PEWS

The Vatican and the Holy See

I was talking to a friend who had just returned from a holiday in Rome when he mentioned that while on a tour of the Vatican, he found out that it is not the Holy See. I was surprised because I'd always thought they were the same thing.

While investigating the differences between the two, I found many titles and organisations operating from within the Vatican all with strange Latin names. Here are three examples:

Ecclesiastical - means belonging to a Christian religion.

An *Apostolic Nuncio*, sometimes called *Papal Nuncio* or just *Nuncio*, is an envoy or permanent diplomatic representative of the Holy See, not the Vatican. The Holy See has diplomatic relations with around 180 countries. It is the Government of Catholicism.

Legate: A legate is a personal representative of the Pope to foreign nations and is empowered on matters of Catholic faith and to settle ecclesiastical matters. The legate is appointed directly by the Pope.

These and other titles made it difficult for me to understand some things, so please excuse my simplification of these matters as I cover the Vatican and the Holy See

separately, but remember:

The Vatican was founded in 1929. St Peter and St Paul founded the Holy See in the first century.

The Vatican

Its official title is The Vatican City State. It's a microstate within the Italian city of Rome and became independent from Italy in 1929 after the Lateran Treaty between the Church and Italy.

It has the smallest land area, around 121 acres, and the smallest population of any state in the world. There are around 500 people who live there and another 500 who work there. It is ruled by the Pope who is also the Bishop of Rome and head of the Catholic Church.

Within the Vatican City State is the most well-known church on earth: St. Peter's Basilica. There is also the famous Sistine Chapel, the Vatican Library, the Palace and the Museum, which contain some of the world's most famous paintings and sculptures.

It even has its own railway system that can link to the Italian railway system.

The city's revenues come from donations from the worldwide Church, charges for visiting the various areas within the Vatican

and the sale of stamps and souvenirs. It has no taxes and items are duty-free.

The famous St. Peter's Basilica was planned in the 15th century by Pope Nicholas V followed by Pope Julius II. Building began on 18th April 1506 and was completed in 1626.

It was designed mainly by Bramante, Michelangelo and Maderno with the colonnade by Bernini, and has the largest interior of any church in the world. It is regarded as the greatest of all Christian churches.

Tradition has it that it is the burial place of St. Peter who Jesus selected as the first head of his Church, the first Pope. His tomb is said to be directly below the high altar, known as the Altar of the Confession. St. Peter's is a basilica, not a cathedral.

The Holy See

The Holy See is the Government of the Roman Catholic Church, which is led by the Pope.

'Holy See' refers specifically to the position of the Holy Father, who 'because of his office as Vicar of Christ, has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.'

MICHAEL CAINE
ST WINEFRIDE'S PARISH, LYMM, CHESHIRE



The word 'see' comes from the Latin word 'sedes' which means seat. It is the chair occupied by a bishop and the area over which he has responsibility.

Where the Holy See is concerned it is the 'seat of government' of the Church, having jurisdiction over the worldwide Catholic Church and sovereignty over the Vatican City.

The term Holy See is used when referring to the area governed by the Pope who is the Bishop of Rome. This includes the Vatican and the entire Catholic Church.

If the Vatican ceased to exist, the Catholic Church would still be ruled as normal by the Holy See as it can exist anywhere. The Vatican

does not have foreign diplomats to deal with foreign countries, the Holy See has around 180.

In very simple terms:

- The Vatican is an independent state, ruled by the Pope and exists within the Italian city of Rome.
- The Holy See is the government of the Catholic Church and has the Pope as its head. It has diplomats dealing with around 180 states around the world.

I found it fascinating, interesting and informative to delve into this matter, and if you want to be surprised about what goes on in these two areas and how they are organised, I urge you to do the same.

JOURNEY IN FAITH

CHRIS MCDONNELL



Standing stones, and a reflection on faith history

All round Europe there are circles of standing stones, some more complete than others. They date back thousands of years, their construction, their purpose, a matter of much conjecture. One thing is sure our ancestors were responsible for them and have left us a remarkable heritage of their times.

But in our age, they have lost meaning, a mere shadow in an open field season by season, of what once was.

Across those same European lands are the Christian cathedrals, magnificent architectural statements of faith from a time much nearer our own. How they were physically achieved has always fascinated me, but they were, and still are, a testimony of faith.

That was then, now is now; what's changed? A great deal. We don't deny the faith of earlier generations by asking that question. Previous generations are the tap root of our Christian experience. Indeed, if we don't ask

questions about change with honesty and integrity, our future is bleak.

In Francis, Bishop of Rome, we have a man whose life experience is beyond this European cultural model. He has brought with him a South American concept of Church that is not steeped in this European mode of being Church. It is worth remembering that only a quarter of

the world's Catholic Christians are resident in the European western culture.

In attempting to examine the experience of Christians in our time and to draw faith from it, there was always bound to be a contradiction with the clear cut, defined views of earlier times, not essentially on matters of doctrine but of how doctrine is experienced

in our age.

That is where the focus must be clear and sharp. Our faith in the person of Jesus and our willingness to make the Gospel the signpost of our journey comes before everything. If that means being realistic in our time for the sake of the people, then that we must be.

No longer does the gas lighter switch on the city lights in early evening as in Eliot's poem *Preludes*: '...and at the corner of the street, a lonely cab horse steams and stamps. Then the lighting of the lamps'. We live in a rapidly changing world, the cab horses have gone from London streets, along with the gas lamps. It is no wonder that such a changing world is reflected in the discussion at the Synod gathering. Some things last, because they are useful, others are useful while they last. We have to learn to distinguish which is which.

The doctrine we hold must be a life force for our times, otherwise it (and we) will become ossified like ancient stones and that will help

no-one.

The few lines below were written before this posting was prepared, but they nicely reflect the tone of what I have been trying to say.

Mute Memorials

*In the field, a circle of stones,
carefully placed, their feet
hidden in the overgrowth of uncut
grass,
their rough grey surface
etched with
green and yellow lichen.*

*Gathered for a purpose now long
lost
they have stood erect beneath
countless Winter storms, later to be
warmed under a Summer sun,
mute memorials to a distant
dream.*

We must not let the Church that is our home, become a mute memorial to a distant dream. Like Francis of Assisi all those years ago, we too are called to rebuild our Church, here in the 21st Century.





Lent: A Time for Renewal

Lent is upon us, a liturgical season cloaked in purple, reminding us of Christ's Passion. This season invites us to step into a sacred space of introspection and renewal.

It's not just about giving up chocolate, alcohol, cigarettes or social media. It's a spring cleaning for the soul, a chance to rediscover the light within that transforms, outwardly, the way we behave.

Imagine Lent as a 40-day workshop led by the greatest teacher, Jesus himself. He lays out three tools in Matthew 6: 1-18: Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving, disciplines that serve as the pillars supporting our quest for renewal. These are pathways to deepening our communion with the divine and with one another.

A good idea is to reflect on what Jesus says about these three practices.

On Prayer: "Go to your inner room, and pray to your Father in secret."

On Almsgiving: "Do not let your left hand know what your right is

doing, so that your almsgiving may be in secret."

On Fasting: "When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Heavenly Father who is hidden."

We need to ponder first what we are being renewed for.

The answer lies in the resounding message of Easter: to become more like Christ. He, who walked through the valley of darkness and death, emerged radiant and alive, and calls upon us to follow in his footsteps. The goal of Lent is to become more Christ-like.

Lent is not only about fasting from external things as I've mentioned. It is about fasting from intrinsic things like anger, bitterness, jealousy, harassment, harsh judgment, pride; and it's about replacing these vices with their opposites: love, co-operation, joy, compassion, meekness, humility. A good Lenten practice would be to meditate on the Beatitudes of Jesus (Matthew 5:

1-12), those interior attitudes that backtrack to the true condition of the human heart. The beatitudes call on us to shed the layers of our being that distance us from God and our better selves, encouraging

"Imagine Lent as a 40-day workshop led by the greatest teacher, Jesus himself. He lays out three tools in Matthew 6: 1-18: Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving..."

a transformation, both inward and outward. This kind of conversion is never static; it is on going because of our fallen nature.

Think of Lent like training for a marathon, not of the body, but of the soul. We must be transformed from within by giving up defeatist thoughts, nasty words and evil deeds, and replacing them with positive thoughts, compassionate words and generous deeds. Think

of this whenever you ask for forgiveness "in thought, word, and deed" at the beginning of Mass.

This spiritual de-cluttering touches every fibre of our being. For example, the worrier can replace anxious thoughts with trusting prayer. The stressful soul can find solace in silence and meditation, letting the noise fade away and connecting with the stillness within. The bitter heart can heal, choosing forgiveness over resentment. The judgmental mind can embrace empathy, stepping into another's shoes and understanding another's journey before casting stones. The grudge-holder can let go of what weighs him/her down, choosing reconciliation over the poisonous grip of the past.

Renewal, however, is not a one-time event. Lent serves as a reminder that our journey towards renewal is continuous and ever-evolving. Indeed, it's a lifelong journey, fuelled by the continuous process of conversion.

St. John Henry Newman reminds

us that change, sometimes uncomfortable, is necessary to blossom into our best selves. We shed old habits, embrace the good, and inch closer to Christ. Lent challenges us to confront our resistance to change and to embrace the power of God's grace. In doing so, we are not only preparing ourselves for the celebration of Easter but also for a life that reflects the example of Christ.

Remember: Lent is not just a season but a state of being, a call for meaningful renewal, where we commit to a path of positive change, deepening our faith and enriching our spiritual journey. It's an opportunity to embrace the transformative journey of becoming more Christ-like, not just for forty days but for life.

May this Lent be a stepping stone on your path to becoming more like Christ; one kind word, one act of compassion, one moment of quiet reflection at a time.

Humility is the difference between the righteous and the arrogant

Humility is a powerful spiritual force. It makes us real by avoiding the arrogance of pride.

There's a story about a famous footballer who was dining in a restaurant. He noticed a little boy eagerly coming to his table. Expecting him to be a fan, the player quickly reached for the menu, signed his autograph on it and handed it to the child, smiling contentedly.

Puzzled, the child looked at the famous

player as he was thrusting the menu at him and said: "No thanks, mister. I just want to borrow your tomato sauce. The star was dealt an unexpected lesson on humility. By a child, no less.

Humility is the truth concerning ourselves, about our strengths and weaknesses, about selfishness and egoism that lies buried within the best of us.

It is the truth about our need for God to raise us up, to shield us from evil, and to lead

us in His way of goodness. No wonder Jesus puts so much emphasis on humility.

Humility is at the heart of Jesus's teaching. It is the first beatitude, "blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3).

People who approached Jesus with humility such as a blind beggar, a poor widow, a Roman official, a publican or a woman in distress were never turned away. They all received his gift of healing.

"Humility is the truth concerning ourselves, about our strengths and weaknesses, about selfishness and egoism that lies buried within the best of us..."

SUNDAY WORSHIP

ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS



When Christ cleared out the temple he was making space for our faith to grow

3rd March 2024 – Lent, 3rd Sunday, Year B

Exodus 20:1-17

The Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Responsorial: from Psalm 19

R./: Lord, you have the words of everlasting life

The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul; the decree of the Lord is trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple. (R./)



The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the command of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eye. (R./)

The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true, all of them just. (R./)

1 Corinthians 1:22-25
Christ crucified is our focus, calling a halt to all factions and disputes

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Gospel: John 2:13-25
Jesus purifies the Temple of commercial defilement; then proclaims himself the New Temple

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found

people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for 46 years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.

But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

Moving house

Psychologists tell us that, apart from the death of a loved one, perhaps the most traumatic experience a person can have is that of moving house. Those of us who have gone through all that is involved in this particular trauma can attest to the truth contained in these words.

One of the benefits derived from the exercise, however, is that we get rid of all the junk we have accumulated since our last move. It could perhaps be argued that people's dread of moving is directly proportionate to the amount of stuff they have gathered.

The Israelites, having come out of Egypt, had been through the experience, and were inclined to avoid too much clutter. (One of the psalms laughs at the pagans who "carry around their idols made of wood.") Today we find Jesus clearing all the accumulated junk out of the temple. But what is

Jesus in the temple. He cleaned out all the money traders and sellers.

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happening here is not merely the removal of unwanted items; by this symbolic act, Jesus is calling all the peoples of the earth to worship God "in spirit and in truth." True worshippers, he will tell us later in the gospel, are those who worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

Worship is not a word which figures largely in our religious vocabulary today. Like "adoration," it is a particularly God-centred word, ill-suited to be our self-centred age where religiousness is more often expressed in terms of self-actualisation. There is a sense in which it is true to say that people today have forgotten how to worship, so that often even our liturgical acts become simply gatherings or experiences. To worship means to acknowledge the transcendence of God, and his claim on us as our creator, and to respond appropriately.

Rather than being just a relic of primitive religion, worship is an integral part of the Judeo-Christian religious sense. From deep within our self springs the desire to worship and adore God. Getting in tune with that desire, and expressing it through word and gesture is at the heart of prayer.

In order to worship in spirit and in truth, we must prepare our hearts and minds by being faithful to the covenant relationship (keeping the commandments) and seeking the wisdom of God, which is the wisdom of the cross. We have to let Jesus cleanse us, as he cleansed the temple, leave our sins behind, and simplify our lives, getting rid of any needless clutter. Then we are able to enter into the new temple, which is Jesus himself, praying in and through him.

When the side of Jesus was pierced on Calvary, the veil of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom. The place of worship is no longer the temple in Jerusalem; now, it is through the pierced side of Christ that we have "access to the Father in the one Spirit." So it is that, after the resurrection, Thomas will place his hand in Jesus's side and worship, saying, "My Lord and my God," as today's gospel tells us: "When Jesus rose from the dead, his disciples remembered and believed. If we are to properly worship God, we must leave behind everything that gets in the way, then enter into that secret chamber which is the side of Christ, and there worship the Father in spirit and in truth.



Ignore the gossip about Benedict: there was nothing wrong with his resignation

Q: How do vegetarians or vegans, who do not eat meat, participate in this Lenten discipline of the church?

A: Strictly speaking with respect to the Lenten discipline of abstinence on Ash Wednesday and all Fridays of Lent, vegetarians already fulfill the requirement of the law simply by not eating meat. The Church does not demand that those who abstain from meat on a regular basis tack on an additional penance to compensate for their routine, habitual vegetarianism.

However, it could be spiritually fruitful for a vegetarian to consider freely giving up something else they perceive as a sacrifice personally equivalent to a carnivore's Lenten abstinence. This would have to be something the individual vegetarian discerns with their confessor or spiritual director.

Like every other Catholic, a vegetarian between the ages of 18-59 would also still be required to practise the Lenten discipline of fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Incidentally, it might be good to recall that while most Catholics are now only obligated to abstain from meat during Ash Wednesday and Fridays in Lent, the Church actually still requires us to practice some sort of penance on every Friday throughout the year (barring those times when a major solemnity falls on a Friday). While abstinence from meat is the traditional Friday penance, another suitable penance can be substituted according to a good-faith discernment of individual members of the faithful.

Q: Did Pope Benedict XVI validly resign even though he did not renounce the *munus*?

A: As many of us will recall, on 11th February 2013, Pope Benedict XVI surprised the world when, after noting his advancing age and declining health, he announced: "... For this reason, and well aware of the seriousness of this act, with full freedom, I declare that I renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome, Successor of Saint Peter, entrusted to me by the Cardinals on 19th April 2005, in such a way, that as from 28th February 2013, at 20:00 hours, the See of Rome, the See of Saint Peter, will be vacant."

The 1983 Code of Canon Law had already accounted for the possibility, however theoretical it might have seemed at the time of the drafting of the code, for a pope



Pope Benedict: 'The general consensus among canon lawyers was that Pope Benedict's resignation was lawful and effective.'
Photo: Nancy Wiehce

to step down. As Canon 332, Paragraph 2 tells us: 'Should it happen that the Roman Pontiff resigns from his office, it is required for validity that the resignation be freely made and properly manifested, but it is not necessary that it be accepted by anyone.'

Thus, canonically only two elements are necessary for a papal resignation to be valid:

1. That the resignation come about as a result of a truly free choice on the part of the Holy Father. eg, a resignation made under threat of violence would not count; and

2. That this resignation be 'properly manifested'. This latter aspect means that it should be public and obvious what the incumbent pope intends to do. Or, in other words, the pope privately

expressing a wish to resign to a handful of close confidants would not effect a valid resignation; nor would a papal resignation take effect if the only evidence of it were rumours or second hand accounts.

As far as anyone can reasonably discern, Pope Benedict XVI's resignation plainly fulfilled both of these criteria. There was no evidence that Benedict was coerced or pressured to resign, and he specifically mentioned that he was making this choice 'with full freedom.' And Pope Benedict clearly manifested his intention to step down; his resignation announcement was made at a meeting of the College of Cardinals and in front of several journalists.

At the time, people had different feelings on the appropriateness of a contemporary pope deciding to

abdicate for reasons of physical infirmity and old age. However, the general consensus among canon lawyers was that this resignation was nevertheless lawful and effective. Still, as you note, there was some limited speculation that Benedict XVI might not have resigned validly.

One such argument was that the resignation was invalid because Benedict supposedly did not resign the *munus* – a Latin term that, depending on the context, can be best translated into English as 'office' or 'duties' – of the papacy explicitly.

But, as I see it, this argument doesn't hold water because the papacy is technically nothing more than an 'office' (albeit a deeply significant one). That is, unlike priestly or episcopal ordination, which can be primarily understood as a personal, sacramental configuring to Christ independent of any 'job' or 'position' that a priest or bishop might eventually hold, at the end of the day the role of pope is in some sense 'just a job.' There is

no sacrament that makes a bishop into a pope; a newly elected pope essentially just accepts a new position as the head of a new diocese, the Diocese of Rome.

Therefore, if a pope is announcing his resignation from the papacy, it's already very strongly implied that he intends to renounce the papacy as an office or '*munus*,' even if he doesn't specifically use the exact word *munus*.

Q: Is the devil an actual being, or is he a metaphor for 'people doing bad,' and for just general evil in the world? I've sometimes heard this last called 'the demonic,' which I understood to mean just a sort of negative spirit that people put out, or create, by being mean to each other.

A: While there might be contexts in which we might speak of the devil or the demonic in a purely metaphorical or rhetorical sense – such as when we describe some evil but obviously human action as "demonic" or "diabolical" – we as Catholics do believe that the devil or Satan is a real, personal being.

Paragraph 414 of the catechism speaks of the devil in literal terms when it tells us this: 'Satan or the devil and the other demons are fallen angels who have freely refused to serve God and his plan.' There are also several places in the Gospels where the devil and demons are described as playing an actual, historical role in the earthly life of Jesus, such as when Satan tempted Jesus in the desert (see Mt 4:1-11 and Lk 4:1-13), or when Jesus cast out demons who called out to him by name (e.g., Lk 4:34).

There is a Catholic Latin maxim that goes: '*lex orandi, lex credendi*,' which can be roughly translated as: 'what we pray is what we believe.' Our Catholic belief in the existence of literal demons is made very clear in our liturgy and other prayers. The most obvious example is the ritual of major exorcism, which a properly mandated priest – exorcist uses to free those who are really possessed by actual demons.

But there are also several 'minor exorcisms' used in the sacraments of initiation, where the Church prays for the spiritual protection of those soon to be baptised.

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

There was no evidence that Benedict was coerced to resign, and he specifically mentioned that he was making this choice 'with full freedom.' He clearly manifested his intention to step down

THEOLOGY

ELIZABETH SCALIA

Are we Catholic enough?

Elizabeth Scalia

A discussion among practising Catholics occurred in a social media group recently, inevitably landing on current divisions between Catholics: those who would describe themselves as ‘orthodox’ vs the ‘more progressive;’ those who pronounce themselves ‘proudly cafeteria’ versus those who identify as ‘proudly traditionalist.’

For Christians in touch with their own failings, it seems pointless to be ‘proudly’ anything, and yet the stink of pride eventually attaches to most of us, no matter how pure our practice.

That led to questions about what ‘purity’ means in a fallen world, and debate on following all the ‘rules’ promulgated by the church in the face of Christ’s own teachings.

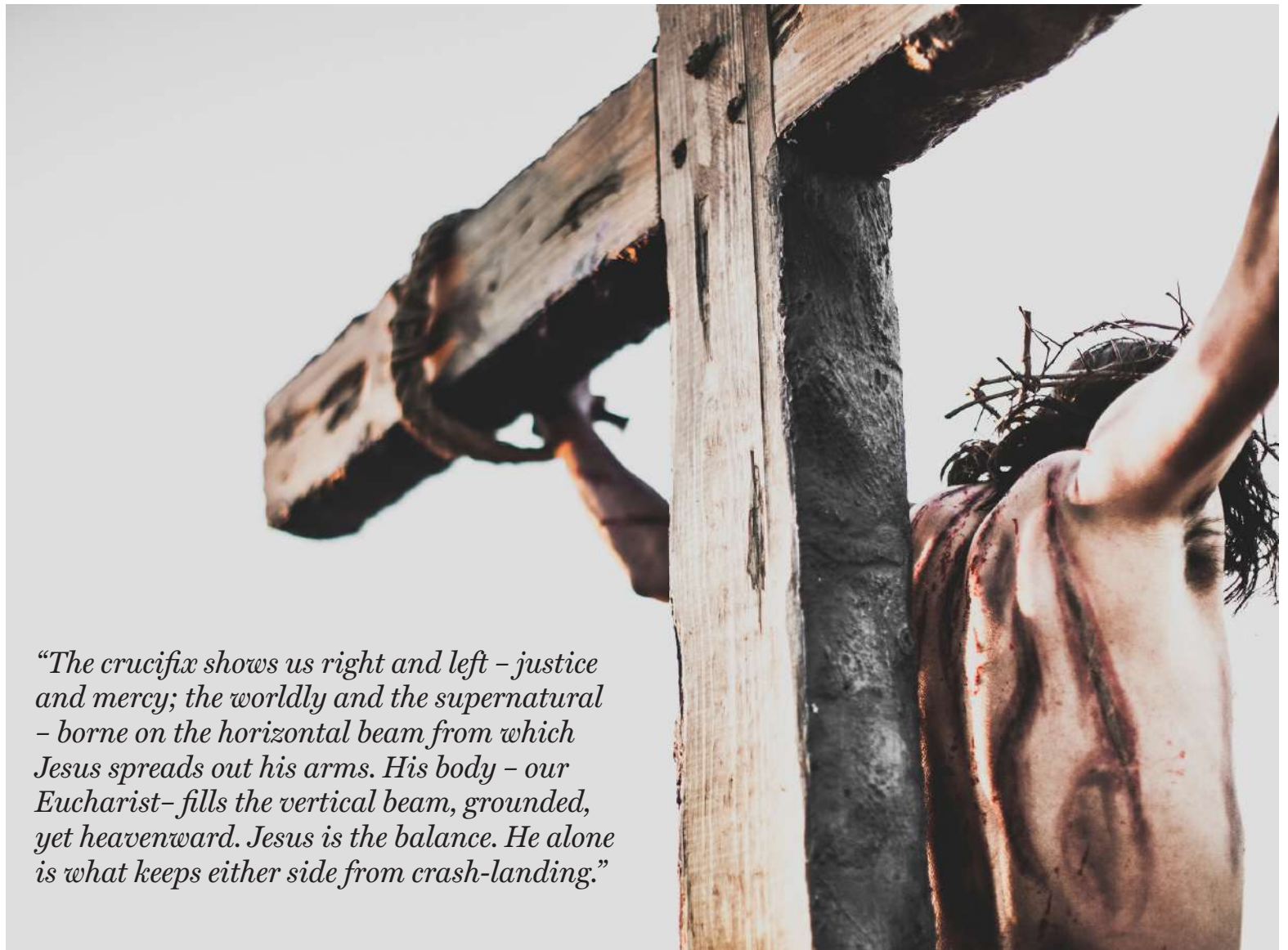
For instance, is Jesus’ story of the Prodigal Son – in which he depicts the father running toward the imperfectly contrite son, even “while he was still a long way off” (Lk 15:20) – contrary to the mandate that we all be in a ‘state of grace’ before we may approach Christ in the Eucharist? It is good that such conversations happen, good to see people still actively wondering. Wonder grounds the work of better-knowing God.

Still, after lengthy exchanges, someone finally wailed, “How can any of us ever be ‘Catholic enough?’”

That *cri du coeur* is worth pondering in prayer: What is ‘Catholic enough?’ The answer might be as simple, and as difficult, as “love moving without limits, yet unchained to human excess.”

As any parent will tell you, rules matter. Honest parents will admit that sometimes love requires carefully reconsidering even the most entrenched and principled of family rules. Does that touch the modern Church? Some Catholics fear any ‘development of doctrine’, while others clamour for it.

Perhaps we should read St. John Henry Newman’s *On the Development of Doctrine*, wherein he makes helpful distinctions between principles and doctrine: ‘Principles are abstract and general, doctrines relate to facts; doctrines develop, and principles at first sight do not; doctrines grow and are enlarged, principles are permanent; doctrines are intellectual, and principles are more immediately ethical and practical. Systems live in principles and represent doctrines. Personal responsibility is a principle, the Being of a God is a doctrine; from that doctrine all theology has come in due course, whereas that principle is not clearer



“The crucifix shows us right and left – justice and mercy; the worldly and the supernatural – borne on the horizontal beam from which Jesus spreads out his arms. His body – our Eucharist – fills the vertical beam, grounded, yet heavenward. Jesus is the balance. He alone is what keeps either side from crash-landing.”

under the Gospel than in paradise, and depends, not on belief in an Almighty Governor, but on conscience’ (Chapter 5.2).

As a both/and Church, we entwine with the supernatural and the world – ‘all things visible and invisible.’ Does this contribute to our branching away from each other, aligning with factions rather than working the faith together? We want to embrace the (mostly undiscussed) supernaturalism of the Church, but instinctively wish to serve humanity in humane ways. Both efforts can be taken up in good faith but brought to extremes, weighing too heavily in one direction or the other.

The thudding end to extremism

is, well, pride. It is entirely possible to become prideful as a Pharisee, preening as we follow all the rules while also overworking the supernaturalism – and yes, the urge and action toward prayer is supernatural, as in the inspiration to serve. I knew someone who prayed a full Rosary every day, reciting not just the Fatima prayer but also the prayer to St Michael at the end of each decade and calling it “necessary.” It made me wonder how often we proclaim our faith while not trusting that prayer can be both simple and ‘enough’. Did pride cause my acquaintance to deem a powerful prayer as inadequate to the world’s needs? God knows. But if we offer prayer

yet don’t trust God enough to believe that prayer is both efficacious and plenty, then what are we really offering? Is prayer without trust part of our pride? On the other hand, I know people so committed to the world-service side of faith that they’ve become detached from the supernaturalism of prayer.

I was sneered at once by an ardent ‘social justice’ Catholic who called Eucharistic adoration “a medieval relic, too passive in the face of so much human need.” “Yet it supports the work you do,” I argued.

Were we both prideful? Again, God knows? A both/and Church is a Martha-and-Mary Church of

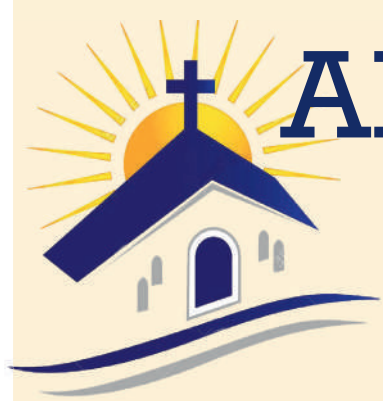
‘being’ and ‘doing’. We broken humans constantly forget that, leaning one way or the other.

It’s a tricky but necessary thing to take time to sit quietly before the Lord while also putting your time and talent into service for Christ’s sake. If we all worked on that, there might be less discontent and distrust between Catholics, and fewer questions about whether we’re doing Catholicism ‘correctly’. The crucifix shows us right and left – justice and mercy; the worldly and the supernatural – borne on the horizontal beam from which Jesus spreads out his arms.

His body – our Eucharist – fills the vertical beam, grounded, yet heavenward. Jesus is the balance. He alone is what keeps either side from crash-landing. Perhaps when we habitually join our crosses to his, questions of purity and perfection will become moot. Because there is nothing purer or more perfect than being in balance with Christ.

“I was sneered at once by an ardent ‘social justice’ Catholic who called Eucharistic adoration ‘a medieval relic, too passive in the face of so much human need.’ ‘Yet it supports the work you do,’ I argued. Were we both prideful? Again, God knows. A both/and Church is a Martha-and-Mary Church of ‘being’ and ‘doing’. We broken humans constantly forget that, leaning one way or the other...”

Elizabeth Scalia is a writer with the US-based OSV News



AROUND THE PARISHES & EDUCATION

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



Cardinal delighted to welcome over 1,000 to cathedral for Rite of Election



Over one thousand people gathered at Westminster Cathedral on Saturday, 17th February to celebrate the Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion, a key milestone in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

They came to accompany and support 398 adults from 82 parishes who will receive the Sacraments of Initiation at Easter.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols presided over the liturgy, assisted by Bishops John Sherrington, Nicholas Hudson, Paul McAleenan, and Fr Gerard Quinn (Episcopal Vicar).

During the Rite of Election, the cardinal declared 223 catechumens to be ready and to have been chosen by the community as 'the Elect', to go forward to prepare for the Sacraments of Initiation of Baptism, Confirmation and First Holy Communion at Easter. Their names were brought forward in the Book of the Elect which was blessed by the Cardinal.

During the Call to Continuing Conversion, 175 candidates who are already baptised Christians, were affirmed by their sponsors and the assembly. The Church recognised their desire to complete their initiation in order to be received into full communion with the

Catholic Church.

The service was a joyful occasion full of music, celebration and joy attended by families and friends from across the diocese. For many, the highpoint was when each parish group was called forward to meet the cardinal and the bishops.

The Cardinal spoke in his homily about the centrality and relevance of the Lord's Prayer as both a model for prayer and a summary of our Christian faith.

Writing to the catechumens and candidates in the order of service, Cardinal Vincent said: "We give

thanks to God for the ways in which our parishes and diocesan family will be enriched by you and we promise to continue to support you and your families with our prayers and the example of Christian life that you experience in our parish communities."

He also acknowledged the "support which so many priests, deacons, religious, parish catechists, godparents and sponsors have provided" to these catechumens and candidates. He added: "Please God, the journeying with those seeking full communion

with the Church will have been a time of grace for you and all the members of our parish communities."

The Rite of Election is celebrated on the first Saturday of Lent, with parishes from all deaneries of the diocese. During Lent, the Elect and candidates will continue their preparation to receive the Sacraments of Initiation at Easter in their parishes.

The Book of the Elect will be on display in the Baptistry until Holy Saturday so that those who visit the Cathedral may pray for the Elect.





Powerful retreat brings joy to Southwark's young Catholics

80 young people from across the Archdiocese of Southwark attended a youth retreat at St George's Cathedral on Saturday, 17th February.

There was a full house for the retreat, which was led by Net Ministries Scotland in conjunction with the archdiocese's youth ministry, with 80 young people from 10 parishes, many of whom are going to receive the sacrament of Confirmation in May.

The theme of the retreat was 'Choose Joy', and the retreat was

certainly a great success from the radiant smiles of the young participants.

The young people enjoyed an action-packed day including games, testimonies, drama, music, exhortation, prayer, as well as getting to know each other.

The prayer sessions were powerful, and the testimonies were moving.

Join us in praying that our young people felt the love of God during the retreat and may God continuously bless his disciples.

Five dads set to tackle St Chad's Way for charity

Five dads from St Nicholas Catholic Church in Boldmere, Sutton Coldfield, are preparing to run the St Chad's Way for charity.

Team St Nicholas - Chris, Stephen, Matteo, Andrew and James - will be off on 2nd March, departing from St Chad's Cathedral in Birmingham for a demanding 21-mile run to Lichfield Anglican Cathedral.

The St Chad's Way is a Pilgrim Way for the Archdiocese of Birmingham, from the Cathedral of St Chad to St Chad's Well and the Shrine of St Chad in Lichfield.

The run will raise funds for the St Nicholas World Development Group (WDG), the parish charity dedicated to enhancing the lives of those in need.



The team will leave St Chad's Cathedral at 9am, have a quick stop at St Nicholas en route around 10.15am before continuing to Lichfield, to arrive around 12.30pm.

On their JustGiving fundraising page, the team said: 'This run is not just about personal achievement; it

is about making a difference in the world.

'Every donation, no matter how small, brings us closer to our target amount of £500.

'Together, we can make a real difference and create positive change.'



Spike's on hand to cheer children's walk to school

St Wilfrid's Catholic Primary School in Ripon have taken part in local 'Walk to School Days' to protect the environment in the spirit of Pope Francis' Laudato Si'. The W2S days take place once every half term and supported by Zero Carbon Harrogate, with its mascot Spike the Hedgehog and motto, 'Be a ZERO HERO and simply swap the car for your feet!'

St Wilfrid's is one of around 60 schools now regularly taking part to promote good transport habits on a daily and weekly basis, to improve air quality, reduce congestion and improve pupil health and wellbeing.

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Warm welcome to Wigan parish for Fr Hugh

St Patrick's Church, part of St William's Parish in Wigan, welcomed Fr Hugh Donleavy with open arms as he celebrated his first Mass at his new home parish.

Fr Hugh, who was ordained on 1st December 2023, will shortly be taking up his first priestly appointment as the parish curate at St William's,

After a wonderful Mass, parishioners invited Fr Hugh to join them for a celebratory post-Mass coffee morning. This gathering provided an opportunity for parishioners to extend a warm welcome to Fr. Hugh in person.

Fr Ian O'Shea, parish priest of St William's Parish, along with all the staff, volunteers, and parishioners, welcomes Fr Hugh to the parish and prays that his tenure here will be long and happy.

Tell your story to the Universe Catholic Weekly!

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Andy Drozdziak

andy.drozdziak@universecatholicweekly.co.uk

And we love great photos – so send them, too!



Conference celebrates vital role of ethnic chaplaincies to the Church

Mgr Daniel McHugh

"Very successful, a good turnout, lively, well worthwhile."

Those were the words Archbishop Bernard Longley used to describe the annual Ethnic Chaplaincies Conference held on Tuesday, 20th February.

It was the first occasion that the conference took place at Fr Hudson's Care, a Catholic charity which has grown services in breadth and depth to such an extent in recent years.

Andrew Quinn CEO outlined its work, which extends far beyond its origins in adoption, fostering and care for children, and now includes the care of the elderly, the disabled, asylum seekers and refugees.

Not only does Fr Hudson's continue to be a base for care, it also reaches out through partnerships in local areas and parishes across the archdiocese as an enabling organisation and facilitator.

For the ethnic chaplaincies, eparchies and missions attending the conference, it was an "eye-



opener" on the resources Fr Hudson's can offer Catholic ethnic communities, which are now established as vital partners and enablers of the mission of the Church in the UK.

The conference heard how ethnic communities still find obstacles in their paths, particularly around Visa applications and safeguarding. It was great to have the Helen Perry and Claire Reay from the Vicar General's Office talk about

safeguarding in the archdiocese, together with Monica Coke from the Jamaican Consulate.

Whether it is priests or religious coming to this country from abroad, or members of congregations going abroad on pilgrimage, there was plenty to absorb. The main lessons were: be prepared to go through the regulations, and, although it takes time, help and advice are available.

The final session in the afternoon

was sharing by a number of participants:

- Around the Chaplaincies, Eparchies and Missions
- Ita Gooden, West Indian Chaplaincy: The Chaplaincy and the Windrush Experience
- Fr. George Ettuparayil, Syro-Malabar Eparchy: A Christian Cultural Celebration
- Peter Luczka, Ukrainian Eparchy: The Church and those who have fled the invasion of Ukraine
- Fr. John Mudereri, Zimbabwean Chaplaincy: A Weekend of Prayer and Music

The overall impression was of Catholic ethnic chaplaincies, eparchies and missions playing a vital part in the mission of the Church, and contributing so much to its life, and to society in general.

It was a heartwarming day, with Archbishop Longley speaking movingly in his address of the importance of ethnic diversity, the new face of the Church in mission in recent years.

Photos: Con McHugh

Everyone's included at All Saints

All Saints Catholic school in Dagenham has achieved the Inclusive School Award with Flagship status, with praise for the way "its inclusive Catholic ethos shines through and permeates into all the school's pastoral and academic support."

The report adds: "Leaders are committed to ensuring success for every pupil, studying a learning pathway that reflects their skills, talents, needs and abilities. No child is left behind, and pupils with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) are well supported."

The chapel is the heart of the school, with all pupils and staff attending Mass throughout the week. Open Mass on a Friday morning is very well attended.

Each form group has a 'Saint charity' which they fundraise for, and there is a strong sense of community and family feel to the school.

The school chaplaincy team is drawn from the Society of St. Joseph, spoke about the religious element of the school. They value the visual timetable on the plasma screen, reminding people when different religious events are happening each day, such as times for the rosary.



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HEALTH

Beware the hidden salt if you struggle with controlling your blood pressure

Salt substitutes significantly lower high blood pressure risk, study finds

Excess salt consumption is a known risk factor for developing high blood pressure – and new research shows swapping regular table salt for a salt substitute could help regulate blood pressure in older adults.

Salt substitutes help minimise sodium intake while increasing potassium intake, both of which are associated with healthy blood pressure levels.

Overconsumption of salt is a global driver of cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure.

New research indicates that using salt substitutes – flavoured food additives with less sodium – instead of table salt could help reduce the risk of high blood pressure.

An article published 12th February in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, found that older adults with blood pressure above normal who used a salt substitute had lower incidences of developing high blood pressure. They also had lower blood pressure overall compared to those who used table salt.

Additionally, incidences of low blood pressure, a potential health concern for those with healthy blood pressure, were nearly identical between the two groups.

"This means the salt substitute is beneficial not only to people with hypertension, which has been demonstrated in previous studies, but also to people with normal blood pressure, and that it is safe," Dr Yangfeng Wu, Ph.D., executive director of Peking University Clinical Research Institute and senior author of the study, told *Medical News Today*.

Salt substitute cuts high blood pressure risk by 40 per cent

The research comes out of the DECIDE-Salt trial, a multi-centre trial conducted at 48 elderly care facilities in China. About 75 per cent of participants were males, and the average age of participants was 71.

Throughout the two-year trial, scientists wanted to see how different salt initiatives would affect participants' blood pressure.

The 2x2 factorial design compared usual salt intake and progressively restricted salt intake to regular salt or a salt substitute.

Participants who received the salt substitute demonstrated improvements in blood pressure.

To further investigate these findings,



researchers wanted to see how the salt substitute would affect only individuals with less than 140/90 mm Hg, blood pressure.

The study included roughly 600 participants, divided evenly into two groups: one that received regular salt and one that got the salt substitute.

To be included in the trial, participants had to have a blood pressure reading of less than 140/90 mm Hg to meet the study authors' "normal" blood pressure requirements and could not be taking any blood pressure medication.

However, it's important to note that the ideal blood pressure reading is 120/80. According to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) anything above that is considered at-risk or prehypertensive.

Two-year study

Over the two-year period of the study, researchers found that individuals in the salt substitute group were 40 per cent less likely to develop high blood pressure than the salt group.

There were 60 new cases of high blood pressure for those using the salt substitute compared to 95 cases among those using salt.

Meanwhile, occurrences of low blood pressure were roughly even: 16.6 per cent of subjects in the salt substitute group and 11.7 per cent in the salt group. Researchers did not deem the finding to be statistically significant.

The average blood pressure reading between the two groups was important. Compared to the baseline reading, the salt substitute group saw an average eight-point decrease in systolic

"Sodium consumption has less to do with the salt shaker at the table, and much more to do with how foods are processed today. 10 per cent of sodium intake comes from the salt pot; the rest comes from refined, processed foods and eating out."

blood pressure (the top number) and a less robust but still significant, two-point decrease in diastolic blood pressure (the bottom number).

"The study demonstrated that mean blood pressure increased in the regular salt control group but remained unchanged in the salt substitute group," Dr Wu explained.

The authors note the salt substitute appeared to prevent blood pressure from increasing rather than causing a decrease in blood pressure. This distinction helps to explain why occurrences of low blood pressure remained about the same.

Should you reduce your salt intake?

Salt consumption has been associated with high blood pressure and other negative health outcomes such as:

- heart attack
- stroke
- kidney damage
- osteoporosis

Mounting evidence shows that salt

substitutes can be a cheap, effective way to reduce salt intake.

In an accompanying editorial to the study, Dr Rik Olde Engberink, Ph.D., a researcher at the University of Amsterdam UMC, looked at the potential public health effects of using salt substitutes on a large scale. He wrote that attempts to curb salt intake globally have been a "failing strategy" and noted that salt substitution is an "attractive alternative."

"Ideally, individuals should choose the right products in the supermarket that contain a low amount of salt and should not add salt themselves. Dr Engberink told MNT.

"This, however, is quite difficult for individuals. I would prefer that my patients eat less than 5 grams of salt instead of eating 10 grams of the salt substitute," he said.

Hidden salt in foods

Sodium consumption has less to do with the salt shaker at the table, and much more to do with how foods are processed today.

Only about 10 per cent of sodium intake comes from the salt pot; the vast majority comes from refined, processed foods and eating out.

Kristin Kirkpatrick, a registered dietitian at the Cleveland Clinic and author of *Regenerative Health*, told MNT that she recommends avoiding processed foods and replacing salt with herbs and roots.

"Ultra-processed foods are often very high in salt. Salt substitutes can play a role. However, it is often not my primary behaviour change that I am trying to assist with my patients," she said.

HEALTH

Teachers' cry of 'sit up straight' is wasted as slouching does you no harm

New research finds that slouching at your desk or during lessons isn't as bad for your spine as you might think, and will likely provide few if any long-term problems. Chris McCarthy reports

Often a posture assigned to teenagers and disaffected youth, slouching is traditionally considered to be a "bad" posture – with some claiming it will damage your spine and cause pain.

The term itself hails from medieval Norse meaning 'lazy fellow' – and later the middle English word meaning 'walking, sitting or standing with a loose attitude'.

In the last 150 years or so, posture has come to be associated with aspects of a person's value, dignity, respectability and morality. Erect posture has been deemed "healthy", "the aesthetic utopia", "dignified", "a backbone against subjugation", "attractive" and "good" by various cultures, political movements and even social media influencers.

So it's not difficult to see then how slouching came to be considered "bad" for us since it's long been considered to be a bodily representation of negativity.

But while posture is heavily overlaid with psychological meaning, is it really that bad for our spines if we slouch? Are certain postures really "good" and others "bad"?

The great news is that in the past two decades, there's been a plethora of rigorous clinical studies conducted which have concluded that there's no relationship between slouching and spinal pain. There's also no evidence that people who slouch are more likely to suffer with back or neck pain compared to non-slouchers.

There's also no clear evidence that slouching while sitting at your desk or while using your phone causes damage to the spine. Even the UK government's latest guidance on working with screens puts less emphasis on an idealised posture at the workstation.

Instead, they emphasise the importance of adopting comfortable positions, varying your positions, avoiding awkward positions (such as flexing or arching your back or neck) and including regular breaks from your static posture



throughout the day.

All of these tips will help reduce the risk of developing pain and muscle fatigue.

So if you experience back or neck pain, you can rest assured that the posture you adopt when walking or sitting probably isn't to blame as much as you might have been led to believe. Instead, it's probably related more to other features of life – such as how stressed or physically active you are and if you

have previously had back pain.

Surely there must be some damage?

There's a pretty good reason why slouching doesn't damage our spines, and that is because our spines are designed to allow movements as diverse as Olympic weightlifting to limbo dancing.

Our spines aren't going to be damaged by a bit of sitting down, even if we happen to be wiggling

"So if you experience back or neck pain, you can rest assured that the posture you adopt when walking or sitting probably isn't to blame as much as you might have been led to believe..."

our fingers on a keyboard at the same time. And while standing desks are popular, prolonged standing is no more comfortable for the spine than prolonged sitting

The best thing to do throughout your day, to both make your body feel more comfortable and to increase your productivity and positive sense of wellbeing is to break up prolonged periods at your desk with breaks to walk, stretch, stand or sit down.

Positive posture

But there is one area where slouching may have a negative effect. Slouching has been linked to poorer information and memory recall, as well as worse mood when compared to sitting upright. These memory and mood problems are shown to be rapidly improved when moving from a slouched to erect posture.

So perhaps there is some truth to the notion that slouching may still be a bodily representation of negativity.

But aside from that, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests there's no single, ideal or good posture. Differences in spinal posture are not related to pain. And, in fact, posture naturally varies from person to person – and can even vary depending on race, sex, and even mood.

So if you're a sloucher, rest assured that it isn't really bad for you and is as good as any other posture you adopt. Comfortable postures are safe and sitting is not dangerous.

Overall, the human spine is designed to be on the move rather than static in one posture for long periods, which is why movement and changing your posture throughout the day is important to reduce fatigue and subsequent discomfort.

If you can't move around and spend all day slouched in front of the computer, this may cause you some discomfort – but it's not actually damaging your spine.

Chris McCarthy is a Research Fellow, Rehabilitation, Manchester Metropolitan University



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FOOD

Easy, delicious seafood options to enjoy for Lent – and every day

Whether you're looking to expand your protein options during Lent or want to try new twists on your seafood favourites, Morey's Fine Fish & Seafood offers plenty of easy-to-prepare, delicious frozen options that your whole family is sure to enjoy.

Look for products from Morey's for convenient and affordable ways to satisfy your inner 'seafoodie' this season and all year long.

Did you know almost half of consumers (46 per cent) say they love or like the flavour of sweet chili and, according to Datassential, 42 per cent say that sweet chili is their most preferred Asian-style sauce? Tilapia Sweet Chili is a restaurant-quality entree that features ASC-certified tilapia, frozen at the peak of freshness, along with that beloved sweet and spicy sauce. To take this new product one step further, try this recipe that highlights Morey's Tilapia Sweet Chili by combining it with fresh veggies and your favourite Asian-style noodles.

Tilapia Asian Noodle bowl

This noodle bowl is packed with savoury flavours thanks to ingredients like fresh ginger, sesame, cilantro, and the sweet and spicy marinade featuring notes of honey, soy, peppers and garlic. Snap peas, bell peppers, cabbage and green onions add pops of colour and freshness when tossed with flaky Tilapia Sweet Chili and deliciously springy udon noodles. The veggie-



and flavour-packed dish makes an easy weeknight dinner, plus you can enjoy leftovers – warm or cold – for lunch.

Prep time: 15 minutes;
Cook time 15–20 minutes; Serves 2

Ingredients

- 1 package Morey's Tilapia Sweet Chili,

prepared according to package directions

- 6 ounces cooked udon noodles or other favourite Asian-style noodle
- 2 tablespoons coconut, avocado or olive oil
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 cup snap peas, sliced in half lengthwise
- 1/2 red bell pepper, thinly sliced

- 1/2 yellow bell pepper, thinly sliced
- 2/3 cup plus 2 tablespoons sweet chili sauce
- 2 tablespoons water
- 1 cup red cabbage, thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 green onions, sliced
- 2 tablespoons cilantro, chopped
- 1 tablespoon sesame seeds
- Lime wedges

Instructions

Cook fish: Prepare Tilapia Sweet Chili fillets according to package directions.

Prepare vegetables: While the tilapia is cooking, heat oil in saute pan over medium heat. Add minced ginger and garlic and cook 1 minute. Add snap peas and bell peppers and cook 2–3 minutes, until softened. Stir in 1 tablespoon sweet chili sauce. Remove vegetables and set aside. Add 2 tablespoons water, 1 tablespoon sweet chili sauce and red cabbage, cooking until red cabbage is wilted, then remove cabbage and set aside.

To serve: Add remaining 2/3 cup sweet chili sauce, soy sauce and cooked noodles to pan. Toss to coat and heat through until noodles start to caramelize. Divide noodles on two plates, arrange cooked tilapia on top and add vegetables on the side. Garnish with green onions, cilantro, sesame seeds, squeeze of lime and extra sweet chili sauce.

Maintaining a healthier home on a budget

Living healthily remains a primary concern for many today, with homeowners looking to make home improvements with an emphasis on the health benefits of living in an environmentally friendly space.

"When it comes to home improvement, eco-friendly choices can be budget-friendly," said Bonnie Lee, Vice President of Property Claims at Mercury Insurance.

"Healthy home choices, especially for large renovations, can bring your homeowner cost down and save you money on insurance too."

The journey to a healthier home begins by identifying areas needing regular maintenance and determining which environmentally friendly products can replace current ones. Here's a round-up of beneficial and feasible home enhancements:

Breathe easier with clean air

Indoor air can be up to five times more polluted than outdoor air.

And while the air filters in your home's heating and cooling equipment can weed out contaminants like dust and pet dander, remember that a dirty filter hampers their efficiency.

Regularly cleaning or changing these filters, especially HEPA filters that cost as little as £23, can ensure clean air.

A costless preventive measure is to maintain the proper functioning of smoke and carbon monoxide detectors throughout your home.

Fires and carbon monoxide poisoning are more likely during winter when homes are typically heated, making detector maintenance an important step.



Air filters in your home's heating and cooling equipment can weed out contaminants like dust and pet dander, remember that a dirty filter hampers their efficiency.

Ensuring safe water

Water filters offer a health-centric and budget-conscious upgrade to homes. Filter pitchers start from as low as £15, and there are more upscale alternatives available like under-sink, countertop or faucet-mounted systems.

Water leak detection devices present another home improvement avenue. These systems alert homeowners when a leak is detected and can automatically shut off the water system if a significant issue exists. Mercury Insurance offers a related discount to eligible homes equipped with these devices.

Environmentally friendly and effective household supplies

Attentions have shifted due to concerns over the composition of traditional cleaning products,

paints, flooring and construction materials. Many homeowners now prefer environmentally friendly alternatives. Look for biodegradable products based on renewable resources. When painting the walls of your home, look for volatile organic compounds (VOC)-free options or those that are Green Seal or GreenGuard certified.

When it comes to appliances, aim for LEED-certified or STAR-rated products for lower energy usage and eligibility for an insurance discount for green homeowners. For flooring, consider alternatives like unfinished hardwood, stone or concrete, and carpets made from natural fibres. Look for non-toxic adhesives to further limit chemical exposure.

Adopting routine maintenance and home improvements can foster a healthier living environment and offer financial rewards.

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FILMS

Our Lady's vision was the final signal that took Christian faith to the Americas

John Mulderig

Every year, in the run-up to her feast day on 12th December, more than 10 million pilgrims flock to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. The uplifting documentary *Guadalupe: Mother of Humanity* (Goya) directed by Andrés Garrigó, provides viewers with an insight into the background of this remarkable phenomenon.

Filmmaker Pablo Moreno's narrative recounts the 1,531 Marian apparitions that continue to be celebrated and commemorated almost half a millennium after they first took place. They began at a difficult time for the indigenous people of Spanish colonial America. For many of visionary Juan Diego's fellow Chichimeca, it was a period of psychological disorientation and even despair.

The conquistadors may have accomplished something positive by banning the human sacrifices that had previously been frequent in the region. But the failure of their gods to respond to – and avenge – this affront left those who had once worshipped them feeling religiously bereft. Evangelisation efforts on the part of the European newcomers, meanwhile, had largely stalled.

Thus, when Our Lady appeared to the pious neophyte – Juan Diego – and conversed with him in his native language, the miraculous event was not only to have lasting spiritual consequences but cultural ones as well. The



Angelica Chong as Our Lady of Guadalupe and Mario Alberto Hernandez as St. Juan Diego star in *Guadalupe: Mother of Humanity*.

Virgin's appearance and apparel, moreover, both served to reinforce her identification with Juan Diego and his countrymen.

These visual details were given permanent form when, in a sign to the local bishop that Diego's account of his interactions with her was true, Mary caused her image to be imprinted on his Aztec-style cloak or tilma. In defiance of the toll even a short passage of time would normally take on such a fragile textile, her self-portrait endures to this day.

Moreno intersperses re-enactments of Juan Diego's experiences (featuring Angelica Chong and Mario Alberto Hernandez) with observations from clergy and scholars, interviews with devotees and compelling tales

of healing and conversion. Striking facts regarding the image on the tilma – some not properly understood until the advent of modern technology – are also examined.

As the scene shifts from the New World of the 16th century to present-day Los Angeles and Barcelona, Mexican actress Karyme Lozano provides lively commentary. She helps to highlight Our Lady of Guadalupe's immediate impact as the inspiration for mass conversions as well as her ongoing legacy, including her role as an intercessor for the protection of the unborn.

References to abortion, along with accounts of illness and accidents, make the film too intense for small viewers. But all others will find

this celebration of the Patroness of the Americas both intriguing and inspiring.

"There is no other (Marian) advocacy that has so many millions of faithful who come to visit her from far and near with such fervour year after year for (almost) five centuries," said director Andrés Garrigó.

Garrigó said that finding an actress who would convey an image of purity proper to the Blessed Virgin was a great challenge. However, the first of the four actresses at the casting call was the one who met the requirements, including candour, sympathy and physical similarities.

"She told us that she was a Guadalupana and that her mother was praying for her at that moment of the casting. In the end, it seemed to us like a gift from the Virgin," Garrigó said.

Another early fruit of this film was that one of the writers discovered his call to the priesthood and is now in the seminary, he said.

"We have several miracles, small and large, that happened while shooting," he recounted. One of them was the scene of the first apparition where, according to forecasts, it would rain heavily. However, the sky cleared, the sun came out, and they managed to film this scene for three hours. After finishing, the sky darkened, and it began to rain.

For more information, visit: <https://www.guadalupehthemovie.com/>

Sickness slip-ups: Five ways you might be self-sabotaging your recovery when ill

When an unwelcome sickness or ailment creeps up, your home becomes both a sanctuary and a battlefield in the fight against sickness.

Yet, recent research conducted by MDLIVE, an Evernorth company and leading virtual care provider, suggests many workers may be unknowingly engaging in activities that are hindering their recovery process.

"It's easy to overlook the subtle ways in which our sickness day habits can impede our path to wellness, especially when we're distracted by our daily responsibilities or the physical symptoms of sickness," notes Dr. Vontrelle Roundtree at MDLIVE. "However, navigating the road to feeling better when ill at home requires more than just rest; it involves adopting a holistic approach to self-care."

Dr. Roundtree sheds light on the common mistakes many people make during recovery efforts, and offers expert advice on avoiding these pitfalls for a quicker and more effective healing process.

1. You take a hygiene hiatus

According to the survey, more than half of respondents (52 per cent) put their regular hygiene habits on hold, including showering, skin

care and even brushing their teeth. However, maintaining personal hygiene is crucial when you're ill, not only to thwart the spread of illness to others and improve mental well-being, but also to help prevent additional health problems for yourself. Bacteria thrive and grow when you're ill, and neglecting oral hygiene, for example, can accelerate bacterial and plaque growth, heightening the risk of dental issues.

2. You avoid a balanced diet

Whether you avoid certain foods, overindulge with less-than-healthy foods, or simply don't eat altogether when ill, ignoring nutritional needs can delay your body's ability to heal promptly.

Remember, vitamin C and chicken soup are merely supportive players rather than miracle cures. Instead, boosting your immune system's response effectively comes from a more balanced approach to nutrition.

A diet filled with nutrient-rich foods is the fuel your body needs to fight off illness.

Hydration is equally important; drinking plenty of fluids helps flush out toxins and keeps your mucous membranes moist, aiding in the recovery process.



3. You worry about work

It's natural to try and power through sickness and try to get back to work. However, the stress of working while ill can delay recovery more than most realise. Surprisingly, the mental stress from work can directly impact your physical health by increasing cortisol levels, which in turn can suppress immune function, making you susceptible to longer recovery times or, worse, secondary infections. Taking the necessary time to recover can prevent longer-term health issues and ensure you return to work at full capacity, ultimately supporting a healthier, more productive work environment.

4. You're all rest, no rally

While rest is essential, particularly in the initial stages of illness, incorporating light to moderate

activities can be beneficial for both physical and mental health. In fact, studies have found that exercise, when experiencing an infection or sickness, may not only be safe but could also reduce the severity of symptoms and the number of sickness days needed as a result. Of course, it's essential to listen to your body and consult a doctor to help tailor an appropriate balance between rest and activity for your individual needs.

5. You dodge a doctor's diagnosis

When you're feeling under the weather, the last thing you want to do is pull yourself out of the house to a GP, battling the aches, pains, and fatigue that often accompany illness. In fact, 72 per cent agree that the effort to spend even part of a sickness day at the doctor's surgery is more of a hassle than it's worth, likely due to the time commitment and inconvenience it brings.

However, consulting a doctor when sick is crucial for proper recovery. Many conditions, particularly common or mild illnesses, can be effectively diagnosed through telephone calls from the comfort of your own home. This approach significantly cuts down on the hassle associated with travel and waiting in a doctor's office or urgent care clinic with other ill people. It can serve as a convenient option for getting the care you need, with doctors recommending in-person follow-ups when necessary.

In the fight against sickness, knowledge and action are your greatest allies. The journey back to health is not just about overcoming the immediate symptoms, but nurturing your overall well-being, so that your days spent under the weather are as few and far between as possible.

How modern vendettas compare with blood vengeance in the age of King David

HISTORY

David Shepherd



The English language has borrowed an Italian word, *vendetta*, to refer to a family blood-feud. Thanks in part to Hollywood's long fascination with the mafia, family-based retributive violence continues to be strongly associated in western culture with parts of Italy and the Italian-American diaspora.

Yet a growing body of research, is making it clear that kin-based blood vengeance isn't just found in films. It is surprisingly prevalent in the real world, found commonly in approximately 30 per cent of countries, including almost a third of countries in Asia-Pacific and Europe (notably the Balkan region), and almost half of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and north Africa.

Given that western religions originated in the Middle East and are still prevalent there, and given the dependence of Judaism, Christianity and even Islam on the Hebrew Bible, it is important to understand how the Bible conceptualises blood vengeance.

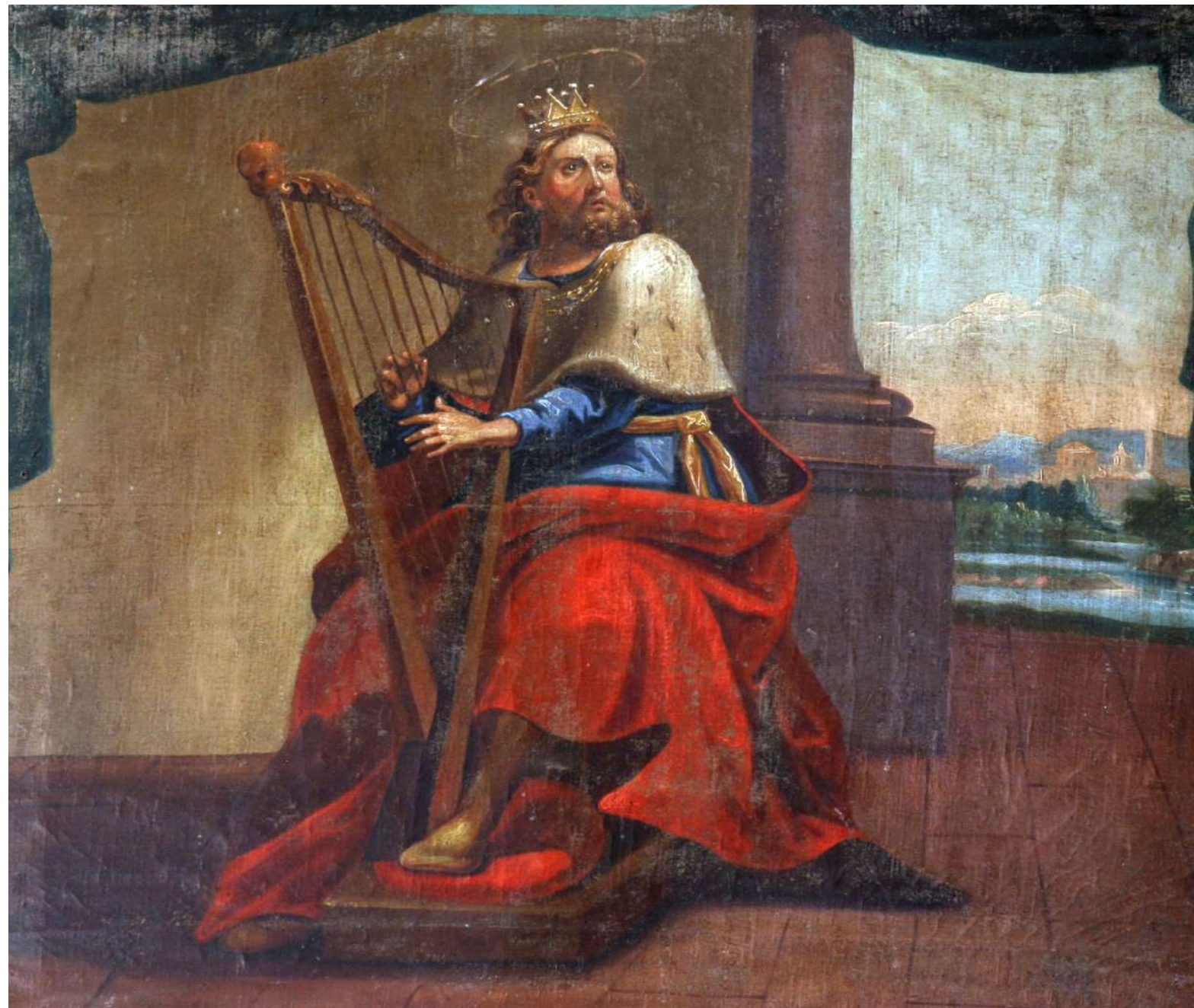
In this ancient canon of western religion, there is clear evidence of legal mechanisms regulating the avenging of illegitimate bloodshed by kinsmen. However, my research on King David in the books of Samuel and 1 Kings shows how the Bible offers a glimpse of the ancient dynamics of blood-guilt and blood vengeance in practice, rather than merely in theory.

Bad blood

Recent research has drawn attention to the role that blood vengeance sometimes plays in modern civil wars – shaping patterns of violence, but also restraint.

Civil wars feature prominently in David's own story, which begins with the slaying of the famous Philistine giant Goliath and then charts his rise to the throne of Israel and Judah, and the blood-soaked struggle to succeed him. It is against this backdrop that blood vengeance is often played out. The theme recurs regularly as King David first struggles to defeat Saul, his rival from the tribe of Benjamin, and later puts down an armed insurrection by his own son Absalom.

In the modern era, blood vengeance can sometimes be exercised long after the original killing. In one case in rural Crete, a



25-year-old avenged his uncle who was murdered in 1958 by killing a distant relative of the murderer almost half a century later, in 2005.

So too in the ancient stories about David, we read of a minority community (the Gibeonites) being permitted to execute blood vengeance against the descendants of the deceased Saul, for Saul's earlier illegitimate killing of their kinsmen.

Whether blood revenge is required against the perpetrators or their relatives, the prospect of it can lead those vulnerable to vengeance to flee the threat of retributive violence.

In 2010, after an Aboriginal man in Australia killed a fellow tribesman in his village, the entire family of the killer fled to Adelaide to avoid the 'payback' required by tribal law.

Similarly, when David's son Absalom murders his half-brother Amnon and flees the scene of the

crime, he too seems to be motivated by his desire to escape blood vengeance. This best explains why Absalom ends up in Geshur, an ancient city beyond the jurisdiction of his father, King David.

The fear factor

While blood vengeance may spiral into a cycle of violence, research among modern Chechen communities in Russia, suggests

"In the ancient stories about David, we read of the Gibeonites being permitted to execute blood vengeance against descendants of Saul, for Saul's earlier illegitimate killing of their kinsmen..."

that it can also discourage violence and reduce the risk of escalation.

This deterrent effect may be seen at various points within stories about King David. In a crucial episode in David's rise to the throne, he is insulted by Nabal, a powerful chieftain of the Carmel region of Israel.

When David swears to repay this offence by killing Nabal and the males of his household and sets out to make good on his promise, Nabal's wife, Abigail, intervenes on his (and her own) behalf. In appealing to David, she warns him that killing Nabal for this insult, however egregious, would be unwarranted.

She insists that the reason David should refrain from illegitimately killing Nabal is that to do so would invite "bloodguilt" (in Hebrew, literally 'bloods') on himself. This would, crucially, have damaged his prospects of eventually attaining the crown.

When David spares Nabal's life, he does so because he fears the consequences of 'bloodguilt' which almost certainly included blood vengeance. This deterrent is also seen later in the David stories, when he refuses to kill a kinsman of his old enemy, Saul, even after the man curses him.

From these and other examples, it is clear that anxiety about innocent blood and the consequences of shedding it profoundly animate the stories of King David in the ancient books of Samuel and 1 Kings. While the phenomenon of blood vengeance remains a feature of the modern world, to fully understand it, we must first seek to understand its debt to antiquity.

David Shepherd is a Professor in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, Trinity College Dublin

Five years after landmark speech, Church transparency still has far to go

Paulina Guzik

Five years ago, on 23rd February 2019, the spotlight of the abuse summit in the Vatican was on one woman: Valentina Alazraki.

The veteran Mexican journalist, whose legacy was chronicled in her *New York Times* profile headlined: ‘5 Popes, 150 Papal Trips and One Stern Lecture for Bishops,’ received a standing ovation from her fellow journalists in Sala Stampa, the Vatican press room, after she told the bishops to stop “playing the ostrich” and transparently communicate the abuse scandal.

But five years after her comments, transparency is still urgently needed, from Europe to Africa and from Asia to Latin America and to the Vatican itself.

“The faithful,” Alazraki said, “do not forgive the lack of transparency, because it is a new assault on the victims. Those who fail to inform encourage a climate of suspicion and incite anger and hatred against the institution.”

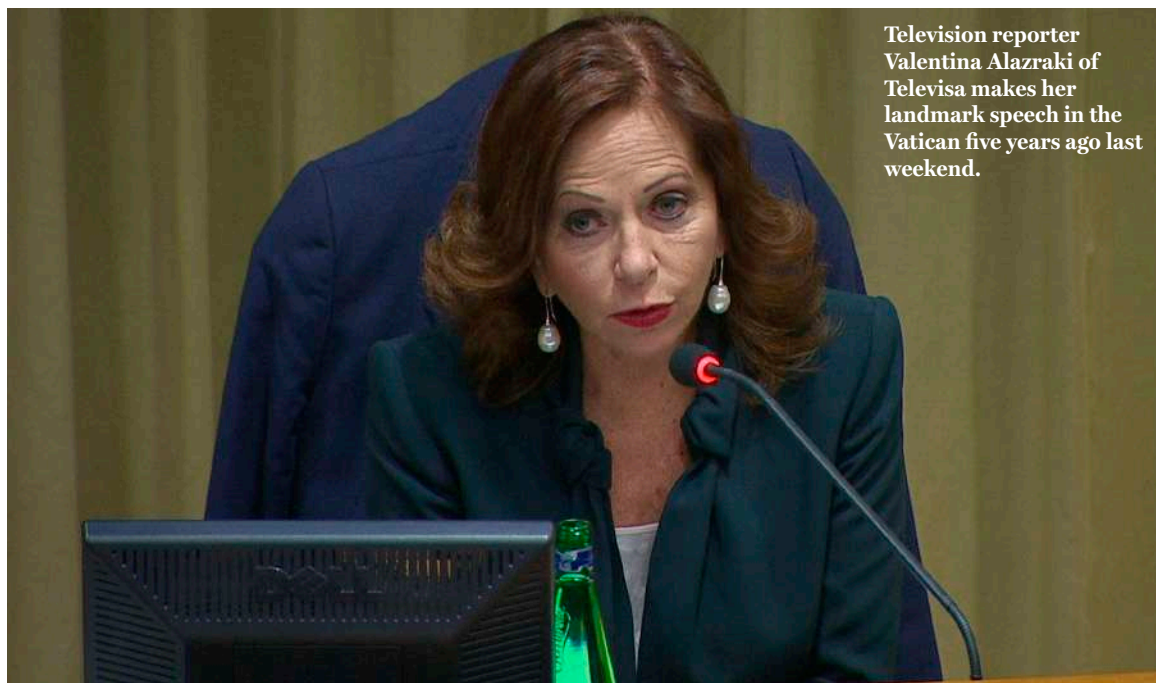
The Meeting for the Protection of Minors in the Church in 2019, was attended by 180 participants, the vast majority of these presidents of bishops’ conferences from across the world. Reflecting on the theme of responsibility, transparency and accountability, it gathered speakers from around the globe and included testimonies of victims of abuse and the expertise of lay and religious women.

“The path of action has been clearly mapped out now that five years passed after the summit, but churches in different countries are moving faster or slower along it,” Alazraki said. “In some countries in Central America the processes are really, really slow. There are also, unfortunately, countries where the existence of clergy sexual abuse is still denied altogether.”

For Yago de la Cierva, a communications professor who teaches at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome and author of a book on crisis management for the Church, “the pope deserves a lot of praise” five years after the summit. “A, for including transparency among the main tools to fix the plague of sexual abuse of minors, and B, to invite an independent journalist to give that speech,” he said.

“Transparency was not just the cherry at the top of the cake but was one of the main layers of the whole cake,” he emphasised.

Introducing herself as journalist, woman and mother that day five years ago, Alazraki told the bishops, including the Bishop of Rome, who was sitting next to her, they “should be aware that the more you cover up, the more you play ostrich, fail to inform the mass media and thus,



Television reporter Valentina Alazraki of Televisa makes her landmark speech in the Vatican five years ago last weekend.

the faithful and public opinion, the greater the scandal will be.”

“If someone has a tumour, it is not cured by hiding it from one’s family or friends; silence will not make it heal,” she said.

She also warned the bishops, “If you are against those who commit or cover up abuse, then we are on the same side. We can be allies, not enemies. We will help you to find the rotten apples and to overcome resistance in order to separate them from the healthy ones.”

“But if you do not decide in a radical way to be on the side of the children, mothers, families, civil society, you are right to be afraid of us, because we journalists, who seek the common good, will be your worst enemies.”

She added that “abusing a minor is as contemptible as is covering up the abuse. And you know better than I that abuses have been covered up systematically, from the ground up.”

“In retrospect, Valentina’s was a message that the Vatican as well as the bishops needed to hear. The Rupnik case is a reminder that Church leaders won’t necessarily move unless under pressure from public revelations,” Francis Rocca, Vatican correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, said, bringing up the case that is one of the most visible signs of how much there still needs to be done regarding transparency.

Fr Marko Rupnik, an artist whose mosaics decorate churches and chapels at the Vatican and around the world, has been accused of sexually, spiritually or psychologically abusing more than 20 women and at least one man over a 40-year period. He was a Jesuit until June 2023, when the order expelled him for disobedience in connection with restrictions placed on his ministry.

Although the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith dismissed a case against Fr Rupnik in October 2022 saying the statute of limitations had expired, a year later the Vatican press office announced Pope Francis lifted the statute of limitations to allow for a formal investigation of the case by the doctrinal office.

At the news conference in Rome, Gloria Branciani – who along with another alleged victim, Mirjam Kovac, decided to reveal her identity – said that although she had testified before both the Jesuits and the doctrinal office before the first case was closed, she had not been contacted again and did not know the status of the case.

Laura Sgrò, a civil and canon lawyer known for arguing high-profile cases at the Vatican and who is representing both women, said she thought the case was still at the doctrinal dicastery, but she was not certain.

“Five years after the abuse summit, the Church still has not learned that transparency is the remedy to scandal, not the cause of it,” said Stephen White, executive director of The Catholic Project, an initiative designed to foster effective collaboration between clergy and laity in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis.

“Obviously these kinds of cases require a certain degree of discretion and even confidentiality to protect both the accuser and the accused,” he said. “But the chronic lack of transparency about even basic procedural matters

“The chronic lack of transparency about even basic procedural matters undermines confidence in leaders, erodes the rule of law, and casts a pall of suspicion over the whole of the church’s judicial system.”

undermines confidence in leaders, erodes the rule of law, and casts a pall of suspicion over the whole of the Church’s judicial system.”

Fr Rupnik’s victims called for a full inquiry into the case similar to the McCarrick report, commissioned by the Vatican to investigate how the Church hierarchy was handling allegations against US ex-cardinal Theodore McCarrick.

“This is a perfect parallel between Rupnik and McCarrick in the sense that the only way for transparency is a proper, official, thorough investigation that would be later communicated,” De la Cierva said. “Once the McCarrick report was published – the case disappeared. Even if there was no punishment for anyone involved! Because it’s not about sanctions, it’s about the truth and the knowledge that will help with one thing – that it will not happen again,” he added.

Alazraki gave concrete advice to the bishops at the end of her 2019 speech on how to make transparency happen. Starting with “put the victims in first place,” the list included also: “Allow yourselves to seek advice” and “Professionalise your communications.” She sees progress on these points but not definitive change.

“The most important thing is for the Church to really, and I underline – really – understand that victims must always be at the center of any action against abuse,” Alazraki said. “They need to be heard, understood, believed and helped in the healing process. Reparation is the first response to

the harm done,” she said.

“The Church must also accept that, unfortunately, it has lost a tremendous amount of credibility by covering up sex scandals,” she added. “And if the Church doesn’t side with the victims, the media will not be an ally of the Church. Supporting victims is work that the Church can undertake precisely with journalists. People will not forgive lies and cover-ups,” she said.

“In fact, I was told victims are still not in the centre of the process in many countries,” Alazraki said.

Catholic news agency OSV News claims that sources have told its reporters that even if transparency is slowly picking up speed across the world, once the cases land in Rome in dicasteries handling them, they are stuck for years without any information about the process for the victims coming from the curia.

A lack of sharing of best practices within the Church and the lack of professional communications protocols for abuse cases in many orders and dioceses around the world are other major problems.

A case in point is the lack of response is a query sent to the Jesuit Curia in Rome regarding the case of Fr Rupnik. On 26th October, OSV News asked Jesuit Father Johan Verschueren, identified as responsible for communications in the case of the Slovenian priest, about the Jesuit order’s reaction regarding Fr Rupnik being incardinated in a Slovenian diocese and how this decision affects the credibility of the Church. Fr Verschueren responded that “as Marko Rupnik is no longer a Jesuit, I am no longer giving any comments on the case,” adding: “I would suggest to follow AP-news [The Associated Press] who procures correct data on the news.” An hour later, AP’s story was updated with Fr Verschueren’s comments on the case. OSV News never got the answer to its questions.

“Catholic media has a tremendous asset – it’s reaching people in our churches,” De la Cierva said. “The Church either understands that or will lose a huge ally in communicating the abuse scandal, and in consequence – lose the faithful,” he stressed.

White said that “media – and especially Catholic media – plays a crucial role in the Church when it comes to abuse. Catholic media helps hold leadership accountable when things go wrong. But Catholic media also helps tell the story fairly and with genuine insight, whether things go right or wrong. The Church needs both.

Alazraki added: “Accusing the media of exposing the scandals was another element of the Church losing credibility.”

Maidstone United offers all of us a glimpse of what is possible

SPORT

Dr Colm Hickey

Maidstone United, the lowest-ranked side in the FA Cup, who defied the odds to overcome Steyning, Winchester City, Torquay, Chesham, Barrow, Stevenage, and Ipswich Town, lost 5-0 to Championship side, Coventry City in the 5th Round of the Cup on Monday. The club equalled history by becoming the first team outside the top five divisions to reach this stage of the competition since Blyth Spartans in 1978.

Maidstone manager, George Elokobi, said: "It is an incredible achievement, not just for ourselves, but for the community, and our fanbase. We have also gained so much admiration globally for how we have gone about our FA Cup run.

"It is historic and a lot of the people around the city and elsewhere who are not even connected with Maidstone have told me their new team is Maidstone United. That shows you what the players have done.

"It is a huge moment for myself. It is a huge moment for my community back in Cameroon. The FA Cup is regarded as one of the best competitions in the world and for Maidstone to be in the fifth round, against a Championship side in Coventry, a club full of history, it's an inspirational moment for myself and I'm ever so proud to be the leader of Maidstone United Football Club."

It is an incredible achievement from which we can all take inspiration. What can this teach us?

Mark Twain famously once said that there are only two certainties in life – 'death and taxes' – but he was wrong. Strangely, the only certainty in life is death, because obviously not everyone will pay taxes, but everyone dies. So, we live our lives with the knowledge that someday we never know when it will be all over. The secret therefore is to maximise the time we have on earth and to do whatever we can to be the best incarnation of ourselves. We cannot all achieve everything.

There will always be others better than us. They may have more money. They may have a better job. They may be seen as pillars of the community and have been recognised with civic awards or MBEs, OBEs, knighthoods and the like. They may be more attractive. They may be more popular. They may be more glamorous. They may be better at sport.

It is all too easy either to be envious and jealous and feel that somehow because they have some, many or even all these advantages over us that we do not matter as much and, because of that, we do not try.

The thought process that 'I'll never be able to do that, so I won't try' is ingrained in so many of us. It acts as a self-made barrier to personal growth, achievement, self-respect and pride. We tell ourselves we are no good at something, so we do not try. I can never lose weight, says one person. I've just got heavy bones. I would love to give up smoking, says another. I have tried, but it just does not work for me. I would love to run a half marathon, but I have dodgy knees, a bad back, weak ankles. I'd love to speak a foreign language, but I can't, says another – and so the list goes on.

I know that you will have heard some, if not all, of these sentences above. You may even have said some of them. You might even believe some of them, but are you right or are you just making excuses?

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not talking about miracles. What I am talking about is the barriers we put up to justify or excuse behaviours and attitudes that we can, if we really want to, change to become a better version of ourselves.

Football is a big part of my social life. I play five-a-side on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. I coach on Saturday and Sunday mornings. I play the occasional 11-a-side game and I am on the committee of two

Maidstone Utd players celebrate a goal in their fourth round victory over Championship side Ipswich Town



football clubs, as well as being a season ticket holder at Charlton Athletic. As regular readers of this column know, I make no claim to be a talented player – just ask the guys who play against me.

On Mondays, the match is organised by John, a retired tax inspector who ensures that all our weekly subscriptions are paid in full and on time. We play from 6pm until 7pm. There's Martin and Leo, two brothers, Parminder, Tim who is a barrister, I believe, Colin who played at a much higher level when younger, Clint who has great ball control, Pete a former driving instructor, and Manos from Greece who has also done some stand-up comedy. Gerry, a Spurs fan, is the most enthusiastic player and scores some great goals.

On Tuesdays, the games are organised by David who has been playing at the same sports centre at 8pm since 1998. I've just joined this group and do not know them all apart from my friend of over 40 years, Eamonn, a former deputy headteacher, who, like most of the

players, is far better than me.

On Wednesdays, the games are organised by Charlie, a retired Ealing council official. Charlie is in his 70s. He drives for over an hour to get to the game. He used to play semi-professionally for Wealdstone and told me he once scored seven goals in a match. His ball control is fantastic – although he is not as quick as he once was! He has organised the game since the 1980s.

Mark plays, an electrician, and a Chelsea fan. Very rarely does anyone dribble past him. We have three QPR fans: Glenn, the funniest man in all three nights, Joe, a British Gas engineer, Andy, an assistant headteacher, Rob, an Arsenal fan and pocket dynamo, and Athar, a Liverpool fan who can run the legs off anyone.

One of the wonderful things is that some of our sons play with us. Jack is at university and James and Darragh also make up the numbers. They are, of course, far too fast and skilful for us. To be honest, playing football with all these men is a joy for the simple reason that we are rolling back the years, reliving our childhoods, forming friendships, maintaining a level of fitness and doing something that is good for our mental health.

So, what are we trying to do? When we play, we are not ourselves, but our heroes. We play for the love

of the game, and every week one of us pulls off a trick or scores a great goal that wins the admiration of all. However, next week it is 'back to normal' and our usual inept performances, but does it matter? Of course not.

We all have God-given talents. It is up to us to make the most of what we have. Some people cannot play sport for a variety of reasons. My younger brother died from multiple sclerosis.

But what about you? What is holding you back from being the best version of yourself that you can be? Are you holding yourself back due to shyness, nerves, a feeling of inadequacy or dare I say it laziness? I do not know, but you do. I say to you that you need to dismantle that self-made barrier of inadequacy.

Of course, you are no good, but nobody is. There is always someone far more talented than you, but I ask you does it matter? No, it does not. What matters is that you try and be the best version of yourself that you can be. You owe it to yourself. You owe it to your family. You owe it to God to make the absolute best of all the gifts and talents that you have been given.

Are you going to do it 'one-day' – or is today going to be 'day-one'?

Remember, life is not a rehearsal and let the story of what Maidstone United achieved be a shining example to you.

"The thought process that 'I'll never be able to do that, so I won't try' is ingrained in so many of us. It acts as a self-made barrier to personal growth, achievement, self-respect and pride. We tell ourselves we are no good at something, so we do not try."

LITURGICAL CALENDARS

Ordinary Form

Sunday, March 3: 3rd Sunday of Lent Exod. 20:1-17; Ps. 19:8-11 r. Jn. 6:68; 1 Cor. 1:22-25; Jn. 2:13-25

Monday, March 4: St Casimir 2 Kgs. 5:1-15; Ps. 42:2-3, 42:3-4; Lk. 4:24-30

Tuesday, March 5: Dan. 3:25, 34-43; Ps. 25:4-6, 7-9; Mt. 18:21-35

Wednesday, March 6: Deut. 4:15-9; Ps. 147:12-13, 15-16, 19-20; Mt. 5:17-19

Thursday, March 7: Ss Perpetua and Felicity, Martyrs (optional memorial) Jer. 7:23-28; Ps. 95:1-2, 6-9; Lk. 11:14-23

Friday, March 8: St John of God, Religious Hos. 14:2-10; Ps. 81:6, 8-11, 14, 17; Mk. 12:28-34

Saturday, March 9: St Frances of Rome, Religious Hos. 5:15-6:6; Ps. 51:3-4, 18-21; Lk. 18:9-14

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In the past I have asked for many favours, this time I ask for this special one. Take it, dear Heart of Jesus, and place it within your own broken heart where your Father will see it. Then, in His merciful eyes it will become your favour, not mine. Amen.

Say prayer for three days, promise publication and favour will be granted.
Never known to fail



PRAYERS /THANKSGIVING



POWERFUL NOVENA
May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be praised, adored, glorified and loved, today and every day, throughout the whole world, now and forever. Amen.
Say 6 times a day for 9 days.

IMAJ

PRAYERS /THANKSGIVING

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St Casimir

Sculpture of St Casimir on the pediment of Vilnius Cathedral, Lithuania.

In the statue he has two right hands to illustrate his generosity to the poor.

St Casimir was born on 3rd October, 1485. He was a Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Poland, and of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. He was noted for his charity and help with the needy, and turned down the hand of marriage to a princess. Some say it was because he wanted to remain celibate, and also, he knew his death would come at a young age.

At the age of 24, he came down with tuberculosis. He became more ill, and died at the age of 25. He was declared the patron saint of Poland and Lithuania. In 1948, Pope Pius XII named St Casimir the special patron of all youth.

