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Church rejects criticism of support for migrants

Diocese issues strong denial it had links to chemical attack suspect

Andy Drozdziaik

The diocese of Hexham and Newcastle has denied being involved in supporting chemical attack suspect Abdul Ezedi amid claims that Churches are enabling bogus asylum claims.

A 31-year-old woman may lose the sight in her right eye after she was attacked in London last week with a corrosive alkaline substance attack. Her daughters, aged eight and three, were also hurt but have since been discharged from hospital. Met officers have been searching for chief suspect Ezedi since last Wednesday.

Politicians Suella Braverman and Robert Jenrick have expressed concerns following the attacks that Churches are facilitating “industrial-scale bogus asylum claims” and criticised vicars and priests as “naïve” for supporting such claims.

But their comments have prompted a backlash from Church leaders, who said they would never apologise for offering help to migrants, or assisting anyone to encounter Jesus.

Ezedi, who is believed to be from Afghanistan and is based in Newcastle, is said to have successfully challenged a Home Office decision to refuse him asylum in 2020 and was permitted to stay in the UK after a Christian leader confirmed he had converted to Christianity and was “wholly committed” to the religion.

A spokesman for the diocese of

POPE WELCOMES THE DRAGON FOR CHINESE NEW YEAR



Pope Francis was happy to ‘dot the eyes’ of performers dressed as a dragon and lion in a traditional ceremony at the Vatican in which they symbolically awakened and welcomed in the Chinese New Year. See pg 14

Hexham and Newcastle confirmed that Ezedi “visited our diocesan Justice and Peace Refugee Project, which assists a wide range of people who come to us in need”. However, the Diocese denied any involvement in Ezedi’s faith journey.

“After checking local parish re-

ords and central records and after consulting with clergy we have no indication that Abdul Ezedi was received into the Catholic faith in this diocese, or that a Catholic priest of this diocese gave him a reference,” the spokesman said. “We do not know which Christian Church re-

ceived him nor which Christian minister gave him a reference.”

The diocese added that it would “keep the victims [of tis attack] in our prayers and hope that justice is done soon.”

There are fears, however, that some of those converting do have

questionable intentions. The *Daily Mail* reported that it was, in fact, a Baptist Church from the north east who provided Ezedi with a key reference which convinced an immigration tribunal that he was a ‘genuine convert’ to Christianity.

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A surprise benefit

COMPANION

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Confusion and dismay as Plymouth postpones bishop's ordination

Andy Drozdziak

The upcoming ordination of the Bishop of Plymouth has been postponed, with Canon Christopher Whitehead stepping back from active ministry.

Canon Whitehead was due to be ordained as the Bishop of Plymouth on 22nd February, but a statement from the diocese announced its postponement. It added that 'a canonical process is currently underway.'

Under the heading 'Episcopal Ordination statement', the diocese said: 'The Episcopal Ordination of Canon Christopher Whitehead will not take place on 22 February 2024 as expected. Canon Paul Cummins continues as the Diocesan Administrator.'

'A canonical process is currently underway, and no further comments will be made until this has been concluded. Canon Christopher Whitehead has stepped back from active ministry whilst this process is ongoing.'

No further information was pro-



Canon Christopher Whitehead
Photo: Mazur/ebcew.org.uk

vided about the reasons for the cancellation when the *Universe* contacted the diocese.

References to Canon Whitehead and the ordination have been removed from the websites of both the Diocese of Plymouth and the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, as well as the Diocese of

Clifton, Canon Whitehead's home diocese.

When he was appointed Bishop of Plymouth in December 2023, succeeding Archbishop Mark O'Toole, the former bishop-elect called Plymouth "a beautiful part of this country."

"Plymouth is such a beautiful part of this country and I am truly happy to have the opportunity to make my home among its great people," he said. He vowed to "willingly give myself to where the Lord has called me to serve and with all I have to offer."

As the announcement stated, Canon Paul Cummins will continue in his role as the Diocesan Administrator while the investigation into Canon Whitehead takes place.

The Diocese of Plymouth spans 226 miles, covering the counties of Cornwall, Devon and Dorset.

Plymouth's former bishop, Mark O'Toole, relocated to Wales in June 2022 after being appointed by Pope Francis as archbishop of Cardiff and bishop of Menevia.

Church rejects criticism of support for migrants

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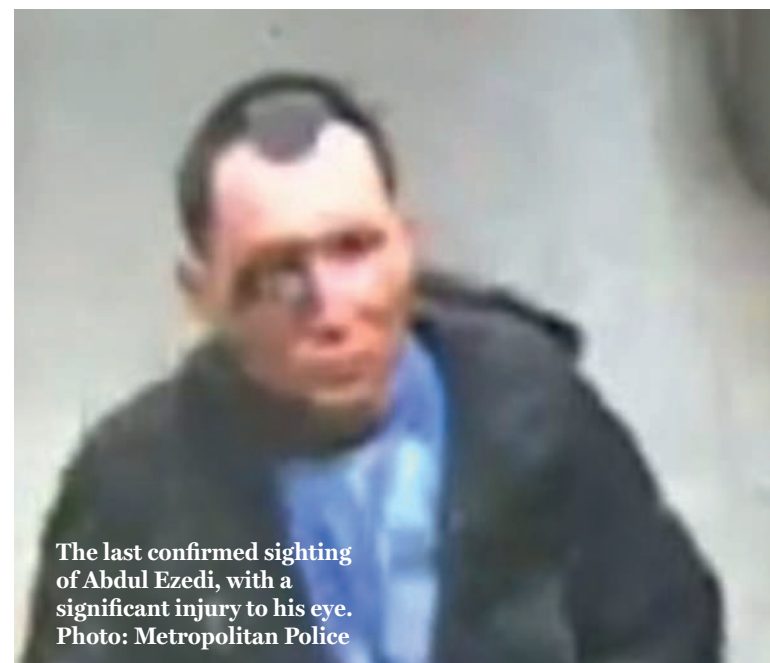
Moreover, *The Daily Telegraph* has reported that around 40 of the asylum seekers who are living on the controversial *Bibby Stockholm* barge in Portland, Dorset are attending local churches, a fact confirmed by Dave Rees, an elder at Weymouth Baptist Church.

Former home secretary Suella Braverman, writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, said during her time in office that she "became aware of churches around the country facilitating industrial-scale bogus asylum claims".

Former immigration minister Robert Jenrick also referred to "spurious" claims by people in the asylum system that they have converted to Christianity "aided and abetted by often well-meaning but naive vicars and priests".

Speaking to *The Daily Telegraph*, Home Affairs Committee Tim Loughton said: "We have got to have a much more rigorous scrutiny process for those claiming to have converted and the basis on which it would be dangerous to return them to their home countries."

However, Baptist elder Dave Rees said on behalf of his church that he was "confident" in the measures and



The last confirmed sighting of Abdul Ezedi, with a significant injury to his eye.
Photo: Metropolitan Police

scrutiny in place, adding: "There's no reason we would doubt these asylum seekers from their profession of faith."

Some people were Christians in their own country and others had taken part in Alpha courses in the UK, Mr Rees said.

Anglican Bishop of Chelmsford Guli Francis-Dehqani said she

makes no apology for the involvement of religious leaders in "supporting people who are often deeply vulnerable and traumatised".

She said religious ministers from all denominations occasionally provide statements of support to asylum seekers, "but it is wrong to think of this as some sort of magic ticket".

Cardinal offers faithful's steadfast prayers after King's shock cancer diagnosis

Andy Drozdziak

Cardinal Nichols has led the Catholic community in "steadfast prayers" following the news that King Charles is being treated for cancer.

The shock news came on Monday evening. A Palace announcement said: "During the King's recent hospital procedure for benign prostate enlargement, a separate issue of concern was noted. Subsequent diagnostic tests have identified a form of cancer."

The statement added that the King "remains wholly positive about his treatment and looks forward to returning to full public duty as soon as possible."

Cardinal Nichols, the President of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, said that he was 'saddened' to hear the news. "On behalf of the entire Catholic Community in England and Wales, I offer His Majesty our warmest wishes and assurance of steadfast prayers for his full and speedy recovery. God bless the King," he added.

Cardinal Nichols has met King Charles on several recent occasions, and was invited to attend and say a

Cardinal Nichols
@CardinalNichols

I am saddened to learn that King Charles is now facing a time of treatment for cancer.

On behalf of the entire Catholic Community in England and Wales, I offer His Majesty our warmest wishes and assurance of steadfast prayers for his full and speedy recovery. God bless the King.



prayer at the King's coronation in May 2023 – the first Catholic senior cleric to take part in a Coronation service in this country in over 400 years.

The news comes as a string of medical issues in the Royal Family were announced. The King's recent hospital stay coincided with major surgery for the Princess of Wales

which will keep her away from official duties until after Easter, and Sarah, Duchess of York, being diagnosed with skin cancer.

Fellow bishops and Christian leaders were quick to share their concern at the sudden news. Bishop of Nottingham Patrick McKinney said: "On behalf of the Catholic community throughout the Diocese of Nottingham, we commit to holding the King in our prayers as he undergoes treatment for cancer."

Archbishop of Liverpool Malcolm McMahon prayed not only for the King, but also his family and those who are caring for him, as well as other cancer sufferers.

"At this time as the Catholic community, we hold him up in prayer before the Lord," he said. "Let us pray for all those who support him, the Royal Family and his doctors and nurses and all those throughout this archdiocese who suffer with cancer of any form. May Christ the Healer touch hearts and minds in their sickness and their suffering."

Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle Stephen Wright also focused on all cancer sufferers and prayed for

healing. "With prayers from the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle for King Charles and for all suffering with cancer.

"May the healing presence of the Lord be with them all," he said.

Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, president of the Irish bishops' conference, sent his best wishes. "King Charles and his family are in my thoughts and prayers.

"As he begins his treatment, I wish him healing, strength and courage for the days ahead," he said.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said he is thankful the King's cancer has been "caught early" as he wished him a full recovery.

He said that everyone will be hoping the King "gets the treatment that he needs and makes a full recovery". "That's what we're all hoping and praying for, and I'm of course in regular contact with him and will continue to communicate with him as normal," he added.

Labour leader Keir Starmer also passed on his prayers, saying he was looking forward to meeting His Royal Highness when he is back to full health.

Flame youth urged to be 'unstoppable'

Andy Drozdziak

Young Catholics are being encouraged to be 'unstoppable' as tickets go on sale for Flame 2025.

Flame, the largest Catholic Youth event in the UK, will take place on 15th March 2025 at OVO Arena, Wembley. It is organised by CYM-Fed, the Catholic Youth Ministry Federation, which supports and helps deliver the Catholic Bishops' Conference's mission.

The theme chosen for the event is 'unstoppable', with Catholic worship collective One Hope Project and Adenike Adewale already booked to perform.

Event organiser Mary Madziva explained the meaning behind the theme. "The world often tells young people what they can't do. 'Unstoppable' flips the narrative," Mary told the *Universe*.

"It tells them that, with faith and determination, they can achieve

greatness. 'Unstoppable' serves as a reminder that, with God's love and the community's support, they can rise above obstacles and overcome all barriers."

At the 2023 Flame event, over 8,000 young people gathered at the OVO Arena to hear international speakers, Christian musicians and moments of prayer and adoration.

Mary Madziva said she hoped Flame 2025 will help young people to 'light up the world.'

"We look forward with great hope for Flame 2025," she said.

"Since 2012, Flame has allowed parish, school and diocesan groups to gather and journey together, and share a day of prayer, worship and learning led by world-class speakers and musicians. We hope Flame 2025 inspires and reminds the youth that with God on their side, they can light up the world with their passion and faith."

Bookings for Flame 2025 are now open, with passes available at an early bird price of £29 each. For further information, including group booking prices, visit www.cymfed.org.uk/flame



One Hope Project will be attending Flame 2025

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In Brief

Rapper bailed after dogs kill grandma

A rapper has been released on bail following his arrest after his two suspected XL Bully dogs mauled a woman to death while she was visiting her grandson.

Esther Martin, 68, was found seriously injured and is believed to have been attacked by two of the now-banned breed at a house in Jaywick Sands, near Clacton-on-Sea.

The pensioner died at the scene. Ashley Warren, a rapper who goes by the name Wyles Man and is said to have eight dogs, was arrested for dangerous dogs offences. He has now been released on conditional bail until 5th March.

Kwasi Kwarteng to step down as MP

Kwasi Kwarteng, the former Chancellor, has announced that he will leave Parliament at the next General Election.

Mr Kwarteng, who represents the constituency of Spelthorne in Surrey, said he had told his local party that he would not stand at the next contest.

Triple killer to receive benefits

A paranoid schizophrenic who killed three people is entitled to claim £360 a month in benefits after being sent to high-security hospital rather than jail

Valdo Calocane was originally charged with the murders of 19-year-old students Barnaby Webber and Grace O'Malley-Kumar and school caretaker Ian Coates, 65, but these were downgraded to manslaughter as a result of his diminished responsibility. A judge instead sentenced him to a high-security hospital, where he is classed as a patient rather than an inmate and so can receive the state money.

New poll shows no support for extending abortion limits

A recent poll conducted by Whites-tone Insight, involving 2,011 participants across Britain, has revealed that only 16 per cent of those surveyed oppose the current legal stance that prohibits abortions of healthy babies after 24 weeks, up to birth.

This finding indicates minimal public support for changes to the law that would allow self-administered abortions at any stage of pregnancy, right up to birth in some cases.

The polling comes amidst renewed debate following proposals

by Labour MPs Diana Johnson and Stella Creasy to amend the Criminal Justice Bill.

Their initial amendments, aimed

Diana Johnson is looking to remove all restrictions on abortions, despite a lack of public support



at decriminalising self-administered abortions throughout pregnancy, were withdrawn during the committee stage, but Johnson has

since reintroduced her amendment for consideration at the Bill's report stage.

Johnson's proposal, if passed, would effectively remove all legal barriers to self-administered abortions at any point during pregnancy, by allowing women to use abortion pills without regulation.

This has raised concerns about the potential for deregulation of abortion, bypassing any future regulations set for abortion providers and undermining the integrity of abortion laws.

Spokesperson for Right To Life

UK, Catherine Robinson, criticised the MPs for being out of touch. "This recent polling indicates that the MPs behind these extreme abortion amendments are radically out of touch with public opinion on this matter," she said.

"Our abortion laws are already extremely permissive and even allow abortion up to the point of birth if the child is thought to have a disability. Stronger protections for unborn babies and their mothers need to be introduced, rather than the few remaining protections removed".

Pro-life campaigner questions MPs looking to axe important 'silent prayer' concession

Andy Drozdziak

A leading pro-life activist has criticised MPs who are pushing to remove silent prayer and free thought from buffer zone legislation.

The Home Office drafted 'Non Statutory Guidance on Abortion Clinic Safe Access Zones' in December 2023, which states that silent prayer would be allowed outside abortion clinics.

The guidance specifically defines silent prayer as 'the engagement of the mind and thought in prayer towards God' which 'is protected as an absolute right under the Human Rights Act 1998 and should not, on its own, be considered to be an offence under any circumstances. However, where an individual is praying, but their conduct is also intrusive, this is likely to be an offence under section 9.' (2.7)

Sky News reported that Labour MP Rupa Huq and Tory MP Sir Bernard Jenkin visited Home Secretary James Cleverly last week to

urge him to remove this. Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, who was arrested on several occasions in 2023 outside an abortion clinic in Birmingham for praying silently, questioned their motives. "I think the Home Secretary has been under tremendous pressure from pro-abortion MPs to amend the draft guidance on buffer zones. These MPs are the same MPs currently calling for the decriminalisation of abortion," Isabel told the *Universe*.

"Their ambition is not to prevent harassment and intimidation but to stamp out pro-life beliefs, thoughts, and expressions."

In October 2022, the House of Commons voted 297 to 110 in favour of an amendment to the Public Order Bill which would prevent people handing out leaflets, praying or standing within 150 metres of an abortion facility, known as 'Safe Access Zones'. However, it soon became apparent that the legislation was not fit for purpose, with arrests

being made for people simply standing outside the clinics, so the Home Office introduced a six-week consultation on the issue, which closed last week.

Isabel Vaughan-Spruce pointed out that the protesting MPs are



Isabel Vaughan-Spruce questioned the MPs' motives

seeking to promote their own views on abortion rather than protecting women. "Thought, prayer and personal autonomy are basic rights which the guidance rightly aimed to reflect," she said.

"The fact that there is a push to remove even these basic rights from the guidance is the clearest example yet that those advocating for buffer zones are doing so to advance their own ideological positions on abor-

tion rather than to genuinely protect women."

According to *Sky News*, Rupa Huq and Sir Bernard Jenkin believe the exceptions in the non-statutory guidance would still amount to harassment of women seeking abortions. The Home Office said it is "completely unacceptable" for women accessing abortions to "feel harassed or intimidated."

But Isabel called the Public Order amendment "unnecessary and disproportionate" and criticised those who are clamouring for the removal of the silent prayer feature.

"They not only managed to introduce legislation that was unnecessary and disproportionate – painting peaceful behaviour as harassing and intimidating – they are now seeking to ensure that the Government's mainly sensible guidance makes no mention of basic human rights such as freedom of thought and consensual conversations," she said.

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102-year-old Jack Hemmings AFC pictured in a Spitfire to mark 80th anniversary of the military charity Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF). The former RAF Squadron Leader and pioneer of MAF, the world's largest humanitarian air service, hopes to become the oldest Briton to fly a Spitfire. Mr Hemmings, who lives at home in Horam, Sussex, has been given access to the iconic Heritage Hanger at London Biggin Hill, and will take to the skies in Britain's best-loved Second World War aircraft to raise money for MAF, the charity he co-founded almost 80 years ago.

Catholics told to make their views known as poll nears

The Catholic Union is urging Catholics across the country to have their say on what matters most to them ahead of the next General Election.

With an election expected later this year, the Catholic Union has launched a new survey to test the temperature of Catholic views and attitudes towards politics.

The survey is seeking people's views on the policy areas where



Mike Kane: "This is an important election. I strongly encourage you to get involved"

Catholic voices are most needed. It also explores the extent to which the faithful are engaged in politics and how they plan to participate in the election.

The results will inform the Catholic Union's interventions in the election campaign, including the publication of a 'Catholic Manifesto' which will be sent out to candidates ahead of polling day.

A date for the General Election has not yet been confirmed, but strong hints from Prime Minister Rishi Sunak suggest it will take place in "the second half of this year".

Catholic Union Vice President and Labour MP, Mike Kane, encouraged people to take part in this "really important election" and make their voices heard.

Mr Kane said: "This is a really important election. I strongly encourage Catholics in this country, and everybody, to get involved and make

your voice heard. Whatever your views, please make sure that you vote. Taking part in free and fair elections is a great gift and we should not take it for granted."

The Catholic Union's President and Vice Presidents are drawn from across the political spectrum. Last year, Crossbench peer Baroness Hollins took over as President from Conservative MP, Sir Edward Leigh.

The survey can be found on the Catholic Union's website. Nigel Parker, Catholic Union director, underlined the importance of the survey in enabling the Catholic Union to focus on areas of greatest importance to lay Catholics.

"There are so many areas in society where a Catholic voice is needed, both now and in the next Parliament. We want to make sure that our work is focused on those areas which lay Catholics care most about and where we can have the greatest impact. Taking part in this survey is an important first step in this election year," Mr Parker said.

"A General Election year is a particularly important moment in our mission to contribute a Catholic viewpoint to public life. The work we do relies entirely on the generosity of our members and supporters. Please consider donating to the Catholic Union today to support our work during this election campaign and beyond."

The Catholic Union's General Election survey can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/bd8ktx9e>

Online campaign plan: see pg 6

Back CAFOD walk, says author Frank

Author Frank Cottrell-Boyce is encouraging Catholics to back this year's CAFOD's Big Lent Walk, saying it's more important than ever "to support its work because the world is more unequal and unstable than ever... CAFOD has deep roots in its communities, so you know the aid it delivers is appropriate and sensitive and sustainable."

Oscar-nominated actress 'happy' with her Christian life

Andy Drozdziak

Hollywood actress Carey Mulligan has opened up about her faith, saying that she is "very happy" to be a Christian.

The Oscar-nominated actress confirmed her faith in an interview with *The Times*. "I'm very happy to say that I'm Christian and I go to church," she said.

Mulligan, 38, is married to Marcus Mumford, the lead singer of Mumford and Sons, who she first met while attending a Christian camp as a teenager. She also went to a convent school.

Marcus Mumford hails from a strong Christian family, and has met Pope Francis, which he described as "really beautiful and really cool." His parents, John and Eleanor Mumford, were leaders of Vineyard Churches in the UK and Ireland for over 20 years.

Mulligan acknowledged the influence of her family and Mumford, with whom she shares three children.

"I don't think I would describe



myself as super-super-Christian," she said. "But I was definitely brought up going to church and I still go to church, but it's not, like, a hot topic."

Mulligan has previously received an Oscar nomination for her roles in *Promising Young Woman* in 2020; this year she is up for Best Actress for her role in *Maestro*.

She was also nominated for a Tony Award for Best Actress in a Play for her performance in *Sky-light* in 2015.

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COMMENT Prayers for King Charles

The announcement of the King's cancer has naturally caused some alarm throughout the nation. His Majesty attended hospital last week for what was hoped would be a routine procedure for an enlarged prostate.

This is not an unusual condition for men of His Majesty's age and by making it public, the King has encouraged many others to seek treatment. Indeed, there was a surge in online searches about diseases of the prostate which will have helped many sufferers to catch any problems early.

While he was in hospital, an unspecified cancer was identified by clinicians, not directly connected to the prostate and it is this, which is now being treated. The King has felt it necessary to postpone his public-facing duties while he recovers.

Long-standing protocols are in place to ensure that Government continues to function even if the head of state is not able to give it his full attention. Her Majesty the Queen will continue to fulfil the Monarch's public duties with the personal skills and commitment that have endeared her to the nation.

The King will carry on reading his boxes and holding key meetings with the Prime Minister and the Privy Council, so there should be a seamless continuation of the functioning of the state.

The so-called "golden triangle" of functionaries linking Buckingham Palace, No 10 and the Cabinet Office will ensure that business carries on as normal.

The Prince of Wales, who has been helping his wife recuperate after her abdominal surgery, will undertake some duties on behalf of his father as will the Princess Royal on behalf of her brother.

But from all accounts, the prognosis is good, with the Palace saying that the King is anxious to return to full public duties as soon as possible. The key to dealing with cancer is to catch it early and that appears to have happened here.

The Universe, along with the rest of the nation, prays that His Majesty may make a speedy and good recovery.

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Their fight for your vote this year has moved online

POLITICS

**Katharine
Dommett**



Four trends you'll see in online election campaigns this year

Over the past decade, social media has become an essential component of election campaigns. But in 2024, the options seem endless. With a record number of elections taking place around the world, how will digital campaigning look different this year?

1. TikTok is drawing a crowd

In 2024, campaigners have access to more digital channels than ever. Facebook and X (formally Twitter) remain a mainstay, but campaigns will also be looking to exploit newer platforms to reach the electorate.

TikTok is the obvious choice, after it was so successfully used by New Zealand prime minister Chris Luxon and Jagmeet Singh, leader of Canada's New Democratic Party. UK campaigners will be tempted to follow suit in the 2024 campaign.

Many Labour, Conservative and Lib Dem MPs already have their own accounts, and more aspiring politicians are joining by the day.

While Reform UK and the Green Party have official party accounts, the major parties have yet to join TikTok – probably because they're focusing on reaching older voters considering switching from Tory to Labour, who are not TikTok's demographic. However, we're sure to see more new accounts springing up as the election approaches.

2. Advertising beyond Facebook is more important than you think

Since January, we've seen a lot of focus on Facebook advertising, with Labour and the Tories already spending tens of thousands on these ads. What has been less commented on is expenditure on other digital advertising channels.

Parties are now using Google, YouTube and optimised program-matic advertising – where automation is used to place ads on websites aligned with a campaign's desired target audience – to communicate with voters online.

This means that large sums are already being spent on things like unskippable YouTube pre-roll videos, Google search ads, and web ads on local newspaper sites, websites and message boards. These tools are highly effective at reaching particular groups of voters, with research showing that



unskippable pre-rolls are more likely to be noticed by the intended audience.

For campaigns trying to connect with and grab the attention of particular audiences, these tools will be very powerful – perhaps the defining feature of the next election campaign.

The reason you've probably not heard about this is because these practices are much harder to monitor than other kinds of campaigning, because of a lack of transparency. It's therefore going to be almost impossible to monitor how these services are using during the 2024 campaign.

3. Micro-targeting no, Mumsnet yes

There has been much concern in recent years about the use of microtargeted electoral messaging. This is where people receive personalised (and potentially contradictory) messages based on their personal data. However, there is little evidence that fears about this practice have been realised. Indeed, recent studies – including my own recent book – have shown that data collection and analysis is often unsophisticated, and targeting is often focused on broad groups rather than individual people.

Rather than seeing campaigns in 2024 develop more individualised

and bespoke campaign messaging than ever before, we'll instead see them use different platforms to connect with the types of voter their data shows to be electorally significant.

If they're trying to win support from 18- to 34-year-old men, they'll be tempted to campaign on Twitch – a gaming platform which US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez used to engage that demographic group.

Alternatively, if they're looking to connect with 30- to 40-year-old women, then websites like MumsNet will be a better venue for advertising and web chats.

Of course, advertising on Meta platforms such as Facebook will also be used to reach particular demographics – but alongside this tactic, we'll see campaigners meeting voters wherever they are online. So, party campaigns will need to manage and generate content for multiple platforms.

4. Playing field will not be level

Digital technology is often seen as levelling the political playing field. The idea is that anyone on any budget can make a success of campaigning online if they play the game well. But the reality is that, just like offline campaigning, there are significant inequalities in campaigners' ability to benefit from

digital tools.

Within campaign HQs, there are vastly different numbers of digital staff and huge disparities in expertise around digital tools. Labour and the Conservatives often have large digital teams for elections (a point evidenced by the number of jobs currently being advertised by Labour), but parties like the Greens often have a minimal central staff. This limits their capacity to create and manage content.

Even at a grassroots level, we see parties having different capacities. Labour, for example, has many more party members than others, giving them an advantage. It's notable that Labour has been making a concerted effort to upskill its activist base, hiring large numbers of digital trainees and hosting training sessions on "creating good digital content" and developing "your digital strategy".

The use of Labour's grassroots activists in digital campaigns could be particularly useful for creating locally relevant content. Other parties haven't rolled out such schemes at scale, leading them to rely on local pockets of expertise.

Of course, parties can buy external expertise to compensate for a lack of digitally savvy activists – something the Conservatives may attempt to do, especially given the recent uplift in campaign spending limits which make it possible for parties to spend more than ever before. The Tories have the capacity to make such outlays, but other parties such as the Lib Dems, Greens, SNP and Plaid Cymru don't have that financial clout.

The digital campaign will evolve throughout 2024, but it'll by no means be uniform across the different parties. In fact, we're likely to see greater inequality in digital campaign activity than ever before.

**Katharine Dommett is a
Professor of Digital
Politics, University of Sheffield**



Archbishop welcomes O'Neill's historic role and urges all politicians to work together

Michael Kelly

Ireland's most-senior churchman hailed an agreement that sees a Catholic take the top political job in Northern Ireland for the first time in its history as an "opportunity for a fresh start and a new beginning."

Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, president of the Irish bishops' conference, made the comments as Northern Ireland's power-sharing Government was restored on 3rd February, after two years of deadlock.

The executive branch is a key plank of a 1998 peace agreement that ended 30 years of bloody sectarian violence, but has struggled to take root with sporadic boycotts from both sides of the political divide.

Michelle O'Neill of Sinn Féin is the first Catholic to head the region's government. Addressing the region's legislative assembly upon her election on 3rd February, O'Neill said: "The days of second-class citizenship are long gone, and today confirms that they will never come back."

"This is an assembly for all: Catholic, Protestant and dissenter," O'Neill told the legislature upon her election, adding that "despite our different outlooks and different views on the future constitutional



position, the public rightly demand that we work and deliver together, and also that we build trust and confidence in our ability to collectively do that."

Archbishop Martin told *The Irish Catholic* newspaper that he felt there was a "sense of relief" from citizens "who are so anxious that we can have appropriate representation to deal with the very pressing problems that we have in the North

at this time."

He referenced a recent general strike which saw tens of thousands of public sector workers, disgruntled by the lack of pay raises, withdraw their labour.

"Clearly the recent strikes brought to our attention the urgent need to deal with issues to do with pay within the civil service, within the health service, the huge waiting lists for people in our health services, the

pressing issues within education, the massive problem we have at the moment within homelessness and housing in Northern Ireland, which often goes unmentioned," the archbishop said.

The restoration also was welcomed by the representative body for the main Christian denominations in Ireland, the Church Leaders Group.

In a joint statement, the leaders



of the Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist tradition, and the Irish Council of Churches, said: 'A re-established Executive and Assembly are first and important steps towards re-establishing hope and a vision for the future.'

"However, for that to be achieved it will mean a commitment to focus on the common good."

Under the terms of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the constitutional status of Northern Ireland can be changed only with the consent of the majority of its population.

For the first time in 2021, the census showed that more people in Northern Ireland identified as Catholic than Protestant intensifying calls for a referendum on reunification with the rest of Ireland.

Catholic charity joins ranks with leading slavery support project

To mark the International Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking, on 8th February, The Medaille Trust and the Salvation Army are celebrating a new partnership to provide support to survivors and their family members through global networks.

The Salvation Army has added Medaille Trust to its Beyond Programme, which was established in recognition that international support systems for survivors of modern slavery are underfunded, constantly changing and highly varied.

The Beyond Programme supports survivors wishing to return to their home country to reintegrate safely and with support. It also provides support to their family members when separated by borders.

Medaille Trust is one of the largest Catholic charities confronting modern slavery. Its CEO, Garry Smith, said: "We are delighted to be participating in The Salvation Army's Beyond programme. Confronting the global crime of people trafficking requires better international collaboration, particularly in sup-

porting survivors who wish to return and reintegrate into their home countries. We have already seen the benefit of this partnership supporting a survivor to go home and begin the process of rebuilding their life, and we are excited to see what could be possible in the future."

The Beyond Programme already operates with The Salvation Army's specialist support services in England and Wales. Through a government contract, they help adult survivors of modern slavery with their recovery. Other partner organisations include Causeway and most recently Hestia who, like Medaille Trust, work with The Salvation Army on this contract.

Since February 2023 it has supported more than 80 survivors who wished to reunite with family members from whom they are separated.

A support worker for one trafficking survivor who returned home safely through the programme said she "was very grateful to the programme... I can see the huge difference returning home has made to her mental health."

Catholic Agency for Overseas Development **CAFOD**

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Hymns and modern physics

Sir John Battle



It was the familiar hymn *Colours of Day Dawn into the mind* at Sunday morning Mass that generated the distraction, particularly the references to the sun: *'it never goes down,'* and *'the sun came to die.'*

Meditating on the future of the sun on a dark, wet January Sunday morning and its relation to our belief that 'Jesus lives' was an early brain and theological challenge. Our sun is tied up with difficult questions of time, infinity and eternity". Back in the 1970s physicists introduced us to the theoretically and counterintuitive concept of Black Holes and the end of the Universe? As stars, such as our sun, run out of fuel, they fade and under the weight of their own gravity, collapse and shrink. Massive stars with strong gravity become squeezed down to a singularity point of infinity, as Einstein's theory of general relativity suggested, dragging everything close to it into a black hole, a kind of funnel, and crushing it out of existence.

Now respected physicist Carlo Rovelli's work on White Holes proposes that these collapsing stars don't actually get to the bottom of the Black Hole. Rather they carry on falling, with space and time becoming dissolved in 'a cloud of quantum probabilities', and a Black Hole becomes a White Hole with time reversed! Rovelli argues that what falls into a Black Hole can eventually be beamed out again. Moreover, White Holes will be smaller than Black Holes, creating 'miniscule White Holes in the heavens'.

The great physics problem apparently is the effect of gravity on our concept of time. This really is a difficult challenge to our ideas of reality. Rovelli's work is far from easy to tackle but what comes across is a deep sense of wonder at the strangeness of the created universe, and how our scientific understanding is radically limited.

As Rovelli acknowledges, 'when we seek to understand White Holes we do so not as pure reason'. Rather, we employ imagination and artistic analogy, just as St Thomas Aquinas insisted we should, blending faith and reason.

And it was to his hymn *Godhead here in hiding* that we turned to at Holy Communion, singing, *What God's Son has told me/ Take for truth I do, / Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true.'*

This was translated by the Jesuit priest-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The modern physicists are just taking us deeper into God's wonderful creative mysteries.

New checks may be needed but we should still welcome converts

CATHOLIC COMMENT

Caroline Farrow



The appalling chemical attack upon a mother and two young children which took place in Clapham last week, has led to an upsurge of anger against the work of churches and Christianity after it emerged that the suspect, an Afghan refugee called Abdul Ezedi, was also a convicted sex offender who had only been allowed to stay in this country, after Christian leaders had vouched for his conversion to the faith during his third appeal against deportation.

The anger is to some extent justified because it is extremely clear that this man ought not have been free to walk the streets. Not only did he douse a woman and her children with corrosive chemicals, he inflicted sickening violence on a three-year-old, dragging her from a car and slamming her head on the pavement twice. If had not been for the brave intervention of passers-by, who Ezedi sprayed with chemicals as they attempted to help, then it is likely that the entire family would have died. The mother has been left with severe burns and is likely to lose the sight in one eye, but miraculously nobody else has suffered life-changing injuries, although they will carry the trauma with them forever.

It is easy to say that had the immigration system been more robust, this heinous crime would never have happened as Ezedi would have been banished to another country, but the fact is that this crime was aided in part by a failure of a number of different state safeguarding agencies, the Home Office being only one. Despite his inclusion on the sex offenders' register, Ezedi was purportedly in a romantic relationship with his victim. What measures, if any, were being taken to protect her, is one question. Another is, what contact with authorities did Ezedi have, especially as he would have been required to regularly register his details with the police, given his previous sexually motive offence.

As an aside, I find it astounding that the police are able to be at your door in a heartbeat if you use the wrong pronoun on social media, but are still struggling to track down a man who, in an act of poetic justice, significantly disfigured his own face during the attack, who then made off on public transport and of whom there are a number of CCTV sightings.



A swathe of converts to Christianity from residents of the Bibby Stockholm migrant barge in Dorset have aroused suspicion

Blaming Christian leaders for taking Ezedi at his word as an allegedly professing Christian is misguided, as none of us are in full possession of the facts. Many of Ezedi's friends have expressed their shock over the incident, stating that they were unaware of his criminal record, that he had never previously displayed any aggressive behaviour and also described Ezedi as a 'good Muslim', being completely in the dark about his apparent conversion.

A Halal butcher has described him in glowing terms as a model Muslim, so it seems as though Christian clergy may have been hoodwinked, as was the case with the Emad al-Swealmeen, the man who attempted to blow up a maternity unit in Liverpool in 2021. Despite being a 'Christian convert', a Qu'ran and Islamic prayer mat were found at his flat.

This has inevitably led to a spate of headlines and opinion pieces such as one in the *Spectator* asking whether 'Christians are being played for fools' and the head of a counter-extremism think-tank describing British institutions such as the Church of England as a 'pro asylum industry', even though Ezedi is not (yet) known to have any links to either the local Church

"Many of Ezedi's friends have expressed their shock, saying he had never previously displayed any aggressive behaviour and also described Ezedi as a 'good Muslim', being completely in the dark about his apparent conversion..."

or England or Catholic churches.

Adding fuel to the fire is the news that 40 of the 300 migrants being housed on the *Bibby Stockholm* barge moored in Portland Dorset, are currently attending their local church and plan to convert. Public anger and distrust of Christians is hardly a new concept and without succumbing to pride, I was glad to discover that my initial reaction to hearing of these potential new converts, was still one of joy and optimism.

Admittedly it is hard not to be sceptical, especially when you hear statements such as the one from the Reverend Peter Wilcox, the former Dean of Liverpool Cathedral, who said that out of 200 recent conversions from Islam to Christianity, not one involved someone who already had the right to live in Britain.

It is likely that some conversions may well be opportunistic, especially as we know the risks that are faced by apostates upon their return to an Islamic country. But the Gospel calls us to be open-hearted and to welcome the prodigal sheep. Christ did not approach people with an attitude of scepticism and neither can clergy be expected to see into people's hearts.

Rather than blaming clergy, the public should look to the failures of the Home Office for putting too much weight on their testimony when considering applications. Also, perhaps more stringent measures need to be applied, similar to those wanting the priest to sign their form for their children attending Catholic school.

Conversions should always be welcomed. But perhaps the Home Office should ask deeper questions of clergy. Has the convert continued with regular church attendance post-baptism? Have they attended study groups, such as in Advent or Lent? Do they regularly help out and participate in the life of the church and offer a joyful witness of conversion?

If the answer is no and that such enthusiasm for the faith immediately wanes once the letter of recommendation has been written, then their conversion claims should be treated with scepticism.

Perhaps in these situations, where refugee status solely hinges on the Christian faith of the applicant, a temporary visa ought to be issued and the priest or clergy who issued the recommendation, consulted a year later.

Short of giving lie-detectors out, given that we are commanded to take people on trust and judge actions and not just words, it's difficult to know what else to do, but it's a terrible and sad day, if one's first response upon hearing news of people finding Christ, is one of suspicion and concern.

Columbans support Lent Vigil: ‘We’ve no faith in fossil fuels’

Ellen Teague

Christians are gearing up for a ‘No Faith In Fossil Fuels’ Lent Vigil to pray that political leaders will make changes needed to address the climate crisis.

The 10-day 24-hour Lent Vigil outside Parliament begins on Ash Wednesday, 14th February, at 2.30pm. Columbans will attend on Ash Wednesday and lead the vigil between 5pm and 11pm on Wednesday 21st February.

The event has been organised by a coalition of groups, including Christian Climate Action, A Rocha UK, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Green Christian, Operation Noah, the Salvation Army and Tearfund.

Many other groups are signing up to support include Columban Missionaries in Britain, Churches Together in England team, and Caterham Churches. The Rosary will be said daily at midday.

Christian Climate Action explained the reason for the vigil. “Around the world creation is crying out. Heatwaves, fires, droughts and floods are becoming more frequent, wrecking

lives, land, and livelihoods. Meanwhile, the biggest polluters who have caused this crisis make vast profits from fossil fuels.

“As creation groans, the poorest, who have done the least to cause the problem, are paying the price,” Christian Climate Action said.

“As the climate crisis wreaks havoc in our world, we are drawn to our most ancient of traditions – prayer.

“We have faith that our prayers are heard and can bring transformation, even in the midst of injustice.

“Lent offers us space to lament our failure to address the climate emergency, and as we approach the Easter season of renewal, we hope and strive for climate justice. We endeavour for our prayers to be participatory – moving us into action and calling on our politicians to make the changes needed.”

Ash Wednesday will also see Columban support for a 3.30pm ‘Witness and Prayer Against War’ at London’s Ministry of Defence, which is nearby, lamenting the UK Government’s investment in arms, and particularly



its continued stockpile of nuclear weapons.

The London liturgy will include prayer, readings, symbolic actions that focus on war and nuclear weapons and a call for repentance.

It is organised by the London group of Pax Christi England and Wales and supported by Columbans in Britain, Christian CND, Lon-

don Catholic Worker and Westminster Justice and Peace.

That evening there will also be a national on-line service for peace organised by Pax Christi England and Wales.

For further information, visit <https://paxchristi.org.uk/>

Jon Cruddas next up for a ‘Pub Talk’

Jon Cruddas MP will deliver the next Catholic Union ‘Pub Talk’ in conjunction with Catholics for Labour on 20th March.

Mr Cruddas, Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham, will speak about the politics of the common good, and the contribution of the Catholic Church to Labour’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, spoke of his excitement at the upcoming event. “We are really looking forward to hearing from Jon Cruddas,” Mr Parker said. “Having been in Parliament since 2001 he has a huge wealth of knowledge and experience.

“Working for the common good is something that the Catholic Union is passionate about and I look forward to seeing as many members and supporters as possible for what will no doubt be a very insightful discussion”.

The event, to be held in the Morpeth Arms in Pimlico, London on Wednesday, 20th March, 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 Catholics in this country. In the most recent Pub Talk, which took place in January, former Conservative party leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith called on the Catholic Church to take a tougher stance on China.

Other previous Pub Talk speakers have included Ruth Kelly MP, Ann Widdecombe, Lord Alton and Professor Stephen Bullivant.

The event on Wednesday 20th March is a joint event with Catholics for Labour and. Doors open at 6pm, with the talk due to start at 6.30pm, subject to parliamentary business.

Information about future Catholic Union events can be found on their website: www.catholicunion.org.uk.



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Father Hudson’s Society today delivers a diverse range of services to older people, adults with disabilities, children and families, refugees and people experiencing homelessness, from purpose designed care homes, parish and community buildings, schools and a modern efficient office. Employing over 325 employees, its services are currently spread across Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire and West Midlands.

Due to the present incumbent retiring, the Board of Trustees is now seeking to appoint a practising Catholic as Chief Executive Officer. Under the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 there is a Genuine

Occupational Requirement (GOR) for the successful candidate to be a practising Catholic.

Throughout its history the organisation has continually changed in response to new challenges and areas of need, and trustees will expect the new CEO to play a full part in shaping and delivering future developments. The successful applicant will also have the proven ability to provide strategic direction, lead and develop teams, act as an ambassador with external stakeholders, drive excellence and maintain and grow a sustainable organisation. A degree and/or relevant professional qualification in social work, health, education, community work, finance or business management together with evidence of post-qualification training in relation to the Senior Management task is essential.

The successful candidate will require an enhanced disclosure from the Disclosure and Barring Service (funded by FHC).

**Closing date: 12pm Friday 9th February 2024; Interview date: Tuesday 27th February
CVs not accepted - only application forms (see below).**

Previous applicants need not apply. No agencies.

We do reserve the right to close this advertisement early if we receive sufficient suitable applications.
If you would like to have an informal conversation about the role with the current Chief Executive Officer, Andy Quinn, please ring 07966 935533.

**For further details and an application pack, please see <https://www.fatherhudsons.org.uk/vacancies/chief-executive-officer/399.htm>
or email: recruitment@fatherhudsons.org.uk quoting post reference P1732**

In Brief

Dentists offered 20k to fill UK's 'dental deserts'

Dentists will be paid golden hellos worth £20,000 to move to areas where there is a shortage of NHS appointments, under plans announced by the health service.

Lump sums will be offered to 240 dentists willing to relocate to rural and inner city 'dental deserts' where patients cannot access care.

Dentists will also be paid up to £50 for every NHS patient they see who has not had an appointment within the last two years. The latest figures suggest this is more than half of England – around 30 million people.

Move to the gym for health appointments

NHS appointments should be moved from hospitals to gyms and swimming pools to get patients back to work, a former executive said, as he admitted that Britain is 'losing the battle for the nation's health.'

But Mike Farrar told health care leaders "it doesn't have to be this way." Patients with common conditions like obesity, diabetes and mental health issues, those being treated for cancer, as well as people undergoing physiotherapy or rehabilitation after surgery, could all benefit from appointments in leisure centres, he argued.

Foreign students beat Scots to local university places

The SNP's cap on student numbers has been criticised after it emerged that foreign teenagers are more likely than Scots to be offered places at the country's top universities.

An investigation found that for many sought-after courses at top universities such as Edinburgh and St Andrews, the proportion of applicants receiving an offer was higher for those from overseas than it was for homegrown students.

For a law degree at Edinburgh, figures show that 24 per cent of Scottish applicants received an offer of a place last year. For international applicants, this rose to 41 per cent.

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Biden's bid for second term isn't a sure thing, as poll ratings fall

Joe Biden could still stand down before the election – here's how and what would happen next

Thomas Gift
When Joe Biden took the oath of office in January 2021, many expected him to be the "placeholder president". His mandate: heal the country's wounds after four turbulent years of Donald Trump. Don't try to be a transformative figure. Then hand the reins to a capable successor.

Fast forward to 2024 and there's room for debate about the merits (and demerits) of Biden's first-term legacy. But it's Biden's decision to run for re-election that's become the major flashpoint for Democrats.

Polling collated by US political website FiveThirtyEight shows Biden with a dismal sub-40 per cent approval rating. Former president Trump, the 'inevitable' Republican nominee who has all but punched his ticket to the general election with primary victories in Iowa and New Hampshire, has jumped into the lead in a head-to-head match against Biden in almost every swing state.

Many allies privately, and publicly, worry that Biden is at risk not only of overstaying his welcome, but of passing the baton to his twice-impeached rival that Biden himself pillories as an existential threat to democracy.

Is it too late for Biden to bow out in 2024? Technically, no. Biden could, for any reason, declare that he's no longer seeking a second term.

If he did it before March, there would still be (some) time for other Democrats to get their name on many primary ballots, although deadlines for more than 30 states (amounting to roughly two-thirds of delegates) have already passed.

If it didn't happen by then, his successor would be determined in a high-stakes fracas at the party's convention scheduled for late August. Unless the Democrat party changed the rules, delegates pledged to Biden would enter the convention 'uncommitted', and so would lobby, and ultimately vote, on a replacement.

Practically, however, the odds of Biden changing course now look small. The two main reasons for pressing ahead haven't changed since Biden announced his re-election bid last April. First, Biden is the only candidate who's proven that he can beat Trump. Second, there's no obvious heir apparent.



The only one who can beat Trump?

Biden has said explicitly that "[Trump] is running so I have to run". Although he says he's not the only one who could topple Trump, Biden clearly feels that he has a significant upper hand. For one thing, he's already proven he can do it.

There's a reason why Biden earned the Democrat nomination in 2020. Biden's blue-collar roots, resonance with moderate voters, and an ability to sell himself as the most 'electable' Democrat ultimately gave him a come-from-behind win in those primaries.

In that general election, Democrats' faith in him paid off. Biden tipped key swing states, including Michigan, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Pennsylvania — all of which had gone for Trump over Hillary Clinton in 2016.

Unlike in a typical election, 2024 is likely to be more a referendum on Trump than about the incumbent in the Oval Office. Biden is betting voters will prefer the devil they know. "Don't compare me to the Almighty," he says. "Compare me to the alternative".

No heir apparent

The Democrats also don't have a deep-bench of obvious successors. Biden sees himself as sparing the party from what would otherwise be a brutal nomination fight.

Whereas Trump has cruised to a commanding lead in the Republican primaries and squashed challenger

and former governor of South Carolina, Nikki Haley, a contested Democrat primary would be punishing. The candidate who emerged would be battle-tested, but potentially too busy nursing wounds to pivot into the general election.

Four years ago, many envisioned the current vice president, Kamala Harris, as Biden's natural heir. Few say that now. If Biden's poll numbers have disappointed, Harris's have been a catastrophe. Her recent approvals, at 37 per cent, are the lowest of any first-term VP since Dan Quayle in the early 1990s.

Other familiar names who ran in 2020 — like US transportation secretary Pete Buttigieg or Minnesota senator Amy Klobuchar — could step in for Biden. But it's not a fluke that they lost to Biden in 2020. No one was able to unite Democrat moderates and progressives, much less win over Republicans and swing voters.

Some think California governor Gavin Newsom is already running a "shadow campaign" for the White House, while Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer is also "happy to be interrogated" about a presidential bid. Yet many see Newsom as "too Hollywood," while Whitmer hasn't been vetted on a national stage.

New York representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, too, has been rumoured as a potential fill-in for Biden. But a hard, populist leftist, without the cross-over appeal of left-wing Vermont

senator Bernie Sanders, would almost certainly guarantee a Trump victory.

Experts have also speculated about the possibility of a "saviour" parachuting into the Democrat Convention, such as former first lady Michelle Obama or even legendary TV personality Oprah Winfrey. This seems more like the stuff of liberal fantasies.

No turning back

Biden had plenty of opportunities to gracefully ride into the sunset. He could have said that he'd accomplished everything he set out to accomplish. He could have cited his desire for a rising generation to be represented in politics.

Now, it seems, there's no turning back. Eleven months from now, we'll know if Biden made the strategically right decision. But if he misfires, it likely will be several years until we know the full effects of that choice.

A Trump sequel promises, at best, volatility and serious tests to US democratic norms and institutions. At worst, it promises a "revenge term" — the full-blown manifestation of the ugly underbelly that manifested itself on January 6 in the attack on the US Capitol.

With no back-up plan for exiting, Biden's legacy, win or lose, will invariably be tied to whether he refused to be the 'placeholder president'.

Thomas Gift is an Associate Professor and Director of the Centre on US Politics, UCL

Call for new law to punish buying of sex

CARE has welcomed a new strategy from the Scottish Government to help women leave sex work – but is urging ministers to stop ‘dragging their heels’ on measures which are designed to target sex buyers.

Ministers say new hubs will help sex workers leave the industry, and will bring together specialist services aimed at helping those impacted by commercial sexual exploitation. However, CARE Scotland believes it should have gone further and introduced laws to ‘punish’ men who pay for sex.

Michael Veitch, Scotland policy officer at CARE, said a clear deterrent was needed to stop men looking to buy sex.

“We would ask the Scottish Government to stop dragging its heels and introduce legislation that punishes men who pay for sex, making it clear that this exploitative manifestation of gender-based violence has no place in a modern Scotland,” he said.

“There is much to welcome in this new strategy from the Scottish Government. However, it is disappointing that calls for a law criminalising sex buyers have not been heeded.”

Public demand controls on AI after sick targeting of pop star

Andy Drozdziak

8 out of 10 British people believe that specific AI tools, which enable users to digitally undress women and children, should be banned.

The new figures were revealed to mark Safer Internet Day 2024, according to a poll by Whitestone Insight.

In the poll, carried out on behalf of Christian social justice charity CARE, 1,203 British adults were asked to consider the following: ‘Websites and apps that use AI to simulate sexually explicit content such as undressing women and children should be banned by the government.’

Seven in ten respondents strongly agreed (69%) and one in ten (10%) somewhat agreed. The number of respondents who strongly agreed rises to almost 8 in 10 (75%) discounting those who preferred not to answer.

The results come as social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter, blocked searches linked to pop star Taylor Swift after fake, AI-generated explicit images of her



Taylor Swift

were posted to the site. The graphic, fake images of Swift began to appear online at the end of January.

Since technology, which enables users to create sexual images without people’s permission, remains freely available, campaigners are calling for ‘nudify’ tools to be specifically outlawed.

Louise Davies MBE, CARE’s Director of Advocacy and Policy, underlined the severity of the issue. “The deepfake AI generated pictures of Taylor Swift that have swept social media for the last few weeks highlight a disturbing new trend.

“Technology now exists to take any picture, however innocent, and use artificial intelligence to turn it into a naked, pornographic image,” she said.

“With this year’s Safer Internet Day urging people to work together to make the internet safer, it is clear that a new and looming threat is AI technology.

“If lawmakers do not act swiftly, these apps and sites could generate untold harm.”

While acknowledging the opportunities AI offers society, Pope Francis has drawn attention to the dangers associated with the technology in recent messages. He chose ‘Artificial Intelligence and Peace’ as the theme for the World Day of Peace in January 2024, and will return to the theme on World Communications Day 2024, 12th May, when he will

consider ‘Artificial Intelligence and wisdom of the heart for a fully human communication’

Louise Davies called for a ban on so-called ‘nudification’ apps, underlining the dangers to young people in particular.

“Last year it was estimated that links advertising ‘nudification’ apps and websites increased by 2,400 per cent.

“The content they create is extremely realistic. As well as still images, some platforms allow users to create new pornographic videos where subjects appear to do whatever the user asks,” she said.

“We are particularly concerned about an impact on children and young people. There is a rise in the use of these apps in schools. Young girls are being dehumanised and treated as mere sex objects.

“Deepfake images cause serious mental and physical distress to victims.

“It is clear that swift action to ban these apps would make a difference. There can be no reasonable argument against banning them.”

Sony steps in to back Pact family project

Andy Drozdziak

Catholic prison charity Pact has teamed up with Sony music to help prisoners’ families stay in touch with loved ones inside.

The project, funded through a corporate donation from Sony Music UK’s Social Justice Fund, will bring prisoners’ families together with senior prison staff in special Family Forums in HMPs Ranby, Gartree and Leicester.

These forums will allow family members to share their views with the prison and support efforts to make visits easier for families and children.

The project will link up with organisations in the community such as schools, social services and court teams to bridge the gap between Families and Service providers.

Lesley Ward, Pact’s Head of Services for the North and East Midlands, thanked Sony Music for the funding and explained its impact.

“We are extremely grateful to Sony Music UK for the funding for this important project that will support efforts to keep families together, deliver safer prisons and reduce reoffending,” she said.

“The imprisonment of a loved-one can have a devastating impact on family members and children. Not only can they lose household income, they can also suffer with social stigma which can be particular-

ly hard for children affected.”

Meanwhile, Pact CEO Andy Keen-Downs has urged the Government to invest in mental health care after a damning report revealed that some prisoners with mental health issues are forced to ‘linger’ for long periods of time before they are able to be transferred to secure hospitals.

In the report, *‘The long wait: A thematic review of delays in the transfer of mentally unwell prisoners’*, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons Charlie Taylor said that “very seriously mentally unwell men and women who are waiting to be transferred from prisons to secure hospitals are forced to wait for long periods.”

Mr Taylor said: “All too often, I meet prison officers and health professionals struggling to care for these patients. Their prompt removal from prison to secure hospitals should be a priority.”

Mr Taylor called for ‘immediate action’ so that prisoners can be moved quicker.

Confirming the findings, Mr Keen-Downs called for greater investment in mental health care. “We see this and hear from families the heartbreaking stories of trying to keep their mentally ill loved ones safe in prisons. There is a clear policy choice. Build more prisons or invest in mental health care and alternatives so that we don’t need them,” he said.



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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 we reserve the right to edit all correspondence for space and legal reasons. Please provide a name and address with all letters, but we are happy to anonymise your thoughts in print.

Overseas students should not get preferential access

I was shocked to read that foreign students appear to be receiving preferential treatment by universities because they are prepared to pay much higher fees.

Since the introduction of the annual £9,250 tuition fee, we have seen some university vice-chancellors' annual salaries rocket to £500,000, so clearly they are not short of cash.

The offer of a place on a preferred university course is an honour and there should be a level playing field for all university applicants, regardless of the fees some are prepared to pay.

**Victoria Shackleton,
Dartmouth, Devon.**

Costs nothing... until we get charged, that is

I have just received this year's water rate notification and no surprise, there is a massive increase in the charges.

It seems that our totally inefficient water companies are just the latest to jump on the bandwagon of hiking up their prices, taking the strategy, one assumes, that 'we may as well do the same.'

Good job God doesn't take the same strategy. Last time I checked, his charges for rain hadn't moved in line with inflation indices.

**Kathryn Atkinson
Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire**

We still need our local church services

I have to say, I have been more than a little surprised that the *Universe* has carried next to nothing on the bombshell news that the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton intends to radically reform its parish structures in the light of falling numbers of priests.

As my local church is a small one, and has struggled to maintain a priestly presence, we are only too aware that we are likely to become one of those parishes where the

sacraments will be said rarely, if at all. We are not encouraged, either, by the news that we can, assuming we can find the finances to maintain its upkeep, keep the church open for community events and to maintain a presence in the village. Without services bringing parishioners in, this all seems highly unlikely.

Is this really the only way? Perhaps in such desperate times when it comes to priest numbers, more attention needs to focus on whether the Holy Spirit really wants us to keep married men and women out of the priesthood, rather than accepting our need to shut historic, beautiful churches and close down local services without a fight.

**Name and address supplied
Sussex**

A cheery remedy, Italian style

Good to see the return of a Letters page in the *Universe*, and having bemoaned the fact that you do not have one often enough, I

thought I should make an effort and put pen to paper.

In the belief that letter's pages do not need to contain only hefty worthy tomes, here is my offering in the hope that you might be able to continue with yours.

I read with interest last week the news that in future we will be able to seek more medical attention for minor problems at a pharmacy. I sincerely hope that we follow the Italian model in doing so.

About ten years ago I was on holiday in a small town in southern Italy. I awoke one morning with a very painful upset stomach. In my best Italian I explained this to the local pharmacist, who disappeared into the back shop and reappeared with a glass containing a cloudy liquid, with instructions to drink it down quickly.

I did as instructed, remarking as I finished that "It tastes like Grappa".

"It is," the pharmacist replied.

No charge. Stomach sorted.

**Elizabeth Nichols
Accrington**

Welcome home: JRS throws open doors to refugee house

JRS UK (Jesuit Refugee Service) has welcomed the first residents to Amani House in London. The new home for male refugees was made possible by the generosity of the Jesuits in Britain, other religious orders, and JRS UK supporters.

For many years JRS UK has provided a Hosting scheme, with volunteers welcoming refugee friends into their homes. Now Amani House offers the chance to live within a shared residence, for those who require longer-term accommodation.

Each resident has their own bedroom and shares communal

areas, with support from the accommodation team at JRS UK.

Finding safe accommodation is, increasingly, one of the most pressing challenges facing refugees in the UK. One new resident explained: "For the past year and a half, I prayed daily for stable accommodation. Amani House is that answer to my prayers. I'm thrilled to move in and it finally feels like I'm coming home. I'm excited to be in charge of my own daily routine. I'll be able to sleep when I want to and eat whenever I want to."

Amani House residents also

share the values that underpin this new community: mutual respect and kindness, working together, sharing responsibility for the house, and supporting each other through difficult times.

One refugee friend shared his joy at moving into Amani House: "I'm excited to share life stories and be part of a fraternity as we are all in the same situation. I'm ready to belong with my community and be less stressed and anxious.

"We will make use of every room, the kitchen for nourishment, the prayer room to talk to God and my bedroom for sleep. I'm excited for the positive energy of the House."

Emilie House, JRS UK's house for female refugees, opened in 2021 thanks to the kindness of the Sisters of the Holy Family of St Emilie. Since then, it has offered refugee friends a unique chance to find safety as well as regaining independence and vital life-skills.

JRS UK has been highly critical of the Government's treatment of refugees. Last week, the charity called on the Government to stop playing 'party politics pantomime' and to focus on refugees and asylum seekers as its Rwanda Bill passed its second reading.

JRS UK Director Sarah Teather said: "If enacted, the Rwanda scheme will destroy the lives of people who have already lost everything. It is these people- men, women, and children- who should be foremost in this discussion. For them, we continue to oppose this Bill and the Rwanda scheme as a whole. Stop playing party politics pantomime."



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Enter the dragon for papal audience

Pope Francis “dotted the eyes” of performers dressed as a dragon and lion in a traditional ceremony to symbolically awaken them and welcome in the Chinese New Year. He complimented the performers for “this fine art” and thanked them for their thoughtfulness during an audience at the Vatican on 2nd February with a delegation from the National Federation Italy-China and the Chinese Martial Arts Academy of Vercelli in northern Italy.

“I extend to all of you a warm welcome and I thank you for your visit” to mark the 10th anniversary of the founding of the federation and to prepare for the Chinese New Year, which begins on 10th February and ushers in a year of the dragon. He expressed his appreciation for the group’s efforts in fostering dialogue “and seeking to respond to the challenges posed by cultural integration, education and the promotion of shared social values.”

The traditional Chinese dances, which the performers exhibited for the pope, “express the hope that the New Year will be prosperous and productive,” he said.

The performance included having the pope paint the eyes of the dragon with red paint to symbolically bring it to life.



Pope hears new insights on women’s role from female Anglican bishop

Pope Francis and his international Council of Cardinals devoted the first morning of their February meeting “to deepening their reflection, begun last December, on the role of women in the Church,” the Vatican press office said.

Joining him and his senior clergy at the meeting were a woman Anglican bishop, a Salesian sister and a consecrated virgin.

Matteo Bruni, director of the Vatican press office, said the pope and cardinals heard from Bishop Jo Bailey Wells, deputy secretary-general of the Anglican Communion; Salesian Sister Linda Pocher, a professor of Christology and Mariology at Rome’s Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences Auxilium, and Giuliava Di Bernardino, a consecrated virgin and liturgist from the Diocese of Verona, Italy.

The Vatican has not shared details about the discussions on the role of women in the Church nor the texts of presentations made at the meeting.

However, it is known from previous comments that Pope Francis has repeatedly said women should have senior roles in managing the Church, and has extended access to his vatican Dicasteries – or departments – to female Catholics.

While he has ruled out female clergy, the pope has insisted the future of the Church is to be run “by lay people, by women... we need to make use of all the resources God has given us.”

God is close, compassionate, not a distant and cold father

Carol Glatz

Christians must let go of the God they think they know and convert every day to the God Jesus presents in the Gospel – the God who is the father of love and compassion, Pope Francis said.

When the faithful discover “the true face of the Father, our faith matures: we no longer remain ‘sacristy Christians’ or ‘parlor Christians,’ but rather we feel called to become bearers of God’s hope and healing,” he said before reciting the Angelus prayer with about 15,000 visitors in St. Peter’s Square.

During his greetings after the noonday prayer, he also marked the celebration in Italy of the Day for Life.

“I join with the Italian bishops in hoping that ideological visions can be overcome so as to rediscover that every human life, even those most marked by limitations, has an immense value and is capable of giving something to others,” he said.

And he greeted the many young people from different countries who

A bustling St Peter’s Square, despite a cold day for the Angelus



were in Rome to mark the World Day for Prayer and Reflection against Human Trafficking, which was celebrated on 8th February.

“Many brothers and sisters are deceived with false promises and are then subjected to exploitation and abuse. Let us all join to counter the dramatic global phenomenon of human trafficking,” he said.

In his main Angelus address, the pope reflected on Jesus being con-

tinually on the move in the Gospel accounts of his ministry and how that “challenges us with some questions on our faith.”

“The Gospel lets us see that Jesus, after teaching in the synagogue, goes out, so that the word he has preached may reach, touch and heal people,” he said.

“He reveals to us that God is not a detached master who speaks to us from on high; on the contrary, he is

a father filled with love who makes himself close to us, who visits our homes, who wants to save and liberate, heal from every ill of the body and spirit,” the pope said.

“God makes himself close to accompany us, tenderly, and to forgive us,” he said. “Do not forget this: closeness, compassion and tenderness.”

Jesus’ journeying reminds the faithful “that our first spiritual task is this: to abandon the God we think we know, and to convert every day to the God Jesus presents to us in the Gospel,” he said.

Christians should reflect on whether they have “discovered the face of God as the father of mercy, or do we believe in and proclaim a cold God, a distant God? Does faith instill in us the restlessness of journeying or is it an intimist consolation for us, that calms us? Do we pray just to feel at peace or does the word we listen to and preach make us go out, like Jesus, toward others, to spread God’s consolation?” he said.

Students told to be open to ideas - ignorance breeds fear

Love and seek the truth, which requires being open to listening to others and sharing in dialogue, Pope Francis told a group of students who met the Holy Father during a visit to the Vatican.

Always stay actively engaged with activities at school, he said, “but always with a mind open to

newness.” “Seek the truth in everything without letting yourselves be conditioned by the fashions of the moment or by common thinking, by ‘likes’ or the consensus of followers,” the pope said during a meeting in the Paul VI Audience Hall with students and teachers from a

private Catholic school in northern Italy. The Rotondi school in Gorla Minore was celebrating its 425th anniversary.

Depending too much on current trends or prevailing opinions “can take away our freedom,” the pope said.

“Do not be afraid, when

necessary, to change and accept opinions and ways of thinking different to your own in all that which is not essential: be true lovers of the truth, and for this, always open to listening” and shared discussion. “Ignorance breeds fear, and fear breeds intolerance,” he said.

Christian Churches vow to work together in a challenging world

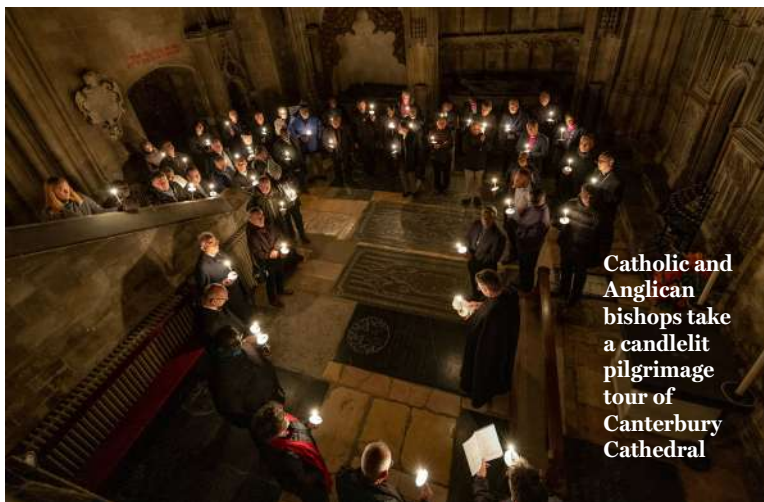
Cindy Wooden

As Catholics and Anglicans pray and work for the day when they can celebrate the Eucharist together, they are called to support one another in situations of suffering, apologise together for times when they have sinned and work together to share the good news of God's love, said bishops from both communities.

Pairs of Catholic and Anglican bishops from 27 nations travelled to Rome from 22nd-25th January, and to Canterbury from 26th-29th January for prayer, discussion and a commissioning by Pope Francis and Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury.

The pilgrimage was organized by the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission, a body established in 2001 to promote common prayer and joint projects to demonstrate concretely how the theological agreements the churches have made also have practical implications in witnessing together to the Christian faith.

A final statement drafted by participants was posted 1st February on the websites of the Anglican Communion and the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity.



Catholic and Anglican bishops take a candlelit pilgrimage tour of Canterbury Cathedral

During the journey, the statement said, "we listened to the testimony of some of our bishops who minister courageously in circumstances of violence, acute suffering, oppression and warfare.

"In a world so scarred and wounded, we hear in many places of a suffering Church and the call for all of us to be united in prayer."

"The vocation of the Church is both to love and to witness to the love of God in the face of suffering," the statement said.

The pilgrimage was a time for Anglican and Catholic bishops to draw closer in faith and in friendship,

they said. "Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we have been walking the road together with Christ in our midst.

"Because we recognise one Lord, we recognise one another as his disciples, and are strengthened for the journey ahead.

"Bonds of trust are being forged, challenging preconceived notions, and allowing us to speak to each other with the frankness that friendship allows."

The bishops shared prayer and attended each other's celebrations of the Eucharist; the Catholic bishops received a blessing during Com-

munion time at the Anglican service and the Anglican bishops went up for a blessing during Communion at the Catholic Masses.

"The act of approaching the altar for a blessing when we could not receive the Eucharist, though marked by sadness, was for many of us a moving experience of spiritual communion, and a further impetus to continue this journey so that we might one day break bread together around the same altar," the statement said.

The Catholic and Anglican bishops also shared stories about the struggles of members of their flocks, including because of clergy sexual abuse or the past co-operation of the churches with people and powers that oppressed them.

"As we have shared the challenges and hopes of our peoples in different parts of the world," they wrote, "we have heard how in many places Indigenous peoples, descendants of enslaved persons and others live with the legacy of colonisation and assimilation."

"We have heard the call to repent of our participation in efforts of colonisation, and to commit ourselves to walking together and to stand in solidarity with those marked by this painful legacy," they said.

Let's see all the children join in our special day

The Vatican is encouraging all the world's Catholic children to take part in its first World Children's Day.

While the pope knows that most of those who come to Rome to join in will be Italian, Cardinal Jose Tolentino de Mendonza said he hoped "local celebrations will take place so that the whole Church can experience their joy and will show them the beauty of gathering with other believers."

He added that when Pope Francis met in November with some 7,000 children who were taking part in May, "it seemed like we were watching a fountain whose lively jet refreshed the earth and the Church."

Referring to that event as the 'zero edition' of World Children's Day, he said that with only six months to prepare for the event itself, it probably will be "more like a final release than the concert itself," but it is still important for the children and for the Church as a whole.

The cardinal was speaking at a news conference presenting initial plans for the May event and announcing a new website on events, <https://www.worldchildrenday.org>.

"I hope local churches will put on their own events to coincide with ours," he added.

Parishes, priests need each other, says prefect

Catholic priests are increasingly confronted with solitude and secularism, so they need support and encouragement from their parishes, the Church as a whole and one another, said the prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for the Clergy.

Today, many priests are "tired and discouraged, caught off guard by the challenges of today's society and the burdens they carry," Cardinal Lazarus You Heung-sik, the prefect said as he opened a Vatican conference on the continuing education and formation of priests.

As a result, "the importance of providing priests with the necessary support and accompaniment, and thus the need for ongoing formation, has increasingly come to the forefront," he said.

The four-day conference at the Vatican gathered more than 1,000 priests from 60 countries to discuss developing a "unique, holistic, communal and missionary formation" for priests. Participants met with Pope Francis on the 8th February.

Cardinal You said he sees many priests vocalise feelings of loneliness in today's secularised world. He said priests must respond by forming close-knit communities

among themselves.

"This will help with mutual care, and this will also give witness to the outside world," he said. "For us, this means a synodal church: moving together, working together, serving together."

Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, pro-prefect for the Dicastery for Evangelization's Section for the First Evangelization and New Particular Churches, told the conference that some priests think "that ordination means the end of formation."

But study, prayer and spiritual direction are not only for seminarians, he said, yet "precisely because we are ordained to the service of God and the Church, we need to be continuously formed."

"I believe this humility will help the ordained ministers recover new energy and avoid a false sense of superiority and entitlement," he added.

The cardinal said that priests must take care of themselves and their faith through ongoing formation, while Cardinal Tagle also said ongoing formation allows priests "to become credible and effective agents of communion among culturally diverse people."

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Public Engagement by Catholics for the Common Good

In Brief

Pro-life Poland vow to fight liberals' abortion agenda

Catholic pro-life campaigners have vowed to resist sweeping liberalisation of Poland's abortion law, in a package of radical measures proposed by the new coalition government.

Prime Minister Donald Tusk's government has announced plans to allow abortion on demand up to 12 weeks, and to make the morning-after pill available without a prescription to girls age 15 and up in the traditionally Catholic country.

"We face a struggle -- what they're planning is deeply worrying," said Ewa Kowalewska, vice president of the Polish Federation of Pro-Life Movements. "Easy-access abortion has long been opposed here, despite the efforts of liberals to promote it as easy and good."

The Polish bishops also warned against liberalisation of abortion laws, and said easy access to "emergency contraception" could harm young women's health and fuel a dangerously "false sense of freedom." "Use of morning-after pills contributes to treating pregnancy as a problem that must be combated by all means, including abortion – from an ethical point of view, this is an abortive action," bishops said.

Cardinal found safe after vanishing act

The Church in Panama has confirmed that its Cardinal, Jose Luis Lacunza Maestrujoen of David, had been found safe after disappearing for more than two days.

The cardinal, who is 80, was found after a police search and concern for his well-being.

The cardinal was found in Boquete, close to the border with Costa Rica, and was in good condition. He had been last seen 30 miles to the south in his diocesan seat.

Panamanian bishops' had called for "permanent prayer" just prior to Cardinal Lacunza's reappearance. The circumstances of Cardinal Lacunza's disappearance and reappearance remain uncertain.

Abbot spat on in Jerusalem

The head of the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem has described an incident in which he was spat on by Jewish extremists in the Old City as "heartbreaking." The Jews insulted and spat on Benedictine Abbot Nikodemus Schnabel in what police say was a religious hate crime. Two men were arrested.

Qatar raises hopes for ceasefire as Hamas hints deal is possible

Qatar's prime minister says Hamas's reaction to the latest Gaza ceasefire plan has been "generally positive" and suggests the group is looking for a way out of its conflict with Israel.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani shared his assessment in talks with visiting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Qatar, which has long mediated with Hamas, has been working with the US and Egypt to broker a ceasefire that would involve an extended halt in fighting and the release of the Israeli hostages still held by Hamas after its October 7 cross-border raid that ignited the war nearly four months ago.

Hamas demands include exchanging hostages for Palestinian prisoners and rebuilding Gaza, in response to an Israel-backed ceasefire proposal. It also wants a full withdrawal of Israeli forces and an end to the war after three 45-day truce periods.

But the news came as Israel told the families of 31 hostages that it had confirmation their loved ones were dead, and was studying unconfirmed reports that had said a further 20 had perished.



Two-thirds of Palestine's population has been forced to flee south towards the Egyptian border, which now could become a target for Israeli attacks

Hamas said in a statement that it responded in a "positive spirit" to the latest proposal from the US and Middle East mediators. But the militant group said it still seeks "a comprehensive and complete" ceasefire to end "the aggression against our people".

But the offer is likely to be unacceptable to Israel, whose prime minister has called for "total victory"

in Gaza. Benjamin Netanyahu has ruled out a ceasefire, suggesting Israel believes it is in a position to destroy Hamas once and for all.

The question is whether a middle ground can be reached to move the process on.

Mr Blinken also met Egyptian and Saudi Arabian officials amid growing concern that Israel's will expand combat operations to areas

on the Egyptian border that are crammed with displaced Palestinians.

Israel's defence minister has said his country's offensive will eventually reach the town of Rafah, on the Egyptian border, where more than half of Gaza's 2.3 million people have sought refuge.

UN humanitarian monitors said that attacks on the area would cause a disaster and could kill thousands of innocent civilians.

Israeli evacuation orders now cover two-thirds of Gaza's territory, forcing thousands more people every day toward the border areas that could next in the firing line.

On Wednesday, Egypt warned Israel that attacks on the border would threaten the peace treaty the two countries signed more than four decades ago.

Egypt fears an expansion of combat operations to the Rafah area could push terrified Palestinian civilians across the border, a scenario Egypt has said it is determined to prevent.

Mr Blinken told Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el Sissi in Cairo, that Palestinians must not be forced out of Gaza across the border.

Israel warned it risks widening war after new strikes in Syria

Israeli air strikes over the central city of Homs and nearby areas have killed and wounded civilians, the Syrian military said, adding that the attacks risk raising tensions amid local demands for retaliation.

The Israeli jets reportedly struck the Syrian city and countryside from near the Lebanese coastal city of Tripoli.

The Britain-based pro-opposition war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Humanitarian Rights said at least six civilians were killed, among them a woman and a child, as well as two militants from the Lebanese Hezbollah group.

The casualties were all in a building that was apparently targeted in one of the strikes, it said.

Search efforts were ongoing, the observatory added, and that at least nine explosions were heard in Homs and its outskirts, where Hezbollah is reportedly present.

Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets inside government-controlled parts of war-torn Syria in recent years.

Israel rarely acknowledges its ac-

tions in Syria, but it has said it targets bases of Iran-allied militant groups, such as Hezbollah, which has sent thousands of fighters to support Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces.

It has also targeted members of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in Syria, including a high-ranking general in December.

Historic rainfall levels cause mass flooding event in LA

Los Angeles fire and rescue services responded to more than 400 mudslides after historic levels of rainfall over last weekend caused by an 'atmospheric river-fuelled' storm.

The rain began to ease in some areas on Tuesday after bombarding Los Angeles with nearly half of its seasonal rainfall in just two days.

Although the rain was tapering off, forecasters warned of the ongoing threat of potentially deadly landslides.

"LA should know that even though the rain may ease up a bit, this storm continues. And that means take precautions and to stay informed during this time," the mayor's office said.

Most of Southern California remained under flood watches, and the weather service warned people to remain on high alert, as swollen and fast-moving creeks and rivers increase the risks of drowning and the need for swift-water rescues.



The majority of Pajaro is flooded

"This has truly been a historic storm for Los Angeles," Ariel Cohen, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service's Los Angeles-area bureau told reporters, noting that the city just recorded its third-wettest two-day stretch since recordkeeping began in the 1870s.

The storm plowed through Northern California over the weekend, killing three people who were crushed by falling trees before

moving south and lingering. It was the second storm fuelled by an atmospheric river – a weather pattern made from plumes of moisture that can produce torrential amounts of rain – to hit the state in a matter of days.

On Monday, the storm pounded Los Angeles with rain, sending mud and boulders down hillsides dotted with multi-million-dollar homes while people living in homeless encampments in many parts of the city scrambled for safety.

Near the Hollywood Hills, floodwaters carried mud, rocks and household objects downhill through Studio City, city officials said. Sixteen people were evacuated.

"It looks like a river that's been here for years," said Keki Mingus, whose neighbours' homes were damaged. "I've never seen anything like it."

Drake Livingston, who lives in the Beverly Crest neighbourhood,

said: "We looked outside and there's a foot-and-a-half of running water, and it starts seeping through the doors."

City centre Los Angeles received nearly seven inches (18cm) of rain by Monday night, which was nearly half the yearly average of 14.25 inches (36cm). It was already the third-wettest two-day period since recordkeeping began in 1877, the service said. The danger had not passed despite the expected dip in the rainfall, the weather service said. "The ground is extremely saturated – supersaturated," meteorologist Mr Cohen said.

"It's not able to hold any additional water before sliding. It's not going to take much rain for additional landslides, mudslides, rockslides and other debris flows to occur."

Shelters added beds for the city's homeless population of nearly 75,000 people.

I'm here to find peace in Ukraine - not for good headlines, says pope's envoy

Dawid Gospodarek

Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, Pope Francis' special envoy to Ukraine, said that his mission to the war-torn country has specific patterns – but garnering favourable headlines for the Holy See wasn't one of them.

"It is about looking for the best ways to promote peace, and first of all it has a humanitarian dimension. We are particularly mindful of children, especially those uprooted from their family environment," Cardinal Zuppi said.

"We want to get them back for their families. This is also what the Ukrainian authorities cared a lot about," the cardinal said, referring to the near 20,000 Ukrainian children unlawfully deported and transferred from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation.

Zuppi said concrete co-operation has been established and, "slowly" but "surely" some successes are being achieved. According to the cardinal, they give hope for the purpose of continuing the mission.

He cited the example of a Ukrainian teenage boy abducted to Russia and threatened with conscription into the Russian military when he turned 18.

Thanks to the Vatican's diplomatic actions, the orphaned Ukrainian boy was rescued and transferred to Kyiv, where he lives with his sister.

There were other examples of this, he said. "We are interested in the solution, in achieving the goal,

Cardinal Zuppi: 'I want peace, not headlines.'



not in publicity, propaganda, exploitation by either side of the conflict. It's about pure humanitarian action.

"We want to help solve problems especially for the youngest ones. War causes so many casualties, children are even more affected, this is the greatest injustice," he said.

Cardinal Zuppi also addressed the issue of conducting diplomatic dialogue with those responsible for war crimes, such as Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russian presidential commissioner for children's rights. "People must strive for peace with their enemies. This is exactly the

point – of course never forgetting responsibility and justice. Peace requires talking to enemies as well."

In March, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Lvova-Belova and Putin, accusing them of abducting children from Ukraine.

Cardinal Zuppi met Lvova-Belova during a two-day peace mission to Moscow in June 29. Earlier in the

month, he visited Kyiv. Cardinal Zuppi acknowledged that a major challenge to a just peace is Russia's recognition of its faults and reparations. "Justice is necessary, and it always requires truth," he said. "This is a huge challenge, but we must take it up, otherwise we are left only with the logic of force. We must seek peaceful paths of justice, in accordance with the law. This requires a 'third' player in the conflict, and it must be a united international community that seeks to end the war."

Asked about the controversy of ecumenical and diplomatic dialogue with Moscow's Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, who directly supports Putin and his justification for the war in Ukraine, Cardinal Zuppi said that this dialogue "must be possible ... despite everything."

"The Russian Orthodox Church is a very important actor there. This makes it all the more necessary to maintain dialogue. However, let us remember that dialogue does not necessarily mean conceding the interlocutor's right or agreeing with him. Dialogue is a tool. Here the goal is peace and dialogue is to help build peace."

he also insisted that Pope Francis "perfectly understands" the pain of Ukrainians and is on the side of the oppressed and those experiencing injustice.

"I believe that the pope has already manifested in many ways his closeness for Ukraine, his sensitivity to its pain," Cardinal Zuppi said, adding that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had thanked the pope for his peaceful engagement in the conflict.

The cardinal said he was concerned that interest in Europe and the USA was declining in the war, and fewer new bulletins were featuring it. Societies seem to have grown tired of the war, he said.

"We need to be in solidarity," Zuppi insisted. "We have to provide information about what is happening in Ukraine."

"I see this certain fatigue in the societies, maybe getting used to the fact that this war has simply been going on for so long," he said, stressing that a "very beautiful and important sign and testimony of solidarity was how Poles opened their homes and hearts to the war refugees from Ukraine. This support must continue."



A Ukrainian child prepares to board a train taking her away from her homeland

"We want to help solve problems especially for the youngest ones. War causes so many casualties, children are even more affected, this is the greatest injustice..."



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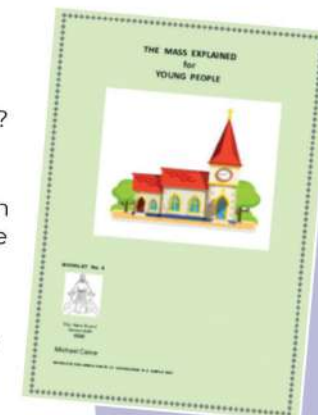
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Nation's youth urged to embrace hope as they work for peace in South Sudan

Tonny Onyulo

Cardinal Michael Czerny visited South Sudan from 2nd-9th February to commemorate the first anniversary of Pope Francis' apostolic visit to the country.

The prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development travelled to Juba, Malakal and Renk during his visit, meeting government officials and peace workers. While pontiff's 2023 apostolic trip was an "ecumenical pilgrimage of peace," the country still struggles and is suffering the consequences of conflict, instability and displacement.

Cardinal Czerny expressed his hope that his presence and words will show South Sudanese that they must not give up hope, even when things are not going well.

"I think the bishops invited me because they felt that this all-important message of a year ago needs to be restated, at least with as much vigour as we can," he says.

"In many ways I am simply reiterating his message from last year: one of hope.

"I hopes that my visit will remind countries to make peace for the good of their people.

"We do not make peace by raising walls and by making it difficult and dangerous for those who, for every good reason on earth, are seeking the minimum security; we then make their access difficult," stresses Cardinal Czerny.

On the contrary, he continues, "we should open our doors, our hearts, and also our capacities, so that they can find safety, without which human life is basically impossible."



Prior to the cardinal's arrival, dozens of religious leaders and young Catholics in the northeastern African country were touring troubled villages, towns and streets to preach messages of peace and urge residents to embrace forgiveness and reconciliation.

The country of more than 10 million people descended into a bloody civil war in 2013, only two years after it became Africa's youngest country following its peaceful secession from Sudan in 2011.

But a power struggle in an oil-rich land soon developed into an ethnic conflict resulting in the death of almost 400,000 people and displacing millions – both

internally and into neighbouring countries, including Uganda and Kenya.

Church leaders said that the overall security has improved in the country since the 2018 Peace Agreement, but the lack of political goodwill to implement the peace deal fully has triggered fighting between communities and road ambushes that have left more people dead and displaced. Today in South Sudan, 9.4 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance – 76 per cent of the country's population, UN agency for humanitarian assistance reported.

"South Sudanese continue to suffer because of this conflict," said

John Deng Chol, youth leader from the diocese of Rumbek in central South Sudan. "People have lost their loved ones, their properties, their homes have been destroyed, and the majority are still living in camps, and they lack basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, medical aid, and even children are not going to school."

Chol said that he and his fellow young Catholics have been walking for several miles to sensitise communities in the country on the need for peace and forgiveness and to get to know each other.

"We are telling our fellow youth to maintain peace and love each other for the sake of our beloved country," Chol said. "We are making young people understand that for any country to develop, there must be peace, and we should create and build peace for our next generations."

Bishop Christian Carllassare of Rumbek said the peace initiative is meant to unite people and for them to know and love each other. He said such an initiative would prevent revenge killings, cattle raiding and road ambushes that the country has witnessed for a very long time. "We are working hard and praying to change the minds of youths because we don't want to see them being used by those in power and marching on the streets with guns ready to kill each other," Bishop Carllassare said.

"We are giving our youths wherever we go the message of hope that they can still change the destiny of their country if they maintain peace."

The bishop recalled that earlier this month, he held a peace pilgrimage with hundreds of young

people across the country in response to Pope Francis' message last year to the people of South Sudan to be "seeds of hope" that will "soon bear fruit."

During his three-day tour of South Sudan in 2023, Pope Francis appealed for peace and forgiveness, urging political leaders to end the civil war and encouraging the people of South Sudan to save the country from collapsing.

"The future of South Sudan cannot lie in refugee camps," the pontiff stressed.

"True, right now you are 'planted' where you don't want to be, but precisely from this situation of hardship and uncertainty, you can reach out to those around you and experience that you all are rooted in the one human family," the pope told South Sudanese in Juba.

Catechist Peter Garang Akot said the Church trains local leaders, elders, and opinion leaders in conflict prevention, stopping rumors, and peace education. He said the Church leaders were also calling on political leaders to prioritise urging citizens to maintain peace.

"The peace initiative involves all of us, and we want the message to reach out to everyone in the country to end the war that has destroyed the lives of our people," said Akot, adding that the peace initiative will continue until the country finds peace.

But he stressed that for him, "the future lies in our young. We need them to take the pope's words and build peace. They need to work together to build a South Sudan in which peace can flourish and a strong nation develop."

US pro-lifers vow to ensure abortion is at heart of election

Kate Scanlon

This year's presidential election threatens to become an intense fight over abortion, with pro-life groups vowing to use President Biden's pro-abortion stance against him in the polls.

The national pro-life group Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America said it intends to raise and spend \$92 million in the 2024 election cycle, an increase from its \$78 million mid-term campaign for the 2022 election cycle.

The money would be spent endorsing pro-life candidates, including at presidential election level

And in a hint that Catholics' views on migration could be another focus for the election, Republican leaders in the Senate have indicated that they will vote

on a tentative deal to enact more strict policies for the US-Mexico border, which may include policies that have been criticised by Catholic immigration advocates.

SBA Pro-Life America, along with its partner Women Speak Out PAC, said it also will knock on 4 million doors across eight key battleground states including Arizona, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Montana and Georgia. They said they intend to focus on low turnout and persuadable voters "to win the presidency [for the Republicans] and a majority in Congress."

Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of SBA, which works to elect pro-life candidates to public office, said in a statement, "Life is the human rights issue of our time

and the pivotal issue in 2024 elections."

"Pro-abortion Democrats have declared they are going all in on abortion on demand through all nine months, as their number one campaign issue," Dannenfelser said. "They're spending unprecedented sums to mislead voters on their stance. Many Democrats now say they want to 'Go Beyond Roe' because it wasn't enough."

Dannenfelser said pro-life candidates should "go on the offensive" and communicate with "the 'three C's.'"

"They must be clear about their opposition to painful late-term abortions, they must have compassion for women facing unplanned pregnancies and they must contrast their views with

those of their opponents, who have an extreme stance of pushing unlimited taxpayer-funded abortions on demand," she said. "This election cycle will be our largest ground game yet as we will focus on key battleground states to win a pro-life Senate and elect a National Defender of Life as president. We will take no voter for granted, whether they are pro-life and don't vote consistently or can be persuaded to vote pro-life when they hear how radical the Democrats have become. We must not grow weary in our pursuit to serve mothers and save children."

The group has not to date made an endorsement in the Republican presidential primary, but previously said it would support a candidate who supported a federal standard of a 15-week limit.

It is likely Donald Trump will support that lower limit, and it is acknowledged by pro-lifers that, while Trump was not an enthusiastic pro-life supporter while President, it was his elevation of right-wing justices to the Supreme Court that made the repeal of *Roe vs Wade* possible.

Catholics are moved divided on immigration. "We need to offer a hand to the helpless," pointed out one Catholic activist, "but there have to be some controls. Hardline anti-migrant policies may well not go down too well with grassroots Catholic voters, who would prefer a more nuanced and compassionate policy towards immigration."

Republican lawmakers are seeking tighter controls on the USA's southern border with Mexico.

Fernandez admits to shredding own book as controversy continues over contents

Anyone hoping to get their hands on a book by one of the Vatican's leading clerics that's now considered very controversial is out of luck - the clergyman says he has destroyed every copy.

Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez admitted that the book, *La pasion mística: espiritualidad y sensualidad* (*Mystical Passion: Spirituality and Sensuality*) written 25 years ago but which has now resurfaced, is "by current standards inconvenient" and "did not have the usefulness" he had envisioned at the time of writing.

The head of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith told OSV News that the book, published in 1998 while he was still a priest in Argentina, was perhaps an indicator that priests "should not venture into every area of life."

The DDF prefect told OSV that he bought "the few copies that were available in some bookstores and destroyed them."

The book billed itself as "an invitation to the world of passionate love that hides in the depths of our being."

Three of the book's chapters explicitly discuss orgasms, with the final chapter titled *God and the couple's orgasm*. Another passage



recounts a 16-year-old girl's "passionate encounter with Jesus" that includes caressing him on the beach and kissing his mouth.

Published while then-Father Fernandez was an adviser to several Argentine bishops' commissions, the 94-page volume explores what the author calls "the sublime paths of mystical union, until reaching a point in which we seem to touch the impossible."

Shortly after the original Spanish

text resurfaced online in early January, two sexual abuse survivors – who emphasised they were not accusing the cardinal of wrongdoing – told OSV News they found the material, passages of which they had read in translation, distressing.

Clerical abuse survivor Faith Hakesley, author of *Glimmers of Grace: Moments of Peace and Healing Following Sexual Abuse*, called the book "absolutely nauseating."

Teresa Pitt Green of Spirit Fire, a Christian restorative justice network that works with the Catholic Church, said that she was troubled by Cardinal Fernandez's account of the unnamed teen in his book, which she said indicated "a level of impropriety that is very disturbing."

In an email conversation with the cardinal, OSV shared a link to the full text of its interview with Hakesley and Pitt Green and asked the cardinal for his specific thoughts on their concerns.

Replying he said, "I agree that by today's standards it is an inconvenient book. In fact, I myself realised this 25 years ago, a few months after its publication and ordered it to be withdrawn because

it seemed to me that it did not have the usefulness I had imagined, and that very young or very old people could get confused.

"Moreover, I bought the few copies that were available in some bookstores and destroyed them," the cardinal wrote.

"That is why I regret that the ultra-conservative sectors that do not accept me have used this book and have spread it widely. It is totally against my will and no good is done with this. Today, I would write something very different."

Cardinal Fernandez said that "the material on male and female orgasm was taken from scientific books. But today we prefer lay people to do this research and not priests."

"Over the years we have learned many things, especially in the last decades," he wrote.

Regarding the unnamed 16-year-old girl referenced in his book, the cardinal said that "the story that this person told me, which I narrated in the book, was her initiative and I, of course, did not want to inquire about it."

He added that "on the other hand, the person's age was imaginary, because this was in a small parish in the interior of the

country, and I did not want anyone to be able to deduce who the person was."

The lurid details of the book have caused considerable embarrassment to the cardinal since their release at the start of the year, though many supporters are pointing out that the 'discovery' of the now out-of-print book online at that time was no coincidence. One Vatican insider told the *Universe*, "one second the cardinal is helping put together a liberal Church policy allowing blessings for same-sex couples and others in irregular relationships, and the next, by sheer 'coincidence', this odd book from his past resurfaces.

"It's clear that some of the more conservative elements of the Church have been sat on *La pasion mística: espiritualidad y sensualidad* for some time, and are using it as a weapon to belittle the cardinal.

"Church politics and power games can get nasty. More traditional elements of the Church Christian are seeing Fernandez as a key promoter of a liberal agenda, and are taking him down a peg or two now as a result.

"By hitting the man, you hit the policy."

Put the Eucharist at the centre of formation, seminarians told

If seminarians want to advance in their discernment and practice of religious life they must place the Eucharist at the centre of their formation, Pope Francis wrote.

Making God the "cornerstone" of one's life "can only be achieved through adoration," the pope said in a message to seminarians from the Archdiocese of Madrid.

Instead of reading his prepared remarks, he opted to field questions from the seminarians for an hour, reported COPE, the Spanish bishops' conference's radio station.

COPE's Vatican correspondent reported that among other things, the pope warned them against falling into ideology, "which prevents us from looking at people as brothers and sisters."

For seminarians studying how to transmit Jesus to others, "there is no other example but himself," the pope said. Jesus "will be our teacher, patient, severe, gentle or firm as we need in our discernment, because he knows us better than we know ourselves, and he waits for us, encourages us and sustains us in all our journey," he wrote.

The pope encouraged the seminarians to come face-to-face with the Eucharist each morning, a



practice which "makes us reflect on the futility of our worldly ideas, of our desires to ascend, to appear, to stand out."

"He who is immense makes a total gift of himself, and in my hands before receiving Communion he asks me: Have you reconciled with your brother or sister? Are you ready to enter my eternal banquet?" the pope wrote.

Pope Francis told seminarians to attend Eucharistic adoration "so that you may build the temple of God in your persons and in your communities with docility."

Meeting with the Spanish seminarians at the Vatican, Pope Francis urged them to "go into the desert" as Jesus did, so that Christ may speak directly to their hearts.

"If one is full of worldliness, of things – no matter if they are

deemed 'religious' – God will not find a place (in him), nor will we hear him when he knocks at our door," he wrote.

"Therefore silence, prayer, fasting, penance, asceticism are necessary to free ourselves from what enslaves us and to be entirely for God," the pope wrote.

The group travelled to Rome to accompany their archbishop, Cardinal Jose Cobo Cano, in formally "taking possession" of his titular church in Rome, St. Mary of Montserrat, which was built in 1506 as a church for the Spanish pilgrims traveling to Rome.

With a titular church, the cardinals become members of the clergy of Rome, evoking ancient times when the cardinals who elected popes were pastors of the city's parishes.



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Hallam-based charity launches new palliative care service in Bethlehem

On 1st August 2023, Bethlehem Care and Hospice Trust, a Hallam based charity, launched a new and ground-breaking service in Bethlehem.

Its nurses, the first licensed palliative care service in Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), began caring for 15 terminally ill people in their own homes, in Bethlehem and its surrounding villages.

The Bethlehem Care and Hospice Trust is a registered charity based in the UK and in Ireland. It is registered as an NGO in Palestine. It was set up in response to requests from Bethlehem community leaders who highlighted the limited provision of care for the terminally ill in Palestine.

Cancer is one of the major causes of death in OPT. Seven out of every ten reported cancer cases are at terminal stage when diagnosed. A recent report identified Bethlehem as having the highest concentration of reported cancer cases in OPT.

Prior to the launch of this service, care for the terminally ill was generally unsupported.

Described as 'a major humanitarian service and the first of its kind to be licensed by the Palestinian Minister of Health', the Bethlehem Care and Hospice Trust is presently providing palliative care to 31 patients and supporting their families. This includes providing equipment the patient would need that is not normally available in the home, such as oxygen machines, anti-decubitus mattresses, and wheelchairs. Pain relief is very important for these patients, but this hospice care extends beyond pain control and the supply of equipment and it includes support to grieving families.

There are a great many people in need of palliative care in the OPT, and while the Trust has ambitions to care for many more terminally ill patients, it does not have the resources to provide such care. Neither the Bethlehem community or the Palestinian Authority has the



Nurses Tamer and Dhua with Mohammed, a terminally ill patient, and his mother.

resources to support hospice care.

Bethlehem today

Bethlehem today sees no active conflict, yet the lingering repercussions of war weigh heavily on its residents.

The tragic events of Saturday 7th October, and subsequent incidents have effectively paralysed the local economy. Security checkpoints continue to isolate these areas, impeding the free flow of goods and people.

Last year there were no civic Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem. Bethlehem's hotels stand vacant. Bus and coach operators, tour guides, cafés, restaurants, and tourist sites have all shuttered doors, resulting in employee lay-offs. Those who are fortunate enough to have jobs often struggle to reach their workplaces due to stringent security lockdowns and checkpoints that obstruct the

free movement of people and goods.

Bethlehem's economy heavily depends on tourism and pilgrimages, yet during times of turmoil, visitors tend to stay away, causing widespread hardship. A World Health Organisation report dated 16th September 2023 highlighted that 40 per cent of the Palestinian population survives on less than \$2 per day (£1.58p). Bethlehem people simply do not have the means to support themselves.

Regrettably, in a region already grappling with limited employment opportunities and modest living standards, these individuals may remain jobless until lockdowns are lifted and the economy rebounds. This is not anticipated to be anytime soon.

In these circumstances, the young and healthy emigrate in search of work, security and a better life leaving the sick and the elderly. They cannot leave. They

must endure. This inevitably increases the demands on the limited resources of the hospice service.

However, even amid movement and travel constraints, these dedicated hospice nurses persist in their compassionate work, providing care and comfort to individuals with life limiting illnesses in the Bethlehem region, in the sanctity of their homes, despite the tumultuous circumstances that envelop them.

Daily these nurses courageously confront concerns for their personal safety, yet their commitment remains unwavering as they go out and attend to the most critically ill.

The future?

This service is presently the only licensed hospice service in the OPT, providing essential palliative care to terminally ill patients, enhancing their quality of life and supporting their families.

Fr Rami Asakrieh, parish priest of St Catherine's, Bethlehem, and Chair of the Charity's Bethlehem Board, said: "People are very happy that care is being given to the very sick and their families are being helped and supported. This service is a great blessing to the people of Bethlehem."

Joe McNally, trustee of the charity, told the *Universe*: "Our service began with 15 patients on 1st August. Today we care for 42 patients including two children. Demand for care increases every week and there is a huge amount of unmet care need.

"The charity's ambition is to develop and extend the service beyond Bethlehem into other towns and villages in the OPT so as to extend a compassionate hand to those who are suffering to enhance their quality of life on a daily basis.

"We are seeking support in this really important work, because under constant difficulties and deprivations these communities do not have the resources to provide for their terminally ill and elderly themselves.

"Every contribution makes a real difference in enabling some of the world's most vulnerable people, who have spent much of their lives under the shadow of injustice, violence, and warfare to spend their final days pain free and with some dignity."

For more information, visit www.bethlehemcareandhospicetrust.org



Nurses Tamar, Helen and Fr Gus O'Reilly with patient

France recalls famed priest 70 years after his urgent appeal to help the homeless

Caroline de Sury

On 1st February 1954, a Catholic priest was shocked to learn a woman had frozen to death on the streets of Paris with an eviction notice in her hand.

Seventy years later he was remembered for his heartfelt appeal that moved the country and changed the way the church helped the homeless forever.

Born Henri Grouès in 1912, he always wanted to become a priest and was ordained as a Capuchin Franciscan in 1938. But when World War II broke out, he joined the French Resistance, helping Jews escape the horrors of Nazi occupation in Europe. That's most likely when he earned his new name: Abbé Pierre.

He founded his Emaus ministry for the poor and homeless in 1949, but it was the winter of 1954 that made his name known to every French citizen.

In the aftermath of war, France faced an immense housing crisis, and in 1954, the winter was particularly cold. That year Abbé Pierre was shocked to learn of the death of an elderly woman on a Paris street, found in rags during the night with the eviction notice in her hand.

One month earlier, the friar witnessed the death of a baby in similar circumstances. Abbé Pierre rushed to the offices of Luxembourg radio in Paris and got a few minutes of air time.

"Each of us can come to the aid of the homeless," he urged. "By tonight, and tomorrow at the latest, we need: 5,000 blankets, 300 large American tents, 200 catalytic stoves," he said, referring to the tents used by American soldiers in World War II. "Drop them off quickly at the Rochester Hotel, 92, rue de la Boétie. Thanks to you, no adult, no child will lie tonight on the asphalt or quays of Paris."

The friar immediately set up two emergency centres, but they were "immediately overflowing," he said, adding that "every night, there are more than 2,000" people in need "huddled under the frost, without roof, without bread, more than one almost naked. Faced with so much horror, emergency cities are no longer even urgent enough!"

"This very evening, in every city in France, in every district of Paris," he continued, "signs must be hung under a light in the night, at the door of places where there are blankets, straw, soup, and where under this title 'Fraternal help centre,' we read these simple words: 'You who suffer, whoever you are, come in, sleep, eat, regain hope, here we love you.'"

The response to Abbé Pierre's



Abbé Pierre pictured at a birthday party in his honour shortly before his death in 2007

appeal was immense and immediate: Tons of clothing and blankets were donated in a few hours. In the following weeks and months, the momentum generated by his appeal raised 500 million francs – around \$86 million in today's terms. It included a check for two million francs donated by Charlie Chaplin in October 1954.

"I'm not giving them to you," the English-born actor was reported to have said to Abbé Pierre. "I'm giving them back. They belong to the vagabond that I was and that I embodied," he said referring to his early silent cinema roles of a moustache-and-round-hat vagabond.

To mark the auspicious date, Bishop Pascal Delannoy, who is

today's president of the Solidarity Council of the French bishops' conference, issued a statement about Abbé Pierre's commitment.

"Poverty is not inevitable, it can be fought," he said, referring to the works of the famous priest, who died in 2007. Bishop Delannoy

heads the diocese of Saint-Denis, north of Paris, where poverty is rife, linked in particular to the arrival of immigrants in precarious situations.

With the money he collected, Abbé Pierre built emergency housing and founded a new

"This very evening, in every city in France, in every district of Paris, signs must be hung under a light in the night, at the door of places where there are blankets, straw, soup, and where under this title 'Fraternal help centre,' we read these simple words: 'You who suffer, whoever you are, come in, sleep, eat, regain hope, here we love you.'"
Abbé Pierre's plea for help in 1954

Emmaus Association, working in the field of accommodation for the needy. In 1956, his work led to the adoption of a law prohibiting the eviction of tenants during the winter. It is still in force today.

"The sole aim of this appeal was to solicit everyone's generosity so that no one would freeze to death for lack of shelter," Bishop Delannoy said. But it did much more, the bishop stressed. "By putting the poorest of the poor at the heart of everyone's concerns, it provoked what the press of the time relayed under the title of the 'insurrection of kindness.'"

Bishop Delannoy pointed out that today, 15 per cent of the French population lives below the poverty line, which is about 10 million people. On 1st February, the Abbé Pierre Foundation published a 2024 report on housing difficulties in France. The document states that four million people 'suffer from inadequate housing' today, which it describes as a 'social bomb'.

The bishop of Saint-Denis called the situation of so many single-parent families especially alarming, but also pointed out that a number of French people commit themselves every day to serving the poorest of the poor.

"Today, may we once again hear the words of Abbé Pierre, and respond to his call," Bishop Delannoy concluded. "In the face of their brothers dying of misery, only one opinion should exist between people: the will to make it impossible for this to continue."



An emergency worker tends to a homeless man living on the streets of Paris. Despite efforts to eradicate poverty, today 15 per cent of French people live below the poverty line, with four million in inadequate housing

Disney star nails it: Three life lessons from Ursula the Sea Witch's bold voice

Elizabeth Scalia

"Life's full of tough choices, innit?"

The question oozes out of Ursula the Sea Witch like a plume of playfully poisonous vapour as she interrupts a brilliantly executed cabaret of a con meant to work on Ariel, the emotionally torn *Little Mermaid* of the 1989 Disney cartoon. "Come on, you poor, unfortunate soul," she booms in a joyfully passionate shout of wicked persuasion, "go ahead! Make your choice! I'm a very busy woman and I haven't got all day."

Ariel makes her difficult choice and Ursula, whose own voice suggests a bourbon-soaked brass band, steals the mermaid's youthful, bell-like tone.

We should hiss and boo and hate the sea witch. I never could, though, because as portrayed by the late, wildly gifted Pat Carroll, I was too busy wondering what sorts of awards are given to voice actors.

Carroll certainly deserved one but when she died on July 30, 2022, she may have gotten something better – a series of obituaries that gave the artist her due in spades. Reading it, however, I felt like Pat Carroll was leaving one last gift to the world – offering real wisdom from someone who had gone ahead and made her choices, and in ways that remained true to her own vision and her own voice.

Hers is the only obituary from which I have ever taken notes. After two years before my eyes the bullet points have gone a bit grubby, but I still ponder her "life lessons" when I really need to.

Carroll wouldn't have called them that, but it's what they are – three instructive messages from a compelling and creative woman:

Lesson one: Don't just go along

to get along, especially not for a credential.

Though Carroll studied at two colleges she never earned a degree. "I realised that what I was learning was not going to advance what I wished to do," she said once. "I always thought experience was the best preparation."

She was very right. Employers are beginning to rediscover the truth that not every career requires a degree and not every degree ensures competence. H.L. Mencken and Pete Hamill, two great journalists who never went to J-school, could write (and think) rings around their contemporaries. Broadly speaking, unless you want to fly a plane, engineer a building

or perform surgery, it is well to identify a mentor and then start doing the thing you feel called to.

Begin as you mean to continue. If you've made a mistake you'll know it soon enough.

Lesson two: When the phone stops ringing, don't get bitter. Build your own bell, and ring away! Create your own opportunities.

There is genius in this. At 50, Carroll faced being typecast in 'aging mother' roles for the rest of her life and didn't think much of that. Once more refusing to go along to get along, she boldly commissioned a playwright to create a one-woman show about Gertrude Stein. The play opened to



US actress Pat Carroll, pictured just before her death in 2022 at the age of 95. Her optimism in the face of adversity carries with it lessons for all of us.

rave reviews and Carroll won numerous accolades and awards for her work. She called it "the jewel in my crown." As she remembered, "I was recently divorced, I had gained a lot of weight, and the phone was not ringing. It was not the agents'

or directors' or producers' fault that the phone was not ringing. I thought, 'I am responsible for creating some kind of work.' And I began thinking of people to do."

Ten years later – and long before gender-bending ever became a thing – she ignored her sex to 'do' Falstaff in a production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* -- once more, to great acclaim. Theatre critic Frank Rich marvelled, "One realises that it is Shakespeare's character, and not a camp parody, that is being served."

Lesson three: Be proud of what is worthy.

Modesty may be a virtue but so is truth. Ursula the Sea Witch may have been a voice in a cartoon, but Carroll called the role "the one thing in my life that I'm probably most proud of. I don't even care if, after I'm gone, the only thing that I'm associated with is Ursula... ¶ because that's a pretty wonderful character and a pretty marvelous film to be remembered by."

Carroll's Ursula was a singular sensation and her pride was well-founded. It is no small thing to be able to recognize that what you have loved, you have served, and served well.

Which is a whole 'nother lesson, altogether.



We need to take every opportunity to reach out to others

Effie Caldarola

It was a crisp morning a few years back. I was early for a meeting in the city and I planned to pick up a coffee on my way.

I had forgotten to bring cash. And then I noticed a man on the corner. Did he have a sign asking for help? Or was it his clothing and demeanour that suggested he was probably homeless, facing another day on the streets.

I hurried by. I didn't have a couple of pounds to give him. But my conscience suggested I could ask him if he'd like some coffee. I could pay for it with the same card I would use for mine. But instead, I journeyed on and put him out of my mind.

But I didn't really put him out of my mind, did I? Because all these years later I

still wish I had paused and done that.

Here's another. My daughter and I were once visiting a university she hoped to attend. We went out one evening to a pizza place someone had recommended, and later, making our way down the few short blocks to our hotel with a pizza box, we saw an old man sitting against a building, surrounded by his possessions.

"Let's give him our leftover pizza," we said. He accepted and we headed home.

When would we have eaten those leftovers anyway? What bothered me later was that we simply handed him the pizza and walked on. Could we have spared a few moments to talk to him as one person to another? We had time, we were not in a dangerous place, and he, an old man

sitting on the street with a pizza box, was hardly a threat.

Pope Francis once said we should give to everyone who asks. This was in response to someone that suggested money might be used on alcohol, cigarettes or drugs. The pope implied that simple humanity overrode those judgmental concerns.

But if you live or work in a big city, you're probably overwhelmed by need at every street corner. We become inured to it. People become invisible, part of an unhoused 'problem' or immigration 'crisis,' not individual human beings with unique life stories.

In the Gospels, Jesus says "the poor you have always with you." Some people interpret this to mean, 'Yeah, there will

always be poor people'. But others see Jesus's emphasis differently. He tells his disciples they must always be with the poor, one with them. That's where a disciple belongs. It's easy to forget this.

We can't all help immigrants, or hand money to every person on the street. We cannot solve the housing crisis.

But somewhere in your community, there is a chance to be present to those who struggle. A parish near me hosts lunch for homeless people three days a week. Many parishes have SVP societies which provide direct outreach to people in need.

Sometimes I wonder what prevented me from buying that man a coffee. What did I fear? And what an opportunity to reach out to the other had I missed?

A VIEW FROM THE PEWS

Why did the apostles die as martyrs?

When I was teaching children about Catholicism, one of them asked me why the Apostles had to suffer awful deaths. Couldn't God have made sure that they died without any pain and peacefully?

What a question. I hadn't a clue, but the answer I did give was not far from what I now believe to be a possible answer. I said that God wanted the new and future believers in Christianity to remember what Jesus had gone through when he died, and we humans tend to have a habit of remembering truly horrible things when they happen to others and remember truly good things when they happen to us.

Jesus dying such a horrible death made sure we didn't forget it all.

The clue to a possible answer to that child's question came to me when I heard some specific words in a homily at Mass; these were 'God has absolute knowledge and wisdom, and this is why we humble human beings should trust him in all things.'

Those words stuck in my mind, and after the Mass, I turned them over in my mind. I had no doubts

about them, and they made me wonder how God may have used his supreme knowledge and wisdom to make sure we mere mortals not only understood, but more importantly remembered what he wanted from us, especially obeying his laws, which we call the commandments.

God knows that we are being tempted continually by Satan to disobey his commandments, and that our desires, especially for wealth and power, are also great causes of sinning against him.

Knowing we could be weak in such situations, and because of his love for us, he sent His Son to show and tell us how we can overcome these problems. It was now that my answer to the child's question seemed to me to be all about the effectiveness of our human memory. Could it be that God knew that we humans always needed reminding of his laws?

Throughout history, from the earliest civilisations, such as the Babylonians, Greeks, Romans and even the Nazis in the early 1900s, all made sure that their great



The Martyrdom of Saint Peter by Caravaggio

accomplishments, as they saw them, were recorded for posterity on things such as stone, papyrus, vellum, and paper, so that people would be reminded about what were nearly always their conquests, never what they invented for the benefit of people. This helped me realise that even throughout history we have known that our human memory is limited.

It was this fact about our memory that made me realise why God allowed many of his staunchest supporters such as the saints and martyrs to be put to death in cruel ways.

The death of St. John the Baptist

is a very clever one. It's all about him telling the king, Herod Antipas, that his marriage to Herodias, his dead brother's wife, was against the law. She already had a beautiful young daughter called Salome who was Herod's stepdaughter. Herod found her beauty captivating and promised her anything if she would dance for him. She promised to dance for him, but only if he had St. John's head cut off and served to her on a platter. This happened. It's a gruesome tale, which is probably why it is easily remembered.

We know that John and Jesus

were born within a year of each other so John could only have been in his early 30s when he was executed. Why so young? Was it because God knew that he had done the work he was put on earth for and wanted him to have the glory of heaven sooner rather than later?

The Apostles all died nasty deaths as martyrs except John who was marooned on the isle of Patmos for not denying Jesus. Knowing how these saints died and for what, continually reminds us of what Christianity is all about, and why we should be determined not to sin.

Our Lord Jesus Christ suffered a terrible death. He was beaten, whipped, crowned with thorns, crucified, and speared, all before dying on the cross. Because of his cruel death, we remember easily why it was very important. This was because he'd promised to rise from the dead after three days, and when he did this, it proved beyond any doubt that he was the Son of God.

We can never be sure why God does things unless he tells us, but when it helps us obey his commandments, then trying to understand his actions can help us keep our immortal souls free from mortal sin which should always be our aim in life.

We can never be sure, but does God use gruesome situations to help us remember easily the important things he wants us to remember?

JOURNEY IN FAITH

A quiet little mountain village in the Pyrenees...

It is a story that we are all familiar with, that of a young French peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous and the unlikely events in the grotto of Massabielle a small hollow in the cliffs just outside of the town of Lourdes, that began in the early weeks of 1858.

What happened that cold winter morning to a young girl, her sister Toinette and neighbor Jeanne Abadie, her companions, while they collected wood for their fire at home? Something did, for it changed lives, theirs and countless others, in subsequent years.

We are familiar with the story of the young woman seen by Bernadette, holding a rosary, captivating her attention. She got short shrift when she shared the story with Church authorities. But word spread of the young Soubirous girl who had been 'seeing things' at



Massabielle and it was not long before people began to follow Bernadette when she went to meet with 'the lady', as she called her

So, when the 'lady' was asked her name at the request of the Church, her response fitted the current

Church narrative. "I am the Immaculate Conception," she told Bernadette.

And the story grew. A spring of water sprouted in the grotto where the vision had appeared. And pilgrims began arriving. They do so

to this day.

It is estimated that some five million people a year visit Lourdes, either as part of an organised pilgrimage or in family groups. They visit the grotto and bathe in the water spring, which is very cold indeed!

My only visit to the shrine at Lourdes was back in 1962. It was a birthday gift from my Godmother, Jenny. I went as a helper with the HCPT, the Handicapped Children's Pilgrimage Trust, founded by Dr Michael Strode in 1956. On retirement Michael became an oblate with the Cistercian Order community on Caldey island off the coast of Tenby, South Wales. After a life devoted to the service of others, he died in late December 2019, at the age of 96. May he rest in the peace of the Lord.

My abiding memory of that

pilgrimage was of children's laughter and cheerfulness. One little girl, I think her name was Fiona, couldn't walk without a frame. When, one evening, someone casually asked her if she would like to be cured in Lourdes, her reply was quick and simple. "If Our Lady wants it".

On other occasions they arranged wheelchair races, urging their carers to go faster. By some miracle, no one was hurt.

And together, at the candle lit grotto, we gathered in prayer Bernadette entered the convent of the Daughters of Charity in Nevers where she remained until her death in 1879, at the age of 35. She was canonised on December 8th, 1933, by Pius XI.

This weekend, on February 11th, we mark the feast day of Our Lady of Lourdes.

CHRIS MCDONNELL



The business of the Christian is to follow Christ – his teaching and his example

In the call of Christ to follow him, there lies a profound simplicity and depth. It is not merely an invitation to admire his example but to embody it in our daily lives.

The early Christians, aptly named ‘The People of the Way,’ understood this deeply. They followed a path illuminated by Christ’s example of love, not through complex theological constructs but through simple, powerful actions: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and those in prison, and burying the dead.

These acts of love, by which we help our neighbours with their everyday material and physical needs, gain us entry into Jesus’s kingdom on the last day (Matthew 25: 34-40). Thus, the call to follow him extends our circle of care beyond family and friends to encompass all humanity, as exemplified in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

At the heart of Christ’s kingdom within us are the Beatitudes, the interior conditions for a life of loving service. What happens to us inwardly affects what we do outwardly. These interior attitudes backtrack to the condition of the human heart and showcase the way we should live: with humility, meekness, mercy, justice, purity of heart, compassion, peacefulness, and persistence in face of opposition. These blessings ensure that whatever we do, is done with the right spirit. Do we not all cringe when someone does the right thing, but in the wrong way? Not with a glad heart but reluctantly, perhaps?



But when someone comes to our aid in a spirit of humility and respect, what a relief and what a difference that makes.

Christ’s kingdom, as he taught, is an inward realm of spiritual richness, manifesting outwardly in societal actions. This kingdom is not about accruing wealth or status but about serving and uplifting others. In describing his kingdom, Christ paints a picture where acts of kindness and service, conducted in the spirit of the beatitudes, are the true measures of allegiance to Him.

This fundamental aspect of Christianity, however, often gets overshadowed by an overemphasis on doctrine separated from Christian practice. Cardinal Newman insightfully differentiated between mere doctrinal assent and a “real assent,” which involves living by Christ’s example. It’s about active faith issuing forth in acts of love, not passive agreement.

Christ posed a vital question about those who truly follow him in Matthew 7: 21-23. Are those his followers who offer lip service to His teachings or are those his

followers who actively live by his example? The answer is unequivocal. The essence of being a Christian is not found in the mere appreciation or elucidation of doctrines but in the practical application of Christ’s teachings. This practical application is encapsulated in the Golden Rule illustrated in Matthew 25:40, which reminds us that our actions towards the least in society are actions towards Christ himself. (“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”)

Today, the Christian journey is at a crossroads. Many are entangled in doctrinal disputes, losing sight of the essence of Christ’s message — to live a life of love and service. The Church risks becoming mired in abstract, intellectual debates rather than engaging in transformative action. This predicament echoes the warning in James 1:23-24, where faith without action is likened to a person who forgets his own reflection. (“Anyone who

listens to the Word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”)

Pope Francis has been vocal about this divide. He emphasises that ideology should never eclipse a real, practicing faith. His approach to faith is not static but evolves with a deep understanding of the times.

His critique of backward-looking practices, like insistence on the use of the Latin Mass, underscores this point. He is a pastoral Pope who exemplifies Christ-like service, directing resources to the poor and personally ministering to the needy.

The true business of a Christian is to follow in the footsteps of Christ. It is a calling to be conformed to Christ who stands with and serves the poor, learning from them and embracing poverty in spirit.

It is a call to live out Christ’s teachings in tangible, loving ways by following his example.

Pope Francis’s approach to faith is not static but evolves with a deep understanding of the times. His critique of backward-looking practices, like insistence on the use of the Latin Mass, underscores this point.



“The essence of being a Christian is not found in the mere appreciation or elucidation of doctrines but in the practical application of Christ’s teachings ... our actions towards the least in society are actions towards Christ himself...”

SUNDAY WORSHIP

ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS



Jesus brought all together - even lepers

11th February 2024 – 6th Sunday
(Year B)

Leviticus (13:1-2, 44-46)

Lepers had to live apart. Only if a priest pronounced a leper cured could he or she come back into normal life

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: “When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. He is leprous, he is unclean. The priest shall pronounce him unclean; the disease is on his head.

“The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.”

“He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

Responsorial: from Psalm 32

R./: I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation

Blessed is he whose fault is taken away,

whose sin is covered.

Blessed the man to whom the Lord imputes not guilt, in whose spirit there is no guile.
(R./)

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,

my guilt I did not hide.

I said, I confess my faults to the Lord,

and you took away the guilt of my sin. (R./)

Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you just;

exult, all you upright of heart.

(R./)

1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1

Instead of offending people, we must aim to please them if we can

My brethren, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Gospel: Mark 1:40-45

Jesus cures a leper by the healing touch of his hand

A leper came to Jesus begging



him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Leprosy of the soul

By referring to leprosy in two of the three readings today, clearly the Church wants to direct our attention to something deeper than a purely physical disease. This is confirmed in the Responsorial Psalm, celebrating the joy of those who confess their sins before God, and experience his forgiveness. We might regard sin as a kind of leprosy of the soul. The ancient world used to combat physical leprosy by isolating the lepers, make them live outside the camp or town, and making them cry aloud, “Unclean, unclean!” as a warning to anyone approaching them. Also, whoever had the misfortune to even touch a leper would be regarded as unclean, and would be excluded from the community.

Perhaps there is some parallel to this on the spiritual plane. In the church of Jesus Christ, a sin committed by any member of this

community is never a purely private affair, but a rejection in some degree of the standards the members have pledged to uphold. One of the most disturbing sayings of Christ in the gospels was his reference to Judas at the Last Supper: “Not one of them is lost, except the one who chose to be lost” (Jn 17:12).

There is a touching humility in the leper’s request to Jesus, “If you want to, you can cure me.” This appeal was met with compassion by Jesus who, as St Mark comments, was moved with pity. He went further, stretching out his hand and touching the leper, so making

“Jesus wants to re-establish communion in a broken human family ... leprosy drove people away from others through the fear of the healthy ... Jesus wants to remove these barriers ...”

himself unclean according to the law. Shortly afterwards Mark says that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but had to stay outside in country places. This compassion for suffering humanity resulted in more and more people coming to him, and even today the outstretched arms of God’s Son on the cross are a never-ending invitation to sinners to seek refuge with him. No longer was the leper, when cured, forced to live apart. After showing himself to the priest he was re-admitted as a member of the community.

What in the past was called a confession is now called the sacrament of reconciliation. We

should reflect that just as mortal sin is not an isolated act, but rather the culmination of a series of minor infidelities, so reconciliation is a gradual return to God over a period of time, with the reception of the sacrament as the high point, a time to celebrate our joy and gratitude in being at one with God again.

This conversion, this newly-found commitment to the Lord is a thing which has to be constantly renewed. There is an enduring need for reconciliation, if we want to love God with our whole strength, and our neighbour as ourselves — the task Christ has set each of us when he said, “This do, and you will live.”

A Word of thanks

Today’s story may be an early version of the story of the ten lepers. However the point is quite different. In this version the leper, far from not thanking Jesus, goes about shouting his gratitude to all who would listen. The passage is made more obscure by Mark’s literary device of the ‘Messianic Secret’, his recurring claim that Jesus was trying to keep who he was a secret, which today’s scholars regard as just an odd, narrative form. Surely, however, Jesus did not want to be known as the kind of military messiah that so many people in his time wanted and expected.

The predicament of the leper in the time of Jesus was truly pathetic. Those unfortunates were debarred from all social life, both religious and commercial. We might try to explain their plight with examples from one’s local surroundings, although it is difficult to find such an all-embracing boycott, in

modern cultures.

Jesus crosses social and religious boundaries in order to cure the leper. But before this could happen, the leper had the courage to break the Law of the Old Testament and approach Jesus. The outcast had such a high opinion of this holy man that he risked a rebuke from him for ignoring the normal prohibitions. At the heart of the encounter, compassion moves Jesus not only to respond with a word of encouragement, but also to reach out and touch him. Here Jesus shows us God’s attitude to human disability. He wishes to reach us in our weakness and restore us to fullness of life.

It is not enough that the outcast is restored to health. Without the permission of the priest he could not regain his place in society and would remain an outcast. Jesus wants to re-establish communion in a broken human family. Leprosy drove people away from others through the fear of the healthy that they would contract the dread disease Jesus wants to remove these barriers between human beings and set up a communion that is free and harmonious. We might apply this to our own community by instancing types of bias and prejudice that exist locally and invite people to ask the Lord to heal whatever keeps them at a distance from certain others. Continuing reconciliation is necessary as we go through life and receive various types of hurts, which could make us withdraw from others as the leper did. It requires the courage of the leper to bring these hurts and fears to the Lord for healing.

A different homily could be built on the second reading. Paul’s emphasis on thought for the other’s good is a reminder that none of us can ignore. He does not pander to the desires of others, but in a generous spirit thinks of how his actions might affect them. He wants to imitate the Lord, who loved his brethren even unto death. Paul wants to love them in their weakness and to work for their advantage. This type of attitude is unto the glory of God in ordinary things, such as eating and drinking. It resembles the practical advice given by Matthew in 18:10 that no one can ignore anyone else, even the least.

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See www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie

Ashes can be public witness to our faith, so wear them with pride this Lent!

Q. As Ash Wednesday approaches on 14th February, we will receive ashes on our forehead and be told: 'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.'

With Catholic teaching about an eventual resurrection after death, why are we told such a seemingly morbid and fatalistic thing? Why not simply say something like, 'These ashes are a sign of repentance?' It seems to me that the emphasis should be on the fact that, even though we are stained by sin, we will live again. Could you comment?

A. In recent years, there has been an option with regard to the distribution of ashes. Those administering them may say the traditional 'Remember that you are dust ...' or they may opt instead to use the formula: 'Repent and believe in the Gospel.'

I always choose the latter, for some of the same reasons that you have cited. The 'dust' line does, though, remind us that we are both human and mortal, and it is taken directly from the Book of Genesis (3:19).

Q. At the Ash Wednesday Mass, we will hear the injunction from Matthew's Gospel: 'Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them.'

But I have found that wearing ashes is a recognisable reminder of the season for those whom I meet during the day, and it can sometimes serve as a tool for evangelisation.

Recently, I explained to a work colleague the significance of ashes and the rules of the Lenten fast, and I noticed that he actually ate less – although maybe he was simply being polite!

Should I wash off my ashes early in the day to honour the biblical directive or wear them all day in the hope of prompting conversation?

A. I would say wear the ashes all day. The passage you quote from (Mt. 6:1) is taken from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, and earlier in that same sermon, Jesus had said: "Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father" (5:16).

It all has to do with motivation; what Jesus rules out is wearing ashes "to win the praise of others" (6:2). But that's not why you are wearing them; your goal, instead, is to have people look at your forehead and wonder what it means.



'When worn for the right reasons, ashes witness publicly to our belief.'

The ashes serve first as a sign of repentance; in the early Church, converts who were coming into the church at Easter were sprinkled with ashes during Lent as a sign of their need for forgiveness. We are not perfect people; all of us stand in need of God's mercy. Second, the ashes indicate our mortality – the fact that our bodies will one day return to the dust of the earth.

When worn for the right reasons, ashes witness publicly to our belief. Matthew's Gospel discourages not the outward show of faith but the interior pride that could undermine it. As you have found, the ashes can sometimes lead to a discussion about their meaning, and that is surely a worthy outcome.

Q. Why do so many priests leave the altar as soon as the final hymn begins? The choir practises the hymn for hours, and then the priest hurries off right after they start. So other people begin to leave, too, and nobody pays any attention to the music. I think it's rude.

A. I agree. The guidelines of the Church (the General Instruction of the Roman Missal) are silent on the matter of a recessional hymn, and some parishes choose not to use one at all – their thinking being

that the congregation is sent forth immediately to "glorify the Lord by their lives."

But if a hymn is used, common courtesy and liturgical propriety ought to keep the priest at the altar for the greater part of it. Since it is a 'recessional', the final part of the hymn may accompany the priest back down the aisle; but he should encourage the congregation to sing (and respect the choir) by not moving too soon.

Q. A number of Catholic parishes here in my archdiocese have hosted programmes on the Alpha movement in Christianity. I have found conflicting guidance as to the legitimacy/orthodoxy of this movement. Can you advise me as to whether it is approved for Catholic membership?

A. Alpha is a programme of Christian evangelisation first developed some 30 years ago at an Anglican charismatic parish in London. It consists of about a dozen interactive sessions in which participants discuss basic questions of faith – for example, 'Who is Jesus?' and 'Why and how do I pray?' The goal is to bring them into a closer personal relationship with Christ.

Alpha is compatible with

Catholic teaching, although it does not deal specifically with issues like the theology of the sacraments. There is a version called Alpha for Catholics, which supplements the basic programme with teachings specific to Catholicism. Since its inception, Alpha has been used in thousands of Catholic parishes in more than 70 countries.

Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, the preacher to the papal household, is a great friend of Alpha, and Cardinal Christoph Schonborn of Vienna has said, "Alpha is for meeting Jesus. ... For me, the Christian life has something to do with simplicity, friendship, closeness and joy. That's what I feel about Alpha, and I think that's a sign that it works and that it's given from the Lord."

Q. My question concerns the 'Amen' response just before taking Communion. When the priest says, "the body of Christ," is it ever appropriate to say something different, such as "yes," "I believe" or even "thank you"? Or what if the recipient simply says nothing at all? With any of these or other possible responses, could the priest refuse to serve Communion?

A. The response to 'the body of

Christ' is 'amen'. In the liturgical guidelines, there is no suggestion of, or permission for, an alternative response. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, the official 'rulebook' of Church liturgy, says: "The priest raises the host slightly and shows it to each, saying, the body of Christ. The communicant replies, amen, and receives the sacrament" (No. 161).

I'm sure that part of the reason for this universal conformity is to assure the dignity and respect that should surround the Eucharist.

As to your final question, whether the priest should refuse to give Communion to someone who uses a different response, I don't think so; that doesn't mean the person doesn't believe in the Eucharist or is unworthy to receive.

If the recipient, however, made no response at all, the priest might wonder whether the person had ever received before. I can imagine a priest, in that situation, quietly asking if the person were a Catholic – although my own tendency would be simply to give the benefit of the doubt.

Unfortunately, this column cannot accept questions from readers

PRAYER AND SCRIPTURE

ALLEGRA MUTANDA



Leaning into the Cross – a Lenten journey

Soon, we will be entering into the season of Lent. I am writing this article in the week between the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord and Ash Wednesday. We have come out of the Christmas season and are about to embark on our Lenten journey. We have just celebrated the birth of Jesus and now we are looking towards his passion and death to his Resurrection on the third day.

But not so fast with Easter. The Church gives us those 40 days of Lent before Resurrection day to push us to focus and spend time with the Lord in the wilderness. To walk the way of the cross with him. To accompany him to Calvary and stay with him during his Passion. To hold our breath on that silent Holy Saturday while God sleeps in the flesh so that, ultimately, we come to witness and celebrate Christ's rising from the dead.

But again, let's return to the start of that story.

Take up your Cross

How are you planning to spend your Lent? Is this something you have been thinking about – or is Lent going to 'fall' on you unexpectedly when you wake up on Ash Wednesday? Are you asking the Lord what He is hoping to teach you or reveal to you this Lent, as you spend time in the wilderness with Him?

For this journey of Lent is an essential one in the life of each believer. St Louis-Marie de Montfort said: "Never the cross without Jesus or Jesus without the cross". Pope Francis tells us that, as Christians, faith always remains something of a cross. Being Christians does not mean we are immune to the desert and the cross that Jesus calls us to carry. In fact, Jesus said: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16: 24).

Yet the cross is not an affliction. Through the cross, we see resurrection, we see new life and new birth. We see a new beginning. We do not need to fight the cross, but rather we are called to lean into it and embrace it as Jesus did.

Yes, the cross will lead us to death – but from death to glorious resurrection.

Lean In

A few years ago, I joined Student Cross, an Easter walking pilgrimage to Walsingham. The group I was part of was the Essex Leg of the pilgrimage (125 miles to Walsingham, carrying a 25-pound cross). On the first day, the cross seemed quite light. Hardship? What had they been talking about? This was easy and not heavy at all.



Veronica wipes the face of Jesus in this representation of the sixth Station of Cross at the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes. Photo/Paul Haring)

Yet, as the days progressed, things started to change. My shins were hurting, I was starting to develop blisters – I swear my blisters had blisters, and the skin on my shoulders was tender where the cross laid each time it was my turn to carry it. To make matters worse, the cross seemed to have become heavier. How was that possible?

I got to the stage where I didn't mind the walking as long as I didn't have to look at or carry that cross; it had become a symbol of pain and hardship for me.

But then I found solace in two places. First, in those in the group: their love, support and encouragement. Second, and more importantly, I also found that, when I leaned into the cross and rested my weight upon it, it became much easier to carry. Oddly, its weight as I leaned into it gave me support and relief. Yet, when it was lifted from my shoulder by the next person, I lost the 'comfort' of its presence.

By day seven, Good Friday, when we arrived at Walsingham, I was

aching all over but my heart was full [of joy] for what we had accomplished.

That pilgrimage helped me understand a little of what it means 'to carry' the cross.

The Big Picture

Many of us will give up and take up something for Lent. At first, it might be easy but, as the days progress and there is no sight of the finish line, we may find ourselves 'bartering' with our own choices and with God. We might even feel

like giving up.

When, or if, those moments come, look at the cross. Really look at it. Lean into it. Embrace it. And let it become your strength. That very first Good Friday, it looked like it was all over. But God knew. He was redeeming creation in that single act of love. And not any kind of love.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Deus caritas est* – on God is love – speaks of Jesus' death on the cross as the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise us and save us. This is love in its most radical form.

Whatever our Lenten resolutions end up being in what we give up (fast or abstinence) or take up (prayer and almsgivings), we should never forget or be distracted from looking at the cross. It reminds us of the bigger picture even in times of struggle. It is the breakthrough to new life. Just remember why you are doing this and the journey the Lord is taking you on. So embrace the cross. Lean into it – and let its presence remind you of the love that God has for you.

'Yes, God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life.' (John 3: 16)



Allegra carries the cross during an Easter walking pilgrimage to Walsingham. 'I also found that, when I leaned into the cross and rested my weight upon it, it became much easier to carry. Oddly, its weight as I leaned into it gave me support and relief.'



AROUND THE PARISHES & EDUCATION

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



Ancestors bless memorial of famous recusant family

Fr David Ward

Lord and Lady Stafford visited Our Lady & St Walstan's, Costessey, for the morning Mass on Sunday, 28th January, at the end of which everyone processed to the cemetery for the blessing of the recently restored Jerningham Memorial.

The Jerningham family lived at Costessey Hall for many centuries and kept the Catholic faith throughout the Reformation, one of the famous recusant families of Norfolk. In the 19th century, the Jerninghams married into the Stafford family.

Costessey Hall closed after the First World War and was demolished over a number of years. Costessey golf course now occupies the site.

One of the last parts to be decommissioned was the cemetery

and in 1953 the bodies buried there were transferred to the cemetery at Our Lady & St Walstan's. It is the memorial over their grave that has been restored and which Lord and Lady Stafford came to visit.

After the blessing, Lord Stafford thanked everyone for attending and especially for looking after his ancestors.

The parish and their guests then retired to the Garden Room for refreshments and to look at a wonderful display of photographs of Costessey Hall assembled by local historian Paul Cooper.

Photo: L to R, Fr David Ward (parish priest), Lady Stafford, Lord Stafford, Paul Cooper, Sharon Blundell (Norfolk County Councillor) and Vivienne Bell (Costessey Town Councillor).



Great story as St Alban's quartet make it to semi of writing competition

Four aspiring young writers from St Alban's Catholic Primary School in Walker have been picked from thousands to go through to the semi-final of a national story writing competition.

Thirty Year 6 pupils at St Alban's took part in the BBC 500 Words contest, which required them to write a story of no more than 500 words, with marks awarded for characterisation, plot, originality and enjoyment.

"Children of all abilities are encouraged to use their creativity and imagination to write a story they would love to read without the pressure of having to worry about spelling, punctuation and grammar," explained Daniel Moore, Year 6 teacher at the school.

"All stories were judged by a panel, and only 5,000 stories from around the country would be picked to go through to Round Two - which four of our pupils were included within."

The St Alban's qualifiers were Ruby Watson, with a fantasy story entitled *'The Enchanted Meadow'*; Olivia Jenkins, with *'Nala's Christmas Wish'*, which related the tale of Santa rescuing a homeless

puppy; Eliza Costen, who wrote *'The Misshapen Trip'* about a disastrous school expedition to London; and Anna Richardson, with the comedy *'Santa Loses His Beard'*.

All four were delighted to progress to Round Two of the competition.

"I'm amazed," said Eliza, while Anna agreed, "I couldn't believe I got picked," and Olivia added: "I'm so excited about the next round."

Ruby, who was additionally chosen as the school's in-house winner, said: "It's pretty good to get picked."

Each member of the class was awarded a BBC certificate of achievement for entering, while the semi-finalists received an additional prize of sweets, and Ruby was presented with a box of chocolates.

"Year 6 had a special classroom celebration with sweet treats, pop and a film to celebrate the whole class's entries and efforts," continued Mr Moore.

Since 500 Words was launched by Chris Evans on the Radio Two Breakfast Show in 2011, over a million stories have been submitted

by children aged five to 11 from across the UK.

The penultimate round will see the remaining entries reduced to a shortlist of 50 finalists, with bronze, silver and gold winners in each of two age categories then decided by the 500 Words Panel.

Judges include best-selling writers Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Francesca Simon and Charlie Higson, along with former Children's Laureate Malorie Blackman, and TV legend, children's author and World Book Day ambassador Sir Lenny Henry.

The competition is also supported by Her Majesty Queen Camilla

"These competitions contribute to inspiring creativity and excitement for writing and reading," added Mr Moore.

"The children enthused a great deal about their stories, and it really heightened their level of personal pride in their work. They really wanted to be the best that they could."

The winners will be announced on World Book Day on 7th March, when they will appear on The One Show.

Tell your story to the Universe Catholic Weekly!

Let's see your parish and school news in the Universe Catholic Weekly

Submit your stories to Andy Drozdziak

andy.drozdziak@universecatholicweekly.co.uk

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

St Mary's receives Race Equality Charter award

St Mary's University, Twickenham (SMU) has been awarded the Race Equality Charter (REC) Bronze award after a successful application to Advance HE.

The REC is a framework through which institutions work to identify and address internal barriers faced by Black, Asian, and Minority

Ethnic (BAME) staff and students. The framework aims to help improve the representation, progression, and success of BAME people in higher education.

St Mary's Vice-Chancellor Anthony McClaran said: "I am delighted that St Mary's has been awarded the Race Equality Charter

Bronze Award from Advance HE. This award underpins our commitment as a university to fostering equality, diversity, and inclusion in higher education.

"In doing so, we draw on our university values of excellence, respect, inclusiveness and generosity of spirit."

Cardinal pays tribute to those who chose the consecrated life

On the feast of the Presentation of the Lord each year, the Catholic Church also celebrates the World Day of Celebration for Consecrated Life. Instituted by Pope John Paul II in 1997, the theme chosen this year is: 'Pilgrims of Hope on the Path of Peace'. On this day, all consecrated men and women are invited to renew their commitment 'to follow Christ, as joyful messengers of the good news of the Gospel.'

This year was no different, with a Mass celebrated by Cardinal Vincent on 3rd February at Westminster Cathedral to celebrate the great witness of those who have been consecrated to go out and

share the Gospel.

In his homily, Cardinal Nichols drew attention to this witness. He told the congregation: "It's probably impossible to calculate the contribution and impact that religious women and men make in the lives of other people," he said.

"Think of the leadership roles that you have been fulfilling, think of the example you've given quietly day by day and continue to do so. I think of leadership in education institutions like our schools. Think of all the teaching that has passed through your hands and actions to countless children. The nursing that you have given and imbued with that great sense of faith and



prayer. The catechesis in parishes that you assist. The social outreach, especially gathering in the lost and the marginalised.

"These are just some of the responses to the women and men in religious life, to the presentation of the Lord Jesus. To those tasks, you bring wisdom and experience,

often great courage and bold judgement, patience and an enduring enthusiasm and so much more. So thank you very much indeed."

Several individuals were also celebrating a jubilee, with three Silver Jubilarians, two Golden Jubilarians, four Diamond

Jubilarians and a Platinum Jubilarian. Cardinal Vincent especially congratulated Sr Bernadette O'Malley on her 75th Anniversary of her profession.

After the homily, all religious were invited to renew their commitment. Mass was followed by a reception in the Cathedral Hall.



St Anselm's College

Birkenhead, Wirral CH43 1UQ
Part of the Edmund Rice Family

requires a new

Headteacher



Start Date: September 2024 Salary Range: L29-L33 (£94,348 - £102,995)

The Board of Governors of this popular and successful boys Catholic Grammar School seeks to appoint a suitably-experienced, ambitious and exceptional Headteacher with a proven track record of success.

We require an outstanding leader capable of inspiring, motivating and supporting our pupils and staff to achieve their full potential. The College is part of the Edmund Rice Schools Network, founded by the Christian Brothers, and will soon enter the Trusteeship of the Gaudete Trust, a joint Trust with five other Religious Orders. The current Headteacher retires in August 2024 after 22 years' service, during which The College and its facilities have been transformed.

The successful applicant will be someone who:

- Is a practising Catholic
- Is committed to and understands Catholic education
- Is an inspirational leader with an understanding of the ethos of the College and a clear vision for its future
- Is committed to improving outcomes for all of our students
- Is able to lead, motivate and inspire students and staff
- Has a proven track record of raising standards in teaching and learning
- Has excellent communication, organisational and inter-personal skills

Prospective candidates are invited to contact the College to arrange a visit.

Please contact Mrs Alison Cook by email: acook@st-anselms.com

Application packs and further details are available **via the College website** at: www.st-anselms.com

Completed application forms should be returned by post to: Mrs Alison Cook, Clerk to the Governors
Or via email to acook@st-anselms.com

Closing date for applications: Friday 9th February 2024

Shortlisting will take place: Monday 12th February 2024

Interview dates: Tuesday 27th and Wednesday 28th February 2024



Photograph: Jubilarians pictured with Archbishop Bernard Longley, and Fr Gary Buckby and Sister Una Coogan, Episcopal Vicars for Religious.

Archbishop celebrates religious' lives of service

On Saturday 3rd February, St Chad's Cathedral hosted the annual Day for Religious, at which religious brothers and sisters from across the archdiocese renew their commitment to the service of Jesus Christ, Light of the World.

The Mass was celebrated by Archbishop Bernard Longley with Fr Justin Karakadu, SDV delivering the Homily. As ever the Mass involved a Nigerian offertory procession and music from the Sorelli Minori at communion.

Eight jubilarians received special attention for their lives of service. They met with Archbishop Bernard ahead of the Mass and shared their vocation stories. Between them they had given 270 years of dedicated service.

After Mass, the guests enjoyed lunch before guest speaker, Austen Ivereigh, a journalist, author, commentator and biographer of Pope Francis, addressed the gathering.

Dr Ivereigh was one of the theological advisors at last year's Synod in Rome and is a close friend of Pope Francis. He has written several biographical books about the Holy Father.

During his talk, Dr Ivereigh discussed his role at the Synod and asked, "why synodality at this moment?" He touched on the crisis/collapse in vocations and outlined "the coming era of Christianity is going to look very different."

He shared with the audience that "Synod is about a spiritual

conversion" and we are "in transition to a new era" and embarking on a "transformation of culture."

Dr Ivereigh referenced the words of Pope Francis that we "must rediscover the word 'together'...we are "listening, hearing and feeling the voice of the Spirit...we are a Church that embraces everyone."

The eight religious marking special jubilees were (Silver): Sr Maris Stella Igwe, DDL; Sr Loretto Okwaji, DDL; Sr Ewa Pliszczak SSpS; Sr Roseline Ezeifo, DDL.

Celebrating her Golden jubilee was Sr Pauline Myres, SP, while Diamond jubilees were marked by Sr Marie Joynes, SP; Sr Therese Browne, SP; and Sr Christine of St John the Divine, who is an Anglican Religious.

Exciting 'menu' of great books to read serves up a tasty treat for St Aidan's pupils

Tasty reads were on the menu at a Catholic school in Ashington when pupils were served up a literary feast in an initiative designed to promote a love of reading.

The Book Tasting was a new venture for St Aidan's Catholic Primary School, where 28 Year 3 children from Maple Class took part in the innovative event.

The school hall was transformed into a 'restaurant', with each table featuring a selection of books from different genres, especially chosen to whet the appetites of the young readers.

"We wanted to entice the children into reading a range of book types," explained St Aidan's deputy head, Julie Teer, who organised the morning with the assistance of Year 3 teacher Julie Poynton.

"Book tastings are a way to get several books into the hands of students to explore in a fun, no-pressure way.

"They can be elaborate or kept more simple."

"The children completed a 'menu'

after exploring books on each table and completing a bookmark about which books they would like to read," she continued.

"It was a great way of sharing our love of reading with parents and children, and a special time when parents and carers could spend time sharing books and reading with their children."

The pupils at St Aidan's have also recently benefited from a new library at the school, which is a member of the Bishop Bewick Catholic Education Trust.

"The children loved exploring new books – as well as the cookies!" said Mrs Teer.

"Any experience the children get to share with their loved ones is special to them. They also loved showing off our new library to parents."

"Any initiative to promote reading in our school is vital to growing budding readers," she added.

"We want our children to be inspired by a range of genres and to be excited by reading."



One of the tables gets a taste of the reading on offer, with family members



The guests tucked into a traditional fish and chip supper after the service

Real show of Christian unity creates joyous day in B45

Ann Smith

To celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, members and friends of eight churches in the B45 postcode area of Birmingham came together to worship and share a meal on Friday, 19th January.

Around 70 people attended, drawn from four denominations in south west Birmingham to the church hall of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour.

Fr Srinu Bonthu welcomed everyone and the worship was led by Greg Hartigan from Our Lady's church. B45 Churches Together

clergy joined hands to lead the final prayers and blessings.

There was a joyous atmosphere. One person said: "I have waited all my life to see churches really join together to share the love of Jesus." Another said: "We need each other now more than ever." A final comment: "Oh, I have missed such gatherings in recent years."

Many people offered suggestions for further get-togethers, such as a joint choir, picnic in the park with worship, joint retreat days and men's groups. The positivity and joy was palpable and, at times, emotional.



It's great to debate, mate, as St Paul's discusses hot topics

Students at St. Paul's Catholic High School in Wythenshawe are taking part in the Debate Mate programme, which is designed to develop confidence, improve speaking and listening attainment and enhance leadership and teamwork skills.

St Paul's hosted one of the first regional rounds of the Urban Debate League, with over 70 pupils plus staff in attendance. Five schools from across North West took part in the event – St Paul's, Burnage Academy for Boys, Trinity C of E, Eden Boys Leadership Academy and Ellesmere Park High.

St Paul's had two teams of 4 pupils in the competition, drawn from from Years 7 - 10, with support from staff. The teams went head-to-head with teams from other schools in two rounds of fierce and previously unseen debates. They had just 15 minutes to prepare after being given the motion and were allocated either opposition or proposition.

All pupils from across the schools employed high-level skills in terms of creative thinking and formation of content to argue their views. They utilised formal and ambitious linguistic choices and a range of rhetorical devices as well as effective debating strategies and listening skills to rebut opponent's points and interject their own with solid supporting information and clarity. Their input was assessed by independent Debate Mate judges on their content, style and strategy.

The topics debated were:

Motion 1 - Reality tv should be banned

Motion 2 - The government should impose an 8pm curfew for under 16s.

The St Paul's teams each won a debate. They are now looking forward to round 2 of the Urban Debate League.

The St Paul's Debate Mate team

meets weekly with the school's Oracy Champion, history teacher Ms Holly Lewis, and forms part of the school's commitment to develop oracy as a key life skill, to build pupils' confidence and ability to find their voice to articulate and discuss ideas in a safe space ready for life beyond school.

Debate Mate, which is a charity, employs university students to run extra-curricular debate workshops in schools, teaching pupils how to control and promote discussion and ideas and developing a range of skills in them.

Year 9 St Paul's pupil, Ashley, is just one of the pupils who has been enjoying the Debate Mate sessions, and commented: "Being involved in Debate Mate has helped me feel more confident about standing up and speaking in front of others."

Year 8 pupil, Enzo, added: "I enjoy Debate Mate as I feel part of a team and it is fun competing against teams other schools."

Rio, from Year 8, said: "I like the Debate Mate mentors and have learned a lot from them about how to calmly argue and present points in a debate."

Laura Fannon, assistant headteacher and English teacher at Saint Paul's, said: "Most young people are much better public speakers than they think are; however, many students are very nervous about speaking in public, especially in front of their peers. This programme is designed to address those fears and to raise the students' confidence."

Holly Lewis said: "The students were extremely enthusiastic and enjoy addressing issues that affect them, their communities and the wider world."

"I am sure that they will particularly benefit from developing their key listening, thinking, exploring and articulation skills."

Pupils' wellbeing at centre of North East education trust

Children and young people who "feel that their voices are heard and can make a difference have a greater sense of community and self-esteem", according to Place2Be.

The children and young people's mental health charity launched Children's Mental Health Awareness Week in 2015 and its aim is to "empower, equip and give a voice" to children and young people across the UK.

The theme of this year's awareness week, which runs from 5th February to 11th February, is 'My Voice Matters', a concept that is central to a North East multi-educational trust's health and wellbeing strategy.

Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust, which has 25 primary schools and five secondary schools in South Tyneside, East Durham and Sunderland, now has a senior designated mental health lead in all of their schools responsible for embedding the whole-school approach to positive mental health in their settings.

Louise Swailes, mental health co-ordinator at Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust (BCCET), said: "At BCCET, we are committed to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our students, staff



and the wider school community.

"We have a robust, tiered system of support in place including peer mentors, mental health first aiders and support teams, as well as counsellors. We promote the five 'Ways to Wellbeing' (Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give) to encourage self-care as a proactive, preventative strategy.

"The theme 'My Voice Matters'

puts the child most definitely at the centre of our mental health offer at BCCET. Pupil voice is key to developing our support package and we now have teams of mental health champions/warriors/ambassadors in our schools who are involved in decision making and the co-creation of policy. It is important that our students feel seen, heard and valued."

The Catholic Independent Schools' Conference (CISC) require for 1 May 2024, or as soon as possible thereafter, a:

General Secretary



Closing date for applications is Thursday 22 February 2024 at 4.00pm

Interviews will be held on Thursday 7 March 2024

The Catholic Independent Schools' Conference (CISC) represents a growing community of Catholic Independent Schools in the UK and beyond, working together to promote and celebrate the global project of Catholic education.

Supporting and representing all of the UK's Independent Schools, and a number of Associate schools in Ireland and further afield, the General Secretary's role is a stimulating and multi-faceted job which has an increasingly high public profile while retaining its traditional member-focused perspective.

The successful candidate will be an accomplished and inspirational leader with a compelling vision for Catholic education and a passion for improving the lives of our future generations. We are seeking an outstanding ambassador for the charity and, as such, the successful candidate will need to be an excellent communicator, relationship builder and facilitator - someone with a strong track record in senior leadership within Catholic education.

Applicants will need to demonstrate a strategic mind-set with a clear understanding of how best to support Catholic independent school heads in their role. The post-holder will be a practising Catholic with the vision, determination and faith to move CISC forward to the next stages of its development.

For informal discussions, please email Antony Hudson, CISC Chair, at AHudson@stgeorgesweybridge.com.

An application pack and further details can be found at www.catholicindependentschools.com.

 CATHOLIC INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS' CONFERENCE

www.catholicindependentschools.com

CISC is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and applicants must be willing to undergo screening appropriate to the post, including checks with past employers and the Disclosure and Barring Service.



GARDENING

Successful fruit growers know when it's time to get the bottling kit out

I have always loved growing fruit and have had a fascination with the process since I was young.

This in turn led me to thinking about what to do with said fruit once grown.

Bottling is one of many possibilities and one that I have experimented with over the years. Here's a tip for all you fruit gardeners.

Normally, people use a lot of sugar when bottling fruit and they do this is for two reasons. First, sugar has the ability to help the fruit retain its colour and texture.

A jar of peaches or apricots in a heavy syrup will look beautiful and fresh picked six months down the line. But the second reason is that people just like the taste. Sweetened fruit tastes good!

But in this instance, sugar is NOT necessary for safety.

In fact, you really do not need to use sugar at all when you are putting up whole or sliced fruit. You can safely process fruits like apricots and peaches in just water if you wanted to because the fruit itself is in the safe pH range.

However before you run off to do that, you should know that just using water does not give you very good results. The fruit turns dark quickly and loses texture.

So although some people do put up fruit with just water, having a little sugar in there helps a lot.

Sometimes I bottle my fruit using a medium to heavy sugar syrup. But other times, I may have an apricot or peach that is so delicious on its own, I do not want to cover it up with all that sugar.

So here is the alternative: bottle your fruit in unsweetened white grape juice

The natural sugars in the grape juice help retain the colour and texture of the fruit but you can still taste the natural flavours of whatever you can.

Yes, your resulting fruit will darken faster than fruit canned in a sugar syrup, but not as quickly as if you bottled it just water. It is a pretty good compromise.

The benefits of using fruit juice:

- The bottled fruit is considered 'low sugar'. Only the natural sugar in the fruit and juice are there.

- You can add whatever sweetener you want when you open the jar later.

The cons of using fruit juice:

- It is safe to eat up to 1 year but the fruit will darken and should be used within six months for best colour.

- The fruit will not taste as sweet. (Which is not necessarily a bad thing.)

Remember, the loss of colour is only aesthetics. The fruit taste is still delicious and



safe. It may not look as pretty but it still has great flavour. My solution to this darkening problem is to just use up those jars faster than I would the fruit canned in heavy sugar syrup. But when I do have a jar that has darkened a bit, I use it in something that gets cooked, such as a pie or sauce.

I also like to include some spices such as cinnamon sticks or allspice to give the fruit a little 'oomph'. Once you open the jar, you can sweeten it more if necessary any way you like.

What about using ascorbic acid or other product for colour retention? Yes, ascorbic acid

(vitamin C), lemon juice and products like Fruit Fresh (which is an ascorbic acid mix) will help prevent darkening. Ascorbic acid works a little bit better than lemon juice and does not alter the flavour of the fruit but if you buy an ascorbic acid product in the store, just follow the directions on the package.

Apricots bottled in Grape Juice

I do not peel the apricots in this recipe to save time. You can peel your fruit if you wish. Makes 4 pint-sized jars

Ingredients:

- 2 lbs. apricots (washed, not peeled)
- 5 cups white grape juice (unsweetened)
- 2 whole cinnamon sticks (optional)

Into each jar:

- 10 whole allspice
- 10 whole cloves
- 1 star anise

Method

- 1) Fill your water bath canner with water and heat it up. Add clean jars to the bath to warm them. (You do not need to sterilise the jars because they will be processed for 20 minutes.) Heat your lids in a small saucepan.
- 2) Meanwhile, heat grape juice and cinnamon sticks to a simmer and prepare fruit by cutting it in half and removing pits. You do not need to peel. If you wish, you can cut the apricots into quarters.
- 3) Remove warm jars from the water bath and the spices to each jar.
- 4) Add your apricots (face down) and gently pack them in up to 1/2 inch headspace.
- 5) Add your hot grape juice to each jar leaving 1/2 inch headspace.
- 6) Use a skewer or plastic knife to dislodge any air bubbles in the jars. Add more juice if necessary to maintain the proper headspace.
- 7) Wipe the rims with a clean cloth and add your lids and rings. Process in a water bath for 20 minutes.
- 8) Turn off heat and let the jars sit in the canner for an additional 5 minutes. Remove the jars to cool. Refrigerate any unsealed jars and use within 1 week. Label sealed jars and use within 1 year, but the colour retention is best within the first 6 months.

HEALTH

Move over mouthwash: a handful of tasty greens could do the job just as well

Over half the adult population in the UK have some level of gum disease. Typical treatments include mouthwash and, in severe cases, antibiotics. These treatments have side effects, such as dry mouth, the development of antimicrobial resistance and increased blood pressure.

But research has indicated that a molecule called nitrate, which is found in leafy green vegetables, has fewer side effects and offers greater benefits for oral health.

And it could be used as a natural alternative for treating oral disease.

Inadequate brushing and flossing leads to the build up of dental plaque, a sticky layer of bacteria, on the surface of teeth and gums. Plaque causes tooth decay and gum disease. Sugary and acidic foods, dry mouth, and smoking can also contribute to bad breath, tooth decay, and gum infections.

The two main types of gum disease are gingivitis and periodontitis. Gingivitis causes redness, swelling and bleeding of the gums. Periodontitis is a more advanced form of gum disease, causing damage to the soft tissues and bones supporting the teeth.

Periodontal disease can therefore, lead to tooth loss and, when bacteria from the mouth enter the bloodstream, can also contribute to the development of systemic disorders such as cardiovascular disease, dementia, diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis.

Leafy greens may be the secret

Leafy greens and root vegetables are bursting with vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants – and it's no secret that a diet consisting of these vegetables is crucial for maintaining a healthy weight, boosting the immune system, and preventing heart disease, cancer and diabetes. The multiple health benefits of leafy greens are partly because spinach, lettuce and beetroots are brimming with nitrate, which can be reduced to nitric oxide by nitrate-reducing bacteria inside the mouth.

Nitric oxide is known to lower blood pressure and improve exercise performance. However, in the mouth, it helps to prevent the overgrowth of bad bacteria and reduces oral acidity, both of which can cause gum disease and tooth decay.

As part of our research on nitrate and oral health, we studied competitive athletes. Athletes are prone to gum disease due to high intake of carbohydrates – which can cause inflammation of the gum tissues – stress, and dry mouth from breathing hard during training.



Our study showed that beetroot juice (containing approximately 12 millimole of nitrate) protected their teeth from acidic sports drinks and carbohydrate gels during exercise – suggesting that nitrate could be used as a prebiotic by athletes to reduce the risk of tooth decay.

Nitrate offers a lot of promise as an oral health prebiotic. Good oral hygiene and a nitrate rich diet could be the key to a healthier body, a vibrant smile and disease-free gums. This is good news for those most at risk of oral health deterioration such as pregnant women and the elderly.

In the UK, antiseptic mouthwashes

containing chlorhexidine are commonly used to treat dental plaque and gum disease. Unfortunately, these mouthwashes are a blunderbuss approach to oral health, as they indiscriminately remove both good and bad bacteria and increase oral acidity, which can cause disease.

Worryingly, early research also indicates that chlorhexidine may contribute to antimicrobial resistance. Resistance occurs when bacteria and fungi survive the effects of one or more antimicrobial drugs due to repeated exposure to these treatments.

Antimicrobial resistance is a global health concern, predicted to cause 10 million deaths

“Nitrate offers a lot of promise as an oral health prebiotic. Good oral hygiene and a nitrate rich diet could be the key to a healthier body, a vibrant smile and disease-free gums... a study of sports people showed that beetroot juice (containing approximately 12 millimole of nitrate) protected their teeth from acidic sports drinks...”

yearly by the year 2050.

In contrast, dietary nitrate is more targeted. Nitrate eliminates disease-associated bacteria, reduces oral acidity and creates a balanced oral microbiome. The oral microbiome refers to all the microorganisms in the mouth. Nitrate offers exciting potential as an oral health prebiotic, which can be used to prevent disease onset or limit disease progression.

How many leafy greens for pearly whites?

So how much should we consume daily? As a rule of thumb, a generous helping of spinach, kale or beetroot at mealtimes contains about 6–10 mmol of nitrate and offers immediate health benefits.

Work we have done with our collaborators has shown that treating plaque samples from periodontal disease patients with 6.5 mmol of nitrate increased healthy bacteria levels and reduced acidity.

For example, consuming lettuce juice for two weeks reduced gum inflammation and increased healthy bacteria levels in patients with gum disease.

Growing evidence suggests that nitrate is a cornerstone of oral health. Crunching on a portion of vegetables at mealtimes can help to prevent or treat oral disease and keeps the mouth fresh and healthy.



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FOOD

Four tips to a more heart-healthy lifestyle

You can make positive changes to your well-being by evaluating how your everyday lifestyle affects your heart health. To get started, take steps to understand your risk, then consider making healthier choices to help lower your chances of heart disease. Registered Dietitian and Nutritionist Dawn Jackson Blatner shares a few tips to help you live a heart-healthy lifestyle.

1. Know your risk

Getting regular health screenings is crucial to understanding your risk for heart disease. By consulting with your doctor on a regular basis, you can ask questions and get advice on practical steps you could take to improve your well-being.

"Regular wellness visits are a crucial part of staying healthier," Blatner advises. "And it's always recommended to talk to your doctor before beginning any new exercise routine or nutrition programme."

2. Stay active

Try to fit 30–60 minutes of physical activity into your day, which can include walking, gardening or household chores as well as swimming, dancing, playing a sport or taking a fitness class.

Various aerobic activities that get your heart rate up, strength exercises to build muscle, or stretching for flexibility, are usually a good mix. Make it easier to exercise enough each day by breaking up activity into smaller chunks rather than doing it all at once.



3. Reduce stress

The good news is that many of the activities you can do to keep physically active have the added benefit of reducing your stress levels. According to the Mayo Clinic, exercise can improve your mood, reduce tension and help you focus throughout your day. Apart from exercise, you can try meditation, breathing exercises and any other relaxing activities that help you feel calm and reduce anxiety.

4. Focus on foods that boost wellness

Eat a variety of nutritious foods to help improve your blood pressure and cholesterol, including veggies and fruits, whole grains,

healthy fats like avocado, lean meats and eggs. "When it comes to eggs, I always recommend Eggland's Best," Blatner adds. "They have more than double the Omega-3's compared to ordinary eggs, which support heart health in a variety of important ways such as boosting good cholesterol, lowering triglycerides, and promoting healthy blood pressure."

In addition, Eggland's Best eggs contain 25% less saturated fat compared to ordinary eggs, which helps support healthier blood cholesterol levels and overall heart health. Eggland's Best eggs also have more than double the amount of Vitamin B12, ten times more Vitamin E and six times more Vitamin D.

To help you include more eggs in your daily diet, Blatner shares the recipe below for easy-to-make egg tostadas that are a delicious and hearty snack or breakfast.

POACHED EGG TOSTADAS WITH AVOCADO-TOMATILLO SALSA

Prep time 10 minutes; cook time 20 minutes.

Ingredients

- 4 Eggland's Best eggs, large
- Cooking spray
- Four 6-inch corn tortillas
- 1 tablespoon white vinegar

Salsa Ingredients

- 1 medium avocado (diced)
- 1 medium Anaheim pepper (seeds and ribs discarded, diced)

- 1 medium tomatillo (papery husk discarded, diced)
- 1/2 medium tomato (diced)
- 1/4 cup diced red onion
- 1/4 cup chopped, fresh cilantro
- 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- 1 medium garlic clove (minced)
- 1/8 teaspoon salt

Preparation

■ Preheat the oven to 400°F. Line a baking sheet with aluminium foil. Lightly spray the foil with cooking spray.

■ Arrange the tortillas in a single layer on the foil. Lightly spray the tortillas with cooking spray. Using a fork, pierce the tortillas a few times to prevent them from filling with air. Bake for 5 to 6 minutes on each side, or until golden brown. Transfer to serving dishes.

■ Meanwhile, in a large skillet, bring the water and vinegar to a boil over high heat.

■ In a medium bowl, gently stir together all the salsa ingredients. Set aside.

■ Once the water has come to a boil, reduce the heat and simmer. Break an egg into a cup and then carefully slip the egg into the simmering water.

Repeat with the remaining eggs, placing them in the water so they don't touch.

Simmer for 3 to 5 minutes, or until the whites are completely set and the yolks are beginning to set, but are not hard. Using a slotted spoon, drain the eggs well. Place each egg on a tostada. Serve with the salsa.

FOOD

Quick, make mine a spritzer!

WHITE WINE AND APEROL SPRITZ

You made it through January – congratulations! Why not treat yourself at the start of a February with an unusual but tasty drink?

The following wine spritz recipe brings together water and wine with a herbaceous orange liqueur, and garnished with citrus and berries.

Ingredients

- 2 ounces Aperol Italian liqueur
- 3 ounces Sauvignon Blanc or another dry white wine
- 2 ounces sparkling water
- Orange slice and fresh strawberry for garnish

How to make it

Fill a tall glass with ice and pour over the liqueur, wine and sparkling water. Mix and then garnish with an orange slice and strawberry.



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GAMING

Lush scenery, household chores and full-on combat bring Pandora to life

Adele Chapline Smith

Audiences were captivated by Canadian filmmaker James Cameron's 2009 science fiction fantasy *Avatar*, which eventually became the highest-grossing feature of all time. Fifteen years and one big-screen sequel later, the resulting multimedia franchise continues to expand.

Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora (Ubisoft) is an open-world action-adventure game that takes place concurrently with the movies. Its narrative, however, tells a standalone tale. While the experience as a whole is safest for grown-ups, it may also be acceptable for older adolescents.

Players assume the identity of an unnamed but youthful member of the Na'vi, as the species of blue-hued beings native to the fictional moon Pandora are known. This protagonist was formerly a student at a residential school run by the villainous Resources Development Administration (RDA), the Earth-based organisation spearheading the effort to colonise Pandora.

Ostensibly, the RDA was training Na'vi children to be ambassadors to humankind. In fact, the children were kidnapped from their clans and forced to become soldiers. After the defeat of the RDA at the end of the original film, members of the school's faculty decide that the now-adult students are a liability.

The Na'vi fight back and take refuge inside a cryogenic chamber where they are awakened 16 years later by resistance fighters and join their efforts to send the RDA packing. It is a fight not only for their lives, but also for their culture and identity. Resistance efforts include many different Na'vi tribes as well as human allies.

Combat is straightforward as characters use arrows, guns and explosives to fight against aggressive enemies. While the bloody effects are relatively restrained, some of the cutscenes can be intense – as, for instance, when gamers witness a Na'vi child being slain by gunfire.

The dialogue, moreover, includes occasional swearing. But the pantheistic goddess worship practised by the Na'vi is far less prominent here than in the films.

The world of Pandora is luscious and verdant, with some of the most advanced ecosystems seen in gaming. Players will enjoy the



opportunity to explore its flora and fauna, as they pass through thick jungles to sprawling plains.

Hunting, gathering, cooking and crafting are all essential aspects of gameplay, along with hacking power systems or conducting forensic investigations for clues.

Unfortunately, the storytelling isn't strong, as many of the characters would have benefited from more substantial development. Still, gamers will appreciate the detailed environment as well as the vast amounts of new traditions.

It's interesting to note the correlation between the residential schools of Pandora and similar real-world institutions in which Native people were subjected to separation from their families and programmes of reeducation designed to facilitate their assimilation into white society. That analogy could form the basis for a useful family discussion.



FILM

Intelligent and moving, Origin offers plenty of food for thought

In 2020, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author Isabel Wilkerson published the sociological study *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. In adapting Wilkerson's work to create the biographical drama *Origin* (Neon), writer-director Ava DuVernay adopts an unusual approach to her source material.

DuVernay interweaves events from Wilkerson's personal life with her professional examination of American racism within a global context. Thanks in large part to a forceful performance from Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor, who portrays the scribe, DuVernay's recipe generally works, though some of her artistic choices can be questioned.

Director Ava DuVernay recently told *Vogue* magazine that author Isabel Wilkerson was "generous in the time that she gave me" and that she "embrace(d) me and my ideas about how to work with her material."

Ultimately, both the story of Wilkerson's relationships and her analysis of history prove compelling. The film, moreover, includes a minimum of objectionable elements, making it probably acceptable for older teens, especially in light of its educational value.

Wilkerson enjoys the warm support of both her white husband, Brett Hamilton (Jon Bernthal), and her kindly mother, Ruby (Emily Yancy). But events will eventually find her depending more and more on the backing of her cousin and lifelong friend Marion (Niecy Nash-Betts).

Marion's vibrant personality and take-no-prisoners candour complement Wilkerson's understated reserve. She also serves as one of the people on whom the scholar can try out her gradually coalescing theory about the grim history of race relations in the US.

Briefly stated, Wilkerson's thesis is that the

oppression of Black Americans is simply one manifestation of the universal human instinct to stratify people into a hierarchy of superior and inferior groups. She cites eight 'pillars' on which all such schemes of division rest, ranging from the prohibition of intermarriage to dehumanisation and the use of terror to enforce the system.

Real-life stories illustrating Wilkerson's argument, drawn from the Jim Crow era, Nazi Germany and contemporary India, engage interest more effectively than scenes in which Ellis-Taylor reads long passages from the text of *Caste*. Fortunately, though, there are more touching moments than didactic interludes in the film.

Intelligent as well as moving, *Origin* emphasises the need for unity, mutual respect and a sense of responsibility, regardless of our relationship to the wrongs of the past. As such, it both conforms with and reinforces Gospel values.



They're coming home – for now

The advisor to Ghana's Asante ruler's advisor tells us about the deal

HISTORY

Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann

After 150 years, 39 artefacts that form part of Asante's royal regalia are due to return to the Asantehene (ruler of the Asante people) in Kumasi, Ghana, in February and April this year.

The Asante empire was the largest and most powerful in the region in the 18th century and controlled an area that was rich in gold. Many of the gold royal artefacts were looted by British troops during the third Anglo-Asante war of 1874 (Sagrenti War).

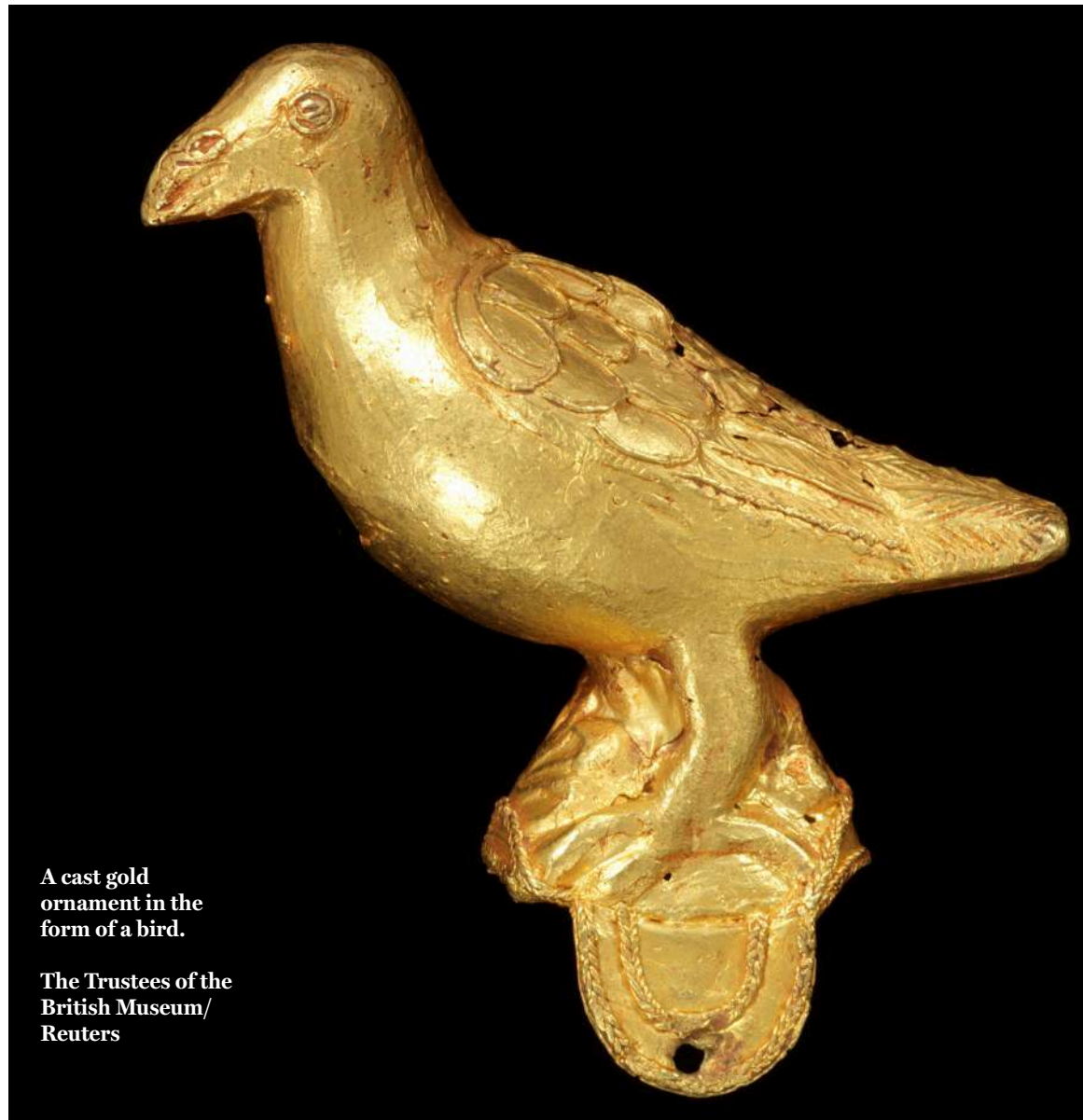
The first collection of seven objects is expected from the Fowler Museum at the University of California in Los Angeles. The second collection of 32 will arrive from the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum in the UK. These artefacts are being loaned to the Asante people for six years. Archaeologist and Ghana heritage specialist Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann spoke to the Asantehene's technical advisor for the project, historian and museum economist Ivor Agyeman-Duah, about the journey to return the items and its implications for cultural restitution, repatriation and the decolonisation of museums.

What are these objects and how did they leave Asante?

They were royal regalia that was looted in 1874 from the palace in Kumasi after the sacking of the city by British colonial military troops. There was another a punitive expedition in 1896 which led to further looting. They included ceremonial swords and ceremonial cups, some of them very important in terms of a palace's measurement of royalty. For instance, the Mponponso sword, created 300 years ago, dates back to the legendary Okomfo (spiritual leader) linked with the founding of the empire, Okomfo Anokye. This sword is what the Asantehene used to swear the oath of allegiance to his people. Chiefs used the same sword to swear their oaths to the Asantehene.

Some of the items were sold at auction on the open market in London; art collectors bought them and eventually donated some of them to museums (some were kept in private collections). The British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum also bought some of them.

However, not every item you see at the British Museum was looted. For instance, there were cultural exchanges between the Asantehene



A cast gold ornament in the form of a bird.

The Trustees of the British Museum/Reuters

Osei Bonsu and T.E. Bowdich, an emissary of the African Company of Merchants who travelled to Kumasi in 1817 to negotiate trade. Some gifts were given to Bowdich, who deposited them at the British Museum later on. There were 14 of these items.

How was the agreement reached?

The issue has been on the drawing board for half a century. It's not just an immediate concern

of the current Asantehene. It has been a concern of the last three occupants of the stool (throne). But this year is critical because it marks 150 years since the Sagrenti War. It also marks 100 years since the return of the Asantehene Agyeman Prempeh after his exile in Seychelles and 25 years since the current Asantehene, Osei Tutu II, ascended the stool.

So, while in London in May 2023, after having official

discussions with directors of these museums, he reopened discussions and negotiations. He asked me and Malcolm McLeod, former curator and scholar at the British Museum and vice-principal at the University of Glasgow, to help in the technical decisions that would be made. We've been working on this for the past nine months.

Why is it a six-year loan and not an outright return?

The moral right to ownership does exist. But there are also the laws of antiquity in the UK. The Victoria & Albert and the British Museum are national museums. They are governed by very strict laws which do not permit de-accessioning or permanently removing a work of art or other object from a museum's collection to sell it or otherwise dispose of it.

That had always been the constraining factor over the last 50 years. But there was also a way that we could have these items for a maximum of six years. Not all the objects are being exhibited at the British Museum. Many have never been exhibited and lie in storage in a warehouse.

Based on the circumstances and the trinity of anniversaries, we came to an agreement. Discussions will however continue between us and these museums to find a lasting agreement.

Of course, the Ghana experience will be important for restitution claims from other countries in Africa.

What does this mean to the Asante people – and Ghana?

The fact that over the last couple of months we were able to reach some form of agreement for this to happen is testimony of the interest in multicultural agreements.

Any set of objects that is 150 years old (or older) will be of interest to many people. Such artefacts help us to connect the past with the present. They are significant for how our people were, in terms of creativity and technology, how they were able to use gold and other artistic properties. They are also something that will inspire those who are in the craft of gold production today.

Manhiya Palace Museum reopens this year in April. The exhibition of these objects is going to increase visitor attendance at the museum. It receives about 80,000 visitors a year and we estimate that it could rise to 200,000 a year with the return of these objects. This will generate revenue and allow us to expand and develop our own museums.

Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann is a Director of Christiansborg Archaeological Heritage Project, Associate Professor at Africa Institute Sharjah & Associate Graduate Faculty, Rutgers University



Left, an oblong repousse gold ornament with three bands of decoration. The Trustees of the British Museum/Reuters

Getting and trying to stay fit

SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

For lessons on how to age well, we could do worse than turn to Richard Morgan. At 93, the Irishman is a four-time world champion in indoor rowing, with the aerobic engine of a healthy 30- or 40-year-old and the body-fat percentage of a whippet. He's also the subject of a new case study, published last month in the *Journal of Applied Physiology*, that looked at his training, diet and physiology.

Its results suggest that, in many ways, he's an exemplar of fit, healthy ageing; a nonagenarian with the heart, muscles and lungs of someone less than half his age. But in other ways, he's ordinary: a onetime baker and battery maker with creaky knees who didn't take up regular exercise until he was in his 70s and who still trains mostly in his backyard shed.

Even though his fitness routine began later in life, he has now rowed the equivalent of almost 10 times around the globe and has won four world championships. So, what, the researchers wondered, did his late-life exercise do for his aging body?

As this new year gets into its stride, and Ash Wednesday falls on 14th February, I'd like to share some basic tips and resources for how to maintain your healthy lifestyle across your PIES: the physical, intellectual emotional and spiritual dimensions of your life.

1. Measure and watch your weight.

Keeping track of your body weight on at least a weekly basis will help you see what you're losing and/or what you're gaining. Recently, aged 84 and a half, I checked that my weight. It is the same as it was when – aged 20 – I rowed for Imperial College

2. Limit unhealthy foods and eat healthy meals

Do not forget to eat breakfast and choose a nutritious meal with more protein and fibre and less fat, sugar, and calories. I refuse to snack between meals and use my 'double two three' diet to ward off weight gain. Typically, every two out of three days, I eat two out of three meals: just breakfast and an evening meal. Given my age, it works for me. Maybe not for you.

3. Take multivitamin supplements

These make sure you have sufficient levels of nutrients, especially when you do not have a variety of vegetables and fruits at home. Many micronutrients are vital to your immune system, including vitamins A, B6, B12, C, D, and E, as well as zinc, iron,



copper, selenium, and magnesium.

In some cases, high doses of vitamins can be bad for your health. Thanks to my god-daughter Kare, I discovered that Turmeric Curcumin and Omega 3 oil together eliminated the rheumatism in both my hands that, due to excoriating pain, had been incapable being shaken. Now they are both fine.

4. Drink plenty of water

Having had the undiluted pain of two kidney stones – both on my left side – I now drink plenty of water and have cut out sugared beverages.

5. Exercise regularly and be active

I walk up and down escalators and up to four flights of stairs, and aim to do 10,000 steps a day.

How is your exercise? As soon as the alarm wakes me up, I flip back the duvet and while massaging my face, bring up my knees as close to my chest as possible, a dozen times. Then I lift up my legs and at 45 degrees hold them up for 20 seconds. On my way to the bathroom, I pray: 'Dear Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.'

Before my push-ups and after my squats, I carry out a stretching routine.

Every morning – Sundays being a day of rest – I brace myself for a manageable ordeal. I alternate proper push-ups – no knees on the floor! – and full squats. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays 86 push ups, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays 86 squats. The 86 is due to my time on earth. 84 and half years breathing + nine months in my mother's womb, rounded off to the nearest higher number = 86.

The squats are easier. Using my electric shaver, I can shave during the first 60 squats. Getting back up, I feel a glow of satisfaction as I drink a glass of water prior to climbing into the shower.

Thanks to the Canadian Air force 5X plan, I do not need to go to the gym or even use weights to keep my

arms toned.

Ever since I watched him on our neighbour's tiny TV screen winning the 1948 London Olympics 10,000 metres, Emil Zatopek has been my role model. He know how to push himself to the limit. Four years later, at the Helsinki Games, he won the 5,000, 10,000 meters and the marathon – a race he had never run before. A great athlete from my country of birth.

6. Reduce sitting and screen time

Exercise can't immunise you from your sedentary time. Even people who exercise regularly could be at increased risk for diabetes, heart disease and stroke if they spend lots of time sitting behind computers. Practically speaking, you could consider taking breaks from sedentary time, such as walking around the office/room a couple of times in a day. You might be lucky enough to have to walk to the printer in your office a few times a day!

7. Get enough good sleep.

Remember that sleep is not a waste of time. Sleep renews the cells in our body. There is a very strong connection between sleep quality and quantity and not only your immune system but risks of dementia. You can keep your immune system functioning properly by getting seven to eight hours of sleep each night.

8. Go easy on alcohol

Try – typically (apart, perhaps, from high days and birthdays) – staying sober. Don't forget that those alcohol calories tend to add up quickly. As the adverts state, 'Alcohol should always be consumed in moderation.'

9. Keep using your mind.

To delay – or maybe even avoid – dementia, I read, write, give talks and discuss things with my acquaintances, colleagues, allies-in-

life and friends.

10. Find ways to manage your emotions.

It is common for people to have feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness, and uncertainty during the current tumultuous state of the world. There is an old saying: 'Worry gets you nowhere at all' – but it does accelerate your ageing.

11. Keep in touch with those who love you.

Thanks to my 54 years of priesthood, I am an honorary member of a number of families and keep in touch with parents, children and grandchildren.

12. Stay in touch with God.

I tell my best friend Yesh – Jesus Christ – what I think and feel as I journey on through each day. With him in my heart and mind life is so much finer – and worry wanders off into the distance.

The PIES are mutually, very tightly interactive. Physical fitness enables us to think more clearly, love more dearly and sense more closely the presence of God. It is God's presence in my body that motivates me to keep on keeping on in doing my best to stay fit.

Why not use this Lent to see if you can get fit or stay fitter? Remember my piece on Vifoil in the 19th January *Universe*? Every weekday's morning, there are within me, two voices: the higher and lower Vlad. The tiresome lower says, "You need a rest, you are tired. Skip the exercise." The higher says, "don't be a feeble wimp. Get that blood racing through your brain to reduce the chance of dementia! Be like Zatopek. Be proud. Do it for God." And so I do. As St Irenaeus hinted, the glory of God is a human fully alive.

Motivation is vital. I owe it to God to look after the gift of my body. I have Zatopek. I have my

pride so when asked, "Are you still on those 86?" I can delight in saying "Yes!"

Having experienced how Churchill teamed up with his enemy Stalin to beat their mutual enemy Hitler, I use my vices to fight each other. Pride beats sloth. Vanity fights gluttony. Confessions in the sacrament of Reconciliation strengthen and motivate virtues. Used cunningly, two negatives can produce a positive.

The key to keeping fit is continuity. The key to becoming fit is to start from where you are and build up the number of exercises, gradually. You might manage a half squat or a kneeling push up. The next week a full one, then two and then? As many as you feel are right for you. Remember "you can always do one more."

The new 40s are the old 20s. I looked up the 2021 Olympics. There, in basketball, was Luis Scola of Argentine 42; in beach volleyball, Jake Gibb of USA, 45; in skateboarding, Rune Glifberg of Denmark, 46; and in table tennis, Xia Lian Ni, 58, of Luxembourg .

India's Rohan Bopanna is 43 and is now the world's oldest tennis number one. He plays doubles with Australia's Matthew Ebden and recently won the 2024 Australian Open title. He puts his fitness down to three, weekly, 90 minutes sessions of Iyengar Yoga which, as you may know, uses blocks and ropes to strengthen, in his case, the muscles around the knees.

You may have read how, on 10th September 2023, Bill Cooksey walked the half marathon route from Newcastle to South Shields, accompanied by two friends. A RAF veteran he became the oldest person to complete the Great North Run. He is 102. He raised almost £2,000 to support his local NHS Trust charity in the process.

Sir Brendan Foster said despite over one million finishers over the years, Mr Cooksey was not only the oldest but also "the most inspirational." "To have met him a few times was a privilege," the event's founder said.

To stay as healthy as you can, avoid or at least reduce emotional stress. Over my 50 years in the priesthood, I have buried all too many "physically fit" – typically men – whose hearts gave out due to stresses generated at work, even at home. That is where prayer is so helpful to physical fitness. I loved Basil Hume's motto *Pax inter spinas*. 'Spinias' being either pricks or thorns.

So, dear reader, to do all you can to stay as fit as you can be. Keep a close eye on your NERP: nutrition, exercise, rest and prayer.

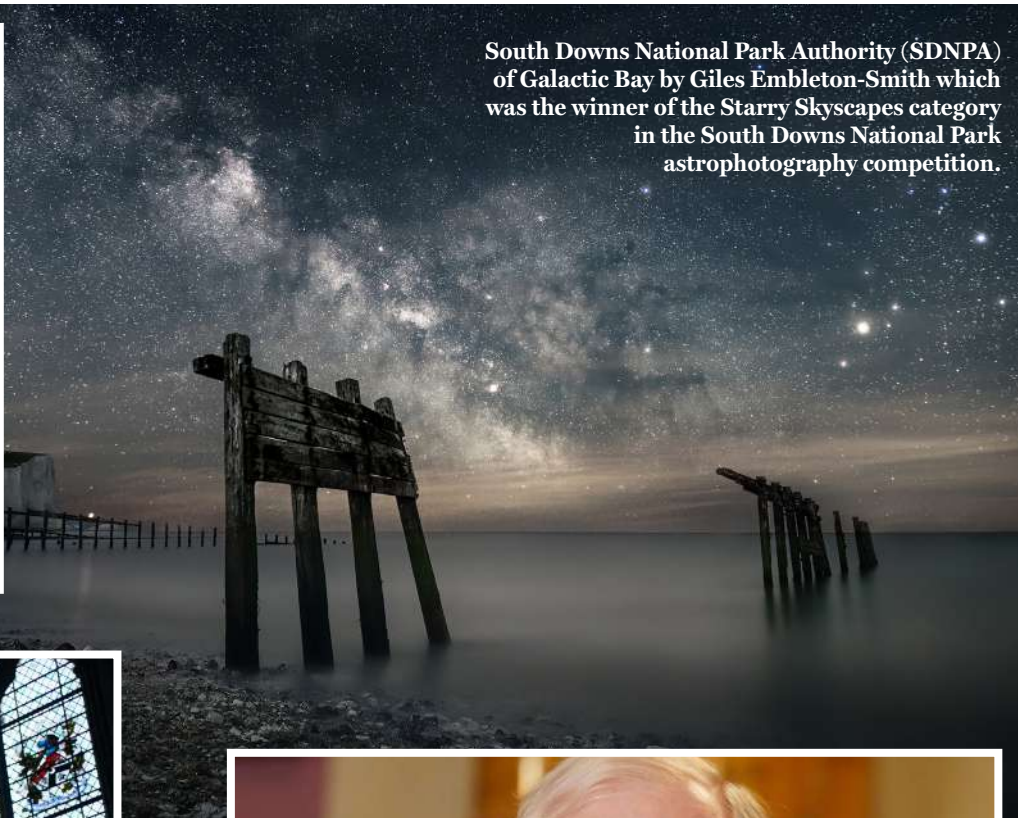
Remember: "If you don't use it, you lose it."

May this Lent help you to embark on becoming fitter across all those PIES.

A pictorial round-up of the past seven days



Principal Curator Ann Dinsdale, with one of Charlotte Bronte's "Little books" at the Brontes' Web of Childhood exhibition, at the Bronte Parsonage Museum in Haworth, West Yorkshire. The formative years of one of literature's most famous families is the focus of a new programme of exhibitions, talks and activities at the museum in 2024,



South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) of Galactic Bay by Giles Embleton-Smith which was the winner of the Starry Skyscapes category in the South Downs National Park astrophotography competition.

A visitor uses an interactive app during a preview for the Notre-Dame de Paris, The Augmented Exhibition, at Westminster Abbey



Top, Professor Charles Mackworth-Young, prime warden of the Goldsmith's Company, inspecting new coins bearing the image of King Charles III, at Goldsmiths' Hall in London, during the Trial of the Pyx, a judicial ceremony to ensure that newly minted coins from the Royal Mint conform to their required specifications.



Specialists from Worcestershire organ builders Nicholson & Co Ltd remove and inspect pipes removed from the organ at Gloucester Cathedral, during its refurbishment in time for the 2026 Three Choirs Festival.



Above, a newborn Black Rhino calf with his mother Najuma in his outdoor reserve at the Yorkshire Wildlife Park in Branton, South Yorkshire, where they are celebrating the first birth in the Park's history of a critically endangered Black Rhino calf, one of the rarest mammals on earth.

Northern Ireland First Minister Michelle O'Neill takes a photo with her Sinn Fein party colleagues on the steps of Parliament Buildings at Stormont as she assumes her role



LITURGICAL CALENDARS

Ordinary Form

Ordinary Form Liturgical Calendar
 Sunday Year B, Weekday Cycle II
 Sunday, February 11: 6th Sunday in
 Ordinary Time: Lev. 13:1-2, 44-46;
 Ps. 32:1-2, 5, 11; 1 Cor. 10:31-11:1; Mk.
 1:40-45

Monday, February 12: Js.1:1-11;
 Ps.119:67-68,71-72,75-76; Mk.
 8:11-13

Tuesday, February 13: Js.1:12-18;
 Ps.94:12-15,18-19; Mk.8:14-21

Wednesday, February 14: Ash
 Wednesday Joel 2: 12-18; Ps. 51:
 3-6, 12-14, 17 r. 3; 2 Cor. 5: 20-6:2;
 Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18

Thursday, February 15: Weekday in
 Lent Deut.30:15-20; Ps.1:1-4,6;
 Lk.9:22-25

Friday, February 16: Is.58:1-9; Ps.
 51:3-6,18-19; Mt. 9:14-15

Saturday, February 17: The Seven
 Founders of the Order of Servants
 of the Blessed Virgin Mary
 Is.58:9-14; Ps.86:1-6; Lk.5:27-32



St Valentine

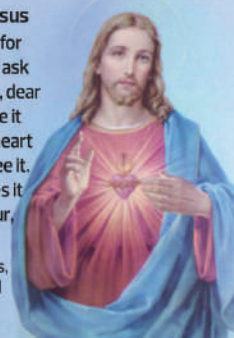
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 within your own broken heart
 where your Father will see it.
 Then, in His merciful eyes it
 will become your favour,
 not mine. Amen.
 Say prayer for three days,
 promise publication and
 favour will be granted.
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PRAYERS /THANKSGIVING

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St Scholastica

(c. 480 – 10th February AD 543)
She was born in Italy and a ninth-century tradition makes her the twin sister of Saint Benedict of Nursia. Her feast day is 10th February.

She is traditionally regarded as the founder of the Benedictine nuns. Statue of St Scholastica at the Benedictine Abbey, Montecassino, Italy.