

THE INTERNATIONAL
CATHOLIC WEEKLY

THE

18/25 DECEMBER 2021 £6

www.thetablet.co.uk | Est. 1840

THE TABLET



CHRISTMAS DOUBLE ISSUE

Madoc Cairns, Sally Read, Wendy Cope, Maggie Fergusson, Frank and Denise Cottrell-Boyce
Madeleine Bunting, Michèle Roberts, Eamon Duffy, A.N. Wilson, Laura Gascoigne, Leonie Caldecott
Christopher Howse, Joanna Moorhead, Lucy Lethbridge, Mark Lawson, D.J. Taylor, Jonathan Tulloch
Christopher Lamb, Conor Gearty, Julia Langdon, Donald Macintyre, Margaret Hebblethwaite
Ian Thomson, John Akeroyd, Hugh Doherty, Michael Glover and Sean McGlynn

STATE OF
THE NATION

POLITICS WITHOUT PRINCIPLE

Britain – and much of the rest of the world – is about to enter Christmas and the new year in poor shape. Trouble is brewing between Russia and its neighbours, between China and its neighbours, between Iran and its neighbours, and almost everywhere else. Domestically, a sudden surge in Covid cases, due largely to the appearance of a new and more vigorous variant but also to lack of government preparedness, is contorting political institutions and conventions towards breaking point. Scarcely anywhere in the democratic world has political leadership risen sufficiently to these challenges. The United Kingdom's prime minister Boris Johnson is besieged from all sides, not least from his own. And it is largely his own fault.

But with only an imperfect human race to draw from, imperfect leadership is inevitable. Those who rise to the top are likely to be more narcissistic, even more sociopathic, than average, because they need such character traits to drive them to attempt the ascent. And if this describes the world in 2021 as it enters 2022, it is a description that would be just as apt 2,000 years ago. God, seeing the mess humankind was making of itself, then as now, chose to intervene in human affairs. But not by sending a political manifesto or an army of avenging angels. He sent a baby, and left the world to figure out the meaning.

Then, as now, a Christian is someone who describes Jesus Christ as their leader. But his kingdom was not of this world: it was a kingdom that was still to come. He was executed as a criminal; hardly a political triumph. But he left a legacy: an example to be followed, a set of teachings to be honoured, and a movement, an institution, the Church, to promote his message until his return in glory. He is still present in its midst; indeed Christians speak of the Church as “the Body of Christ”. And he and his teachings are still the only true corrective to bad government and poor leadership. The Sermon on the Mount is his description of what it means to be good, the fundamental meaning of goodwill. A lesson even sociopaths can learn, though the necessary humility would be a struggle.

The ancient Greeks knew democracy was not enough – there were charlatans then as there are now – so they specified that political leaders needed to be persons of virtue. They listed four as the hinges on which the rest turned: prudence, justice, courage and moderation. They remain a good basis for judging any leader. In the case of Boris Johnson, he is frequently accused, not without reason, of lacking moral integrity. He is moderate when it suits him, indeed too moderate for some of his more fanatical Tory colleagues. This may have less to do with his moral character, more because he recognises that the electorate dislikes extremism. If it paid dividends to be an extremist, as he was to an extent over Brexit, no doubt he would not find it difficult. But there is a limit to pragmatism. Some things must remain unthinkable. Leaving refugees to drown in the English Channel, for instance, would certainly amount to that.

Johnson is prudent from time to time, though rash

to a degree at other times, and lacks the capacity for detailed diligence that prudence demands. Prudence requires the greatest care in imposing Covid restrictions, balancing the evidence for the effectiveness of booster jabs against every good leader's duty to leave people as free as possible to live their lives in the way they wish to. The limited proposals before Parliament this week were prudent, and those who resisted them seemed mainly concerned that they would become the thin end of the wedge, a step towards another lockdown. But even that could be prudent if circumstances worsen significantly.

The prime minister has courage, shown not least in his own willingness to trample on political conventions and occasionally to gamble for the sake of some advantage to himself. But the virtue of courage lies between rashness and cowardice, neither of which vice could be said to be entirely foreign to Johnson's character. As for justice, he has recognised the unfairness of the economic inequality between north and south. But is he just in his dealings with others? Is he always truthful? Does he always uphold the law? Has he allowed his administration to act as if it were exempt from the obligations that apply to everyone else? It is here he has – more than once – fallen down. The public, like a partner in a failing marriage, is turning against him. Once the illusions of love are shattered, negative emotions flood in; what was once endearing becomes unbearably irritating.

Integrity is not the only issue. A government has a duty to be competent, which means devising sound policies that serve the common good and seeing they are carried out. Johnson has handed the management of important government departments to second-rate career politicians. And this suggests a third test that he plainly fails – the need for principles. There is no moral direction to his premiership other than to do what is required to hold on to power. The absence of ideology may be a benefit, given the damage Hayekian free markets can do. But without some underlying principles any government eventually becomes morally bankrupt. His own shows every sign of doing so.

These tests of integrity, competence and principle can equally be applied to the opposition, and indeed they are the pathway it will have to follow if it is to regain the electorate's trust. Politics in Britain still has features of the Roundhead/Cavalier divide, with Starmer as the Puritan Parliamentarian Oliver Cromwell and Johnson as Charles I and II. History is still not sure who won.

The need for virtue in public life and the importance of moral principle behind political policy is summarised in the rousing angelic chorus “*et in Terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*” (“Peace to people of goodwill”). Without moral principles, human life becomes a war of all against all, which Thomas Hobbes predicted to be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” for the many, while a few enjoy extravagant luxury. If that is the direction Britain is heading in under Boris Johnson, then the sooner he is stopped the better.

CONTENTS

CHRISTMAS DOUBLE ISSUE // 18/25 DECEMBER 2021 // VOL 274 NO. 9432

4 / Keeping pace with the Pope

The 'outsider Pope' has always been clear where he would like to take the Church. This year has seen Francis put his foot on the accelerator / **by Christopher Lamb**

5 / Christopher Howse's Notebook

'Like hats, gloves were once thought essential, not just for monarchs'

6 / Out of control

Without dramatic constitutional reform, Britain will continue its slide towards cronyism / **by Conor Gearty**

8 / Christmas party politics

As the popularity of Boris Johnson and his government plummets, opportunities arise for left and right / **by Julia Langdon**

10 / Renewed and born again

The Church of the Nativity has been magnificently restored. But the Covid pandemic has reduced visitors to a trickle / **by Donald Macintyre**

12 / To Mary through Jesus

In recent years, some of the most creative contributions to our understanding of the mother of Jesus have come from Protestant women / **by Margaret Hebblethwaite**

Plus

27 / The Language Quiz

28 / Prize Acrostic

30 / Jumbo Crossword

34 / Word from the Cloisters

35 / Letters

36 / The Living Spirit

55 / From the Vineyard

55 / Glimpses of Eden

37 / Arts

Laura Gascoigne on the delights of the reopened Courtauld Gallery and Joanna Moorhead on Neapolitan Nativities. Plus our critics D.J. Taylor, Mark Lawson and Lucy Lethbridge make their seasonal choices

42 / Books

Eamon Duffy on the history of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, A.N. Wilson's crime fiction round-up and Michael Glover's choice of the latest books on art and artists. Plus Chris Nancollas, Carina Murphy, Sean McGlynn

48 & 52 / News Briefings

49 / The Church in the World
Hopes rise for second meeting between Francis and Kirill

51 / View from Rome

53 / News from Britain and Ireland

'Avoid church if you have Covid symptoms'

THE COURTAULD, LONDON/SAMUEL COURTAULD TRUST © THE COURTAULD



Spinello Aretino's *Nativity* of around 1380, on display in a refurbished suite of rooms at the Courtauld Gallery, London. See Laura Gascoigne, pages 37–38

14 / The holy man and the bishop

The foundation of the Norbertines took place 900 years ago this Christmas Day / **by Hugh Doherty**

15 / Madoc Cairns

'We'd marched believing collapse is likely; we live as though it's impossible'

16 / Advent Meditation

In her final meditation, our writer notices the physician's eye in Luke's telling of the story / **by Leonie Caldecott**

17 / A poet's confession

After her conversion to Catholicism from robust atheism, this poet feared that her range might be constrained / **by Sally Read**

18 / Poem

A Christmas Song / **by Wendy Cope**

19 / The loss of ritual

Has the decline of traditional rituals damaged the cohesion of our communities? / **by Madeleine Bunting**

20 / The Tablet Interview: No ordinary people

The joy of lives lived in faith: the extraordinary Denise and Frank Cottrell-Boyce / **by Maggie Fergusson**

22 / Nightmare before Christmas

While a 91-year-old widow dozed, her son and a roofer battled to save her house from being washed away / **by Ian Thomson**

24 / The evergreen trees of life

The 'land flowing with milk and honey' that God promised to the Jewish people turned out to be rich in wild and cultivated flora / **by John Akeroyd**

31 / Short story

Fallen / **by Michèle Roberts**

A peaceful Christmas and a happy new year to our readers. Next issue: Saturday 1 January 2022

From the start of his papacy, the 'outsider Pope' has made clear the direction in which he would like to take the Church. This year has seen Francis, who turned 85 on 17 December, put his foot on the accelerator / By CHRISTOPHER LAMB

Keeping pace with the Pope

AT THE beginning of 2021, I wrote that as Pope Francis was seeking to press ahead with his reforms, he was showing no sign of slowing down. This year, Francis has not simply kept up the pace of change – he has moved into top gear. The Pope seems determined not to waste what he sees as a critical, epoch-shifting, *kairos* moment to reshape the Church for the twenty-first century.

The last 12 months have been a whirlwind of activity, with Francis opening the most ambitious Catholic renewal process in six decades; making a historic visit to Iraq; giving the green light for an unprecedented corruption trial in the Vatican; and continuing to offer bold leadership on the migrants' crisis, climate change and social justice.

There are no signs that the Pope intends to step down. The operation on his colon in July was a success and, apart from suffering occasional bouts of sciatica, he is in good health for a man of his age. Those close to Francis say he is likely to remain in post until at least October 2023, when the crucial Synod of Bishops assembly is due to take place in Rome. A resignation is considered to be highly unlikely while Pope Emeritus Benedict is still alive. One church source told me that, God willing, the Pope intends to stay until his reforms are "irreversible".

ALTHOUGH he's moved into top gear, the seeds of renewal that Francis has planted need care and attention if they are to produce growth. The worldwide synodal process launched in October is part of his effort to uproot the entrenched culture of clericalism and "invert the pyramid", as he has put it. The process is fragile and, inevitably, is already meeting with negativity and cynicism from those who like the hierarchical pyramid the way it is.

In some ways, the Pope embodies the fragility of his reforms. He has a flat foot, which causes him to walk in an unsteady manner, and occasionally fall over. As he boarded the plane to fly back to Rome from Athens on 6 December, he tripped on the steps. Yet in spite of his vulnerability, the Pope picks himself up and keeps going. The trip to Cyprus and Greece not only capped off a busy year, it highlighted some of the key themes of the Francis pontificate, and sent a message



Pope Francis pictured during his visit to Cyprus earlier this month

about what a more synodal Church would look like. Three characteristics stood out.

The first is that it would be a more **fraternal** Church. Drawing on ideas in last year's encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope told priests and Religious in Cyprus: "Walls do not and should not exist in the Catholic Church." He went on: "For the Church is a common home, a place of relationships and of coexistence in diversity." By rediscovering a deeper sense of what it means to be Catholic, the Church would become "an open space in which all are welcomed". Speaking in Cyprus, the Pope explained that the "diversity of the whole" shows the "richness of unity", one of the things that synodality, with its emphasis on the discernment of local Churches, seeks to bring about.

Developing unity rather than uniformity also means putting into perspective any styles, customs or habits that might seem important but end up obscuring the "living tradition" of the Church. The Pope has often lamented the "we've always done things this way" attitude that prevents evangelisation and hardens divisions between Christians. Francis put it this way when addressing Orthodox Christians in Cyprus: "Let us not permit the 'traditions', in the plural and with a small 't', to prevail over 'Tradition', in the singular and with a capital 'T'."

The second characteristic is **humility**. A synodal Church is able to listen and learn from other Christians, and admit mistakes. During his meeting with the Holy Synod in Nicosia, Francis said that the Orthodox experience of synodality "can truly help us", and when he met Archbishop Ieronymos II in Athens he told him: "We feel we have much to learn from you". The Pope also asked for forgiveness for "the mistakes committed by many Catholics" – he was referring to the lack of support many Catholics showed for the Greeks in their struggle for independence, but he had in mind many other historical insults and failures.

For Francis, a Church marked by humility does not assume it is the dominant force in the culture. Speaking to leaders of the small Catholic community in Greece, Francis pointed out that when St Paul travelled to Athens he was alone, unwelcome and had little prospect of success: "Being a minority – and do not forget that the Church throughout the world is a minority – does not mean being insignificant, but closer to the path loved by the Lord, which is that of littleness: of *kenosis*, of abasement, of meekness."

THIS BRINGS us to the third characteristic of a synodal Church: it is **prophetic**. The most moving scenes of Francis' visit came when he met refugees on Lesbos. His consistent advocacy for refugees and migrants at a time when European governments are hardening in their attitudes makes him seem like a voice crying in the wilderness. Francis is modelling a Church that stands alongside the marginalised and speaks truth to power. The president of Greece, Katerina Sakellariopoulou, described him as a "protector of the poor and the persecuted, sharer of their pain and strong supporter of their rights".

In Athens, Francis spoke of the "retreat from democracy". The symbolic significance of delivering this stark warning in the cradle of democracy should not be underestimated. The Pope sought to place the Church firmly against the rising tide of populism and authoritarianism. His support for democracy represents a remarkable development for the papacy, which in the past has flirted with various forms of dictatorship and authoritarianism. While synods are not parliaments, they open a path towards a deepening participation of all the People of God in the governance of the Church.

The last 12 months have also seen the Pope grow more robust in facing down those who oppose the direction in which he is trying to lead the Church. While the early years of his pontificate saw Francis operating a big tent approach, offering an olive branch to the quasi-schismatic Society of Pius X for example, and appointing cardinals such as Robert Sarah and George Pell to key positions, he has begun to draw some red lines.

He said that those who oppose the teachings of the Second Vatican Council "do not stand with the Church"; he's imposed tough restrictions on the use of the pre-Vatican II liturgy; and in off-the-cuff remarks he described the attacks on his pontificate by the conservative Catholic media network, EWTN, as the "work of the devil". On the liturgy, one church source says that the Congregation for Divine Worship in Rome is working on more detailed guidelines for bishops to help them apply the new rules, and it's likely to give no ground to traditionalists. The Pope is insistent that Vatican II must finally be implemented.

His more assertive stance this year came as those who oppose his pontificate were ramping up their pre-conclave politicking. This is partly driven by the wealthy and vocal conservative lobby in the United States, who openly resist Francis and undermine him publicly. Perhaps more dangerous, are certain Rome-based prelates who use feline manoeuvres to block reforms and influence appointments. According to Francis himself, some of them "were preparing for the conclave" while he was in hospital over the summer.

Take the Amazon Ecclesial Conference, recommended by the Amazon synod, a new body established to promote synodality in the region and made up of lay people, priests and bishops. It took more than a year for it to get formal recognition in Rome. Similarly, the long-awaited new constitution on the Roman Curia has been delayed by filibustering. While Francis is assertive in setting the direction for the Church, he sometimes has to be patient.

WHERE HE has not held back is in radically reshaping the body that will elect his successor. Francis is increasingly inclined only to give a red hat to someone who shares his vision. There is still a possibility that a more cautious successor to Francis could be chosen, or even a candidate who has received the implicit backing of cardinals unhappy with the direction of this pontificate. Should that happen, Francis' reforms could falter, or be reversed.

"He needs to hold two more consistories," one Vatican source told me. Bergoglio has already chosen almost 60 per cent of the current College of Cardinals, and in the first half of 2022 he is expected to add more. By June next year, the number of electors (cardinals under the age of 80) will be 116, just short of the 120 limit on cardinal electors set by Paul VI. But Francis does not have to keep to that figure. He is also understood to be considering an update to the rules governing a conclave, with a Vatican task force studying the matter.

Next year is likely to be equally dramatic. The synod process is expected to move up a gear and papal trips to India, the Korean peninsula, Congo, Papua New Guinea, East Timor and Canada are under discussion. On 13 March, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the "outsider" who had never lived or worked in Rome before his election as Pope, will mark nine years in office. Stand by for more surprises.

Like hats, gloves were once thought essential, not just for monarchs



THE PAIR of woollen gloves slotted on to the tops of railings inside Victoria Station looked like hands reaching out from immurement in the wall behind. That's what attracted my attention. Then I saw that the thumb and index finger tips of each glove had a smooth pad of leather, or more likely plastic.

I thought these were for picking out a rail pass or for paying with a banknote. I've since discovered that they are intended to allow use of a mobile without taking the gloves off. Otherwise the woolly surface would just polish the screen.

Gloves haven't changed much in my urban life for years. Unlike me, the Queen keeps up their use. At the top end of society such things become fossilised in daily life, like cups and saucers or umbrellas. The wide base of society feel obliged, for marginal convenience, to use mugs instead of cups and saucers and nothing instead of umbrellas, leaving them a soggy sight in the rain. Luckily for us in London, it seldom rains. Annual rainfall is 27 inches (compared with 41 for Manchester, 44 for Glasgow).

But, like hats, gloves were once thought essential, not just for monarchs. The Worshipful Company of Glovers, drawing up its ordinances in 1349, rightly forbade gloves to be sold by candlelight lest the customer be cozened. If discovered, "naughtie and deceitfull gloves" were to be confiscated and destroyed.

When I was a child, in the olden days before coronavirus and Brexit, gloves had a function. Winter mornings were frosty, and without gloves the fingers would hurt with the cold. Only in snowy weather were they counterproductive, because making snowballs left them sopping and chill.

Sometimes on my walk to school a single glove would be seen on a gatepost fringed with rime at the corners, placed there by an unknown benefactor and saved from the ground. I don't know how many were reunited with their owners, but it seemed to me then the proper thing to do, and to me now as a civic act, a touching piece of social cohesion, the opposite of litter.

A STRANGE coincidence of an allied kind took place on my way back from the *Telegraph* carol service at St Bride's, Fleet Street. I should mention that last year I had written a short item in print on

lockdown beards. An example I gave was the beardage of Jack Blanchard, a frequent television reviewer of the daily newspapers. It looked like "lichen on an old wall", I suggested. On Twitter, he seemed to take this badly.

On the Underground to the *Telegraph* office at Victoria, a man got out of the train and I saw a woolly hat on the floor. So I took it to the door and called after him with no effect. Someone on the platform asked to board, seeing what I was doing, called out much louder, and so the man and hat were happily reunited.

Once he was on board, the helpful passenger turned out to be Jack Blanchard, who didn't punch me on the nose but assured me he didn't mind the lichen remark and had put it in his scrapbook. It was perfectly reasonable that he should coincide, as he was on his way to the Palace of Westminster. Yet it seemed an odd synchronicity with the hat as mediator of our reconciliation.

Synchronicity is a term that arrived in English in the year of the Coronation, 1953, taken from Jung's consideration of coincidences without causal relations. He gave the example of a woman he was treating recounting a dream in which she was given a golden scarab. As she was telling him this, he heard a gentle tapping on the window behind him, opened it and a creature flew in. It was a shining golden-coloured scarabaeid beetle, *Cetonia aurata*. Old Jung drew conclusions about the effects of a collective unconscious.

Well, I don't know about beetles, but we have been informed about sparrows. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will." The same must apply to woolly hats.

AT VICTORIA Station, on a big bright placard, Safety Santa, as it says on his hat, declares: "Please don't run through the station or on the platforms". Yet I'm still not convinced that safety is the real message of Christmas. No doubt terrible injuries happen to fallen runners and those on whom they fall. But there is a feeling of achievement in catching a train, just that safe non-runners will never know.



Christopher Howse is an assistant editor of *The Daily Telegraph*.

Previous Conservative governments have shown scant regard for the law, but under Boris Johnson's morally bankrupt administration the malaise has deepened. A professor of law argues that without dramatic constitutional reform, Britain will continue its slide towards cronyism / **By CONOR GEARTY**

Out of control

DO THESE NAMES ring any bells: Tim Yeo, Allan Stewart, Hartley Booth, David Tredinnick, Graham Riddick, Tim Smith, Patrick Nicholls? They were just some of the bit-part players in the great Tory sleaze crisis of the mid-1990s, widely believed to have combined with economic mismanagement to guarantee the party's huge defeat in 1997.

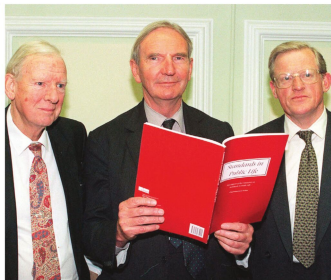
The big beasts in that Conservative calamity – whose names you are more likely to remember – included Cecil Parkinson, David Mellor and Norman Lamont, and this is before we even get to those who were forced out of office for stupid words rather than suspect deeds, among them Edwina Currie (salmonella rifle in eggs) and Nicholas Ridley (can't stand the Germans). Every day seemed to bring a new story of infamy in high office.

It might be thought that little has changed since the last time the Conservatives enjoyed a similarly lengthy period in office. Owen Paterson is today's Neil Hamilton, protesting his innocence while he pockets cash, not for questions this time but for influence. Matt Hancock kisses his girlfriend in the way that Piers Merchant kissed his wife in a gruesome public display of fidelity shortly after news of the affair that was to end his career had broken. Boris Johnson is, however, no John Major. The current Prime Minister is himself an epitome of the moral emptiness that in that earlier era brought men down. And yet he remains in post. Here is surely a material break with the past. Wrong produces sniggering, not the sack – contriteness merely simulated while the next ruse is pondered.

The impunity feels real this time. Public culture seems genuinely to have changed, with the Prime Minister the beneficiary of a now prevailing public taste in which celebrity is everything and immoral behaviour counts for nothing. News rushes at such high speed that little holds the imagination for longer than a nanosecond. What matters is not the detail any more but rather the overall narrative – and so far as Johnson is concerned, that has up to just very recently proved remarkably durable; he has remained that lively bloke from the telly who is really one of us, cheating and lying like the rest of us, as he knows, and (crucially) as he also knows that we know.

At his best, it is that disbelieving twinkle in his eye as he utters the latest ludicrous promise (Forty new hospitals! A tunnel to

I never thought the weaknesses obvious in the UK's unwritten constitution would eventually destroy the country



Lord Nolan, centre, with his 1995 report, flanked by Labour MP Peter Shore, left, and Tory MP Tom King. Top right, Kathryn Stone, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards; and, below, Lord Geidt, the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests, appointed by Boris Johnson



Northern Ireland!) or lie (no trade barriers whatsoever!), that detachment from himself as he plays the role of leader for the cameras, that has consolidated his grip on enough of the electorate for him to count as highly successful. It helps too to have policies that work for closet and explicit racists, the rich who fund his party, and the foreign media bosses who propagandise for him in their newspapers. Johnson has never taken a brave political decision in his life. Whether it is to a wife, a girlfriend, a political associate or the public, Johnson lies to please – with the goal of pleasing himself.

But is the spell still working? Boris Johnson's grip on office is clearly loosening by the day and if he is gone or nearly gone by the New Year, it will have been a combination of Tory mistrust and Establishment retaliation that will have seen him off, although both will still need to be propelled by a collapse in public esteem which at the time of writing has not – yet – holed the Prime Minister below his political waterline.

Tory mistrust is easy to understand; by all accounts Johnson's only claim to their loyalty has been his capacity to win their elections for them. His lack of any deep relationships

rooted in mutual loyalty is becoming an increasingly evident weakness, and very different from John Major, who attracted (and retained) intense personal loyalty. For its part, the "establishment" currently ensnaring Johnson is surprisingly new, a creature of changes wrought by the Major and Blair administrations rather than something with us from the time of Bagehot.

The Nolan principles were Major's riposte to his problems with sleaze, and ethics watchdogs and standards advisers and so on have in the years since become a central part of governing in Whitehall. In 2015, the then "Director General Propriety and Ethics" Sue Gray was memorably described as the "most powerful civil servant you've never heard of". These are the people that Johnson now strives to shake off, the Alex Allans (resigned), the Lord Geidts (in post but at the time of writing considering his position) and the Kathryn Stones (hanging in there).

He wants to reshape public discourse in his own image, returning to a time when prime ministers enjoyed the fruits of office without the cares of accountability, a new Walpole perhaps (Robert, not Horace – you have to go back a long way to find a prime minister as willing as Johnson to trample on public rectitude for personal advantage).

There is a wider dimension to this, as there was in the mid-1990s. I wrote about this

dimension to the sleaze crisis in "The Party in Government", an essay for the *London Review of Books* that appeared in March 1995: "The corruption of this long era of Conservative rule extends beyond personal venality. Though loudly committed to the rule of law, especially when it meant ruining the unions in the early Eighties, the government has found its own actions frequently castigated as unlawful in the British courts, and pilloried in Strasbourg for the infringement of human rights. Its response has been to contrive legal ruses the effect of which has been often to place it quite literally above the law. The contempt towards one great limb of the British constitution has been matched by the scorn it has shown towards another, for which it has also affected respect. The Government's cynical control of the Commons and its contemptuous disregard of the Lords have allowed it singlehandedly to turn Britain into the impoverished and unequal nation that it now finds itself to be."

DURING HIS still brief time in office, Johnson has gone much further than his predecessors, exposing as empty such supposedly entrenched aspects of the unwritten constitution as the imperative of insulating the Queen from politics (the unlawful prorogation of Parliament), and the importance of respecting the will of the devolved legislatures (the Sewel Convention). He has deepened

the usual Tory threats to destroy the BBC while seeking to place his own creatures in positions intended to be independent (Paul Dacre a recent (failed) example; William Shawcross in charge of the Prevent review; the Brexiteer Gisela Stuart as civil service commissioner). His government has proposed changes to the electoral law that will both make its retention of power easier while at the same time stripping the electoral commission of many of the powers of oversight that it currently enjoys, and of which recently he has been a target (the refurbishment of his flat in Downing Street).

The most recently opened fronts are against the rule of law and human rights. The Justice Secretary Dominic Raab wants to emasculate the Human Rights Act (one of the Blair administration's most important achievements) and the Government appears to have recently hinted at a power to overturn specific rulings of the courts of which they disapprove and/or which they judge inconvenient.

Perpetually mocked by Johnson's English administration, Scotland's threat to secede may soon come to fruition, while Northern Ireland's constitutional right to clear off into the Republic of Ireland gathers support by the day (north of the Border anyway). I never thought that the weaknesses that have been obvious in the UK's unwritten constitution that I have been teaching for decades would eventually destroy the country – but that does

appear to be what is happening under Johnson's watch. Here is a far deeper malaise than any experienced in the 1980s.

Will the Johnson project succeed? Its weakness is the same as that which dogs all populists: the only coherent policy it possesses is the accumulation of power for its own sake, not for any particular purpose. Johnson and his gang are fast running out of people they can blame for their indecision, indirection and vacuity on everything except their own interests and the retention of their own power.

THERE ARE CLEAR signs that that section of the public once so mesmerised by Johnson is tiring of him. Freed of their dependence on him for their seats, the wrath of the scorned Tory MPs will be compelling to watch. The quiet guard dogs protecting the constitution may finally manage to bite as well as bark. But unless the downfall of Johnson precipitates dramatic constitutional change – proportional representation; a formalisation of checks and balances; a clamping-down on the influence of money in politics; a reckoning with the country's colonial past – we will be once again back where we are now before too long, the constitutionally "impoverished and unequal country" that I wrote about 27 years ago.

Conor Gearty is professor of human rights law, London School of Economics.

URGENT

Catholic Agency for Overseas Development

CAFOD

Across Afghanistan, more than 8 million people are on the brink of famine because of drought, the collapsing economy, lack of food, conflict, and Covid.

£10 could provide treatment to a child suffering from malnutrition for three weeks.

£50 could provide 45 days' food for a vulnerable family.



<Use your phone's camera to scan here or donate online at:
cafod.org.uk/AfghanistanAppeal

Registered charity number 1160384. Company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 05387733.



CAFOD
DEC MEMBER
TOGETHER
WE'RE
STRONGER

**AFGHANISTAN
CRISIS APPEAL.**

The women, men and children of Afghanistan need your help now.

As the popularity of Boris Johnson and his government plummets, opportunities arise for a revival of the fortunes of parties to his right as well as to his left / By JULIA LANGDON

Christmas party politics

IT WAS Prince Albert who famously popularised the Christmas tree in England. The Hanoverians had introduced the idea to court back in the eighteenth century, but it was only after the widespread circulation in *The Illustrated London News* of an engraving of the royal family around their festive fir at Windsor in 1848 that the idea caught on that, perhaps, everybody might have such a symbol in their own home. By Christmas in the 1860s, Covent Garden was doing a roaring trade and hundreds were being sold every year.

What is less appreciated is that it was also in 1848, that year of revolution across most of Europe, that Prince Albert recognised the dangers of the populist movements that had

swept through Sicily, France, Germany, Italy and the Austrian Empire, and might possibly threaten the British throne. And so it was that he conceived his idea of the Great Exhibition of 1851, a diversionary ploy to exercise the enthusiasms of the Great British public from more alarming ideas, such as overthrowing the monarchy.

Queen Victoria's consort was not the only person to catch the acrid whiff of revolution blowing on the political wind from the Continent, but he was in a position to do something about it. And, as it proved, his idea was both successful and, yes, popular.

This nice distinction between "populism" and "what proves to be popular" is of particular relevance in British politics this Christmas.

There is again a lot of populism abroad – notably in Brazil, Hungary and Poland, but stirrings of populist movements can be felt in nearly all European democracies, and the distant drumbeat of an irrepressible Donald Trump can be heard as the US heads towards mid-term elections next November. There is also a distinct possibility of a resurgence of populist politics here at home, a development that looks set eerily to coincide with the plummeting popularity of Boris Johnson and his government.

That much was assured at the time of writing. As a result of the disastrous concatenation of events that beset his government in recent weeks the Prime Minister has been found out by the British public. This has given the Labour Party its first identifiable lead in the opinion polls for as long as anybody can remember, but it has also created an alarming vacuum. By the time you read this, Nigel Farage may well have raised his head above the political parapet and, if he hasn't done so yet, it will not be long.

A populist leader is someone who presents himself or herself as a man or woman of the people – and their defender against a governing elite that neither understands them nor has their interests at heart. Politicians often try to play this card, even in a mature democracy. Margaret Thatcher, for example, would from time to time present herself as an ordinary housewife, a woman just like any

ONLINE EVENTS

Better the devil you know: An introduction to the noonday demon of *acedia*

Join Fr Toby Lees OP as he explores *acedia*, looking at the writings of Evagrius, Cassian and Aquinas. You might not have heard of it, but you will recognise the symptoms when you hear them!

THURSDAY 13 JANUARY 2022, 7.00PM – 8.00PM GMT

Synod Watch Two – Synod wisdom from the Religious

Continue your Synodal journey with *The Tablet* as Synod Watch Two explores Synod wisdom from the Religious, gaining an insight into the Religious Orders' response to the Synod and their experience of discernment. Join Christopher Lamb and a panel of representatives from the Religious Orders as we gain an insight into a unique perspective on the Synodal journey.

WEDNESDAY 26 JANUARY 2022, 7.00PM – 8.00PM GMT

The Synodal Pathway – Good News for Catholic Women?

Natalie K. Watson, Publishing Editor of the *Pastoral Review*, in conversation with Tina Beattie, Catholic theologian and novelist, Daisy Sriblin, CEO of the Catholic charity Million Minutes, and Alana Harris, Director of Liberal Arts and Senior Lecturer in Modern British History at King's College, London, about synodality and the experience of women in the Catholic Church

WEDNESDAY 19 JANUARY 2022, 6.00-7.00PM GMT

Robots, drones and smart churches? Catholic Social Teaching and the Artificial Intelligence Revolution

Natalie K. Watson, Publishing Editor of the *Pastoral Review*, in conversation with Sean McDonagh, eco-theologian and author of *Robots, Ethics and the Future of Jobs*, about the ethical and theological implications of Artificial Intelligence

THURSDAY 27 JANUARY 2022, 6.00-7.00PM GMT

To book tickets visit: www.thetablet.co.uk/events

JESUITS
IN BRITAIN

Pastoral
Review

THE
TABLET
SINCE 1840

other, who understood about balancing the family budget and getting the family supper on the table. In reality she was an exceptionally unusual woman – as she forcefully demonstrated by becoming the first woman prime minister. But she still somehow managed to convey the message: “I know just how you feel. If I was you, I’d blame the government!” And that was even when she *was* the government.

According to the French political science professor Florence Faucher, our present prime minister perfectly fits the profile of the populist leader. He has cultivated the style of the ordinary man, someone who is not a “Whitehall insider”, who expresses himself simply, directly and with humour, neglects his appearance and does not fear being made to look ridiculous if trapped, for example, on a zip-wire.

Yet the problem for Boris Johnson is that while the populist leader champions the people in their struggle against a privileged elite (epitomised in Trump’s promise to “drain the swamp”) the Prime Minister is, of course, himself an embodiment of that very elite, born the son of an international civil servant, educated at Eton and Oxford, a man whose lifestyle could not be more remote from the ordinary people that he purports to understand and represent.

UNTIL NOW that has not much mattered, at least as far as English electors are concerned (Scottish Tories have always been inclined to distance themselves from him, so unpopular is he north of the border). The public did not mind the many escapades and scrapes. They don’t care how many times Johnson has been married, or how many children he has fathered. They did not appear to be bothered about the liberties that he has taken with the constitution, proroguing Parliament for five weeks, for example, because it suited him, until the law finally stepped in to put him right. And they did not lose faith in his mercurial ability to remain above the sordid business of everyday politics, despite the apparent chaos and incompetence of his office in Downing Street, the uninspiring performance of his ministers and the malfunctioning of his administration.

They didn’t even give a damn that he pursued populist policies of no practical use designed to make people feel better: a bridge to Northern Ireland? Or perhaps a tunnel with a roundabout under the Isle of Man? When he was London Mayor, wasn’t there to be an airport in the Thames estuary? Remember London’s “Garden Bridge”? It was abandoned as too expensive only after £53 million had been spent, £43m of which was public money. None of this seemed to matter to the British public, although the Conservative Party in Parliament could see the dangers in such fabulist nonsense.

But it did start to matter when the Prime Minister was called to account for “party” politics. What we saw then was a man who for once – probably for the first time since he became a public figure – minded very much being made to look ridiculous, because this



‘The Prime Minister has been found out by the by the British public’

time he was trapped on a moral zip-wire operated by Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby. Johnson realised, when he had to answer for this, just how much it was going to cost him, because the electorate could now see for themselves not only the sharp distinction between the rules that apply to the common man and those that apply to the elite – but which side of the divide the Prime Minister was really on. While last Christmas the rest of us were not even able to visit our sick and dying relatives, and were reduced to putting on our overcoats and meeting our friends outside in groups of not more than six – no cheese and canapés – the Prime Minister’s office staff were doing precisely as they wished, and were sniggering and making jokes about it.

THE OUTCOME of the by-election in North Shropshire on 16 December will indicate the degree to which the scenery is shifting on the political stage, and there is little doubt that the Conservatives will do very badly indeed in what should normally be the well-cushioned comforts of their natural habitat. A factor which always accounts for a proportion of the votes in any by-election is the nature of the departure of the former MP: that it was the tragic early death of James Brokenshire which brought about the by-election in Old Bexley and Sidcup earlier this month made the Conservative candidate’s defence of that seat considerably easier. The ugly and untidy circumstances which brought about Owen Paterson’s resignation from the House of Commons will not have helped the Tories this week.


I cannot predict who will win – it may easily fall to the Liberal Democrats – but I forecast that the Conservatives will lose many votes to Reform UK. This is the populist offshoot of the Brexit Party, itself formed from the remnants of UKip, after it faded from public sight in the wake of the 2016 referendum. Reform UK will be a handy dustbin for the votes of disaffected Conservatives who cannot bring themselves to support the Liberal Democrats.

And there will be many such disillusioned voters looking for a political home in the months to come. Boris Johnson may continue to thrash around as Prime Minister, but he and his government will not regain the high ground. He has lost much of his personal support among his parliamentary party, even among members of his own cabinet and among the loyalist new intake of the 2019 election who owe him their seats. The Conservative Party now looks discredited.


There could not be more fertile soil for the sort of nationalist populist policies advocated by the likes of – well, Nigel Farage. He retired from national politics last March, but in November, when things started going badly wrong for Boris Johnson, he casually speculated in public that he might return. A true populist like Farage was able to see then, as the public does now, that a phony populist who has become publicly unpopular is likely to create a vacuum on the right of British politics. Power abhors a vacuum. Farage, the populist’s populist, smells an opportunity.

So, if the Labour Party does now get its act together, 2022 could provide an opportunity for them and might besides put some decency back into British democracy. That would be popular all round – probably even at the Palace.

Julia Langdon is The Tablet’s lobby correspondent.



Find your Sacred Space in 2022



Retreats 2022 includes:

- Listings for over 160 retreat centres
- Articles and book reviews on the theme of Sacred Space
- Key contributor Rachel Mann

Retreats is a unique handbook for those looking for a retreat and resources for reflection.

To order your copy* please contact the Retreat Association at: www.retreats.org.uk
info@retreats.org.uk
 01494 569056

* price £12 includes postage and packing

Registered charity no.1150792

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem has been magnificently restored. Yet the Covid pandemic – even more than the Israeli–Palestinian conflict – has reduced visitors to a trickle / **By DONALD MACINTYRE**

Renewed and born again

THERE IS ONE bonus for visitors to the Church of the Nativity in a Christmas period falling in the midst of a pandemic, as Dr Khoulood Daibes, newly appointed CEO of the Bethlehem Development Foundation (BDF), wryly points out. Whereas you might have had to queue for several hours when the church was receiving up to 3,000 pilgrims and tourists a day during its pre-Covid peaks, “now you have the church to yourself, so it’s the best time to visit – if you are vaccinated”.

Dr Daibes, a former Palestinian minister and diplomat with a PhD in conservation architecture from Leibniz University Hanover, and a mother of three, is right. On the first Monday of Advent I was able to slip into the basilica without fuss through the very low

“Door of Humility”, having the church not quite “to myself” – given the presence of at least two priests, patrolling Palestinian police officers and workmen – with freedom to inspect the results of a remarkable nine-year restoration effort.

And those results are spectacular: visible even before you enter, in the clean white stone of what was long the blackened western façade and the consolidation of the narthex roof, no longer needing support from the precarious-looking wooden props installed during the British mandate. But it’s in the nave that you fully appreciate the work, from the stunning angels and saints depicted in the painstakingly renewed Crusader-era wall mosaics and painted nave columns to the reconstructed wooden windows, the replastering, renovated

wooden architraves and, most vital of all, the recovering of a roof that had been leaking water for generations. The Dominican friar, Antonio de’ Reboldi of Cremona, who visited the church in 1326 and 1330, wrote: “In Bethlehem there is a church on the site where Christ was born, known as St Mary: it is so beautiful, that I never saw another one being so nice, so lavishly decorated, so magnificent in its columns and rich in paintings as this one in Bethlehem, which is taken as worship-worthy everywhere in the world.”

It’s fair to say that only now has the church begun again to merit Antonio’s description; by the 1470s, visitors were already reporting some deterioration. In subsequent centuries damage – some wilful, some natural – gradually eroded the lustre which had so excited the Dominican. No one who knew the church in the early 2000s can fail to notice the dramatic transformation.

Nobody also needs reminding of the spiritual significance to Christians of a church originally built by Constantine the Great in the fourth century over the cave where Jesus is said to have been born, and rebuilt by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian two centuries later. But Dr Daibes, who has been on the committee set up by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to

DIocese of  SALFORD

Parish Development Coordinator (with responsibility for Synod)

As our parishes look to a post-pandemic future, it is important that we reach out and listen to our communities. As such, the Diocese of Salford is looking for someone to coordinate its Synodal journey, assist in discerning the guidance of the Spirit, and facilitate agreed goals and actions.

We are looking for an individual with excellent organisation, prioritisation, and communications skills, and an ability to listen, motivate, and mentor. They will be a skilled facilitator and project manager and be comfortable interacting with a wide range of people, as well as collating and documenting feedback from Synod members.

It is a genuine occupational requirement under the Equality Act 2010 that the post-holder is a Practising Catholic.

The Diocese of Salford is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people. This post is subject to an Enhanced Disclosure by the Disclosure and Barring Service and all employees of the Diocese are expected to work to promote the safeguarding of vulnerable groups.

Closing date: 12 noon on Friday 14th January 2022

Visit <https://www.dioceseofsalford.org.uk/news/vacancies/> for more information and to apply.

For further queries, please call 0161-817-2203 or email HR@dioceseofsalford.org.uk

Salford Roman Catholic Diocesan Trustees Registered Charity
Registered Charity No. 250037

The Tablet Newman Intern

We are looking for our Tablet Newman Intern for 2022. The Newman internship is now well established as a springboard for a career in journalism.

The successful applicant will understand the value of independent journalism and have a keen interest in religion and church affairs. He or she will work beside our team of journalists, researching and writing news stories and features for the print and online platform.

The internship is for 9 months, working 35 hours per week in our offices in west London. He or she will be paid the London Living Wage.

Please send your CV, a covering letter and an example of your writing to thetablet@thetablet.co.uk.

Closing date: Friday 7 January 2021

THE
TABLET
SINCE 1840

Help us provide every Catholic school with a copy of *The Tablet*

We have a number of Catholic schools throughout the UK who are on a waiting list for a copy of *The Tablet*. If you would like to sponsor a copy of *The Tablet* for a school or to find out more about *The Tablet* schools campaign which aims to ensure every Catholic School has access to *The Tablet*, then please email Ian Farrar on: ifarrar@thetablet.co.uk

‘Educating is an act of love,
it is like giving life’ Pope Francis



oversee the work since its inception in 2013, insists the church has a meaning for all Palestinians, whether the Christian minority or Muslim majority. "The message of the restoration is first of all that we Palestinians are proud of our heritage," she says, adding that the church is "sacred for many people around the world and we share it with humanity. We wanted to give it back its authenticity and beauty and protect it for future generations."

CHECKPOINT 300 – through which most visitors to the church pass and at which hundreds of Palestinians with coveted permits to work in Jerusalem are obliged to form a packed queue each morning before dawn – along with the daunting eight-metre-high wall encircling much of Bethlehem, is a sharp reminder that this is a city under occupation. Nor is it difficult to find residents almost as critical of the Palestinian Authority as of their Israeli occupiers, grumbling that it is not doing more to champion the Palestinian cause, or lamenting that when Abbas finally goes he is more likely to be replaced by one of his cronies than by the popular Marwan Barghouti, still in an Israeli jail after 17 years.

But the renovation does seem a Palestinian Authority success story. First, it did what had seemed impossible for centuries and persuaded the three denominations who share the church – Greek Orthodox, Latin or Roman Catholic (represented by Franciscans) and Armenian – that it would be carried out without unravelling the historic and delicately preserved arrangement known as the "status quo", allotting places and times for worship to each.

It was, says Dr Daibes, a "challenge" but after the first stage – the restoration of the roof – the clerics were encouraged to back a major extension of the project. A formal tendering process awarded the contract to Piacenti, a family-run conservation firm from Italy. The fund-raising process which produced the \$15 million (£11m) that the main works have cost so far is ongoing. Dr Daibes said that Palestinian business people and the financially stricken Authority itself provided nearly half of this, the rest coming from individuals and governments – including those of the Vatican, France, Germany, Greece and Italy, though not yet the UK. She says that 400 people in all, foreign and Palestinian, including an international cast of specialist professionals, were involved in the work and that "fund-raising was not an easy task".

Which makes it a pity that more pilgrims will not enjoy the fruits of this process this Christmas. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has long restricted the potential boon of tourism to Bethlehem. Because foreign visitors often come only for the day in normal times, Dr Daibes says that while "many families here depend on tourism, most of the benefit is on the Israeli side". But Covid – and the new Omicron variant – has added a whole new "global" obstacle for would-be



incomers, as she acknowledges. She says that there have already been cancellations among the few foreign bookings for this Christmas since Israel's Covid-driven ban on overseas visitors, imposed last month and likely to be further extended.

Inside the church itself, Palestinian Greek Orthodox parish priest Fr Issa Thalji, 39, says that back at the beginning of March 2020 – when the restoration was not as near to completion as it is now – the church was "actually full – you could see the lines of people outside"; but after the pandemic began, numbers dwindled to near zero. Repeatedly upbeat about the need to have more "faith" and less "fear" about Covid, Fr Thalji nevertheless laments: "This is the birthplace of Jesus Christ and there are no people ... Without tourism in Bethlehem there is nothing; the people in the hotels, shops, restaurants are not working."

Sure enough, across Manger Square amid the olive wood-carved Christmas cribs in her family's shop, the Catholic Palestinian Mary Giacaman, 58, says she can never remember a period as bad for business. Normally, Christmas is the busiest period, with the family working late into the evening. Last year, for the first time ever, they closed the shop altogether. Now, she says, she fears the shop may have to close once again for Christmas. "I hope not. We are praying for a miracle." With typical resilience, she adds, smiling: "If not this year, then next."

But partly spurred by the dearth of pilgrims this year, the city is stepping up its touring of a special exhibition, "Bethlehem Reborn", which will tell the story of what Issa Kassissieh, the



A restored mosaic of an angel, far left; and, left, how it looked before the work. Below, Dr Khouloud Daibes

Palestinian scholar and ambassador to the Holy See, describes as "the refurbishment of the cradle of Christianity", to a wider international audience. Having opened first at the Vatican, and then in several Italian cities, it is now showing in Cologne. (Dr Daibes makes clear she would love to see the show mounted in London.) And it's quite a story, of what you both can and can't see in the Church of the Nativity itself: the use of steel connectors to protect the building against repeats of the earthquakes that have inflicted severe damage every hundred years or so; the discovery of yet another extraordinarily detailed mosaic angel, which had been hidden under plaster during an attempted restoration in 1842; and the discovery of shot amid the tessera from the arquebuses that Ottoman soldiers periodically used to fire at the mosaics – though, not, interestingly, at images of Mary because of her status as the mother of Jesus, a prophet in Islam.

DR DAIBES stresses the work is ongoing; fire prevention equipment is still needed – we don't want "what happened in Paris" to happen here, she says – along with the creation of a microclimate that will protect the mosaics from excess humidity. For this, her foundation is seeking to raise, with the help of organisations like the American Friends of the Bethlehem Development Foundation, another \$2m. But the foundation is also determined to establish an ongoing maintenance programme that will prevent a recurrence of the disrepair into which the church fell in previous centuries.

The head of the BDF is proud that the restoration has removed the church from the list of endangered heritage sites, which Unesco had put it on in 2012: "As Palestinians we proved that compared with independent states with huge possibilities and financial resources we could do it in a relatively short time." With the merest flourish she adds: "We send a message from Bethlehem and Palestine that we try to be resilient as much as we can. The church is a source of hope, and the message of Christmas gives us some power to continue and hope the coming days will be better."

Donald Macintyre was the Independent's Jerusalem bureau chief between 2004 and 2012. He won the Next Century Foundation's Peace Through Media Award in 2011 and has previously been shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Journalism and for the Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism. His books include *Gaza: Preparing for Dawn* (Oneworld).



WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME-

the biggest Internet portal,
providing you various content:
brand new books, trending movies,
fresh magazines, hot games,
recent software, latest music releases.

Unlimited satisfaction one low price

Cheap constant access to piping hot media

Protect your downloadings from Big brother

Safer, than torrent-trackers

18 years of seamless operation and our users' satisfaction

All languages

Brand new content

One site



AvaxHome - Your End Place

We have everything for all of your needs. Just open <https://avxlive.icu>

The old picture of Protestant hostility to Mary of Nazareth is changing. Some of the freshest, most creative contributions to our understanding of the mother of Jesus are now coming from Protestant women theologians and biblical scholars / By MARGARET HEBBLETHWAITE

To Mary through Jesus

WHEN IT comes to Mary of Nazareth, Christmas is the one time of the year that has brought Catholics and Protestants together – though only up to a point. “Mary stars briefly in annual Christmas pageants, if encountered at all,” says Protestant Bonnie Miller-McLemore, professor at Vanderbilt University. A similar tale is told by Presbyterian Beverly Roberts Gaventa: “She creeps into our consciousness along with the Advent wreath, making a brief appearance perhaps in sermon and song, and then she disappears along with the crèche, no later than Epiphany.” Nora Lozano-Díaz, a Mexican Baptist, recounts the absurd extremes to which anti-Catholic prejudice could go: “My siblings and I were not allowed to have a Christmas Nativity scene or to participate in the *Posadas* [pre-Christmas novena] because they were Catholic traditions. We did, however, set up a Christmas tree and wait for Santa to bring us our toys.”

The three women theologians were writing in a 2002 collection of a dozen essays (10 of them by women) called *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, which includes some of the freshest, most creative contributions to Mariology this millennium – except that they do not call it Mariology, of course. Miller-McLemore calls it a “feminist maternal Protestant theology”.

AS WOMEN enter increasingly into theology and ministry in all the Churches, the old picture of Protestant hostility to Mary of Nazareth is changing. Protestant women want to rediscover the female biblical figures that tradition has semi-suppressed, and do not want Jesus’ mother brushed aside as an embarrassment. Many theologians and ordinands nowadays are themselves mothers, and feel they already know a lot about her because of the universally valid emotions of motherhood. And they find ample further development of that in the gospel stories.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore tells vividly how motherhood has affected her response to Mary of Nazareth, as she considers the two passages in Luke where Mary “ponders” and “treasures” things said to her – the shepherds’ report, and Jesus’ reply when he is found in the Temple. “I never paid much attention to these passages until I became a mother myself,” she says, but “with children in tow, the words



Detail from *Madonna and Child* by Guido Reni (circa 1629). North Carolina Museum of Art

“Mary kept all these things in her heart” literally jumped off the page.” She uses the word “ponder” to describe her own thoughts on the dilemmas of mothering, as she was “tested regularly in the fire of trivial yet revelatory moments of childcare”.

“Perhaps I felt able to identify with Mary – albeit partially and in a carefully contained Protestant feminist way,” she muses. “Frankly, I have been in awe of Mary’s pondering for a long time. I have, so to speak, wanted this conversation with her. I have wished, as I think many in Catholicism also desired, that she could talk back. I have wondered if Mary’s experience as a mother even remotely resembles my own.” Let us not cheapen this by saying Miller-McLemore is fumbling towards the practice of praying to the Virgin. Let us rather say that she is teaching Catholics who pray to the Virgin something about why they feel the need to do so.

Feminist maternal Protestant theology (if we are to call it that) is continuing and developing. In the February 2018 issue of the Baptist journal *Review and Expositor*, Natalie Webb pointed out that the word traditionally translated as “lowliness” in the Magnificat, *tapeinōsis*, actually means “humiliation”; and

she links it to the #MeToo movement of women speaking out against sexual assault. Mary’s humiliation could refer generally to her social position as a young female under foreign occupation, she says, but it is noteworthy that when the word occurs in connection with women in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), it specifically indicates sexual humiliation such as rape. “Mary’s pregnancy would have looked to those around her like the result of this kind of humiliation,” she reflects.

NOR IS THE United States the only place where Protestant women are rediscovering Mary of Nazareth. In 1987, a statement was issued by 32 Christian women from 16 countries in Asia and the Pacific region, meeting in Singapore (published in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, edited by Ursula King). They are just as angry with the way the Protestant Churches have ignored Jesus’ mother as they are with the way the Catholic Church has used her to keep women in their place. “In the Catholic Church, Mary’s exaltation has been used to reinforce women’s oppression, while in the Protestant Churches the rejection of Mary has oppressed women,” they write.

They read all the Marian texts with new eyes. While traditional interpretations of the virgin birth “emerged from male fear of female sexuality”, its real meaning, in excluding the human male, is that “the end of patriarchy is announced”. At the Visitation, there is recognition of the support and solidarity that women give to one another, especially older women to younger women, so “it is time for us to claim and celebrate the presence of the Spirit in old women. We need them.”

Mary’s Magnificat announces “moral, social, political, economic and cultural reversals”, so, “with the singer of the Magnificat as his mother, it should not surprise us that Jesus’ first words in Luke’s account of his public ministry are also a mandate for radical change. Predictably, however, the Church has forgotten that Mary is the first to announce this change. Understanding this is basic to our response to everything else about Mary.” In fact, they say, it is she who “inspires and initiates Jesus’ ministry from its beginning to its end”. For example, “she is the one who pushes her son into responding to the needs of hospitality at Cana.” She is the one who said “Thy will be done” at the Annunciation, and taught her son the same response, for “these are also his words in the garden of Gethsemane.” They claim Mary as “a woman of the poor” and “challenge the lie that depicts her as jewelled and elaborately dressed. Because the good news of the Magnificat is bad news for the rich, we reject Mary’s hijacking by a wealthy Church – for the consolation of the rich.”

Like or dislike these ideas, we need to recog-

nise that Asian women's theology is emerging like "the eruption of a volcano," says Korean Presbyterian Chung Hyun Kyung in her moving book *Struggle To Be the Sun Again*. Some Westerners will just want to reinforce the old entrenched positions, on either the Catholic or Protestant side, but others will hear the tone of discovery, and be ready to listen to new ideas and forge a common future.

AT THIS POINT I should make a perhaps surprising confession. I absolutely love singing the *Salve Regina* ("Hail holy Queen"), the second-best-known Marian prayer after the *Ave Maria* ("Hail Mary"). I will go to Masses purposefully where it is sung, usually Latin Masses. The *Salve* incorporates something of the idea of the queenly lady disliked by the Asian women, and it promotes much of the kind of Mariology that I feel uncomfortable with, applying to Mary of Nazareth epithets that properly belong to God: "Mother of mercy", "our life, our sweetness and our hope" and our "most gracious advocate" with "eyes of mercy". It seems to imply that she is more merciful than Jesus is, more merciful than God is.

It can be rationalised by saying that we just *feel* she is more approachable because she is a woman, not that she really is more compassionate. But it is still an indictment of the smallness of our male image of God. In the words of Elizabeth A. Johnson, whose book *Truly Our Sister* is the most important Catholic contribution to Mariology so far this millennium, "Let God have her own maternal face. Let Miriam the Galilean woman rejoin the community of disciples."

Why, then, do I love the *Salve* so much? It is not just that I love the music – though I do – nor is it just that I like Latin – though I do. It is also something to do with feeling plugged into the centuries-old tradition of the Church, part of a believing community, part of the family of God – everything that being Catholic is about in terms of the communion of saints. But how can I make sense of it? How, in short, can I allow myself to enjoy it?

A recent experience has led me to see a possible new meaning in the prayer. This year my daughter has become the mother of a son; and although I myself have borne three children, I am now watching this relationship as an observer, and seeing the bond between them. The confidence of my grandson in his mother, his insistence on her presence, his sense of completeness when she is there, almost his sense of ownership of her – all this tells me something about the way baby Jesus felt about his mother.

For a baby boy, the mother is indeed the source of mercy. She is indeed his life, his sweetness and his hope. She is indeed the queen, the one who can do no wrong. She is the person to whom he turns when distressed, with total confidence that she will make him better. In the privations of the exile, Jesus would have turned to his mother crying, confident that she would look on him with eyes of mercy and make everything right again.

Jesus' favourite title for himself was

Salve Regina

*Salve, Regina, Mater misericordie,
vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.*

*Ad te clamamus exules filii Hevæ,
Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes
in hac lacrimarum valle.
Eia, ergo, advocata nostra, illos tuos
misericordes oculos ad nos converte;
Et Jesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui,
nobis post hoc exilium ostende.*

O clemens, O pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria.

"Humanity's Son" and he represents us. (The translation "Son of Man" is now so archaic as to be inaccurate, and to those who would suspect me of changing the words of Jesus, I would point out that he did not speak English.) By placing ourselves with Jesus in his experiences, even as a small child, we can begin to feel about his mother as he did. Vicariously, we can find it acceptable to love her, put our trust in her and ask her to help us. The old adage "to Jesus through Mary" changes into "to Mary through Jesus".

If this perspective is found comprehensible by those of the new feminist maternal Protestant theology, it could enable them to bring on board something of the wealth of

Hail holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,
Hail our life, our sweetness and our hope.
To thee do we cry, poor banished children
of Eve;

To thee do we send up our sighs,
Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.
Turn then, most gracious advocate,
Thine eyes of mercy towards us;
And after this our exile,
Show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb,
Jesus.

O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.

our centuries of Marian devotional art, music and liturgy that they have lacked for so long. Meanwhile, for Catholics, the time has come to allow our Protestant sisters to help us look at Mary of Nazareth with new eyes. Far from Mary being someone to divide the Churches, says the Singapore Statement, "the Magnificat is the rallying point for ecumenism, as Christians join together working to liberate the poor and all victims of injustice." Is it time for the male celibate interpreters of Mary of Nazareth to be silent and to learn from women?

Margaret Hebblethwaite is writing a book about women in the gospels.

enquiries@jcjourneys.com

JC Journeys

01886 812 862

STY
PROTECTED

FAITH IN ART
Led by Monica Gutierrez del Palacio

PRADO MUSEUM, MADRID

Thu 21 – Sun 24 Apr 2022

From £995 pp **BOOK NOW**

PILGRIMAGE
Led by Catholic Faith Exploration

TOUCH OF HEAVEN, PATMOS

Mon 13 – Mon 20 Jun 2022

From £1375 pp **BOOK NOW**

PASSION PLAY
Including visit to Frauenwirth Abbey

OBERAMMERGAU

Wed 8 – Sun 12 Jun 2022

From £1795 pp **BOOK NOW**

FAITH IN ART
Led by Fr Brendan Thomas

PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA, TUSCANY

Thu 5 – Mon 9 May 2022

From £1095 pp **BOOK NOW**

Visit our website for more Pilgrimages, Retreats and Faith in Art trips

www.JCjourneys.com

The foundation of the Norbertines 900 years ago this Christmas Day was the result of an alliance between a bishop seeking to rebuild a troubled diocese and a charismatic preacher with a vision for a new kind of apostolic life / **By HUGH DOHERTY**

The holy man and the bishop

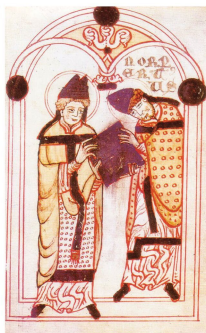
ON CHRISTMAS DAY 1121 Norbert of Xanten and his companions dedicated themselves to the rule of St Augustine. They did so at Prémontré, 18 miles or so to the west of the city of Laon in northern France, within what may have been only a partially completed abbey church. Three hundred years later, sometime before 1422, John Capgrave, an Augustinian friar at King's Lynn and one of Norfolk's many literary sons, would celebrate this event in his life of St Norbert in gripping English verse: "Making profession to God & Seynt Austyn, As very childim and eyres of his kin."

What Augustine of Hippo would have made of all this is difficult to say, but he would doubtless have had views. He may nevertheless have been impressed to learn that some of the descendants of those barbarians who transformed his world in the final years of his life – "the overthrowers of the Empire", as Augustine's fellow bishop and biographer Possidius described them – should have considered themselves his "childim and eyres".

Augustine had composed his *Ordo monasterii*, very likely in 397, as a set of regulations for himself and his small community of priests who lived in the episcopal palace in Hippo (in what is now Annaba in Algeria). His careful set of injunctions for their shared life of prayer, work and communal interaction was destined to become one of the most successful templates for the communal life ever written. This was the rule to which Norbert and his companions swore to observe 900 years ago this Christmas Day.

THEIR OATHS have long been celebrated as the first step in the creation of the Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré, known as the Premonstratensians, or Norbertines. The order still thrives, and reaches parts of the globe unknown to, and undreamed of, by either Augustine or Norbert. On 6 June this year, on the anniversary of Norbert's death and on what has become his feast day, Pope Francis extended a special apostolic blessing to all members of the order.

Norbert was born around 1075 in Xanten, near Cologne, into a high-ranking and prosperous family. The earliest account of the life of the saint provides some insight into the powerful appeal and subsequent success of Norbert's vision for his followers. This document, only discovered in the mid nineteenth century and known as *Vita A*, was composed by an unknown member of one of his com-



Norbert (right) receives the Augustinian Rule from Augustine of Hippo. From the *Vita Sancti Norberti*, twelfth-century manuscript

munities, possibly even Prémontré, some time in between 1140 and 1160. The author repeatedly makes clear that Norbert did not desire to find his sanctuary and salvation within the precincts of a great Benedictine abbey. He did not wish to retreat from the world into a monastic desert. "I have elected," the author has Norbert declare to Pope Calixtus II in 1119, "to live the evangelical and apostolic life." And this is what he wanted, too, for all those who were to follow his example – which included women as well as men, as one well informed contemporary noted.

Some found less to praise in either Norbert's example or in his vision for the communal life. One contemporary, a Benedictine of more traditional outlook, denounced Norbert for his dubious reputation and what he saw as Norbert's hunger for worldly glory. "You are only a cleric," he appears to have imagined himself lecturing Norbert, "but I am a monk and a cleric." The fact that Norbert accepted election as archbishop of the city of Magdeburg (in what was then the Western empire) in 1126 clearly infuriated many of his critics and disheartened not a few of his more zealous friends and followers. In the words

of another hostile Benedictine critic, Norbert went from being "a barefoot donkey rider" to a master of many caparisoned horses and an imperial courtier.

Norbert gave as good as he got. He mobilised the friendship and clout of the great and the good on behalf of his communities. He continued his campaign of preaching and peace-making across northern France and Flanders. And he put one of those Benedictine critics on the defensive, denouncing his most recent statements on the Incarnation as heretical. All of this underlines that the appetite – indeed the hunger – for the heroic life of the Early Church, as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles, was as powerful and as dangerous in the early twelfth century as it was at any other moment in the Christian millennia. G.K. Chesterton proposed that Francis of Assisi lived at "an awakening of the world." The truth, if Chesterton would forgive the qualification, is that this awakening was one re-enacted by many generations in the centuries after the foundation of the Church. The apostolic life was as electrifying for Norbert of Xanten as it was for Augustine of Hippo or Francis of Assisi.

AN EQUALLY important actor in the foundation of Norbert's community at Prémontré was Barthélemy, Bishop of Laon. Barthélemy's support is attested in both *Vita A* and in the surviving copies of documents recording his grants and confirmations of lands and revenues to Norbert and his brethren. His backing is also recorded by a contemporary author, Herman of Laon. Herman had been abbot of the great Benedictine abbey of Tournai (then the county of Flanders, now part of Belgium) before resigning his office on grounds of illness – or, perhaps, as a result of a crisis in the community of his own making – in 1136. After his resignation (or expulsion), he found protection and patronage for the remainder of his life with Bishop Barthélemy.

Herman's vivid account of Norbert's career, included in his history of the restoration of the monastery of St Martin in Laon, is the earliest evidence we have for Norbert's fortunes, earlier, in fact, than *Vita A*. Herman borrowed much of his information from his conversations with Bishop Barthélemy, evidently an enthusiastic talker. Another contemporary, the Abbot of Nogent-sous-Coucy, also in the Diocese of Laon, told him that Barthélemy had spoken to him about the devotional heroism of a local deacon. Herman thus not only provides a very different

perspective on the foundation of Prémontré, but also allows us to overhear some of the early chatter, from within Barthélémy's circle, about Norbert and his community.

In Herman's account, Barthélémy first encountered Norbert and two companions during the great council convened by Pope Calixtus II at Rheims in 1119, two years before he was to establish his new religious order. One of his companions was destined to become the second abbot of Prémontré, Abbot Hugh of Fosses; the other was to prove to be a charlatan and a crook. This first meeting is also mentioned, though with different emphasis, by the author of *Vita A*, so there is every reason to stress its significance for both Barthélémy and Norbert. (The author of *Vita A* adds the unwelcome detail that the second companion, the subsequent villain, was English.) Barthélémy was on the lookout for holy men of authority and charismatic power. The bruising leadership of his predecessor but one, Bishop Gaudry, had initiated a chain of events that had resulted, in 1112, in a murderous feud that had led to the killing of Gaudry and his household and the destruction of the cathedral and a share of the city. In desperation, the citizens had even turned for help to the powerful local nobleman, Thomas de Marle, widely loathed for his violent and predatory lordship. Barthélémy's immediate predecessor had lasted for less than a year before dying unexpectedly. There was therefore much to do.

IN 1119, NORBERT himself was in need of a patron and protector. Since his dramatic conversion from a life of frivolity four years earlier, Norbert had become an itinerant preacher in northern France, brokering peace between feuding lords and communities, and living a life of penitence and prayer. But he was determined to create a more enduring opportunity to realise his own vision of apostolic life. The encounter of the bishop and the holy man thus came at a decisive moment for both men.

As Herman relates it, Barthélémy took Norbert under his wing and then they travelled through his diocese together in search of a suitable location for the foundation of a religious house. It was on one of these many journeys that Norbert chanced upon a small rural church at Prémontré. The church belonged to the monks of St-Vincent in Laon, but with Barthélémy's generous assistance, Norbert was able to acquire both the church and the surrounding lands. The bishop's charter confirming this exchange, still bearing an impression of his seal matrix and the seal matrix of the Abbot of St Vincent, survives to this day. When, therefore, Herman celebrated Barthélémy as both 'a partner and participant' in Norbert's enterprise, he may have been doing no more than echoing Barthélémy's own assessment of the value of his intervention. Augustine of Hippo would surely have shared his pride in Norbert's achievement.

Hugh Doherty is lecturer in medieval history at the University of East Anglia.

We'd marched believing collapse is likely; we live as though it's impossible



No one likes to admit it, but spiritual leadership on the climate crisis among Catholics is currently being exercised from a women's prison in Waseca County, Minnesota. That's where the American government is holding Jessica Reznicek, a Catholic Worker activist sentenced in April to eight years' imprisonment for sabotaging an oil pipeline construction.

Good news: Joe Biden could pardon her tomorrow. The bad news: he almost certainly won't. In a neat legal contrapuntal to its near-orgiastic rhetoric at COP26 last month, his administration insists that Reznicek is a terrorist. If this is how a "good Catholic" behaves, it's hard to imagine how bad the bad ones must be. The US wants to end fossil fuel use; but will condemn as terrorism non-violent action to end fossil fuel use. You won't be alone in considering this an instance of linguistic legerdemain.

Consider "renewable" energy. The sun and wind are renewable; but solar panels and wind turbines require mining very finite (and often very toxic) rare earth metals. "Biofuel" is frequently a euphemism for torching forests, not traditionally considered an environmentally friendly practice; hydroelectric power produces staggering amounts of greenhouse gases. Better and less malformed minds than mine have commented on COP's anaemic final documents, vitiated to within an inch of their life by power politics. That the final inch wasn't taken seems a hollow victory.

Grant the documents a hypothetical vitality, and the ecological crisis still seems unlikely to abate. You can't have an industrial society without industrial amounts of energy, and the evidence suggests you can't use industrial amounts of energy without industrial levels of pollution. Not a difficult argument to follow, but a difficult argument to accept. No one wants to look at the writing on the wall, especially when the letters spell out the end of a way of life that we – whisper it – quite enjoy.

Hauling an enormous placard marked REPENT around Kelvingrove Park, I provided an object lesson in said double-mindedness. The high moral sentiments inspiring my inscription had dissolved under a solid hour of Glaswegian rainfall. In spite of my exhortation to *metanoia*, turning-again, what I was really desperate to turn to was coffee: a product

of the same consumer economy I knew to be destroying the planet.

It was a day of incongruities. A Christian block marched next to protestors from the Global South; Scottish nationalists rubbed beflagged shoulders with performance artists, grotesquely outfitted. Hideous creatures resembling the denizens of Hieronymus Bosch paintings unfolded from the crowd to croak menacingly in my direction, although usually this indicated the arrival of one of my university drinking buddies.

But everyone I met that I knew seemed united by shared blindness as well as a common cause. We'd marched believing collapse is likely; we live as though it's impossible. This one's moving to the coast; another takes out a 30-year mortgage. Veganism is popular; air travel more so. These contradictions enter into our lives unobtrusively, and in their own way, innocently: "the ordinary dirt" – Marx called it – "of bourgeois intercourse". Absent a turning-again, the dirt builds up, and up, and up. We are "conformed", as Paul warned, "to the pattern of the world". Spiritually and ecologically, that pattern ends in death.

You can break the pattern, like Jessica Reznicek, but most Catholics aren't following her lead. Out of scepticism, or ignorance, or trust, or inertia, how we live doesn't match up to what we believe to be true. Admiring Reznicek from a safe distance, I know the way I live doesn't. I also know that this isn't sustainable.

Tom Leonard's poem, "Being a Human Being", put it this way: we only begin to be human when we "accept the moment of fact and choice ... Responsible to that world – and responsible for that world". If we can't change, the world won't. If there was hope at COP26, it was that the young activists at the head of every protest already understood this. They've got their disillusionment in early.

As I made my way home from the march, it was the contrast my thoughts returned to: between young protestors and old politicians; between Biden and Reznicek; between what I believe and what I do. As the sun set, the streets filled with shadow. I remembered words from a book I read a decade ago: "The catastrophe is not coming, it is here. We are already situated within the collapse of a civilisation. It is within this reality that we must choose sides."



Advent Meditation / Winter is past

In her final meditation on the Mass readings for the final days of the Advent journey, **Leonie Caldecott** notices the physician's eye in Luke's telling of the story

The young woman draws breath, then calls out a greeting. Inside her house, the older woman rises on somewhat painful feet. She knows that voice. Putting a hand to her surging belly, Elizabeth's blessing breaks between the elements, her exhalation giving form to something thus far unuttered. *Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?*

The scene (Luke 1:39-45) will be reprised in its chronological context, as the Mass readings between the Fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve unfold. Luke's Gospel lays before us lives transfigured by the flexing of the divine into flesh and blood. Here, as in the Book of Acts, we are in the presence of a master storyteller. Luke may not have been a literal portraitist, but he certainly knows how to paint with words. And he has a physician's eye for



detail. A barren woman is in her sixth month, a virgin is in her first. The events are umbilically linked, the first a sub-plot to the other; which is why Luke devotes so much space to the unfolding story.

There are people in Luke's scenario who never get a speaking part. Those dumbstruck shepherds, or St Joseph, barely present in this gospel. Zechariah's sceptical repartee earns him a tongue-tied period on the bench. Yet

Mary explores her own annunciation with impeccable logic. The Gospel according to Luke is full of lively dialogue. Witness Elizabeth's moment of recognition, and the miracle of poetic exegesis it unleashes: *Magnificat anima mea Dominum!* Step down princes: a new song is being heard in the land. The voices that populate this hill country are not pushing agendas, they're speaking from the heart, from the gut. The Gospel according to Luke will animate faith for generations: in truth, it feels ghosted by something beyond mere human art. The inventor of language itself is mixed up in there.

"Give us life that we may call upon your name!" (Psalm 79). What is the second person of the Holy Trinity, if not the answer to this aboriginal prayer? The angels appearing to the shepherds make sure to convey the appellation, as well as the

location, of the child: Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11). The Christmas gift is this: a real presence, hastening to us through time, yet issuing from eternity. A voice, which calls us definitively out of our comfort zone: "Come my love, my lovely one, for see, winter is past..." (Song of Songs 2:10-11).

Any baby is irresistible – a doctor would know this. This one knows what he is doing, leading us to a God who is far from unknown, nestled unaccountably in his beastly bed. Even this detail is savily chosen. The ox (whose image the Evangelist will come to bear) retreats from his manger, his fodder, so that we might receive ours. As the light of dawn picks out the hills and hollows we have followed through Advent, under our masks a secret smile may now unfold. We may even find ourselves humming the *Tantum ergo* as we make our way home to pop fruit in the toes of our children's stockings.

Leonie Caldecott is a writer living in the West Country, and editor of the UK/Ireland edition of *Magnificat*.



What helped you through the last year?

For many, our Catholic faith and hope kept us going. Will you join Catholics everywhere and share your message of hope?

- 1 Tell us how your faith helped when it really mattered.
- 2 Receive a set of inspirational postcards.
- 3 Leave a gift in your Will to a Catholic cause and create a hope-filled future.

You can share your message of hope by returning the completed form to: **Your Catholic Legacy, Romero House, 55 Westminster Bridge Road, London, SE1 7JB** or by calling 020 7095 5370 emailing info@yourcatholiclegacy.org.uk visiting yourcatholiclegacy.org.uk/messageofhope



Your message of hope

Name

Address

Postcode

Phone

- ☐ I am interested in leaving a gift in my will to a Catholic cause
- ☐ I'd like to receive my free postcard set and legacy guide

We use your personal data for the following purposes: to enable us to provide specific information as requested by you on legacies and will-making, and to forward your information to the appropriate charity to see your request. To view our full privacy statement visit yourcatholiclegacy.org.uk/privacy

After her conversion to Catholicism from robust atheism, a writer feared that her range of material might become constrained: the opposite proved to be the case / **By SALLY READ**

A poet's confession

THREE YEARS after my conversion to Catholicism in 2010, I attended a presentation of my selected poems in Bologna. All of the poems in that book were written by a younger version of myself: an atheist who believed that only art, and specifically poetry, could transform the ugly and the painful (my favourite word when pontificating about literature was *redemptive*).

Most writers know the feeling of promoting a book penned by their former self; published authors carry around their ineradicable pasts like unforgiven sins. For me, the contrast was excruciating: my poetry was not only sexually graphic, it was sometimes blasphemous.

As the presentation in Bologna progressed, the audience was informed that I'd recently become Catholic. Their distrust was audible in whisperings and snorts. And then, a gift: in her talk the moderator somehow made sense of my tortuous path from atheism to belief. She found the seeds of faith in my early poems; she saw an honest searching in my heretical writing about the Virgin Mary. I would spend the next decade making sense of what she said – and discovering that the “confessional” tendencies in my poetry were actually very Catholic indeed.

IN THE BEGINNING though, it seemed my conversion would finish me off as a poet.

“You’re blocking off an infinite choice of narratives and confining yourself to one,” a fellow poet warned me when I told him of my massive volte-face. Despite my enthusiastic bluster for all things Catholic, I feared he was right. Growing up as a poet in 1990s London, I was a child of the American confessional poets (Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton), who used their lives as raw poetic material. Any subject was on the table as long as it was personal, and their work was candid about sex, marital and parental relationships and depression.

A former psychiatric nurse, I quickly became a poet of the body. The “ripple of dust” from a demolished house was analogous to myself in sexual ecstasy; menstrual blood dried in “brown geographical lines”; a fetus’ heartbeat was “the slamming/ of the non-stop train”. I “wrote the body”, to use French feminist Hélène Cixous’ phrase: for me, blood, flesh and bone were expression of feeling, of



Sally Read: ‘I never chose to be a “Catholic poet” or to write about Catholic things’

philosophy, even of “something else” that I could never manage to name. My daily routines, heartaches, pregnancy, illnesses and losses, all these were my currency. But, as a new Catholic, I suddenly felt constrained by the hyper-subjective “I” of much contemporary poetry.

Contrary to what my fellow poet had warned me of at my conversion, I sensed exciting new horizons break open before me with the advent of my faith, though I had no idea which way to run. I was about to understand that God was the first, the consummate, confessional poet, that he too used flesh and blood to write *everything*.

MY FIRST ACT as a Catholic poet was to appoint myself poet-in-residence of the Hermitage of the Three Holy Hierarchs. The hermit, a Byzantine rite priest-monk, had been my teacher through my initiation into the Church. He knew my confessional poetry, was un-shocked by it; he even liked it. Most importantly, he believed I should carry on writing. Providentially, one of the eponymous three holy hierarchs of the hermitage is Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, a fourth century the-

ologian and poet who, I would discover, was one of the first Christian autobiographical writers. When we think of confessional literature and its progenies (reality TV and social media), it can be tempting to think that focusing on the personal is trite and self-indulgent. Yet our faith is the most personal of all faiths: we look at God in the second person of the Trinity and we see him walking, working, eating, crying. Like us.

Saint Gregory cheerfully admitted to being a person who, just like Sylvia Plath more than a millennium and a half later, related everything to himself, and all of his writing seethes with personal details. He even places himself squarely in scripture – he is a “new Lazarus”, a “new paralytic”. He is born in Christ, baptized like Christ, is crucified with him, and resurrected with him – on a regular basis. Gregory’s difficulties are little Passions; his triumphs are Resurrections. His autobiographical poetry is written in vivid identification with his Saviour.

A true poet, though, doesn’t choose what or how they write. I never chose to be a “Catholic poet” or to write about Catholic things. We only ever write well what truly speaks of us, what really obsesses us. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as I took up my pen I found myself, again and again, immersing myself in a scene, identifying with a person, as close as possible to Christ.

My theme was often the Annunciation (a topic I had published blasphemous poems about in my first two books of poetry), and also the Visitation. I became obsessed by the Virgin’s pregnancy – I saw every miraculous feeling of any ordinary gestation magnified infinitely in her experience: the Virgin magnifies the Lord, but she also magnifies us by placing our ordinary human stories in the context of the Incarnation. If I was spellbound at the first movement of my own baby within me, what on earth did Mary feel at the first flutters of Christ?

I WROTE TOO in the voice of Mary Magdalene, her longing for Christ mirroring, and magnifying, my own. Like Gregory, I placed myself (as Mary of Bethany) in the Lazarus story, but I was also the Bleeding Woman. I was Peter at the Transfiguration, and Joseph beside the Christ-child’s bed. All of these poems were in the voice of scriptural figures, or spoke to them or of them, but perhaps it’s the strength of my personal identification with these people that carries them. God identifies with us so we can identify with him – and the people who get closest to him.

A cycle of poems began to emerge that reflected the life of Christ from Anne’s conception of Mary right through to the Resurrection. I was the tormented Crucifer (“In my dreams I’m still hammering”), the Prophetess Anna (“I sing praise ... as though juggling torches of flame”), I washed his feet with my tears (“Only I know the quiet roar of touch, / the march of his being into myself”). I witnessed Veronica’s kindness: (“I imagine

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

that for seconds/the racket stilled") and, many times, Mary's entrancement with her Son ("she is transfixed by his skin/and insistence on her as the only visible, only beautiful thing").

In some poems, the personal reflects the scriptural so intensely that it is hard, even for me, to distinguish if the voice is my own:

Last night, a restless wind –
every doorway howled and ached.
This morning you returned,
like stillness.
Now the pines
are spent; there's not a breath.
Only this hunger as I reach out
to touch you; only this longing.

I also ran back to nature (an arena sometimes shunned as *passé* by contemporary poets), feeling in my bones the sympathy between the natural world and the life of Christ (the earth splitting open at his death, the darkness that fell on the Cross). Nature itself seemed to speak of resurrection every morning; every dawn I was recalled to Mary Magdalene's shock at seeing the risen Christ in the garden. I saw crosses in branches and stiles, and Christ's eyes in the blackness of woods. I wasn't alone: I was tiptoeing in the greater footsteps of Saint Ephrem, Saint Francis, Gerard Manley Hopkins and R.S. Thomas.

WHAT BECAME apparent to me as I wrote, as I participated in the Mass hundreds, then thousands of times, was the sacred nature of poetry. The ineffable Father expressed himself through Jesus Christ. God is, therefore, the original writer of the body, the original confessional poet. His story, his vision, needs to be expressed in skin and bone. He is the first to manifest his pain, his heart, his philosophy, in his Word. The Father is the Poet, Jesus Christ is the Poem.

You might say that God took a risk by becoming flesh, by joining us for mealtimes, sleep and tears, and teaching us that everything we live through has resonance in the divine. Ever since, poets have basked more and more in the epic nature of the personal, until everything – having a Coke, cutting your thumb – are fit subjects for poems.

I'm often asked whether I see a unity between my early confessional poems and those in my first collection of poetry since becoming a Catholic, *Dawn of this Hunger*. At last I can say that I do: faith has taught me the way in which the personal, even the seemingly trivial or misguided, can lead us to God. And that our past is a part of ourselves, the necessary and unique foundation upon which we lay the hopeful strata of our transformations.

Sally Read is poet and writer. She lives with her husband and daughter in Santa Marinella, a seaside town northwest of Rome. *Dawn of this Hunger*, published by Second Spring, is available at: www.secondspring.co.uk/shop/

The Tablet poem

A Christmas Song

By Wendy Cope

*Why is the baby crying
On this, his special day,
When we have brought him lovely gifts
And laid them on the hay?*

He's crying for the people
Who greet this day with dread
Because somebody dear to them
Is far away or dead,

For all the men and women
Whose love affairs went wrong,
Who try their best at merriment
When Christmas comes along,

For separated parents
Whose turn it is to grieve
While children hang their stockings up
Elsewhere on Christmas Eve,

For everyone whose burden,
Carried through the year,
Is heavier at Christmastime,
The season of good cheer.

That's why the baby's crying
There in the cattle stall:
He's crying for those people.
He's crying for them all.

From *Serious Concerns* (Faber and Faber, 1992),
© Wendy Cope 1992, used by permission of the
author

At Christmas, even in the secular West, ritual moves to the fore in people's lives. Has the decline of traditional rituals damaged our sense of ourselves and the cohesion of our communities? Or are new and more meaningful forms of ritual being created? / By MADELEINE BUNTING

The loss of ritual

AGED EIGHT, dressed in my best clothes and sitting through a long church service, I remember the startling sight of my godmother lying on the floor in front of the altar – a prostration expressing her vows of chastity, obedience and poverty. Afterwards, I quizzed her on what had happened but, elated by her experience, she was bewildered by my prosaic questions. Thus began my curiosity about ritual – what are they for? More recently, I have been fascinated by the gaps left behind by the loss of collective ritual: what, if anything, is missed, and how do people compensate? Christmas is the one time of the year when ritual moves to the fore in people's lives in the secular West. My atheist friend insists that her family celebrations are "rituals". But what is it that makes a ritual different from a habit or a tradition?

Ever since the Victorian scholar James Frazer produced his monumental survey of human ritual, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, anthropologists have debated the subject. One recent academic survey noted that, after a century of research and theory, there's still no consensus. But we know that from the very earliest times, human beings have mounted elaborate collective events involving sacrifice, music, costume and myth. Yet, in Western societies, many collective rituals are being abandoned – particularly religious ones – and others are derided as irrelevant, even absurd. The critique is extensive and insistent; the eminent anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote: "One of the gravest problems of our day is the lack of commitment to common symbols... ritual has become a bad word signifying empty conformity."

EVEN TRADITIONAL rites of passage – weddings and funerals – are being radically reinvented. One couple described to me their marriage on a beach in Bali: no family or friends; arranged by a luxury hotel; photos uploaded to Instagram. Is this the privatisation of ritual, or its reinvention whereby the shift to online brings new and wider participation? Meanwhile the crematorium is grimly functional; those presiding often don't know the deceased. I was once asked to find a Buddhist celebrant for the funeral of the wife of a friend who told me she had found solace in meditation in her last months. The Buddhist lama stepped up to the task with the calm authority of someone who knew what was needed to

smooth the deceased's transition into the next life, but I wondered what my friend's sons made of the unfamiliar Tibetan chanting. What purpose does such borrowed ritual serve? But perhaps I was asking the wrong question. Her husband seemed satisfied.

I grew up steeped in Catholic ritual at home, and I recognise the truth in the observation of lapsed Catholic Terry Eagleton that Catholicism as "a body of ritual" creates a mindset which is profoundly at odds with contemporary culture. That culture values the internal journey of feeling and is preoccupied by the individual's personal development; Catholic ritual, on the other hand, marks a collective ordering of experience and the individual's place in the journey of a community. Catholic ritual creates a sensibility evident long after the faith may have lapsed.

Another former Catholic, the historian Patrick Joyce, reflects in his magnificent book, *Going to My Father's House*, on his childhood in the London Irish community. Catholic ritual was "about doing the proper things, building from the outside inwards". It gave him an appreciation of how "the habitual and the inherited governed lives" and an understanding that "the public, collective and symbolic dimensions of selfhood were what mattered". That was true of my father's life –

he never missed Sunday Mass – and while he would never have been able to describe an emotion, or ever wanted to, ritual sustained his sense of life as meaningful. He likened the daily cycle of prayer and Scripture readings of Mother Church to the beat of a mighty ship's engine, always steady.

In *The Disappearance of Rituals*, Korean-born Swiss-German philosopher and cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han (inset) argues that the decline of traditional ritual has had disastrous consequences. It provided stability in life, and a relationship with time. Ritual is in conflict with the values of consumerism as a restless "economy of desire" and has been marginalised. It required the individual to re-orientate along three different axes: vertically to the gods, time or the cosmos; horizontally towards the community; and diagonally towards things – such as ritual objects. Along those axes ritual produced spaces of deep connection, Han argues. We can't go back, he admits, but we need to be honest about what we've lost and why.

Ritual has two elements much needed in contemporary society: the first is the "cultural technique of deep attention" developed in

periods of silence during the performance of rituals. Han picks the Japanese tea ceremony, in which the objects and bodily movements express dignity, reverence and respect, as an example. Much the same could be said of the Catholic Mass. The second is that ritual reflects a story or myth which offers meaning, and this is where its close relationship to the origins of theatre is evident. Plays and rituals have a structure of beginning, middle and end, meeting a human need for narrative pattern in which a plot line is opened up, explored and offered resolution.

WHEN MY mother died suddenly last summer, the funeral ritual proved powerfully cathartic. She had wanted both a Requiem Mass and a period of Quaker silence. They don't easily combine and we ended up with two services. One was in an orchard; my sister decorated the cardboard coffin and my son taught us a folk song he'd learnt at camp. My mother had left instructions there was to be "no black" and the women undertakers wore bright summer dresses. Our ritual was traditional, invented, and borrowed. We were lucky; Covid restrictions had eased just in time. Only weeks before, the broadcaster and racial equality campaigner Trevor Phillips and his family had been alone at the grave of his 36-year-old daughter. Most weddings were cancelled: ritual was one of the casualties of the pandemic.

Covid also led to the creation of new rituals, most famously the doorstep clapping for carers. Our street in East London took to this with gusto, but the participation of the Prime Minister made critics suspicious, and when health staff got a below-inflation pay rise there were howls of derision. Ritual often serves as a focal point for tensions and contradictions in a society, as the anthropologist, Jo Cook, points out, and on this occasion it had brought to the surface essential questions about how society values care. Cook suggests we need rituals for many reasons, and urges the invention of new ones.

Byung-Chul Han goes one step further and proposes that "contemplative rest" is a deeply political act, and must be won back: that seems a fitting Christmas ritual.



Madeleine Bunting is a broadcaster, journalist, writer and novelist. Her five-part BBC Radio 3 series *The Essay: The Meaning of Ritual* will be broadcast between 20 December and 24 December.

WHEN I spend a Zoom hour with Frank and Denise Cottrell-Boyce one evening in early Advent, the room they're sitting in already looks gloriously festive: royal blue walls, fat, ivory-coloured candles, a picture of an angel in flight. But they are quick to tell me that they make a firm distinction between Advent and Christmas: they don't buy a tree until the birthday of the youngest of their seven children on 21 December. And the babies are not laid in their mangers until Christmas morning – babies, plural, because they have numerous cribs, and so many oxen and asses that by Christmas Day their Liverpool home looks "like a Breughel painting".

Instead, when we meet, Frank and Denise have just embarked on their annual week-long fast, living on £1 each per day ("loads of pasta"), and inviting their hundreds of Twitter followers to sponsor them, so that they can make a hefty donation to Mary's Meals, the charity providing chronically hungry children with one meal every school day, and so enabling them to benefit from an education that might lift them out of poverty. This is the evening of day one of their fast, and they've already raised nearly £1,000.

It's more than 40 years since Frank and Denise met as undergraduates at Keble College, Oxford. Denise, one of the first girls admitted to the college, was reading theology, and planning to become a nun – "My aunt was a nun, and I loved her pre-Vatican II habit: it was all about clothes really."

Frank came from a devout family in a deeply Catholic part of Liverpool. He remembers watching people flocking to Mass every Sunday: "Maybe there were downsides – a kind of uniformity – but I loved the sense of belonging; it was a lovely thing." When he joined a punk rock band as a teenager, "the lead singer used to introduce each of us by parish".

FROM OXFORD, where he read English, Frank went on to become a star: a multiple-prize-winning children's author, the writer of the 2012 Summer Olympics ceremony (the storyline based on *The Tempest*) and a screenplay writer. His many credits include *The Railway Man*, a film about Eric Lomax (played by Colin Firth), who survived working on the Thai-Burma Railway during the Second World War and in later life forgave the Japanese secret police officer who had tortured him. In the course of making the film, Lomax became a firm friend, and an inspiration.

With Frank so much in demand as a writer, and Denise busy home-schooling their younger children, it surely wouldn't have been surprising if Catholic Social Teaching – the need to promote the common good for the poor and vulnerable – had slipped off their agenda. But Frank, as well as working for prisons and with the homeless, visits between 30 and 40 state schools a year. Sally-Anne Tapia-Bowes, a teacher at Alsop High School, where Frank is Patron of Reading, says, "He's never said no to anything, and he never lets



DENISE and FRANK COTTRELL-BOYCE

No ordinary people

Despite the strangeness of the past year, the high-profile couple tell **Maggie Fergusson** they find joy and hope working with schools and prisons and with refugees and others whose lives are largely hidden

us down. He's one of those rare golden nuggets who makes everybody's day happier and brighter." The school is, she says, in one of the poorest areas in Liverpool, "so we really value his dedication and his kindness, but above all I'm moved by his humility".

Denise, meanwhile, has for nearly 15 years volunteered at a drop-in centre for female asylum seekers. In an inspired piece of commissioning, the publisher Darton, Longman & Todd invited her to reflect on this in *Welcoming the Stranger*. In the same series of short Bible Studies for individuals or groups, Frank wrote *Forgiveness*. Both books look slight, but both are beautifully written, full of surprises and pack a mighty punch.

Denise conveys powerfully the suffering of the women she works with – "their inadequate housing, truncated education, language difficulties and the endless, endless waiting". But she also urges us to sympathise with the communities forced to accept migrants: "People living in depressed and deprived communities already feel that they are the bottom of the heap. They already have the worst housing, the worst schools, the worse

job opportunities, the worst health and the worst life expectancy. Now in response to our collective compassion for the victims of war and social unrest on the other side of the world, it is these people and not the more affluent liberals who are being asked to share the already inadequate resources they have been allotted."

Fuelling this work, for both the Cottrell-Boyes, is a rich prayer life. Alongside the "exclamatory pleading prayer that goes on in your head all day", Frank loves the Psalms – "you see in them people who've brought their whole life to prayer" – and spending time with the Blessed Sacrament, "which I believe to be nothing less than the real and living presence of God". Denise loves the Magnificat, and the Book of Job. They say morning prayers and night prayers together, and as a family they have always prayed before meals. All seven children – now aged from 18 to 36 – remain faithful Catholics.

If this all sounds like too much po-faced piety I should stress that our hour together is filled with laughter, and a tremendous sense of fun. "We aspire to more faith, and more

Denise and Frank Cottrell-Boyce pictured on their wedding day in 1983

fun," says Denise. "One of the reasons I love working at the refugee centre is that there is so much laughter. People who are having a really hard time look for lightness. It's a bit of a cliché, I know, but you notice the stars in the darkness." "Lightness of heart," says Frank, "is a sign of strong faith." He reminds me, as we speak, of the transformed Scrooge on Christmas morning, alight with joy.

When Mary Blanche Ridge reviewed Frank and Denise's books for *The Tablet* earlier in the year she was so moved that she found herself wishing the two of them could have a role in helping Pope Francis – whom they both love and admire – to lead the Church. Similarly, listening to them, I find a part of myself wishing that their work with schools and prisons and refugees was taking place more in the limelight, that Frank might use his influence and contacts in the world of literature and film to do a bit of tub-thumping, to campaign for social reform. But working at grass-roots level with people whose lives are largely hidden is, they persuade me, a marvellous thing.

In her work with migrant women, Denise says, she's had "a very insignificant role. I couldn't do any of the technical stuff. I didn't have a pen in my hand or a clipboard. I couldn't even drive. But because I'd had seven

children, I was put with pre- or post-natal women, and I became an auntie to them. Mostly, I was just listening – I listened and listened and listened. And I came to realise that having no status and no importance was a bonus."

Frank warns particularly to people with no status or importance. Delivering a "Eulogy for the Lost" in St George's Hall, Liverpool, back in March, he spoke of the "stern, joyful discipline of noticing other people", and mourned the death by Covid of Brian (he'd never known his surname) who worked at the local Merseyrail station, and always exchanged news and a bit of banter. "He made you feel as if you mattered. He gave you back a little bit of humanity with your change."

BRIAN MIGHT sound like an ordinary person, but in *Forgiveness* Frank quotes from "The Weight of Glory", the magnificent sermon delivered by C.S. Lewis in Oxford 80 years ago: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours."

"We are all", Frank concludes, "moments in other people's lives."

How to impart this wisdom, especially to children? Through stories. The first time he

went to read in Bootle Primary, Frank says, he "felt like Homer" working "an ancient magic". Stories, he believes, are how we make sense of the world, and as a storyteller he has an extraordinary gift for lighting up a page with an image, or keeping you on your toes by making surprise connections, or bringing biblical figures alive: for him, the Good Thief is as much a flesh-and-blood man as Eric Lomax, or Brian at the local station. Reading *Forgiveness* felt to me like following a Hansel and Gretel trail of precious stones, leading to a place of calm and contemplation.

So as we prepare to celebrate the one story that has never lost its savour, how do Frank and Denise feel about those who cannot share their faith? Frank refers in *Forgiveness* to "our supposedly secular era" – why "supposedly"? "I love that great David Foster Wallace speech where he says that there is no such thing as atheism, that everybody believes in something. I believe there's a spiritual hunger in everyone. I've never met anybody who wasn't pleased to be prayed for. Even people who don't believe find some kind of comfort, some kind of empowerment, in people who do."

Maggie Fergusson is *The Tablet's* literary editor. How *The Bible Can Help Us Understand: Welcoming the Stranger and How The Bible Can Help Us Understand: Forgiveness* are published by Darton, Longman & Todd at £7.99 (Tablet price, £7.19).

Every £5 buys a gift for a homeless individual.



Help us to reach our £15,000 target this Christmas, so we can give over 3,000 people a Christmas worth remembering.

Donate: www.churchhomelesstrust.org.uk/donate





My nightmare before Christmas

While a 91-year-old widow slept over the mince pies, her son and a roofer in a reindeer jumper battled to save her house from being washed away / By IAN THOMSON

LAST CHRISTMAS EVE I found water gushing through a crack in my mother's bedroom ceiling. It had been raining for days – it was still raining – and snow showers were expected. She lives alone in London's Notting Hill in a house behind the Gate Cinema, a 91-year-old widow surrounded by a collection of British art (she had known Carel Weight) and knick-knacks from her travels round the world.

The bedclothes were waterlogged but I was not too concerned. The water poured down on to the bed at its own unhurried pace. A smell of chestnuts roasting reached me from the kitchen. I was thinking of King Wenceslas (was he really that good?) when the ceiling began to bow. I reeled back in fright as half the ceiling broke apart before my eyes amid a roar of spewed water and plaster chunks. Next I was standing in quantities of floodwater, drenched.

I used to love Christmas.

It was a dark Thursday afternoon. My mother was watching a *Stephoe and Son* Christmas rerun in the room beneath the flood and, being slightly deaf, was unaware of the commotion. Opposite her, the Christmas tree winked with glass balls, and on the television set was a model manger with two Wise Kings (they had arrived early: the third was still on his way).

My fear was that the flooded bedroom might collapse on top of her – and on top of her collection of Eileen Agars, Elizabeth Blackadders and other collectable Britons. I hurried to shut off the electricity at the mains, and from the kitchen I grabbed a plastic bucket and plastic storage boxes and with these I ran upstairs. The flood there was swelling up fast; it was back-breaking work as I repeatedly lugged the baled-out water into the bathroom across the way and emptied it out. I heard my mother call out: "Would you be a dear and fetch

me a glass of wine? And one of your nice mince pies?"

I phoned my wife and asked her to get hold of a roofer. There was no time to hunt for quotes on Christmas Eve: "Just take the first roofer available." By now the water was shooting down through a mess of exposed timber beams and roof wadding. A debris of things lost, forgotten or worthless swirled about my feet in two inches of water: photographs, electricity bills, John Lewis receipts, a baptismal certificate. Water, water everywhere (including in my shoes), the carpet squishy underfoot.

After two hours the roofer arrived. He had on a reindeer jumper and smelled of mulled wine – aromatic. "You look a bit stressed, sir." Really? (I only had cuts to my face from flying roof debris.) He looked up at the ceiling: "I've never seen anything like it." Had I not been there to bale out, the house would have turned into a "riverboat" with me and my mother up on the roof for the duration. He thought the water tank in the attic might be the culprit. With some difficulty I gave him a bunk-up as he had no ladder. He was right: the freak rains had not wrecked the room after all; it was a ruptured tank. Most water tanks these days are galvanised zinc. "But they do CORRODE!" the roofer shouted down to me, adding: "Do yourself a favour – ask Santa for a new one..." He fiddled with the stopcock and ladled out what

water remained, passing it down to me in washing-up bowls.

The waters had receded at last and the immediate danger passed. With the help of a mate who arrived mildly intoxicated from an office party in Staines, the roofer moved furniture to safety on the far side of the pulled-apart room. Most of it was now ruined. What was left of the ceiling was then dismantled. The roofers threw rubble and mattresses, bed bases, plaster, timber and roof insulation material out of the bedroom window and on to the street. Next, they lifted up and removed sodden carpeting and underlay, and dumped that on to the street also.

The house on Farm Place was now an antisocial mess. The detritus left on the narrow street in front of it would have to be disposed of by Boxing Day at the latest or else Kensington and Chelsea would fine my mother for fly-tipping or perhaps present her with an Asbo. (They are that sort of a royal borough.) The rubbish was removed by trailer late that Christmas Eve, before the roofers at last headed home at 10 p.m.

My mother had fallen asleep over the mince pies (they were not that nice) but the ordeal was far from over. Hungry to despoil, the water had seeped down three floors to spread out behind bookshelves, electrical wiring, an Eduardo Paolozzi pop fantasia of New York and other stuff. In the study, the water had collected on the ceiling above the piano in giant puffy blisters. I covered the piano in bathroom towels and put buckets under the blisters and slit them open with a knife. Out gushed a silty Bisto-brown liquid – the stuff of the horror B-movie *Christmas Evil*.

It was long past midnight by the time the leaks had ceased. The flood had scarcely registered with my mother. When I came out of the house the next morning it was snowing. The neighbour said it was like a Christmas card, and so it was, with carol singers on the doorstep already. I headed off for morning Mass.

Ian Thomson is an award-winning biographer, reporter, translator and literary critic. His latest book, *Dante's Divine Comedy: A Journey Without End*, is published by Head of Zeus.

Merry Christmas from everyone at the London Jesuit Centre.

We are looking forward to a new term, with some events and courses we think you will enjoy, including:

Science & Theology: more than just a story of conflict, explore some of the ways faith is enriched by science.

Five Medieval Islamic Thinkers: discover how Islamic thought has influenced Western philosophy and theology.

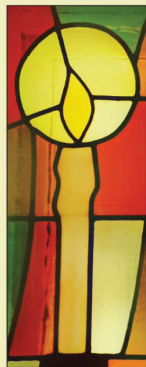
Sing a New Song to the Lord – Praying the Psalms: deepen your understanding of these beautiful, timeless songs.

For the start of the new term, most courses will be delivered online. Find out more, and explore the programme, at:

www.londonjesuitcentre.org



Bringing Faith to Life



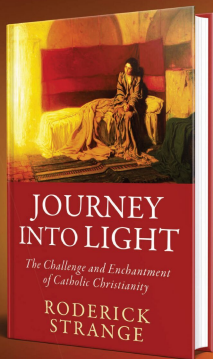
AVAILABLE NOW

‘This journey, of course, is not without its challenges ... And yet facing those challenges also lends enchantment to the journey.’

The perfect introduction for those new to the Catholic faith.

ISBN 9781529380002 • Hardback • RRP £16.99

H HODDER &
STOUGHTON



Twitter: @HodderFaith Facebook: @HodderFaith Instagram: @hodderfaith

The “land flowing with milk and honey” God promised to the Jewish people turned out to be rich in wild and cultivated flora, with wheat, figs and olives a constant presence in the Bible / **By JOHN AKEROYD**

The evergreen trees of life

TREES AND other plants are an essential part of Christmas, with evergreen holly and ivy living links to the pagan winter solstice. And of course the Christmas tree – completely alien to the world into which Jesus was born – is perhaps the most familiar seasonal symbol of all. How ironic is it that, when celebrating the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, we transform a corner of our sitting room into a cosy tableau of dark spruce, fir and pine forest, log fires, sleighs, snow and reindeer, all presided over by a boreal shamanic figure in red and white, even if his origin can be traced to a kindly fourth-century Bishop of Myra in Turkey.

Few plants of Christmas (apart from the almonds, dates, figs and raisins), derive from the Middle East, although trees especially are a constant presence all through the Bible. One biblical tree story holds for me a particular vividness. Better to view Pope John Paul II in his Popemobile during his 1979 visit to Dublin, I perched on a woody boss of a pollarded lime tree, where I whimsically recalled how Jericho tax-collector Zachaeus, “litt of stature”, had climbed a “sycamore” to see Jesus, who spotted him and then invited himself to his house. There Zachaeus confessed his sins and promised half his fortune to the poor – and to pay back anyone he had defrauded four times as much (Luke 19:1-8).

PHOTO: BRENT WILLIAMSON



Bees gather on a ripe fig, one of the region's most ancient cultivated plants

The tree was a sycamore fig (*Ficus sycomorus*) – larger, evergreen and with smaller fruits than the familiar fig. The Egyptians used the soft light wood for coffins, and in its native East Africa it makes utensils, drums and dugout canoes. The true fig (*Ficus carica*) often features in the Bible and the fruits were prized, perhaps explaining why Jesus curses a barren fig tree (Mark 11: 12). He was clearly upset: the furious altercation with the money-changers in the Temple precinct followed shortly afterwards.

Much of the feel of authenticity the Bible has lies in its detail, which vividly evokes the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world – not least, by references to wild and cultivated plants and the food, wood, fibres and other useful economic products they yield. For example, the myrrh and frankincense presented to the baby Jesus are resins from two shrubs found in remote stony deserts. Both these expensive commodities were burned as temple incense, and myrrh was essential to the Egyptian embalming process. At a humbler level, Jesus's Parable of the Sower nicely portrays small stony arable fields in the Levant and even the Aegean islands.

THE “LAND FLOWING with milk and honey” God promised to the Jewish people turned out to be a treasury of plant riches. From c.8000 BC, advances in crop breeding in the Fertile Crescent that stretched from Kurdistan and Mesopotamia to Palestine and Egypt gave humankind cereals and flax for oil and fibre, staples that enabled organised societies and civilisations to evolve. For millennia, wheat and barley, olive oil and wine, and pulses such as chickpeas and lentils dominated the rural economy and cuisine. Figs and pomegranates were perhaps domesticated earliest of all, even if Jaffa oranges and other citrus fruits did not arrive until later with the emergence of Muslim trade routes, and crops of the Native Americans – maize, potatoes, haricot beans, tomatoes, sweet and chilli peppers and, more recently, avocados – did not augment local bounty until the sixteenth century.

Barley appears several times in the Old Testament, as in Exodus 9:31 when flax and barley (“smitten ... in the ear”) were destroyed while later-maturing wheat and rye survived. Barley bread was a staple of the poor and of



Ancient and modern: an Atlas olive grove, above. Top right, flowering flax stems, bottom right, the winter-dried fruit of a pomegranate

the Roman army, and it was five barley loaves, probably much like pitta bread, and the two small fish that a mother provided for her young son which fed the 5,000-strong crowd (John 6:9). Ordinary people drawn to Jesus's teaching were unlikely to eat expensive wheat bread. Biblical wheat was not today's high-yield crop but a group of related grains we still see in specialist breads – early breadwheat cultivars, hard-grained durum (the wheat of couscous and pasta) and the emmer, spelt and einkorn that still constitute the Italian country dish *fardo*. The Egyptians also used wheat and barley to make beer in a process very similar to modern brewing.

Olive trees and oil are mentioned frequently. Olive (*Olea europaea*) appears early, in Genesis 8:11, as the dove returns to Noah's ark with a sprig in its beak – farming can begin again. The oil provided food, lamp fuel, skin ointment and the oil of holy ritual. Originally a tree of arid wilderness, the olive spread west with the Phoenicians and Greeks, and no other tree so denotes the Mediterranean, other than perhaps grapevine (*Vitis vinifera*). This woody climber probably originated in the Caucasus but the Fertile Crescent cultures soon absorbed it into their regional farming and food base: oil, bread and wine.

Another principal crop from c.5000 BC was flax (*Linum usitatissimum*), which yielded both oil and linen, the strongest and most prestigious fibre for weaving – mentioned more than a hundred times in the Bible. Egyptian priests, nobility and officials wore clothes of fine linen and Joseph is recorded as wearing linen robes. Later, the body of Jesus was wrapped in linen cloth. Rougher quality flax made ship's cordage, sails and fishing nets.

Forest trees feature prominently, the most frequently noted being cedar of Lebanon



PHOTOS: RO FITZGERALD AND ALAMY/JOHN'S BLOOMING GARDEN



(*Cedrus libani*). These stately evergreen conifers, with massive trunks and spreading branches, remain Lebanon's national tree, depicted at the centre of its flag. In 1 Kings 5:6, wealthy, wise Solomon ordered this durable, fragrant timber from Hiram, King of the Phoenician city of Tyre, to build his temple and palace: "Now therefore command them that they hew me cedar trees out of Lebanon." In return Solomon supplied Hiram with wheat and olive oil.

Cedars are familiar far beyond Lebanon, notably in English eighteenth-century landscaped parkland. A few protected, ancient native groves survive, including the Forest of the Cedars of God at Bsharri, beside a Maronite Christian monastery (both since 1998 within a World Heritage Site). The trees are revered alike by the three Lebanese faiths – Christian, Muslim and Druze – a sentiment echoing Psalm 92, "The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like the cedar in Lebanon". Edward Lear's famous 1861 painting, *The Cedars of Lebanon*, was based on field sketches in Lebanon and mature trees in the grounds of the Oatlands Park Hotel in Weybridge, Surrey.

OAKS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN are mostly evergreen, like the conifers. In the Levant and Crete, prickly oak (*Quercus coccifera*), the dark shrubby mantle of rocky hillsides, can grow into full-sized trees. These form woods open enough to allow penetration by mounted soldiers such as the unfortunate Absalom, who, in battle against his father David in the Wood of Ephraim, rode his mule beneath "a great oak" and caught his head in the branches. Two millennia later during the Crusades, Baijars and his Mamluk army lured invading Mongols into similar woods near Nazareth and, in a rare setback for those all-conquering horsemen of the steppes, ambushed and defeated them.

Palms and palm fronds are sacred to many faiths. The date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) is especially important to the Arabs and other

Islamic communities in the arid landscapes of the Middle East. Desert cultures rely on date palms and their fruit, which are a food staple (much sugar, some protein) and source of building material, firewood, fibre, shade and ornament. The trees cope well with the hot dry climate, although requiring irrigation or underground water. Dates would have been vital sustenance for the fast light cavalry of the expanding Arab conquests.

To the Greeks and Romans, the palm symbolised triumph or victory, for the Egyptians it represented eternal life. In Greek mythology, twins Apollo and Artemis were born in the shade of a palm, and there is a long tradition of planting them at pagan shrines and in churchyards. The crowd is said to have cast palm fronds before Jesus, mounted on the donkey during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. All four Gospels record branches or rushes, but John (12:12) specifies palm fronds, richly symbolic and readily available.

But the Bible's single most significant tree, or at least its wood, is the cross on which Jesus died. The tiny amount of available analysis (very many churches possess fragments of wood traditionally believed to be from the True Cross) suggests pine, probably the widespread Aleppo pine (*Pinus halepensis*) of the Mediterranean hills. Cedar-like native cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*), still found in the mountains, has been mooted but that would have wasted valuable timber, which

is also too hard and heavy to be carried. The many paintings and films that depict Jesus dragging the cross through Jerusalem, even if it was made of pine, take considerable artistic licence. The weight would have made it impossible.

Finally, a key biblical plant is papyrus (*Cyperus papyrus*), a huge sedge of African swamps. If the tale is to be believed – and it too has a vividness about it – the basket, woven probably from papyrus and reeds, in which the Pharaoh's daughter found the infant Moses beside the Nile made the foundation of Israel possible. From it arose the Ten Commandments, the Prophets, Jesus and Christianity. Dried, sliced, flattened and rolled, papyrus stems were the "paper" (from Greek *papyrus*) that gave Antiquity literacy. The Greeks also called this material *Byblos* (Βύβλος).

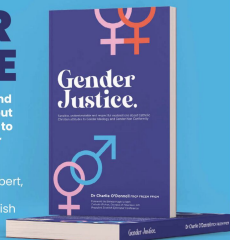


John Akeroyd is the co-founder of Plant Talk, the first global magazine for plant conservation and he is a former vice-president of the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland. With Donough O'Brien and Liz Cowley he is the author of *Plants and Us: How they shape human history and society* (GB Publishing, £22.99).

GENDER JUSTICE

Sensible, understandable and respectful explanations about Catholic Christian attitudes to gender ideology and gender non-conformity.

Foreword by Bishop Hugh Gilbert, Catholic Bishop, Diocese of Aberdeen UK, President Scottish Episcopal Conference.



AVAILABLE FROM HOLYCROSSBOOKS.CO.UK & ALL GOOD SUPPLIERS

Dr Charlie O'Donnell FRCP FRCSM FRCSM

Dr O'Donnell graduated from Imperial College and St Mary's Hospital Medical School, London. He is a consultant in emergency medicine and intensive care medicine. He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, Fellow of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine and a Fellow of the Faculty of Intensive Care Medicine. He holds a distinction in the Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies.

BISHOP HUGH GILBERT

"Reading this fine work of Dr Charles O'Donnell, *Gender Justice*, a worthy successor to his earlier *Sexual Justice*, has been more than a pleasure. It has been an education and an opportunity to listen to the calm clear voice of faith and reason."

Bishop Hugh Gilbert, Aberdeen, Scotland.

STOLEN LIVES

in solidarity with survivors



four online events from Root & Branch Forum and Scottish Laity Network

The Survivors' Perspective

Brian Devlin and A711 with Catherine Deveney

15 Jan 10.00 London

Abuse & Corruption

in the Catholic Church

Tom Doyle, Canon Lawyer, Expert Witness

27 Jan 20.00 London

Cover-up Culture

Francis Sullivan, Order of Australia

12 Feb 10.00 London

What Can We Do?

Plenary Open Session

Discussion on positive, lay-led, empowered outcomes
with Francis Sullivan, AO

24 Feb 20.00 London

all info and registration

www.rootandbranchsynod.org

Memorial against abuse in the National Basilica, Koekelberg, Brussels, reproduced with many thanks.

CHRISTMAS PUZZLES / Prize Acrostic

Enter answers to the 25 clues A–Y in the appropriate columns of the vertical grid, transferring the individual letters of each answer to the corresponding squares of the horizontal grid. When completed, the horizontal grid displays a single extended

quotation, and the lines to the left of the horizontal grid and across the top of the vertical grid display the author and source of that quotation. Just to make life more difficult, one word has been deliberately interpolated into the original quotation.

A 103	B 13	C 98	D 107	E 249	F 112	G 144	H 106	I 175	J 140	K 290	L 264	M 133	N 113	O 101	P 322	Q 129	R 45	S 66	T 252	U 36	V 96	W 310	X 2	Y 158
A 207	B 91	C 291	D 139	E 23	F 349	G 276	H 162	I 303	J 178	K 125	L 234	M 80	N 49	O 67	P 146	Q 116	R 277	S 12	T 224	U 266	V 1	W 63	X 336	Y 230
A 79	B 240	C 142	D 187	E 65	F 191	G 335	H 77	I 32	J 4	K 33	L 244	M 296	N 194	O 127	P 203	Q 287	R 316	S 168	T 169	U 87	V 347	W 237	X 239	Y 286
A 343	B 186	C 70	D 41	E 83	F 8	G 121	H 7	I 273	J 334	K 321	L 213	M 31	N 34	O 202	P 38	Q 328	R 78	S 124	T 39	U 14	V 35	W 37	X 24	Y 130
A 22	B 30	C 225	D 231	E 318	F 332	G 155	H 114	I 354	J 297	K 3	L 197	M 283	N 177		P 182	Q 44	R 11	S 226	T 94	U 190	V 171	W 262	X 302	Y 81
A 183	B 212	C 351	D 9	E 299	F 108	G 27	H 272	I 136	J 21	K 223	L 187	M 166	N 295		P 211	Q 280	R 339	S 313	T 141	U 154	V 115	W 270	X 284	Y 40
A 228	B 199	C 317	D 85	E 74	F 69	G 250	H 132	I 20	J 72	K 238	L 54	M 5	N 217		P 221	Q 143	R 152	S 227	T 349	U 198	V 306	W 109	X 50	Y 195
	B 126	C 268	D 164	E 174	F 236	G 342	H 243	I 145	J 156	K 119	L 110	M 117	N 262		P 64	Q 210	R 99	S 153	T 51		V 159	W 345	X 181	Y 148
	B 271	C 134	D 338	E 6	F 128	G 105	H 52	I 182	J 315	K 71	L 245	M 56	N 16		P 279	Q 311	R 255	S 304	T 248		V 151	W 232	X 325	Y 17
		C 161	D 157	E 229	F 92	G 307	H 216	I 148	J 131	K 308	L 19	M 312	N 188		P 267	Q 76	R 209	S 93	T 129		V 200	W 43	X 189	Y 275
			D 57		F 314	G 88	H 341	I 184	J 214	K 247	L 192	M 218			P 111		R 281	S 219			V 100	W 241	X 256	Y 220
		C 120	D 337		F 26	G 356	H 319	I 263	J 346	K 61	L 253	M 326			P 293		R 309	S 333			V 235	W 75	X 137	Y 285
		C 278	D 150		F 97	G 288	H 28		J 246	K 84	L 60	M 102			P 10		R 242	S 301			V 62	W 104	X 123	
		C 331	D 254		F 260		H 257		J 68	K 147	L 206	M 160			P 165		R 90				V 133	W 204	X 170	
		C 176			F 353		H 172		J 269	K 193	L 340	M 173			P 352		R 258				V 69	W 46	X 320	
		C 13			F 300		H 86		J 259	K 42		M 234			P 53		R 29				V 215	W 289	X 118	
		C 233			F 55		H 208		J 201	K 261		M 205			P 324		R 330				V 323	W 303	X 95	
		C 25			F 222		H 208			K 282		M 265					R 122				V 73		X 99	
		C 251			F 274		H 58			K 355		M 348									V 18		X 350	
		C 196			F 163		H 327			K 329		M 344												
					F 180		H 138					M 185												

- A. Pine for a knees-up with very short delivery. (4,3)
 B. Immerse hand strap and make two characters come together as one. (9)
 C. "----- Road". (We're off to see the Wizard... EY Harburg). (6,3,6,5)
 D. "As Jehu entered the gate, she said, "-----, murderer..." (2 Kings RSV). (2,2,5,5)
 E. Trevor upset about Rhine dock disaster between New Jersey and New York. (5,5)
 F. 'He was of the faith chiefly in the sense that the church he ----- was Catholic' (Kingsley Amis). (9,3,3,6)
 G. 'It'll do him good to lie there unconscious for a bit. Give -----' (N.F. Simpson). (3,5,1,4)
 H. 'A day that hath no pride, ----- doth not usher it in, nor tomorrow shall not drive it out' (John Donne). (3,9,9)

- I. Strange hoax – the plums are eye-popping. (12)
 J. There was a tabernacle made: the first, wherein -----, and the table' (Hebrews, AV). (3,3,10)
 K. 'The Camel's Hump is an Ugly Lump Which well -----' (Rudyard Kipling). (3,3,3,2,3,3,3)
 L. 'My prime of youth is but a frost of cares; my least ----- of pair' (Chidock Tichborne). (2,3,2,3,1,4)
 M. 'Broad of Church and "broad of mind", Broad before and broad behind, A keen ecclesiologist, A -----' (John Betjeman). (6,5,10)
 N. Mix together ink and oak and hang them on the man who was once Prince Carl of Denmark. (4,6)
 O. Depict characters at the heart of slim notebook. (4)
 P. 'King Solomon drew merchantmen, Because of his desire, For peacocks, apes and ----- unto Tyre' (Rudyard Kipling). (5,4,8)

- Q. Estimate audibly permitted when you estimate audibly. (5,5)
 R. 'I ----- get a good book read' (Ralph Waldo Emerson). (5,6,5,2)
 S. The world's a bubble; and the life of man -----' (Francis Bacon). (4,4,1,4)
 T. 'And the Lord said, who will ----- king of Israel, that he may go up and fall ...?' (2 Chronicles, AV). (6,4)
 U. 'I want to -----, But I won't [-----]' (Irving Caesar). (2,5)
 V. 'Too ----- of reality, too thin and you end up dead' (Shazia Mirza). (4,3,3,4,5)
 W. 'What music is more enchanting than the voices ----- you can't hear what they say?' (Logan Pearson Smith). (2,5,6,4)
 X. 'Though I were perfect, yet ----- I would despise my life' (Job, AV). (5,1,3,4,2,4)
 Y. 'Do your bit to save humanity from lapsing back into barbarity by reading all the -----' (Richard Hughes). (6,3,3)

1 V	2 X	3 K	4 J	5 M	6 E	7 H	8 F	9 D	10 P	11 R	12 S	13 B	14 U	15 C	16 N	17 Y	18 V	19 L	20 I	21 J			
22 A	23 E	24 X	25 C	26 F	27 G	28 H	29 R	30 B	31 M	32 I	33 K	34 N	35 V	36 U	37 W	38 P	39 T	40 Y	41 D				
42 K	43 W	44 Q	45 R	46 W	47 C	48 I	49 N	50 X	51 T	52 H	53 P	54 L	55 F	56 M	57 D								
58 H	59 R	60 L	61 K	62 V	63 W																		
64 P	65 E	66 S	67 O	68 J	69 F	70 C	71 K	72 J	73 V	74 E	75 W	76 Q	77 H	78 R									
79 A	80 M	81 Y	82 I	83 E	84 K	85 D	86 H	87 U	88 G	89 V	90 R	91 B	92 F	93 S	94 T	95 X	96 V						
97 F	98 C	99 X	100 V	101 O	102 M	103 A	104 W	105 G	106 H	107 D	108 F	109 W	110 L										
111 P	112 F	113 N	114 H	115 V	116 Q	117 M	118 X	119 K	120 C	121 G	122 R												
123 X	124 S	125 K	126 B	127 O	128 F	129 T	130 Y	131 J	132 H	133 M	134 C	135 V											
136 I	137 X	138 H	139 D	140 J	141 T	142 C	143 Q	144 G	145 I	146 P	147 K	148 Y	149 F	150 D	151 V	152 R	153 S	154 U	155 G				
156 J	157 D	158 Y	159 V	160 M	161 C	162 H	163 F	164 D	165 P														
166 M	167 L	168 S	169 T	170 X	171 V	172 H	173 M	174 E	175 I	176 C	177 N	178 J	179 Q	180 F	181 X	182 P	183 A	184 I					
185 M	186 B	187 D	188 N	189 X	190 U	191 F	192 L	193 K	194 N	195 Y	196 C	197 L	198 U	199 B	200 V	201 J	202 O	203 P	204 W	205 M	206 L	207 A	208 H
209 R	210 Q	211 P	212 B	213 L	214 J	215 V	216 H	217 N	218 M	219 S	220 Y	221 P	222 F	223 K	224 T	225 C	226 S	227 S	228 A	229 E	230 Y	231 D	
232 W	233 C	234 M	235 V	236 F	237 W	238 K	239 X	240 B	241 W	242 R	243 H	244 L	245 L	246 J									
247 K	248 T	249 E	250 G	251 C	252 T	253 L	254 D	255 R	256 X	257 H	258 R	259 J	260 F	261 K	262 N	263 I	264 L	265 M	266 U	267 P			
268 C	269 J	270 W	271 B	272 H	273 I	274 F	275 Y	276 G	277 R	278 C	279 P	280 Q	281 R	282 K	283 M	284 X	285 Y	286 V	287 Q	288 G			
289 W	290 K	291 C	292 W	293 P	294 L	295 N	296 M	297 J	298 H	299 E	300 F	301 S	302 X	303 I	304 S	305 W	306 V	307 G	308 K	309 R	310 W		
311 Q	312 M	313 S	314 F	315 J	316 R	317 C	318 E	319 H	320 X	321 K	322 P												
323 V	324 P	325 X	326 M	327 H	328 Q	329 K	330 R	331 C	332 F	333 S	334 J	335 G											
336 X	337 D	338 D	339 R	340 L	341 H	342 G	343 A	344 M	345 W	346 J	347 V	348 M	349 T	350 X	351 C	352 P	353 F	354 I	355 K	356 G			

PRIZES: This year we are offering a £75 Amazon voucher to the sender of the first correct solution opened on Friday 7 January 2022. Each of the five runners-up will receive a £25 Amazon voucher. Photocopies will be accepted. The editor's decision is final. Post your entries to: **Acrostic, The Tablet, 1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY.** Please include an email address, if available. The answers and the winners' names will appear in *The Tablet* dated Saturday 15 January 2022.

SUDOKU

Level: Hard

6	2	8		3				
3				8				
	4						3	
	5	1		7				
	6				4			7
				9			2	
		2			6			4
	7			2	3	9		6
1							5	2

Each 3 x 3 box, each row and each column must contain all the numbers 1 to 9.

The solution will appear in the 15 January 2022 issue.

Solution to the 27 November puzzle

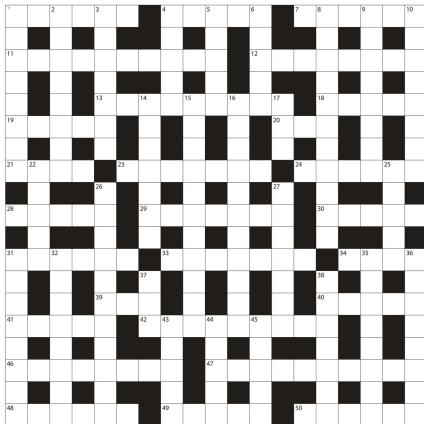
1	2	4	8	9	6	7	3	5
3	9	7	4	1	5	8	2	6
5	6	8	2	3	7	9	1	4
6	5	9	1	4	8	2	7	3
2	4	3	5	7	9	1	6	8
8	7	1	6	2	3	4	5	9
9	8	5	7	6	1	3	4	2
7	3	2	9	5	4	6	8	1
4	1	6	3	8	2	5	9	7

Across

- 1 William, captain of the *Royal Mary*, discovered [1643] Christmas Island (6)
 4 Songs reflecting Christian worship such as by Fr Faber and Fr Caswell (5)
 7 Septimus, the dowager's butler in *Downton Abbey* (6)
 11 Handwritten work of literature or music (10)
 12 Type of feast such as Easter Sunday (8)
 13 Ebbing of coastal water leaving permanent new land (9)
 18 Weapon used in martyrdom of St Stephen, commemorated 26 December (5)
 19 A theatrical farewell (5)
 20 River giving name to city and cathedral in Devon (3)
 21 Direction from which the Three Wise Men came (4)
 23 ----- Aetius, last general of the Western Roman Empire, defeated Attila (7)
 24 House of the last Catholic king of England (6)
 28 See 49 Across
 29 Headwear of a priest, colour determined by clerical rank (7)
 30 & 31 Down: Monument in Paris remembering those who died for France in war (3,2,8)
 31 Marsh Arabs' war canoe, used by British in First World War (6)
 33 Member of the Spanish nobility from the Middle Ages (7)
 34 Birds symbolically associated with wisdom (4)
 39 English cathedral built on an isle (3)
 40 Type of accent, as in 'Señor' (5)
 41 Window and Newman's college at Oxford (5)
 42 Halls of ----- vacated by students over Christmas break (9)
 46 Country where usual 'Merry Christmas' greeting is '*Feliz Navidad*' (8)
 47 The Church militant, the Church suffering, the Church ----- (10)
 48 Substitute, often as a term for inferior items or food in hard times (6)
 49 & 28 Across: Gogol story of Cossack legend inspiring rhapsody by Janáček (5,5)
 50 Norway's annual Christmas tree gift is erected near his Column (6)

Down

- 1 The prayer of St Bernard to our most loving Virgin Mary (8)
 2 Bowling game from Middle Ages, and 'falling' simile (4,4)
 3 'Nuper ----- Flores', a 5 Down by Dufay in honour of Florence Cathedral (7)
 4 Mainly Catholic republic of the Caribbean (5)
 5 Usually Latin short choral work, but can be secular with instruments (5)
 6 Dominic, boy saint of 'heroic virtue', pupil of St John Bosco (5)
 8 Central American plants used for floral decoration at Christmas (11)
 9 In mythology, drink or food of the gods (8)
 10 'On ----- of Stephen', Wenceslas carol (3,5)



- 14 Cradle song, such as that by Brahms (7)
 15 Famously experienced by J.H. Newman, G.K. Chesterton and Ronald Knox (11)
 16 Version of *A Christmas Carol*, the first with John Leech interpreting Dickens' text (11)
 17 World of Dvořák's Ninth Symphony (3)
 22 Ground-covering plant also known as 'bugle' (5)
 25 Village and Water in Cumbria associated with the poet Wordsworth (5)
 26 Illumination in title of John Rutter carol (11)
 27 & 35 Down: Composer of *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* (7,8)
 31 See 30 Across
 32 Holiday coastlines, such as French or Cornish (8)
 35 See 27 Down
 36 Thomas, English furniture designer and author of books on the subject (8)
 37 County town near where *Auld Lang Syne* author born (3)
 38 Towering feature of church architecture (7)
 43 Country providing protection for the Holy Family from Herod's soldiers (5)
 44 Bury (at the end of title of Christina Rossetti's carol) (5)
 45 Greek equivalent name of the prophet Elijah (5)

■ Solution to puzzle No. 783, 27 November 2020

- Across:** 7 Ekron; 8 Isidore; 10 Topheth; 11 Cyrus; 12 Abel; 13 Bethpage; 15 Egyptian; 18 Laws; 20 Isalm; 22 Marcion; 23 Aramaic; 24 Sheba.
Down: 1 Septuagesima; 2 Prophecy; 3 Ange; 4 Tishbe; 5 Milcah; 6 Zoar; 9 Easter Sunday; 14 Adamites; 16 Timnah; 17 Almuze; 19 Druse; 21 Leah.

Answers: See Page 47



Fallen

A Christmas story

By Michèle Roberts

THE NIGHT SKY loomed above Dora. A vast, black airiness that shimmered with pinpoints of light. A lively darkness that breathed and moved, that gently revealed itself as a massive human shape, curving and full. The night sky was an enormous black female figure, made of a softness that was powerful and buoyant. Majestically she bent forwards. She reached out her rounded black arms, lifted Dora like a baby to lie on her black knees. She held her loosely but securely.

A lucid state. Not a dream. Not a reverie. Dora was not asleep, though the people nearby seemed to think so. Their voices tugged at her. Wake up now, Dora. Time to wake up. Dora resisted, but the voices won.

From the recovery ward, two porters in green scrubs wheeled her towards a lift. How odd to be lying flat on a stretcher, rolling along like a delivery. Christmas afternoon party, when Dora and Rosa were seven, and Dad turned the tea trolley into a holly-wreathed sledge topped with a huge plywood snowball, coated in tufty cotton wool, full of presents. Dad, in red dressing gown and white beard, whipped up his twin prancers, Dora and Rosa, got up as reindeer sporting brown satin costumes and papier mâché antlers made by Mum. They drew the sledge into the front room, to the applause and laughter of the uncles and aunts.

Dora's plaster cast was white as that snowball, but cumbersome and heavy. Her leg propped on pillows, the end of the bed raised, she watched the stately approach of a nurse in a mid-blue uniform dress. The nurse strapped a

blood pressure cuff to Dora's arm. So what happened to you, darling?

I fell down some steps, Dora said. I live in a basement flat, I'd gone out, I can't remember why, I'd got to the top of the steps, then I realised I'd forgotten something, so I turned round and went back down. Next thing I knew, I was flat on my back at the bottom of the steps, unable to move.

Your blood pressure's still too low, said the nurse. She hooked thin plastic oxygen tubes into Dora's nostrils.

I lay there, yelling for help, Dora said. I was lucky. Two of my neighbours were passing by, they called an ambulance, and I was whizzed to A & E.

Felted round by sedation, she saw nothing. A kindly voice told her she had dislocated her ankle and also broken it. Someone was scraping her bones together to make fire. Dora heard herself scream. Someone gouged her bones with a red-hot skewer. Dora screamed again. She fell into darkness.

Advent in childhood was a cave of darkness, the thick front-room curtains drawn against the approach of evening, the coal fire lit, the lights turned low. Dora and Rosa unpacked the crib together, peeling off the newspaper wrappings protecting the miniature plaster figures. They arranged them on top of the bookcase that stood behind the coal scuttle. The stable, carpentered by Dad from plywood, hosted an angel, with outspread arms and wings, dangling

CONTINUED ON PAGE 32

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

from its gabled front. A banner stretched between the angelic fingertips read *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Inside the stable, blue-robed Mary and brown-cloaked Joseph lay on their sides, asleep by the empty manger. Every morning, Rosa stood them upright again, and every evening Dora laid them back down on their bed of wood shavings. Baby Jesus was not yet due, but three personages in gold and purple frocks were en route, travelling in daily hops from windowsill to mantelpiece to shelf. Dora named them the Three Wise Women. Dad smiled at her. They're the Three Kings.

Dad went to market and brought home a Christmas tree. Mum wrapped a piece of her embroidery around its pot. The tree budded with lights. It bore fruit, heavy glass balls blue and purple like plums, like frosted grapes. Dad got his way and hung paper chains and swags of tinsel, and Mum fought back with arrangements of dried honesty seedheads sprayed silver. The front room held the tang of the green forest.

The hospital ward smelled of cleaning fluid in the early morning, when the tired-looking woman drove her mop across the floor, and at lunchtime it reeked of boiled vegetables, when the tired-looking man pushed his cart round. Dora slurped her tomato soup. Yesterday, wheeled up from theatre, she had been allotted a bed at the far end of the ward, near the wide plate-glass window. The hospital stood on the south bank of the river bisecting the city, and Dora liked knowing the river was there, even if she could not see it. Her view was of a blank grey wall. The window stayed shut, as former patients had apparently complained about the stink from the invisible rubbish bins in the yard below. Soon after arriving in the stuffy ward, Dora had overheated and turned scarlet, and the blue-clad nurse had brought her an electric fan. That night, Dora lay in the darkness and felt cool air brush her cheeks. Like the breath of someone she loved. Rosa, blowing on her face to wake her up. Where was Rosa? She couldn't remember. Never mind. Just go to sleep.

Christmas Day began in the middle of the night, when Mum and Dad crept up the stairs, giggling and shushing each other, and tiptoed into the bedroom where their two small daughters lay still under their matching eiderdowns, eyes shut, breath calm. The door clicked shut again. Footsteps clacked away. Dora sat up, got out of bed. She cocked an eye at the stocking-shaped lumps on the chest of drawers, slid across the smooth lino, lifted Rosa's coverings. She climbed in beside her twin, curled behind her. Rosa made her own, particular dent in the mattress. Dora, sharing it with her, fitting herself alongside her in the dip, wondered what it was like to be someone else. What did it mean to be a separate person? Why was she Dora and not Rosa?

In the darkness and chill of early morning, they fumbled for their knobbly stockings, special socks knitted by Mum in green wool, their tops knotted with string, and brought them back to Rosa's bed. Sitting up side by side, shivering, the eiderdown pulled up to their chins, they drew out matching small packages. First Rosa opened one and then Dora. Two pink sugar mice. Two knitted coats for teddy bears. Two cellophane-wrapped trays of miniature marzipan fruits. Four walnuts. Finally, weighing down the stocking toes, two tangerines. Dora opened up her array of almond-paste goodies, offered it to Rosa. Tiny dumplings dyed pink, yellow, red. Rosa nibbled half a strawberry, Dora half a peach, then they swapped. Dora considered. They tasted exactly the same. She dipped her head and kissed Rosa's arm. Salty, warm. She licked her own. Yes, the same.

The brown pills of morphine, doled out in tiny pleated paper cups by the nurse, tasted of nothing in particular, brought not only relief from pain but a haze of peace. The nurses' efficiency made Dora feel safe. Every hour, it seemed, they arrived, to run checks, adjust her oxygen, shove a papier mâché bedpan under her, raise or lower the bed. On the afternoon of the day following her operation, Dora began to remember more. How she had been loaded into the rescuing ambulance along with the shoulder bag that had fallen with her. Where was it? Her clothes? Her shoes? Aha. A green plastic sack bulked on the chair next to her bed. She ferreted through her possessions. She had lost her skinny jeans, presumably sheared off her in A & E, then discarded as ruined. She had also lost her sense of identity. Clad in a hospital-issue pink nightdress with a long slit up the back, she was no longer Dora the independent single woman who earned a living, jaunted out partying and dancing, roamed about exploring back streets, walked home alone late at night fearless and happy in her beloved city. She had been changed into a patient. A powerless being dependent on others. You had to trust them, their expert care. She did. The morphine calm held her like a hammock.

Rummaging further, she found her phone and pulled it out. Still charged, thank goodness. She called Rosa. I've been ringing you non-stop, Rosa cried. Why is your phone turned off? What happened?

Where are you? Dora asked.

At home, of course, Rosa said. We're all sitting around having tea. We thought you might have changed your mind and come to lunch. Never mind. I'll send you some pictures. But what's up? Where are you? Tell me.

Christmas lunch in childhood began late, and wound down as darkness closed in outside. Rosa and Dora, dressed in identical deep red frocks, run up by Mum on her Singer machine, collected sixpences from their slices of pudding, half-crowns tucked under the lids of mince pies. They had helped Mum stir the pudding and the mincemeat, relished the harsh fruit smell of the brandy Dad poured in. That's enough! Mum shouted. The twins are only seven years old! You'll get us all drunk! Spoilsport, Dad shrugged. Now Mum and Dad were sipping neon-green Chartreuse, nibbling raisins and dates. They cracked nuts, using the special nut hammer. They let the children have a go. Almonds were best, because if you picked out an especially fat specimen and it proved to have two nuts nestling, tightly embraced, inside its shell, not just one, you could play a particular game called Philippe. You gave the second nut to a chosen person, and then when you met next day, whoever said Philippe first was the winner and demanded a present from the loser. Dad split a plump shell, shattering it so that shards flew across the white tablecloth, and weighed two almonds, one convex and one concave, in his palm. Just like you two, these nuts, he told the twins, laughing. His hammer words defined their difference in whacks. Rosa so good at maths and biology, Dora such a dreamy bookworm. Rosa so good at sport, Dora better at art. Rosa so determined, Dora needing a bit of a push. Dora clenched herself behind a wooden silence. She felt Rosa, next to her, do likewise.

The post-op X-rays of Dora's ankle showed her broken bones set back into place, an architecture of metal plates and screws built round them by the surgeon to scaffold healing. Her plaster-heavy leg seemed to mock that. It dogged her, like a fake friend. She would have to live with it. Accordingly, on her second day on the orthopaedic ward, she learned to hoist herself from the bed to the nearby commode, to hop a few steps using a walking frame. She accepted the tears that suddenly flowed. Shock,

she sobbed to the enquiring nurse. It keeps coming over me in waves, that this has happened, and I'm in this strange new state. The nurse patted Dora's arm. I'm very grateful for your care, Dora wept. You're so kind. That's nothing to cry about, said the nurse.

She peered at Dora's washbowl. Finished with this? Would you like the curtains pulled back again?

The blue pleated privacy curtains on their horseshoe-shaped rail were the same colour as the nurse's uniform. A soft blue wall around their conversation. Dora tried to stop crying. The nurse folded her arms and waited.

I had a row with my sister, Dora said. That's why I fell down the steps. I remember now. Some weeks back, she rang to invite me to the lunch she was giving for her new granddaughter's christening.

Rosa had spoken briskly. You won't want to come to the church, of course, you wouldn't feel comfortable, but you're very welcome to join us afterwards.

I mumbled something vague, Dora said to the nurse. To the effect that I wasn't sure what I'd be doing that day. I was a bit hurt, and I didn't know how to deal with it. And then three days ago, or whenever it was, she rang to see whether I'd decided to come or not. And I don't know, suddenly I couldn't bear it, it all burst up inside me, how much I'd minded not being able to be godmother to her first child years back, because I wasn't a practising Catholic any more, she'd just decided it wasn't possible, and asked someone else, and I felt rejected by my own twin, yes, I know, illogical of me, sentimental as well I expect, egotistical, of course it made perfect sense her not asking me to be godmother.

You didn't talk about it? asked the nurse. All those years ago? You never sorted it out?

We were always so close as children, Dora said. We didn't need to talk to one another. I don't think we ever learned how to. Not about anything difficult, for sure. We've never talked about our religious differences. But suddenly, when Rosa rang me that second time, it all boiled up. I just lost it, I had a real go at her down the phone.

The nurse stood patiently by the bed, in the blue glow of the curtains, as though she had all the time in the world, which Dora knew she hadn't.

You know something? she had blurted to Rosa. I loathe the idea of the godparents renouncing the world, the flesh and the Devil on the child's behalf. What's wrong with the flesh? Flesh is holy, art and music and poetry bear witness to that. And the world? We live in it, we are part of it, it is precious. And the Devil? I don't believe in him. People do wicked things, but that's their responsibility, not the Devil's.

Rosa's reply sounded stern as the responses in the catechism they had to learn before they made their First Holy Communion. Renouncing the world means not being corrupted by materialism. It doesn't mean not trying to save the planet. You misunderstand what baptism is all about. You're thinking like a child. The Church has moved on since the Fifties, you know.

I don't believe we come into this world fallen, Dora rushed on. I don't believe in Original Sin. I don't want a redeemer, I don't need some poor man to be tortured on the Cross for my sake. And I can certainly do without a male-dominated Church and a male Pope trying to control me. The Church hurt me as a woman. I had to leave it.

Rosa said nothing. Dora, shaking, clutched her phone and listened to their silence. She had punched Rosa, perhaps she had winded her, perhaps she had felled her. Rosa was committed, singlemindedly devout, Dora was a part-time pagan heretic agnostic, right now an angry mess. Rosa was Good and Dora was Bad. Who was that talking? The catechism, the hammer of heresy. All right.

Hit back at it. Hit Rosa again.

I'm not a hypocrite, Dora said. I shan't come.

And then I ended the call, Dora told the nurse. I turned my phone off, so that she couldn't call me back.

The nurse pulled back the curtains, pushed their glistening pleats into place. She picked up the washbowl. And then?

I slammed out of my flat, Dora said. I remember now. I was so upset, I thought I'd go for a walk to calm down. I got to the top of the steps up from the basement area, I was crying, there was this scouring pain inside me. I realised I had to phone Rosa back and say sorry and try to sort it out. For some reason I thought I'd left my phone indoors, so I turned back down the steps, and I suppose I was in such a state, I didn't look where I was going, I must have tripped, and that's when I broke my ankle.

The nurse went away. Dora let herself slide down her heaped pillows until she was lying flat. Her white plaster leg reared in front of her. No longer the neat, capable twin of the other, but a rigid stranger, to be coaxed, collaborated with. All right, chum, Dora said to the white cast. We'll just have to see what we can do. We'll just have to get on with it.

After Christmas lunch, after the Queen's speech on TV, the two little girls were put to bed for a rest, to be ready for the afternoon party that would stretch on well into evening. They took off their dark red frocks and lay on top of the sheets and blankets, covered by their eyelidowns. The silky quilt slithered coolly over Dora's bare arms and legs. Like someone stroking her. Bliss. She turned her head. Rosa lay nearby, a hand's reach away, sleeping. Just a narrow space of grey darkness separated them.

The nurse roused Dora, dozing in her warm cave of morphine. She removed the oxygen tubes from Dora's nostrils. She peered into the green plastic possessions bag. Not much here, is there? You'd better keep that nightdress on for going home in. We're discharging you first thing tomorrow. I've booked the ambulance for straight after breakfast.

Dora gripped the sheet. I realise you need the bed. But I live on my own. It will be hard for me to manage if I can't put any weight on my foot. And those steps down to my flat. I'll have to be winched down them! Oh dear.

All sorted, said the nurse. Your sister rang us earlier. She wanted to know when you might be coming out, so that she could get a bed set up downstairs. You're to stay with her for as long as you need to, until you've learned to walk again. Oh, and she said to tell you she's saved you a bag of sugared almonds from the christening.

© Michèle Roberts 2021



Michèle Roberts is the author of 12 highly acclaimed novels, including *The Looking Glass and Daughters of the House* which won the WHSmith Literary Award and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Her memoir *Paper Houses* was BBC Radio 4's *Book of the Week* in June 2007.

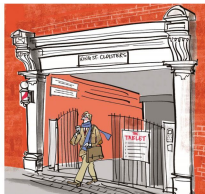
She has also published poetry and short stories, most recently collected in *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*. Half-English and half-French, Michèle Roberts lives in London and in the Mayenne, France. She is emeritus professor of creative writing at the University of East Anglia, a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

Freshly minted

ON 15 FEBRUARY 1968, Labour Chancellor Roy Jenkins announced that Decimal Day would take place exactly three years later. When the designs for the new decimal coins were approved, Wales got its lion, Scotland its thistle and England its Prince of Wales feathers. But the Union's most loyal region – nothing. Occasional *Tablet* contributor Mark Stocker, who has written a new book about D-Day, *When Britain Went Decimal*, tells us what happened next. Jenkins promised to rectify matters with a special Northern Ireland 2 pence coin – but didn't anticipate the kerfuffle over the choice of design: the Red Hand of Ulster. Although this symbol is ancient (and ecumenical), it had developed militant Protestant connotations. Attitudes hardened, and harps and shamrocks obligingly supplied by the designer Christopher Ironside were rejected.

A stropky constituent of the Reverend Ian Paisley demanded the Irish tuppenny bit. Paisley picked his fights, but not this one. Thus ends the story of the decimal coin that never was.

The new coinage kept Arnold Machin's beautiful effigy of the Queen's head with the inscription "FD" for *Fidei Defensatrix* ("Defender of the Faith") beside it. The title *Fidei Defensor* (the male version) was granted to Henry VIII by Pope Leo in 1521 after the



King had launched an excoriating attack on the ideas of Martin Luther. The Pope revoked the title when Henry broke with Rome; Parliament later restored it.

JUST BEFORE the latest Covid constraints loomed, over seventy people gathered in the Waldegrave Room at St Mary's University to celebrate the publication of a festschrift in honour of Professor Gerald Grace, who at the tender age of 85 is stepping down from his role as founding director of the Centre for Research and Development in Catholic Education (CRDCE).

The editor of *New Thinking, New Scholarship and New Research in Catholic Education* (published by Routledge), Sean

Whittle, a visiting research fellow at St Mary's, told us: "Gerald Grace has shaped Catholic education since 1997. His most significant legacy has been to foster a culture of disciplined innovation and systematic research into Catholic education; his work has established St Mary's as a centre of excellence in the study of Catholic schooling."

THE GORGEOUS Nativity on the cover of this year's Christmas issue is by Spinello Aretino (Jesus, Mary, Joseph, ox and ass all look on thoughtfully as a midwife gingerly checks that the water in the baby's tub isn't too hot) had me looking in the archives. Forty-one years ago this week, colour came to *The Tablet*, with a sixteenth century Italo-Cretan icon on the front cover, and our first colour advertisement is on the reverse: a gleaming green bottle of Chartreuse ("the great liqueur still made by monks"), which pops up in Michèle Roberts' Christmas story in this year's issue.

CHRISTMAS DAY this year will be the 100th anniversary of the birth of Hubert Richards, one of the great figures in Catholic scholarship in the post-Vatican Council years, and an inspiring teacher. He touched and transformed the lives of many. This Christmas Day, please pray for the repose of his soul and thank God for the patience and good humour of all teachers in the faith.

The Tablet Online Christmas Shop

For Tablet Christmas candles, Tablet Christmas cards, Tablet 2022 calendars and a new line of carefully selected 'Sanctuary Products' many of which are made by the Benedictine monks of St Augustine Abbey, Chilworth including the Chilworth Rosary Beads and their very popular beeswax skin cream, lip balm and furniture polish, please visit the Tablet online shop.



Skin Cream (beeswax)



Lip Balm (beeswax)



Christmas cards



Tablet Candle



Chilworth Rosary Beads - black



Sun Catcher of The Sacred Heart



Beeswax Polish



2022 Tablet Calendar

A perfect gift for a friend or for yourself

Visit: shop.thetablet.co.uk

THE
TABLET
SINCE 1840

LETTERS

• THE EDITOR OF THE TABLET •

✉ 1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY • letters@thetablet.co.uk

All correspondence, including email, must give a full postal address and contact telephone number. The Editor reserves the right to shorten letters.

Right-brained ritual

● Even as a supporter of the liturgical reform, I would have to admit that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is left-brained. Article 34 is a classic example: "The rites should be ... short, clear, and unencumbered by useless repetitions."

The academic study of ritual was only starting in the 1960s. It has taken over 50 years for leading thinkers like Iain McGilchrist ("The singing of things", 4 December) to suggest how and why we have largely lost something near-indefinable from the pre-Vatican II liturgy – when it was celebrated well at a High Mass or Missa cantata. In his chapter on "The Sense of the Sacred", he talks of "a deep gravitational pull towards something ineffable".

Ritual, like all art, is used when its object cannot be defined in words – or in rubrics, or in Vatican documents. Liturgy is an instrument of worship by those who take part in it – a means, not the end itself. Worship is indefinable because its object, God, is ineffable – literally "beyond speech" – thus its exercise is right-brained, rather than left-brained. That is why art, especially music, can assist worship so effectively when it illumines the ritual being performed. One cannot understand the worship signified by ritual, but one can discern it, intuit it, even be grasped by its mover, the Holy Spirit.

JOHN AINSLIE
LONDON N20

Confession seal

● I read with interest the correspondence concerning confusion around confession (Letters, 27 November) and the similarities and differences in relation to similar professions.

In the case of counselling and psychotherapy, the counsellor is bound to make very clear to the client in advance the boundaries to counselling practice. The "client-counsellor contract" details those situations where the counsellor has a legal obligation to break the "seal" of confidentiality.

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

Spiritual life after Covid

PARTICULARLY at this festive time of year, we should not be overly despondent when confronted with the results of two surveys predicting "a significant drop in post-Covid church attendances" (News from Britain and Ireland, 11 December). This cloud has a silver lining. The Premier survey highlights the green shoots of an increased prayer life during the pandemic among the 18- to 34-year-olds, an important cohort forming the Church of the future.

History provides illuminating parallels to this twenty-first-century trend. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70 made it no longer possible to offer animal sacrifices in temple precincts to atone for sin. As a result of the demise of the temple cult, prayer took the place of sacrifice, fulfilling Old Testament prophecies like Hosea 6:6: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings."

Yes, Covid regulations have restricted our physical access to and participation in the sacrifice of the Mass. But as the psalmist reassures, God's atonement is won and his delight secured less by sacrifice and more by the humble offering in prayer of a "broken and contrite heart" (Psalm 51:17).

The results of the Premier survey provide concrete evidence that contemporary faith is mature, that is, no longer the outcome of

an obligation to worship but rather the fruit of a voluntary impetus to pray.

CHERRIE ANDERSON
LONDON SE18

AS USUAL in Advent, requests arrive from parishes for priests to assist in hearing individual confessions in the context of parish penitential services, and usually priests generously make themselves available.

In the present circumstances however, given the high infection rate of the Omicron mutation, and in the face of scientific and government advice, it is surely not reasonable to expect priests to sit at close quarters in an enclosed space listening and speaking in low confidential tones through a mask to a series of masked penitents whose Covid and vaccination status is unknown to the priest and to other penitents.

The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has not authorised the use of General Absolution, and to my knowledge nor has any individual bishop. If the prevailing pandemic conditions in England and Wales do not constitute a dire and exceptional circumstance vis-a-vis the administration of the Sacrament of Confession and the employment of General Absolution, then I am at loss to imagine what conditions would do so.

(FR) STEPHEN GILES MIHM
LIVERPOOL

These exceptions occur particularly where there is risk of harm to children, to others and to self. We will also work with the client to find appropriate help.

In the same way, surely anyone attending confession should be told the limits to the seal of confession. This can be done individually prior to the start and it can also be done transparently through parish bulletins and bishops' letters. If it puts people off going to confession, so be it.

The Church has to stop hiding behind the "seal of confession", expecting the practice to be exempt from the law. And surely it has to stop trying to find complicated and confusing ways around breaking the seal.

The outdated practice of

"going to confession" in a dark, tomb-like box has largely disappeared, thank goodness. Over the years many have come to regard it as an unhealthy, infantilising process, and have found other more mature and natural ways of expressing sorrow, repentance and reconciliation.

SUE OAKLEY
EASTLEIGH, HAMPSHIRE

Sunday obligation

● The comments of Andrea Kelly and Canon McManus (Letters, 11 December) are most apposite and welcome. I do understand that some people may truly mean to be loving by speaking of absolute obligations (and even mortal sins) just as a parent may snatch a child in

their arms rather than see him or her fall off a cliff. However, how can this analogy apply to a situation of grace?

Missing Sunday Mass is harmful spiritually and deeply disrespectful to Christ, who suffered for us. But to suggest that "one strike and you're out!" is relevant to a God of grace and to human spirituality is ridiculous to many (especially outside the Church) and even obscene. What sort of God are we worshipping?

Don't miss Mass if at all possible. Love him and be loved. Fail and be forgiven. Respect and be respected. But don't throw people under the spiritual bus if they miss one.

(FR) KEVIN O'DONNELL
PONTMAIN, FRANCE

CONTINUED ON PAGE 36

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35

● Many, many years ago, when I was a teenager, I decided to break the obligation which I felt was binding me to go to Mass on a Sunday. So, although I wanted to go, I stayed away one Sunday.

I will always remember the freedom I felt after that. I went to Mass every week, and often during the week as well, because I wanted to, not because I had to. I still feel that freedom to this day.

MARGARET FOSTER
DEVIZES, WILTSHIRE

Listening parishes

● If we, the laity, are going to be listened to, as envisaged in the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis, then the basic parish structure needs to be changed. In our parish, we have had a great number of priests come and go, each one with their own ideas imposed upon us without any consultation. Would it not be better to have a permanent body established in each parish – call them trustees or something similar – made up of both long-term members and newcomers. It would be a body already there for the incoming priest to work alongside.

Perhaps it is time to change the title of the parish priest to “Brother” instead of “Father”. This would change his role from being over us to being with us. As Jesus said in Matthew 23:8-9: “... and you are all

brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven.”

Maybe in these two ways, the hierarchical pyramid could be inverted, as Pope Francis wants to happen, and the people, who are 99.5 per cent of the Church – would be at the top.

CLARE OWENS
YATELEY, HAMPSHIRE

Day of expiation

● I wholeheartedly agree with both Suzanne Kavanagh (Letters, 27 November) and Mary Wilkinson (Letters, 4 December). Christians, members of other faiths and non-believers need to be reminded regularly that Catholics utterly deplore clerical sexual abuse.

Evidence of it has continued to accumulate over several decades. It has clearly been extensive and it has taken far too long for corrective action to be regarded as robust. Some dramatic demonstration, in liturgical form, of our feelings about it is required as a sign of our absolute determination to rid the Church of this evil.

A day of expiation and atonement, or some such annual event, would be a fitting subject for discussion during the current synodal process; and an appropriate outcome of the exercise.

(PROF) PETER ROEBUCK
PENRITH, CUMBRIA

Women deacons

● You report on the ordination of Tuam's first three permanent deacons (News briefing, 27 November). Archbishop Michael Neary told the three men being ordained that, as married men, as husbands and fathers, they brought experience and expertise to the ordained ministry.

Is there any reason that women, as wives and mothers, could not also bring experience and expertise to the ordained ministry, perhaps even more than men? It is long overdue for there to be ordained women deacons.

HOLLY BALL
LONDON N10

Newman intern

● I'm glad that you are looking for the Tablet Newman Intern for 2022. The saint's kindly light surely shines on your inspiration to encourage aspiring journalists, where there are now so few openings. Your fostering of young people who are the future of the apostleship of journalism is indeed an enduring and positive glow at the end of this year.

Congratulations from someone who hammered relentlessly on the door of the local newspaper's editor for a chance some 60 years ago. May you be overwhelmed by the response. Whoever the lucky applicant is, I am sure

they will receive the encouragement to enjoy shaping words in depth and truth.

(CANON) BRIAN O'SHEA
HARROW ON THE HILL,
MIDDLESEX

Closed churches

● Denise Cottrell Boyce (Letters, 4 December), writing about church closures, omits a problem facing many who stay away from a church. If the church is shut, from what then do they absent themselves?

A wise Methodist minister once told me that in her experience people always knew which church they stayed away from. Or does the closure provide a more convincing excuse for absence? (FR) ROBERT MILLER
TISBURY, WILTSHIRE

Date order

● I join David Offord (Letters, 11 December) in lamenting the use of CE and BCE, but could we not say the “C” stands for “Christian” rather than “Common”?

The strange thing about this attempt to secularise dates is that they are still dating things from the birth of Christ, and so acknowledge the Life of Christ still as the central event of human history.

(FR) MICHAEL BRIODY
MOODIESBURN, NORTH
LANARKSHIRE

THE LIVING SPIRIT

AND LITURGICAL CALENDAR

The child in the manger stretches out his small hands, and already his smile seems to say what later the lips of the adult Jesus will say: “Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened”. Some answer this call. When the poor shepherds heard the angelic message they said with simple trust: “Let's go to Bethlehem”. They set out on the way to Christ. Kings from distant lands followed a marvellous star with the same simple faith.

The child's hands poured the dew of grace upon them all and they rejoiced. Those hands give



and at the same time demand. You, who are wise, lay your wisdom aside and become like little children.

Hand over your treasures and do obeisance to the King of Kings. Accept without hesitation the pains and sorrows and burdens his service entails... Ways part before the child in the manger. Whoever is not for him is against him. So choose light not darkness.

EDITH STEIN

FROM “THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS” IN THE WRITINGS OF EDITH STEIN, TRANSLATED BY HILDA GRAEF (PETER OWEN, LONDON, 1956)

★ CALENDAR ★

Sunday 19 December:
Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year C)
Monday 20 December:
Advent feria
Tuesday 21 December:
Advent feria
(St Peter Canisius, Priest and Doctor)
Wednesday 22 December:
Advent feria
Thursday 23 December:
Advent feria
(St John of Kanty, Priest)
Friday 24 December:
Advent feria
Saturday 25 December:
The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)
Sunday 26 December:
The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph (Year C)
Monday 27 December:
St John, Apostle and Evangelist

Tuesday 28 December:
The Holy Innocents, Martyrs
Wednesday 29 December:
St Thomas Becket, Bishop and Martyr
Thursday 30 December:
Sixth Day in the Octave of Christmas
Friday 31 December:
Seventh Day in the Octave of Christmas (St Sylvester I, Pope)
No Friday abstinence
Saturday 1 January 2022:
Solemnity of Mary, The Holy Mother of God
The Octave Day of the Nativity of the Lord
Sunday 2 January:
Second Sunday after The Nativity

+++

For the calendar for the Missal of 1962 go to www.tms.org.uk

The Nutcracker and Swan Lake. **RADIO FRANCE ORCHESTRA**. **Arte** • **A CHORISTER'S CHRISTMAS**. Capella Regalis Men & Boys Choir in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

December 23–26 • How Christmas lights helped guerrillas put down their guns. **TED TALK** • All links at WWW.TINYURL.COM/TABLETDIGITALARTS

Christmas at the Courtauld

Laura Gascoigne enjoys festive jewels at the newly refurbished London gallery

SINCE IT WAS founded 90 years ago, the Courtauld Gallery has been famous for its world-class collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings, cleverly snapped up by the far-sighted Samuel Courtauld at a time when such things were considered too “modern” for the National Gallery.

But the Courtauld is in fact a collection of collections, uniting gifts and bequests made over the years by a number of donors, from the institution's co-founder Viscount Lee of Fareham – who on his death in 1947 left the gallery Botticelli's magnificent *Trinity* altarpiece – to Count Antoine Seilern, whose major bequest in 1978 included Rubens' heart-breaking studies for *Descent from the Cross* and *The Entombment*.

But the least celebrated contributor to the Courtauld's holdings is the Victorian high churchman and philanthropist Thomas Gambier Parry, whose collection of over 300 paintings and decorative objects – all now viewable on the gallery website – came to the institution in 1966 after the death of his grandson Mark.

Like Samuel Courtauld, Thomas Gambier Parry had the confidence to back his own judgement. At a time the Italian High Renaissance was regarded as the pinnacle of artistic achievement, he developed a taste for trecento paintings: the so-called Italian Primitives then regarded as, well, primitive. Having inherited a fortune, and bought himself a seventeenth-century manor, Highnam Court in Gloucestershire, on graduating from Cambridge, he had the means and the space to indulge it.

A self-taught frescoist who decorated swathes of Ely Cathedral and painted a *Last Judgement* for the Church of the Holy Innocents he built on his own estate, Gambier Parry had an artist's eye. Unlike the frescoes he painted, though, the paintings he collected were mainly small devotional panels designed for close viewing. As such, they used until now to be easy for visitors to miss, dotted around the gallery's previously dingy spaces. But with the Courtauld's recent refurbishment, Gambier Parry's collection has acquired a dedicated space in a Medieval and Early Renaissance room carved out of a former store on the first floor. In this new setting, his trecento goldbacks shine like jewels.

The room's displays feature fine examples of the Renaissance maiolica and Islamic metalwork Gambier Parry also collected –



and at this time of year his paintings have a special appeal, as they include a feast of Nativities. Made for private devotion two centuries before the Counter-Reformation laid down ground rules for sacred iconography, these images of Christ's birth have an innocent charm all of their own. Without iconographic precedents to follow, the Italian Early Renaissance artists who painted them drew on their own experiences of childbirth to bring their intimate domestic scenes to life, giving a freshness and authenticity that tends to be lost in later Renaissance representations. Their Adorations of the Magi are less about the richness of the three kings' gifts and the sumptuousness of their apparel than about the basic meaning of the event itself: the welcoming of a special child into the world.

Bernardo Daddi's *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints* (1338) at the Courtauld Gallery

Even in his ornate triptych of *The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints* (1338) – one of two larger works in this room from Count Seilern's collection – Giotto's Florentine apprentice Bernardo Daddi keeps the action simple and the cast of characters to a minimum. Squeezed on to the triptych's left wing, his Nativity is no royal baby shower. In the centre of the panel the Virgin sits on the cold hard ground with the newborn Jesus, swaddled in festive red and white stripes, standing precociously in her lap. On the hill above, a solitary shepherd is tipped off by a single angel; a few other angels worship beside the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38

Welcome to the world of the presepe napoletano, or Christmas crib, writes Joanna Moorhead, as a London exhibition brings the tradition closer to home

Neapolitan Nativities

ITS REAL NAME is Via San Gregorio Armeno, but in Naples it's known as Christmas Alley – and that's a perfect description for the festive trail that sparkles up through the old town to the Basilica of San Lorenzo at the top of the hill.

The narrow cobbled street is festooned with stalls groaning with more Jesuses and Marys and Josephs, more cattle and shepherds and kings, more stables and inns and wondrous stars and cherubic angels than you'd have imagined exist across the entire planet, let alone in one corner of southern Italy. These figurines and settings come in all shapes and sizes: some of the Jesuses recline in real-baby dimensions, others are smaller than your thumbnail. The settings can be life-sized tableaux, or a walnut-sized jar. Some are rustic, some reference actual towns. Some are based a landscape of 2,000 years ago, others feature the shops and streets of the modern-day city down the road.

Welcome to the world of the *presepe* (presepì in the plural): in English, we call it the Christmas crib. We keep it packed away for 11 and a half months of the year, and we dis-



Taking in the sights on Christmas Alley

play it on our mantelpiece for a fortnight in mid December. But in Naples – and much of the rest of Italy too, but Naples is the epicentre – it's an industry, and Christmas Alley throngs with the sights and sounds of the birth of

Christ as much in June or August as it does in November or December. All the same, and unsurprisingly, there's a special buzz in Christmas Alley at Christmas time. Naples has been unseasonably wet, cold and windy of late, but even as the heavens opened and the gusts blew last week, it was hard to squeeze through the crowds as I threaded my way along its route. Before Covid, this street saw more than half a million visitors a year: if my visit was anything to go by, the crowds are definitely back.

Perhaps strangely – because his stamping ground was many miles north of Naples – St Francis is credited with inventing *presepe*: he's said to have built the first Nativity scene in 1223 in the small town of Greccio south of Assisi, inspired by a visit he'd made to Bethlehem many years earlier. Rather than merely describe the scene he remembered from there, he opted to re-enact it: he found a cave, recruited a couple and their newborn to play the principal parts, and borrowed an ox and an ass to stand beside the manger.

This *presepe viventi*, or living Nativity, has been enacted every year since in Greccio, and

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 37

manger, not a hay-lined crib but a large stone trough over which the ox and ass hang deferential heads. The stable offers the most basic shelter, just a thatched roof supported on wooden posts. On the rocky ground below, beside a seated Joseph, another shepherd stands on tiptoe pulling himself up on a ledge to catch a glimpse of the new arrival above. When the triptych is closed, the backs of the two wings join together to form an equally unpretentious *Adoration of the Magi*, with the Virgin presenting her baby to one of the kings while the other two wait their turns on the left, pointing up at the star.

There's a similar simplicity to the Rimini painter Giovanni Baronzio's dazzlingly coloured *Adoration of the Magi* (c.1326-50), also set on a rocky hillside. Behind the Virgin, seen receiving the three kings in the centre, three angels kneel with hands joined in prayer; another three hover in the sky above, one of them beckoning to two shepherds on the hill-top who are already setting off downhill at speed. The picture is organised on different levels, upstairs-downstairs-style: while the Virgin and Child receive the royal delegation on the piano nobile, in the basement at the foot of the hill – as it were behind the green baize door – nervous first-time father Joseph officiates at the bathing of the new baby by

two midwives. Two grooms stand by, holding the horses of the royal guests.

Despite not being mentioned in the gospels, midwives are a frequent presence in these early paintings. They're given even more prominence in a delightful *Nativity* (c.1350-1410) painted by Spinello Aretino for the church in Città di Castello near his native Arezzo. Although also part of the Gambier Parry collection, this small panel hangs upstairs on the second floor in the first of a suite of refurbished Fine Rooms now serving as an Early Renaissance gallery.

Spinello's scene is set immediately after the birth. Mary and Joseph sit on the ground exhausted, grabbing the opportunity offered by bathtime to snatch a moment's rest while two midwives in the foreground take charge of the baby: one holds him on a towel on her lap, while the other tests the water temperature in the tub with her fingers. The moment of parental peace won't last, as an excited shepherd in the background is just being informed of the divine birth by an angel. Any minute now the

stream of visitors will start to arrive.

No Nativity trail around the Courtauld would be complete without a look at two of the smallest representations of the theme among the decorative objects from the Gambier Parry collection in Room 1 downstairs: a miniature *Adoration of the Magi* with a wonderfully animated Christ Child on a fifteenth-century Limoges enamel pan (inset), and an exquisitely carved Gothic ivory

panel from Northern France combining a tiny *Adoration of the Magi* with a minuscule Nativity. In some ways, this is the most contemporary interpretation here. Showing the new mother lying propped on one elbow with her other arm around her newborn infant, it could be a scene from a modern-day maternity ward.

The variations played on this one theme by generations of artists are endless, because it is rooted in universal human experience. Even in a world losing faith in the miraculous, the Nativity will never lose its artistic appeal – to Christian and non-Christian alike – as long as the miracle of new life holds us all rapt.



the popularity of the tradition spread. Soon every village and town had its own *presepe*, and as well as getting models to enact the roles, craftspeople began to carve figurines to represent the infant Christ, Mary, Joseph, and the other characters of the Nativity story. In Naples, the idea of Nativity scenes took off with particular gusto, reaching a high point in the eighteenth century, under the patronage of Charles III, king of Spain.

This was the start of the golden age of the *presepe*, when the craftspeople of Baroque Naples would take the hitherto fairly humble crib-making custom into a whole new realm. The settings became theatrical and dramatic and were often monumental in scale, and the range of characters portrayed in intricately carved and minutely painted figures grew exponentially. No longer were Nativity scenes limited to the stable at Bethlehem and the individuals named in the gospel accounts: suddenly, the setting became the landscape of Italy, the village or town, or Naples itself with all its rowdy taverns, processing musicians and bawdy markets.

As the settings became more and more monumental in scale, often taking up entire areas of the church or the piazzas, so the people portrayed within the scenes multiplied hugely. No individual or animal was too insignificant to be included in the scene: there were shopkeepers and innkeepers, bakers and weavers, mothers and playing children. Animals crowded into the scenes, which were often set in a vertical perspective reminiscent of an Italian hill-town. Angels and birds flew in the sky, and sheep and goats ambled on rocky outcrops. Looking at the *presepi* in Naples today, it often takes time to find the figures of the Holy Family: they tend to be folded almost unobtrusively into the scene, a metaphorical sidebar in the midst of the chaos and ordinariness of life portrayed there. And yet of course it was in the ordinariness of the scene, and the arrival of God as human within it, that the power lay: Christ was being born in Naples, in the middle of the madness and the bustle of everyday life there. The events of so long ago in Bethlehem were as relevant in eighteenth-century Naples as they are relevant in every corner of the twenty-first-century world.

In today's Christmas Alley, the Baroque tradition is taken into modern-day territory: among the characters from the biblical story, and eighteenth-century Naples, modern figures like Maradona, Pope Francis, Elvis and the Beatles turn up in myriad Nativity scenes. Many *presepi* have moving parts: the baker is putting his bread into the oven, the innkeeper is setting the pints down on the bar. Lights glisten in a thousand tiny windows, and stars twinkle amidst fluffy clouds in countless skies.

Christmas Alley is an experience of its own: but for the next few weeks (until 25 February) you don't have to go to Naples to see a stunning and huge-scale *presepe*. The gallery Colnaghi has brought one to London for the city's Art Week: it's a magnificent eighteenth-century crib, and it encompasses all the finest



Saint John the Baptist by Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652), on display alongside a Neapolitan *presepe* at Colnaghi London

elements of the traditional art form. One of the few examples outside Naples, it's crafted from oil-painted terracotta, along with carved wood, painted glass, shaped tin and wire, cork and fabric, recreating the detailed fashions of the time.

The exhibition also features a selection of religious, landscape and still-life paintings by some of the greatest artists who worked in the city during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and served as inspiration for the craftspeople of the *presepe*, including Jusepe de Ribera, Luca Giordano and Massimo Stanzione.

Highlights include two paintings by de Ribera: a portrait of *Saint John the Baptist* dated in the 1630s and an *Ecce Homo*, dated to 1644, considered a high point of the Neapolitan Baroque. Stanzione's *Penitent Magdalene*, dating from the early 1640s, is signed with an elegant monogram and is an

unusual example of the artist's work on copper.

Two large-scale canvases by Giordano reflect his ability to express the drama and pathos of religious and mythological subjects: *The Triumph of Galatea and Shepherds with their Herd*. And still lifes of fish, crustaceans and other seafood are by not only Giuseppe Recco but also his daughter Elena Recco, who accompanied her father to Spain and is known to have continued to work at the Spanish court in Madrid after his death in 1695 – an important example of a female artist working at a time when it was much more difficult for women to train or to practise their art.

Back in Naples, the weather had begun to close in and I had to head for the station and my return train to Rome. But for those with longer in the city, the National Museum of San Martino includes one of the largest *presepi* ever constructed, featuring 150 figures and over 450 miniature items.

CHRISTMAS THEATRE

Not a dame in sight

The best of the stage
this season

MARK LAWSON

IN THE JARGON of composing, the songs in musicals are "diegetic" – in the context of the scene, such as a nightclub, the character is singing naturalistically – or "non-diegetic", where the tunes represent conversation or inner thoughts.

Kander & Ebb's *Cabaret* (Kit Kat Club, London), one of the greatest stage and movie musicals, has many numbers – "Willkommen", "Don't Tell Mama", "Money" – diegetically sung in 1930s Berlin at the Kit Kat Club (into which the Playhouse Theatre beside the Thames has been transformed inside and out) by Eddie Redmayne's creepy, sleazy MC or Jessie Buckley's English chanteuse, Sally Bowles.

The biggest innovation of Rebecca Frecknall's revival is to make the public numbers more internal: Buckley spews out "Mein Herr", a comedy song, as a furious response to her latest male betrayals. Another fresh idea is that the MC, who usually becomes ever more outrageous as Berlin descends into Nazism, here reinvents himself as a blond Aryan heterosexual, an all too plausible search for safety in conformity.

Less happily, the show suffers from the tension in musical theatre and opera over whether to favour singers who can act a bit or actors who can sing a bit. Redmayne is often lyrically indistinct, while Buckley's generally strong voice is somewhat undermined by choosing to emphasise that Sally is a drunken showbiz failure, rather than the Hollywood star turn that predecessors such as Liza Minelli (on screen) and Natasha Richardson (on stage) delivered.

The show's darkest moment – so shocking that producers argued to remove it in 1968 – features the MC waltzing with a dancer in a gorilla suit, singing "If You Could See Her Through My Eyes", ostensibly a plea for tolerance of all forms of love. But the last quatrain – "I understand your objections / I grant you the problem's not small / But if you could see her through my eyes / She wouldn't look Jewish at all" – is an overture to the coming Holocaust.

Across four decades, I've seen this moment greeted with cries of horror or shocked silence but, at this version, there came, from areas of the audience, laughter and even hand-claps. Perhaps the guffaws betrayed awkwardness or confusion – but, at a time of debate about anti-Semitism in British culture, it felt very disturbing.

However, Tom Scutt's astonishing design centres on a revolving stage, with three inner circles that rise and tier like a wedding cake, which the MC suddenly and ominously tops. And Ebb's lyrics, Kander's mordantly jazzy



Eddie Redmayne and
Jessie Buckley in *Cabaret* at
the Kit Kat Club, London

score and Joe Masteroff's stinging and witty dialogue remain a joy even after repeated hearings. This *Cabaret* is pioneering an airline-style reactive pricing system in which cost rises as demand peaks, with hot dates now asking at least £200 per ticket, so play the diary carefully.

The Play What I Wrote (Birmingham Rep, until 1 January 2022, then touring), an international hit 20 years ago – Hamish McColl and Sean Foley's play about a reluctant Morecambe & Wise tribute act – is gloriously revived by Foley at the refurbished Birmingham theatre he runs. Eddie Braben's original TV scripts are mixed with new pastiche material (some puns raunchier than the BBC would have allowed) so that, as Eric used to say of Ernie's rumoured toupee, you can't see the join. In the tradition of the TV cameos by Glenda Jackson and others, a star guests each night. I got Tom Hiddleston: not all audiences will be so lucky but there is a thrill, in these variously dark times, at laugh-

ing so loudly we fear our masks will explode.

With **The Book of Dust** (Bridge Theatre, London, until 26 February 2022) Nicholas Hytner, who had a 2004 National Theatre success with Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, now brings us the recent prequel featuring the early life of Lyra Belacqua, a child hunted by State and Church. Pullman's books attack religion – and are specifically anti-Catholic – but Hytner's direction and Bryony Lavery's script nicely bring out Pullman's contrarian use of Christian imagery (miracle births, souls, angels) in pursuit of his intended refutation of faith.

In **The Shark is Broken** (Ambassadors Theatre, London, until 13 February 2022), a short, funny behind-the-camera drama, Ian Shaw (co-writer with Joseph Nixon) plays his father Robert Shaw, waiting below deck with Richard Dreyfuss and Roy Scheider, for the shooting of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* to resume after the titular animatronic predator has malfunctioned yet again.

CHRISTMAS RADIO

Tove and the trolls

A wistful trip to Moominland

D.J. TAYLOR

NO SELF-RESPECTING child of my generation with a shelf full of Puffins (detail, inset) in their bedroom will need reminding about the adventures of Tove Jansson's Moomin family. Although *Finn Family Moomintroll* and *Comet in Moominland* are probably the best-known of the series, it was an inspired idea of the BBC's drama department to come up with an adaptation of the 1957 title in the series, *Moominland Midwinter* (BBC Radio 4), to be aired on Christmas Day at 11 a.m. Not only does it suit the season, but it is by the far the strangest and most compelling book in what was an exceptionally strange oeuvre.

For newcomers to the party, the Moomins are a gang of Finnish trolls whose idyllic natural habitat, Moomin Valley, is constantly being menaced by comets, environmental foul-ups and a (literally) icy villain known as the Groke, whose appearance betokens sub-zero temperatures. The family hibernates during the sub-Arctic winter, and it is here that our hero, Moomintroll, suddenly finds himself dragged into consciousness when a stray beam of moonlight falls on his face.

Adapting the story for radio was never going to be easy. Although there is plenty of action, involving a wide cast of creatures who emerge from the depths of the snow-bound valley, much of what happens goes on in

Moomintroll's head and takes in his struggles to make sense of a once-familiar world tugged dramatically out of kilter. The radio version solves some of these problems by relying on a narrator (Samantha Bond) to provide much of the backdrop. If John Finnemore, as Moomintroll, sounds a touch like Martin Freeman as Bilbo Baggins as he puzzles things out and tries to acclimatise himself to a landscape of gloom and silence, then this isn't to criticise a performance that is based on a quest for information.

That things may not be as they were is brought home when Too-ticky (brilliantly voiced by Rakie Ayola), one of the valley's out-of-season passage migrants, takes Moomintroll to the family's beach house by a now frozen sea, where invisible shrews boil soup and something mysterious lurks in the cupboard. "In the summer it belongs to you," she explains. "In the winter it belongs to Too-ticky." It is the same when a squirrel unwisely stares into the face of the Lady of the Cold as she stalks across the tundra and is frozen dead on the spot: Moomintroll suggests there ought to be a funeral, but Little My (Clare Corbett), another of his newfound winter companions, can only think that the deceased's tail would make an admirable muff.

Moominland Midwinter's extraordinary charm rests at least partly on the suspicion that here is a kind of ideal world, a lost Eden which, however imperilled by Grokes or natural disasters, is always capable of renewing itself. The Moomin family is a warm, impenetrable, mother-run unit – although, sadly, that great matriarch Moominmamma spends most

of this instalment asleep. Then there is its delicious creepiness, born of the realisation that there are other worlds out there running on without our interference and sometimes best left to themselves.

Jansson (1914–2001), a lesbian who had to conceal her sexuality for much of her life, was in some sense an outsider, and one of the signature marks of the world she created is its insistence that there is space in it for everyone.

One of the novel's most extraordinary chapters, which this programme nicely reanimates, is titled "The Lonely and the Rum", and involves an almost pagan ritual of bonfire-lighting and furtive celebration. None of which is to ignore the continual sense of wistfulness, of other destinies running on over the horizon which it would be wonderful to pursue if only you had the courage – exemplified by the case of Sorry-oo (Farshid Rokeya) the tiny dog who yearns to run with the wolves, only to be plunged into terror when they arrive in the clearing where he sits howling at the moon.

Inevitably, Robin Brooks' adaptation is not as good as the book, but then what adaptations ever are? Top marks for trying, though. Also recommended are the annual *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* from King's College, Cambridge (BBC Radio 4, 24 December, 3 p.m.) and *When the Beatles Didn't Meet Imelda* (BBC World Service, 18 December – 14 January, 7 p.m.), an insider account of the Fab Four's ill-fated 1966 trip to the Philippines.



CHRISTMAS TELEVISION

As tears go by

Moving series with papal wisdom

LUCY LETHBRIDGE

STREAMING ON Netflix from Christmas Day, *Stories of a Generation* is a moving four-parter on great themes expressed through the lives and experiences of people over 70: "Love", "Dreams", "Struggle" and "Work".

The series flags Pope Francis (inset) as the central character, but in fact his presence is lightly sprinkled through the episodes, anchoring the stories of others with some reflections on his own story, and imparting some papal wisdom. Interviewed by the Italian Jesuit and journalist Antonio Spadaro, we see Francis characteristically at ease in warm, intimate conversation, as Jorge Mario Bergoglio – the man who just happens to be the Pope.

There are some astonishing lives touched on here – in fact so many, that you might at times wish we could spend a little longer getting to know them. They have been witnesses

to terrible pain and great love: they include US movie director Martin Scorsese, but for the most part these are unsung people whose one shared characteristic is resilience. An Argentinian woman, now in her late eighties, describes searching for 40 years for her grandson, who was born the day before his Peronist mother was murdered by the regime. She is in the episode "Love" but, like so many of the participants, could as well be in "Struggle".

The 78-year-old widower who lives in a hut in the Costa Rican jungle with his two disabled middle-aged sons wants nothing but to take them to the sea for the first time; they are blind and he wants them to "feel" it. What will happen when he is dead? The question is agonising for him but his stoicism and his faith sustain him. His experience could equally come under all four headings – he features in "Dreams".

Many of the interviewees are still working – and one of the most engaging aspects of the series is the way in which the deep skills honed over decades are celebrated. There is a midwife in her seventies who has delivered thousands of children; a Nigerian nurse seen showing a young woman how to dye with indigo seeds

that have to be fermented over three days by constant stirring; a Vietnamese shoemaker in Phnom Penh who recalls making shoes for the last Cambodian king, and then the bloody terror of the 1970 revolution in which he lost many friends. In "Love", Betty Kilby Fisher packs up her Winnebago for a trip across country to meet a woman whose ancestors enslaved the ancestors of Betty; a deep friendship is born. On the island of Lampedusa, a local ice-cream maker pulled 47 drowning migrants into his boat from the night sea. His relationship with the young people he saved has changed his life as well as theirs: he found it difficult to express emotion with his own children, and now he feels he's been given a second chance.

Pope Francis introduces these short but intensely emotional programmes with a call for the generations to listen to each other. He invites the young to hear what their parents and grandparents have to say about the events they have lived through, great and small. And the touching, domestic moments of human drama are often set against the backdrop of some of the largest world events of the twentieth century.



PHOTO: UK/PA/REDA

BOOKS

• OUR REVIEWERS •

EAMON DUFFY is emeritus professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Cambridge, and a fellow of Magdalene College

CHRIS NANCOLLAS is a retired GP and writer • MICHAEL GLOVER is The Tablet's poetry editor • CARINA MURPHY is a freelance writer

SEAN MCGLYNN is a lecturer in history at the University of Plymouth • A.N. WILSON is a novelist, biographer, historian and columnist

Bare ruined choirs

A new account of the Dissolution of the Monasteries is the fullest ever written

EAMON DUFFY

PHOTO: ALAMY, P. TEMPLERS

The Dissolution of the Monasteries: A New History

JAMES G. CLARK

(YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 704 PP, £25)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £22.50 • TEL 020 7799 4064

BETWEEN 1536 and 1540, Henry VIII's regime dissolved or accepted the surrender of all of England and Wales' 850 houses of monks, friars and nuns, representing 19 separate religious orders, and involving the return to secular life of somewhere between 10,000-12,000 men and women. In purely material terms, the disappearance of monastic life involved the greatest change in landownership since the Norman Conquest. In spiritual terms it extinguished in England an ideal of apostolic discipleship which had been a feature of English Christianity for almost a millennium. A handful of the monastic churches were repurposed as secular cathedrals, but many of the most sublime were unroofed for their lead, raided for building stone or allowed to moulder into ruins. Some of their libraries were appropriated by the Crown, but most were dispersed, and ultimately lost. All of this had been made possible by the single most revolutionary aspect of the English Reformation: the invention of the doctrine of the Royal Supremacy, the claim, whose denial was made a capital offence, that the king was not only head of state but head of the Church in his dominions, the true possessor of a spiritual as well as a political sovereignty which had long been usurped by the Bishop of Rome.

This new claim of the Crown was unprecedented, but the closure of religious houses and diversion of their property to other uses was not. Henry VI's foundations of Eton and King's College, Cambridge had been built with the revenues of captured French monasteries. The Tudor collegiate foundations of Bishop John Alcock, Lady Margaret Beaufort and St John Fisher at Cambridge, and of Bishop Smyth and Bishop Fox at Oxford, had all been financed from the revenues of suppressed religious houses, and Cardinal Wolsey had closed 29 houses to fund his own collegiate projects in Ipswich and Oxford. But none of these reallocations of the revenues of mainly small or ailing houses can be seen as a blueprint for the total eclipse of religious life that took place



Bolton Abbey in Wharfedale, North Yorkshire

between 1536 and 1540, or help account for the astonishing rapidity and scale of, and relative lack of opposition to, the Dissolution.

Precisely because it involved the transfer of vast quantities of land, property and ready cash, the Dissolution is arguably also the best-documented aspect of the English Reformation. James G. Clark, a distinguished historian of medieval monasticism, has drawn on the full range of that surviving documentation to produce the most significant treatment of the Dissolution since Dom David Knowles' elegiac study in the third volume of his magisterial history of *The Religious Orders in England*. Knowles' was an insider's account by an historian of genius who was himself an English monk, but also a stern critic of contemporary English monasticism. His book was characterised both by a sombre assessment of the spiritual mediocrity of the majority of Tudor monasteries – "none of them fervent,

but many harmless" – and by a deep sense of the spiritual tragedy of the disappearance of monasticism as a feature of English Christianity, reflected often in sublimely melancholy prose.

Clark's detailed study, the fullest account of the Dissolution ever written, has little to say about the spirituality of monasticism, and has none of Knowles' pathos or eloquence. At 704 densely written pages it is emphatically not a book for the beach or the bedside. It is, nevertheless, a major addition to our understanding of the whole process of the Henrician Reformation. Clark demonstrates the intensification of lay and episcopal interest in and involvement with the monasteries in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the religious houses themselves deeply embedded in local religious, social and economic networks, their personnel, buildings and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 43

Toil and trouble

CHRIS NANCOLLAS

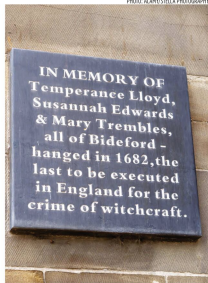
The Last Witches of England

JOHN CALLOW

(BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC, 352 PP, £25)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £22.50 • TEL 020 7799 4064

PHOTO: ALAMY/STELLA PHOTOGRAPHY



THE LAST THREE witches to be executed in England died because a magpie, well known as a witch's "familiar", tapped on the window of an invalid in Bideford, Devon.

The year was 1682, and the invalid in question was Grace Thomas, a young spinster bedridden for months with crippling pains which had defied diagnosis. The nascent medical profession were only too ready to ascribe their failures to darker, supernatural forces – as was the patient herself. As the servants shooed the magpie away, they saw the figure of Temperance Lloyd, a noted local beggar and reputed witch. The connection was made, and the journey to the gallows had begun.

Seventeenth-century Bideford was a busy port on England's "Golden Bay", with a thriving North American and European trade. Beneath the prosperity, however, there were deep divisions, both economically, between the rich merchants and poorer townsfolk, and politically, between the ascendant Tories and the Whigs. More pertinent for this story were the scars left by Cromwell's Interregnum and the Restoration of the monarchy, resulting in a febrile religious atmosphere riven by divisions and fear of the "other".

The three alleged witches, Temperance Lloyd, Susannah Edwards and Mary Trembles, were on the margins of this society: poor, unkempt women who earned a living by begging. Three townswomen who had been accosted by the beggars developed mystery illnesses, among them Grace Thomas, and the rumour spread that they had been cursed. Witchcraft was not an abstract concept back in those days, but a real presence in the lives of ordinary people. "Wished", as in "ill-wished", was a term used of unfortunate folk well into the twentieth century.

Led by Grace Thomas' brother-in-law, the three were arrested and arraigned for trial. As was the custom, they were submitted to intimate bodily searches, the examiners look-

ing for the presence of accessory nipples, the so-called "Devil's Teat", and other bodily abnormalities indicative of witchcraft. Each confessed to having met the Devil in person, "a man dressed in black" or a "black man", which at the time was considered essential proof of demonic activity. They all admitted their crimes, and Temperance Lloyd also confessed to causing the death of Lydia Burman, a brewer. As these "confessions" were extracted under duress in very public circumstances, there must be considerable doubt as to their veracity.

Intriguingly, the court records of the actual trial have disappeared, but it appears from contemporaneous accounts that at least one of the judges was hopelessly biased. The verdict was a foregone conclusion – the mob outside would stand for nothing less – and they were duly hanged at Heavitree, Exeter on 25 August 1682. A plaque erected by the Pagan Federation commemorates the site.

Historian John Callow has produced a well researched and even-handed account of this landmark case, giving pen portraits of all the major players, and providing a comprehensive picture of life in seventeenth-century Britain. He lets the facts speak for themselves, and wisely avoids taking sides, although the fear that powerful men have for independent women is an undercurrent which would find resonance today. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the case was that the only evidence of the women's guilt was the confessions. No one saw them fly, raise storms, kill cattle or cast spells: it was all hearsay and superstition. They may just have been three poor, old, bad-tempered, malnourished women, but in the spirit of the times they were "the other", the witches, and justice had to be done.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 42

economies integral to their neighbourhoods, literally part of the fabric of the regions, whether urban or rural. Tudor England was, he argues, "in many respects a monastic society", and recruitment to monastic life relatively flourishing. Lay people, from the Crown downwards, were increasingly involved with the monasteries as patrons, hereditary "founders", stewards and financial managers, and the Tudor episcopate were increasingly active in the governance, visitation and reform of monastic life. All this made monasticism integral to national life, but by the same token eroded monastic autonomy, facilitating the election or appointment of heads of houses most of whom would prove docilely compliant when the Dissolution came.

As Clark demonstrates, there was no master plan for that Dissolution. On the eve of the break with Rome, neither Henry nor his henchman Thomas Cromwell envisaged an England without monks, friars or nuns, and four abbots had presided at the baptism of Anne Boleyn's daughter, Elizabeth. But the innovation of the Royal Supremacy, that "break with past history", gave a deadly impetus to the opportunistic drift towards

lay entitlement which had been developing for several generations. If the king and Cromwell had anything approaching a plan, it was "piecemeal intervention" aimed at "total possession by the King-Governor", the seat-of-the-pants evolution of royal policy reflected in the inconsistent and sometimes shambolic activity of monastic visitors like the cursory Richard Layton and the officious and sex-obsessed Thomas Legh.

CLARK GIVES short shrift to notions of deep-seated monastic corruption, but is equally dismissive of romanticised accounts of heroic monastic resistance to the Royal Supremacy: there was overt opposition in only eight houses, in every case by a minority of their members, involving perhaps as few as 50 men, and as the avalanche of closures gathered pace, the concern of many heads of houses seems primarily to have been to maximise their pension arrangements. In this area, men did far better than women: abbots and priors of the wealthier houses lobbied to be set up as gentlemen in one of their former manors; choir-monks might hope for pensions between £6 and £10 p.a.; but nuns might have as little as a tenth of that, which no doubt helps explain

why some ex-nuns seem to have pooled their resources and continued to live together.

Clark provides a wealth of information about the subsequent history of monastic property, much of it going to enrich and raise the status of courtiers, office-holders and gentry, some of the buildings speedily demolished, others absorbed into the townscapes of which they were already an integral part, the property of former friaries particularly vulnerable to rapid expropriation, lacking the powerful lay patronage that the older monastic orders had often enjoyed. Monastic and friary churches in towns might be repurposed for parochial use, or unroofed and raided for materials for local churches and public buildings: of the 70 more isolated rural Cistercian foundations, only one saw continued use, and "bare ruined choirs" became a feature of the landscape. It was not only the buildings that saw dereliction: notably, very few former Religious opted to return to monastic life when the opportunity presented itself during Mary's brief reign. What enthusiasm there was, was mainly among the laity. There must be a moral in that, somewhere, though this invaluable book does not attempt one.

RECENTLY
PUBLISHED

Divine Love: The Art of the Nativity / SARAH DRUMMOND / UNICORN, £25; TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £22.50
A beautiful book exploring ways in which the birth of Christ has been depicted from the earliest times

Mysteries and masterpieces

Michael Glover picks the best art books of the autumn



The painter and sculptor Marcel Duchamp regarded the idea of any work of art willingly incarcerated in a museum with horror and contempt. His admirers will take pleasure in **Marcel Duchamp**, a facsimile of a

wonderful monograph, first published in 1959, that this wackiest of rebels co-wrote with the art historian Robert Lebel. Newly reissued in a luxurious slip-cased edition (Hauser & Wirth, £100), it includes a useful piece of advice from his lifelong admirer André Breton, who writes of *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors*, Even with all the usefulness that we might expect the founding father of surrealism to muster: "One should keep it luminously erect, to guide future ships across a civilisation which is ending..."



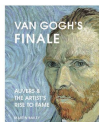
Those with deep pockets and lovers (or admirers) to impress should consider investing in Munich-based art historian Norbert Wolf's latest magisterial survey **The Renaissance Cities: Art in Florence,**

Rome and Venice (Prestel, £99; *Tablet* price £89.10). The pressing questions to be answered are these: what exactly did this "renaissance" amount to? And where and when did it flourish most magnificently? Answer: glance back at the book's title. Also slip-cased, it is copiously illustrated with masterworks by the likes of Raphael, Titian, Michelangelo, Botticelli and Leonardo.



One unsolved mystery has been vexing people since 1988: who exactly stole Lucian Freud's portrait of Francis Bacon, and where is it now? That painting was one of more than a dozen painted by Freud, between 1949 and 1953, on copper, a material barely used by painters since the

seventeenth century. **Lucian Freud: The Copper Paintings** by Martin Gayford and David Scherf (Yale University Press, £30; *Tablet* price £27) describes and illustrates all those closely observed and intense works, and also treats us to a hitherto unseen photograph of the one that got away, minutes before it was stolen.



Van Gogh's Finale: Auvers & the Artist's Rise to Fame (Frances Lincoln, £25; *Tablet* price £22.50) is the concluding volume in Martin Bailey's trilogy about the life of the artist who sold just one work during his lifetime, but whose death nevertheless attracted a tumult of obituaries. The final weeks were a frenzy of painterly activity. But what happened in the aftermath? This book takes in Van Gogh's rapid rise to fame, the conundrum of his death – was it really suicide? – and how he became widely and rapidly feted as a harbinger of modernity.

Oh, to Be a Painter!
Virginia Woolf

There is a pleasingly waspish violence about Virginia Woolf's encounters with the paintings of her contemporaries.

Oh, to Be a Painter! (David Zwirner, £8.95; *Tablet* price £8.05) conveys a visceral feeling that she is both over-qualified and under-qualified even to

open her mouth, but open she must because writers and artists – such as Walter Sickert, her sister Vanessa Bell and others – share a common endeavour to represent a world of dizzying and exhilarating dislocation.



How to speak when one's voice is so readily ignored? The way in which female artists such as Vanessa Bell, Gwen John and Dora Carrington, during the early years of the twentieth century, used the genre of still life to describe, often in code, matters of great intimacy is the subject of a closely argued and

thought-provoking study by Rebecca Birrell. **This Dark Country** (Bloomsbury Circus, £25; *Tablet* price £22.50).



One of the most eye-delighting, visually alluring and agreeably readable examples of book-making of the second half of the year is Simon Martin's **Drawn to Nature: Gilbert White and the Artists** (Yale University Press, £25; *Tablet* price £22.50).

It takes as its point of departure quotations from Gilbert White's great study of 1789, ponderously called *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*. The book is a gathering of images – from woodcuts and wood engravings to paintings, from watercolours and linocuts to pencil drawings – which have been created in response to the natural world as White described it. It is an exquisite production, from Mark Heard's cover – a collage depicting a white thrush – to its endpapers. There is an introduction by Sir David Attenborough, a text on White's Selborne by Virginia Woolf, and W.H. Auden's brief poem-epistle "Posthumous Letter to Gilbert White".



And what of all the bawling children, I hear you ask. Do you have nothing art-bookish this Christmas for all those brilliant art connoisseurs of the future? In fact, we do. **Making a Great Exhibition**

(David Zwirner, £13.99; *Tablet* price £12.59), written by Doro Globus and illustrated by Rose Blake (daughter of the man who will forever be remembered as the creator of the Sgt Pepper album cover) is a picture book for younger children which explains, very simply, and with seeming ease, how a work of art is produced, from first conception by the artist to that triumphant moment when it is finally hung on a gallery wall. It takes in the intermediaries who are so often forgotten, from the art handler to the events assistant and the museum director. It is a delight, as informative as it is light of touch.

SPEED READING



CARINA MURPHY

clocks up Christmas calories

No shortage of treats for the foodies in your life this Christmas. Actor and director Stanley Tucci's *Taste: My Life Through Food* (Fig Tree, £20; *Tablet* price £18) should satisfy cinephiles with a passion for food through exuberant and tender descriptions of Tucci's early meals at home with his Italian American family, and recipes woven into the text. He humorously chronicles the different types of on-set catering and name-drops with abandon, drawing parallels between the "schizophrenic behaviour" of restaurant workers and actors. Towards the end, Tucci intimately reveals how his eating habits changed after a cancer diagnosis.

A new book from Nigel Slater is always a thrill, and his latest – *A Cook's Book* (4th Estate, £30; *Tablet* price £27) – remains true to his style of prefacing all his heart-warming recipes (200-plus in this case) with encouragements, snippets of advice or anecdotes. It almost feels like you're there with him, in his minimalist kitchen, baking a blackcurrant focaccia, or braised chicken with leeks, orzo, peas and parsley, or spinach ricotta pancakes with soured cream, ending with chocolate-chip, rose and marzipan cookies.

For the eco-observant foodie, journalist and broadcaster Dan Saladino's *Eating to Extinction: The World's Rarest Foods and Why We Need to Save Them* (Jonathan Cape, £25; *Tablet* price £22.50) takes the reader across the globe with thought-provoking tales of endangered foodstuffs like exploding corn, wild honey and bear root. Foods which "represent much more than sustenance" but "are history, identity, pleasure, culture, geography, genetics, science, creativity and craft. And our future." It's a passionate, informed plea to reclaim genetic biodiversity before it's gone for good.

The Swiss Luther

SEAN MCGLYNN

Zwingli: God's Armed Prophet

F. BRUCE GORDON

(YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 376 PP, £25)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £22.50 + TEL 020 7799 4064

DURING THE 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation in 2017, a deluge of books and television documentaries appeared on the German arch-reformer Martin Luther. Many Swiss observers looked on bemused, wondering what all the fuss was about. After all, so some claimed, their man Huldrych Zwingli (inset) had set the ball rolling earlier. In reality, the two heresiarchs were contemporary competitors, demonstrating how the reformation was not one but a multiplicity of events. In his superb new biography, Bruce Gordon sets out to ensure that Zwingli is no longer a prophet without honour.

Luther was a colourful and dramatic character, but Zwingli (1484-1531) was a true firebrand priest and radical. Like so many of his compatriots, he joined the army, not as a notoriously tough Swiss pikeman, but as a chaplain on the side of the Pope. He was later to put his martial experience to use in his home country when it experienced Europe's first intra-Christian conflict, in which Zwingli enthusiastically saw himself as God's armed prophet.

Zwingli's developing reformist tendencies were greatly influenced by Erasmus, then in Basel, whom he "never ceased to regard as his spiritual and intellectual mentor". A brush with death during the plague of 1519 re-inforced his nascent and moderate reformism into something far more rigid: his recovery was part of "God's purpose, and Zwingli was his agent". Readings of Luther's prolific new works further formulated his vision. Later, fundamental theological differences over the Eucharist created an unbridgeable distance between the two.

As a priest in Zurich, Zwingli shocked some with his secular musical interests, and more with his sexual ones: he was accused of "frequent fornication". He was soon petitioning for clerical marriage, secretly marrying in 1522. That year also, on Ash Wednesday, Zwingli participated in, but did not consume, a meaty meal publicly challenging the Lenten fast, knowing that "his presence would ensure scandal". By the end of the year he was in full reformist mode, attacking pilgrimages, saintly intercession, fasts, papal authority and transubstantiation. Gordon summarises Zwingli's position on the last of these thus: "Eating the flesh of Christ is not a physical act, but a spiritual one." While many view such beliefs as revolutionary, they had in fact been the concerns of reformers for centuries. By 1525, with



politics and evangelism behind him, Zwingli had helped to orchestrate a separation from the Catholic authorities, with both Mass and religious houses abolished. Zwingli reigned supreme as Zurich's spiritual leader, his authority based on "charisma, trust and connections". With power came a degree of hubris: Gordon notes that Zwingli was "so certain of God's ultimate triumph", he was excused from fathoming "the ways of humans". At this stage, Zwingli was arguably ahead of Luther in the race for implementing a reformist Church.

By 1529, confronted by a Catholic and political counter-attack, the armed prophet mobilised Zurich and eschewed pacifism: "The peace they want means war: the war I want means peace." The war he got also meant his death. Zwingli was killed in a skirmish: "His body was ritually humiliated and reduced to ashes mixed with pig's blood." Luther was sternly unsympathetic: "It is certain that Zwingli died in great sin and blasphemy." For him, Zwingli and his followers were "the enemies of Christ's Cross"; he saw no hope for their souls.

Gordon is sensitive to the subtleties of the age and the dilemma of the Catholic Church: there is no simplistic caricature of the latter. He has written a wonderful biography with great style and lucidity – my book of the year. Luther no longer hogs the limelight.

THE
TABLET
Bookshop

is run by Church House
Bookshop – one of the UK's
leading religious
booksellers with thousands
of titles in stock.



To purchase any of the books
reviewed in *The Tablet* this week
call: +44(0) 207 799 4064
or email:
bookshop@chbookshop.co.uk

International P&P charges will apply. Offers
close 2 months after publication date.

What it is like to be dead

A.N. Wilson discovers crime fiction that is both nihilistic and spiritual

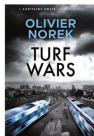


Owen Matthews' **Red Traitor** (Bantam Press, £16.99; *Tablet* price £15.29) is the second in a trilogy about KGB officer Alexander Vasin caught up in potentially earth-destroying Cold War brinkmanship. This time it is the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, said by some to have been the most dangerous week in human history, when the US and the Soviet Union came close to unleashing nuclear war. Owen Matthews Russia inside out and every paragraph rings true. And, almost more important, he is a magnificent storyteller, compulsively readable and with the ability to conjure up a whole gallery of grotesque characters. This story is closely based on the real events which can be read in *The Penkovsky Papers* (about the real Western agent in the heart of the KGB), but Matthews has made the American "mole" much more sinister than Penkovsky. Vasin himself, the ex-cop reluctant KGB spook, is a wonderful central intelligence. The flavour – alcohol-fueled, cynical, dry, as sharp as a sub-zero Moscow winter – is so strongly Russian that it is hard to remember you are reading English.



The Antarctica of Love by Sara Stridsberg (MacLehose Press, £14.99; *Tablet* price £13.49) is not a whodunnit, nor even – exactly – a why-dunnit. The narrator is the one who has been murdered. This is translated from the Swedish by Deborah Bragan-Turner, but you can somehow tell that it is a superb work of literature and that the translator has miraculously rendered the interior monologue of a young dead junkie woman who has been murdered in a lakeside forest near Stockholm. There are passages of sheer utter horror, as she remembers her body being abused, raped and dismembered, that you almost wish you had

not read them. But even these are beautiful. There are strange reflections about what it is like to be dead. There is huge poignancy about the wistful way that Inni, the dead young woman, watches those she has left behind her – the half-crazy mother, the daughter she gave up for adoption. Dostoevsky wrote a short story called "Bobok", in which decomposing corpses converse with one another until their rotting mouths are only able to mutter gibberish – the title of the tale. This book reminded me of that sometimes, but it is more humane, much stranger, utterly nihilistic yet spiritual. I know I'll be reading this again and seeking out Stridsberg's other books.



Two recent titles remind us where the word *noir* comes from. Olivier Norek's **Turf Wars** (MacLehose Press, £16.99; *Tablet* price £15.29) takes us to the bleakest of *banlieues*, where the presence of Commissaire Maigret, let alone M. Poirot, is utterly unimaginable. Norek was himself a police *capitaine* in just such a hellish place and knows whereof he writes. The book starts with a drug surveillance exercise being ruined when one drug baron is murdered before the eyes of the hidden cops. When it is clear that a new teenage baron is now in charge – an individual who makes Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* seem as benevolent as a *Blue Peter* presenter – you know you are in for an utterly absorbing but very disagreeable read.



More impressive, but no less *noir*, is Nicolas Mathieu's debut novel **Of Fangs and Talons** (Sceptre, £16.99; *Tablet* price £15.29), which appeared in French seven years ago and is now brilliantly translated by Sam Taylor.

It's a crime novel, all right, but as to who is guilty – ah, that will have you running to Marx, as much as to the police station. Two men, driven to the verge of economic and existential despair, kidnap a sex worker from the back streets of Strasbourg, and it all goes horribly wrong. But, as with Zola's *Germin*, under whose shadow it is written, the real crimes go much further back. Bruce, the narcotic-dependent, tattooed bouncer in a nightclub, and Martel, his fellow kidnapper, are working for a gang. They do not want to kidnap drug-starved

teenage girls, but need the money to fuel Bruce's narcotics dependency, and the costs of caring for Martel's mother.

My favourite character in the book is the labour inspector, alcoholic Rita, who makes an effort to save the kidnap victim and hide her in the spare bedroom. It is a bleak novel, which makes you feel that the modern world is well and truly ****ed.



Back in Blighty, despite the modernity of the characters' clothes and voices, you are in an earlier era of crime-writing. Sam Carrington's **The Couple on Maple Drive** (Avon, £7.99; *Tablet* price £7.19) is set in Torquay, Agatha Christie's seaside retreat. The thoroughly modern couple – Zach and Isla – would appear to be miles from traditional Christie territory. But not really, not in terms of the good old British unrealistic crime tradition. Isla has been hideously mugged as she made her tipsy way home after a party to celebrate her promotion in a local firm, Bignins and Co. But was she really mugged at random, or did the attack have to do with Zach (son of the boss)'s complicated relationship with the family firm? Billed as a "psychological thriller", it is an exciting, well crafted story. But it depends less on psychological realism and more on the old whodunnit tradition of withholding vital narrative information until it suits the author to disclose it.



Similarly, C.J. Tudor's **The Burning Girls** (Penguin, £8.99; *Tablet* price £8.09) is rightly described as "a mesmerising page-turner", but only if we accept the absurd convention of this type of crime-writing: namely that the most important and salient features of the story are artificially withheld until the last few pages. In this case, a female vicar called Jack and her moody teenage daughter come to a parish in Sussex to take up their duties. Some 30 years ago, two teenage girls went missing in this village with a creepy past – where some Protestant martyrs were burned in the sixteenth century, their memory kept alive by burning corn dollies. All the ingredients are here to make your hair stand on end; but if, like me, you guess the plot in the first few pages, the story, however artfully told, just seems like a game.

For the inside track on what is happening in Rome, the UK and around the world, listen to *The Tablet* podcasts, available on Spotify and other platforms.

www.thetablet.co.uk/podcasts



CHRISTMAS PUZZLES ANSWERS

The Language Quiz, page 00

Words of the year 2021

1. c. 2. a. 3. b. 4. a. 5. c. 6. c. 7. c. 8. b. 9. c. 10. c. 11. b.

Britain on the couch

1. Involves tapping the body in various key points. 2. Six standard phrases repeated every day to make your body feel heavy, relaxed and warm. 3. Massage of meridian lines and fascia along the lines of acupuncture. 4. The use of magnets to stimulate nerve cells in an attempt to alleviate depression and other psychiatric conditions. 5. Watch something you like, and look at a picture of your brain on a computer screen to see yourself becoming happy. 6. Bees and their products as therapeutic helpers. 7. Based on the theories of the American psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich, who believed he could capture "orgone energy", his version of Freud's libido, in a box akin to a Faraday cage. 8. Using the "universal laws of energy: attraction, repulsion and neutrality" to help mind and body. 9. Using radio-frequency waves to heal anyone, anywhere in the world. 10. Drawing energy from surroundings and channelling them into a subject's body without touching it. 11. Using controlled breathing to relieve repressed childhood memories, including of birth. 12. Curing physical and emotional problems by realigning the fascia, the connecting tissue beneath the skin. 13. A technique to deal with trauma. 14. Self-explanatory. 15. A hand-made tuning fork is held over various points in the body. 16. The same as Rolfing. 17. More movement. Music optional. 18. Imagining a situation and thinking about how to deal with it. 19. Teaches you how to contact the "one spiritual being" who guides the universe and asks for help. 20. Drinking 1 to 1.5 litres of water quickly upon waking.

Author! Author!

All politicians. 1. US President Jimmy Carter. 2. Iain Duncan Smith. 3. Ann Widdecombe. 4. Hillary Clinton. 5. Edwina Currie. 6. Benjamin Disraeli. 7. Wilfred Fienburgh (MP for Islington North 1951-58). 8. Boris Johnson. 9. Chris Mullin. 10. Winston Churchill.

Famous last words (allegedly)

1. Joseph Wright, editor of *The English Dialect Dictionary*. 2. Raphael. 3. Gustav Mahler. 4. Margaret Sanger, birth control pioneer. 5. Frank Sinatra. 6. Marie Antoinette. 7. Sr Louise Marie-Thérèse de Saint Maurice. 8. Richard Feynman, physicist, educator, eccentric. 9. A murderer, James W. Rodgers, facing the Utah firing squad in March 1960. 10. Eugene O'Neill. 11. Groucho Marx. 12. Lenin. 13. Derek Jarman. 14. Joan Crawford. 15. The nineteenth-century English surgeon Joseph Henry Green.

Things to come

1. Using Celtic stick writing, originally carved by the Druids. 2. Using the runic writing of the Nordic cultures. 3. Reading tea leaves. 4. Studying bones. 5. Looking inside dead birds. 6. Reading signs and markings on the ground.

7. Examining dust. 8. Picking random passages from the Bible or other valued books to find out what is coming your way. 9. Using pebbles and dice. 10. Using stones and crystals. 11. Looking deeply into things, notably water, fire and crystal balls. 12. Hearing mysterious messages from far away, unheard by others. 13. Divining with onion sprouts. 14. Oneiromancy. Learning from your dreams. 15. Examining inanimate objects to learn about people.

A bakers' dozen

1. "Showtime!" Shouted by announcers when baseball player Ohtani Shōhei attempted to beat a century-old record set by Babe Ruth.

Femtech: technology aimed at problems specific to women. Pictogram. The famous Olympic symbols were brought to life by performers at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, which took place in 2021.

Young carers: those under 18 having to look after older relatives during the pandemic.

2. This message translates the warning inside a Kinder Surprise Egg. It says "Warning: read and keep. Toy not suitable for children under 3 years. Small parts may be swallowed or inhaled." This version is in Modern Indo-European, a reconstruction of the 5,000-year-old language of much of Europe and Asia.

3. The company is Royal Dutch Shell, which is dropping the "Royal Dutch" part it acquired in 1907. It was founded by a man called Marcus Samuel, whose father (of the same name) owned a shop in Houndsditch, London, buying curios from sailors arriving in the Port of London. Among the most popular were seashells and objects decorated with them. Hence the name of the store, which the younger Marcus took over in 1869, rapidly diversifying into the export of machinery and oil.

4. The milk jar was adorned with writing essential to those engaged in reconstructing the history of the alphabet.

5. *Iel* is a non-gender-specific third-person pronoun. Its inclusion in *Le Robert*, a heavyweight French dictionary, prompted the minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer, to Tweet that "inclusive writing is not the future of the French language".

6. Brandon Brown, a racing driver, interviewed on live TV after a race. The reporter said his fans were chanting "Let's Go Brandon". They weren't. They were chanting "F—k Joe Biden". Now Republican politicians have adopted the "Brandon" chant as a coded way of saying what they think, without saying it.

7. Boris Johnson.

8. A three-year-old mare who claimed her maiden victory this year. Her name derives from a Japanese tongue-twister that means "Both sumomo and peaches are kinds of peaches".

9. Pompeo was applauding a Tweet from a group called Champion American Values, which put up a supposed dictionary definition of a "Pipehitter" as someone "dedicated to stand against the radical Left's agenda".

10. *Coq* was originally CoC, for Calculus of Constructions. Unfortunately, *coq* is pronounced "cock", which has caused trouble with both female users of the language and "lappers" who are conducting their conversations about it in English.

11. Placebo comes from verse nine of Psalm 114:

Placebo Domino in regione vivorum. Memento – Latin for "I remember" – comes from Psalm 131. As for *pony up*, 25 March was the medieval "quarter-day" when lots of ordinary folk got paid. The Psalm mandated for that day was No. 119, which includes the words *Legem pone mihi, Domine, viam justificationum tuarum, et exquiram eam semper*, meaning something like: "Lay down the law, Lord, of doing right and I will always keep to it." *Legem pone*, later "pony up", became a byword for "pay on the nail".

12. Blueprint: The final plans before production.

Compendium: a brief summary. Jejune: unsatisfactory. Nauseous: causing nausea. Fulsome: excessive, over-the-top. Effete: exhausted.

Enormity: a crime or atrocity. Condone: forgive. 13. The original slaves were the Slavs. The Medieval Latin word *scelus*, meaning slave, is identical to the word *Scelus*, the name used for the people of Central Europe who had been enslaved by conquest.

Five funny foreign formulations

1. "He's not the sharpest pencil in the box." 2. "Oh dear!" (but stronger). 3. In the Kannada language slang of Southern India and Goa, something like "The devil makes work for idle hands". 4. "Clear off!" 5. "People from different classes shouldn't mix."



■ Quiz compiled with the help of *The Babel Message: A Love Letter to Language* by Keith Kahn-Harris (Icon Books), *The Etymologist* by Mark Forsyth (Icon Books), *The Wordbook* by Anna Vidén (Profile Books).

Language Log (languagelog.id.upenn.edu), *The Register* (theregister.com), numerous other websites and my multilingual friends in Cheltenham Book Club and Cheltenham Stories. Comments welcome: mail@johnmorrish.com

Solution to the Jumbo crossword,

page 47

Across: 1 Mynors; 4 Hymns; 7 Spratt; 11 Manuscript; 12 Variable; 13 Reliction; 18 Stone; 19 Adieu; 20 Exe; 21 East; 23 Flavius; 24 Stuart; 28 Bulba; 29 Biretta; 30 Arc de; 31 Tarada; 33 Hidalgo; 34 Owls; 39 Ely; 40 Tilde; 41 Oriol; 42 Residence; 46 Paraguay; 47 Triumphant; 48 Ersatz; 49 Taras; 50 Nelson.

Down: 1 Memorae; 2 Nine-Pins; 3 Rosarum; 4 Haiti; 5 Motet; 6 Savio; 8 Poinsettias; 9 Ambrosia; 10 The Feast; 14 Lullaby; 15 Conversions; 16 Illustrated; 17 New; 22 Ajuga; 25 Rydal; 26 Candlelight; 27 Vaughan; 31 Triomphe; 32 Riviera; 35 Williams; 36 Sheraton; 37 Ayr; 38 Steeple; 43 Egypt; 44 Inter; 45 Elias.

NEWS BRIEFING

THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

Appeal for aid

Bishop William Medley of Owensboro, **Kentucky**, asked for prayers and financial assistance for the people of his diocese after a series of strong tornadoes ripped through several towns. "Many of those injured in the Mayfield candle factory were parishioners, and others represented migrants and the marginalised in our communities," Bishop Medley said of one of the towns in his diocese that was especially hard hit. The death toll has exceeded 80 in Kentucky, with more fatalities expected. Pope Francis has sent a message of solidarity to those afflicted by the storms to Archbishop José Gomez, president of the US bishops' conference.

Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon and President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of **Myanmar**, said in his Advent message that, "the repugnant violence over the last 10 months has offended the sensibilities of the world, yet we do not accept the evil of despair and hate". He expressed concern for the young, "for just a year ago, they had their dreams", and he urged them to "hold the truth; hold love; for there is always a nonviolent path, a peaceful solution." Myanmar's Catholic Bishops called for charitable works for those suffering since the February 2021 military coup in the country. Bishop Felix Lian Khen Thang of Kalay Diocese called for Catholics to act as "good Samaritans" over Christmas.

Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari was among those laying the foundation of the Kaduna Centre for the Study of Christian-Muslim Relations on 8 December. He welcomed the centre's goal of improving interfaith relations in northern Nigeria and promised the government's support. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, sent a goodwill message commending the foresight of the founder and Secretary-General of the Anglican Communion Worldwide, Archbishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon, a former Archbishop of Kaduna, for promoting peace in Kaduna State. Cardinal John Onaiyekan, Archbishop Emeritus of Abuja, is the Catholic member of the board.



Accepting her Nobel Peace Prize on 10 December, Catholic **Filipina** journalist Maria Ressa (pictured) attacked US tech giants, accusing them of fuelling a flood of "toxic sludge" on social media. The co-founder of Rappler, an investigative journalism website critical of

the Philippines government, criticised Facebook in particular. She noted that, "35 years after the People Power Revolt ousted Ferdinand Marcos and forced his family into exile, his son, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, is the frontrunner for president, and has built an extensive disinformation network on social media".

Catholic Jimmy Lai has been convicted over a banned Tiananmen Square vigil in **Hong Kong**. On Monday, already behind bars, he was sentenced to another 13 months in jail. Seven others also received jail terms. Lai, 74, the owner of the now-shuttered pro-democracy *Apple Daily* newspaper, was found guilty of unlawful assembly at a June 2020 vigil, held to commemorate the victims of Beijing's Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989.

The **Vatican** has released a liturgical rite and guidelines for the institution of men and women as catechists. Earlier this year, Pope Francis formally created the lay ministry. In a letter to bishops, Archbishop Arthur Roche, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, explained that catechists are "co-responsible" with the clergy for the "proclamation and transmission of the faith".

Catholic leaders have questioned migrants' deaths in Chiapas, **Mexico**, after a truck packing in more than 150 migrants flipped over on 9 December, killing at least 55 of them and injuring dozens more. Most of the victims were from Guatemala. The Archdiocese of Tuxtla Gutiérrez highlighted "the terrible drama experienced by migrants in their passage through our country", and said it also "exposes the corruption still prevalent around the issue of migration".

Pope Francis on Saturday met participants in the plenary assembly of the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. "Everything we do is at the service of the

Gospel, and you serve that 'gospel', which is consecrated life, so that it may be the gospel for the world today," he said.



The Catholic social activist and founder of the Catholic Worker movement **Dorothy Day** is one step closer to canonisation with the conclusion of the diocesan stage of her cause. The cause was physically visible at a New York Mass (pictured) on 8 December, marking the end of the local process, in the form of 137 archival boxes containing 50,000 pages of documents attesting to her holiness.

Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, head of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, last week consecrated Our Lady of Arabia Cathedral in **Bahrain**, describing it as "a living sign of God's care for his flock".

Archbishop named

Pope Francis has named Archbishop Jorge Carlos Patrón Wong as leader of the Archdiocese of Xalapa in his native **Mexico**, the Vatican announced. Wong has been serving in the Vatican's Congregation for Clergy, where he was the secretary for seminaries, an influential position charged with the oversight of priestly formation around the world.

The theme for the 55th **World Day of Peace**, on 1 January 2022, will be, "education, work and dialogue between generations: tools for building lasting peace". The Pope's message will be an invitation "to read the signs of the times with the eyes of faith".

Compiled by **James Roberts** and **Ellen Teague**.

The frame: is for kids of all ages. Fit nine smaller frames into the large green frame, and then the square, circle, and triangular shapes. Each small frame and shape comes in red, yellow or blue. This substantial wood-based coffee-table puzzle is 28cm square and stands 2cm tall. Assemble once, admire the result, then try different configurations (because there are many). Get yours at onevillage.com

CRAFT MADE SRI LANKA MORE TOYS ONLINE

onevillage.com

66 If it was a man next to Mgr Aupetit, would the media react in the same way? Must women in the Church be reduced to objects of suspicion? 99

Theologian *Laetitia Calmeyn* on the coverage of her association with former Paris archbishop Michel Aupetit (see page 50)



RUSSIA / Senior Orthodox official to discuss possibilities in visit to the Vatican

Hopes rise for second meeting between Francis and Kirill

JONATHAN LUXMOORE

A SENIOR Russian Orthodox official has welcomed fresh calls for improved ties with the Catholic Church, hinting at moves to arrange a second meeting between the Pope and Patriarch Kirill.

"Divisions have existed for a very long time, and many contradictions have accumulated – our two Churches have lived independent lives for almost ten centuries," said Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, the Moscow Patriarchate's foreign relations director.

"Although there is no talk of unification, however, we can discuss finally ending the situation of rivalry, competition and hostility existing now for many centuries." The 55-year-old spoke at the weekend amid media speculation about a planned encounter between the two Church leaders following their ground-breaking February 2016 talks in Cuba.

In an interview with Rossiya-24 TV station, Hilarion said the Catholic and Orthodox Churches differed over "fundamental



Pope Francis and Metropolitan Kirill in Cuba in 2016

Christian dogmas" as well as over the veneration of saints. However, he added that the Pope's conciliatory remarks during early December apostolic visits to mainly Orthodox Cyprus and Greece – regretting "numerous mistakes made by Catholics in relation to the Orthodox" – had made "an important contribution to normalising relations".

During his Cyprus visit, Francis said he counted on overcoming

"centuries of division and separation" and following a path to "ever greater fraternity and full unity" with Orthodox Churches. Visiting Athens later, he asked forgiveness for historic "actions and decisions" by Catholic leaders "with little or nothing to do with Jesus and the Gospel, but marked by a thirst for advantage and power", and said he hoped Catholic and Orthodox Christians would not "remain paralysed by the negative experiences and prejudices of the past".

Meanwhile, in a press conference on his return flight to Rome, the Pope said he hoped a meeting with Kirill could be arranged when Metropolitan Hilarion visited the Vatican on 20 December, adding that the heads of both Churches, "as brothers", should "go together and try to work and walk in unity".

Responding last week, Hilarion confirmed that his pre-Christmas talks with the Pope would cover "a wide range of bilateral issues", including "a possible meeting of Pope Francis with Patriarch Kirill". However, he added that a date

and venue had not been agreed, and that a meeting in Moscow had never been discussed.

The Vatican established ties with Russia in 1990 following a historic visit to Rome by Soviet Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev, but opened full diplomatic relations only in 2009, after repeated Orthodox complaints of Catholic proselytism and interference.

In their 30-point joint Cuba declaration, which followed two decades of speculation about a top-level meeting, Francis and Kirill deplored the "grave threat to religious freedom" in Europe's "secularised societies", and said Catholic and Orthodox Christians shared "the same conception of the family" in the face of cohabitation, same-sex unions, abortion, euthanasia and advances in biomedical technology.

Poland's influential Catholic Information Agency KAI reported last week that a Moscow visit had "long been a papal dream" and would represent the "crossing of a historical rubicon" with global significance. It added that a "neutral location" was likelier.

In a further sign of movement, the director of Russia's Kremlin State Museum, Yelena Gagarina, daughter of the celebrated Soviet astronaut, was received by the Pope last week to discuss "mutual art loans and exhibitions" between Moscow and the Vatican.

FRANCE

Green light for Church plans to remodel Notre-Dame's interior

HERITAGE officials have approved the outlines of Church plans to update the interior of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris and use its post-fire renovation to make France's top monument more understandable to visitors, writes Tom Heneghan.

The National Heritage and Architecture Commission (CNPA) agreed to switch the entry to the cathedral's central door, redirect visitors to the north side first and remake the dark side-chapels into a coherent narrative of the Bible and Christianity.

It also agreed to a new altar, pulpit, tabernacle and baptismal font if designed by the same artist.

The commission mostly ignored critics who warned against a "woke Disney revamp" instead of the literal reconstruction they advocated. The pre-fire interior was itself a nineteenth-century renovation. "The commission has approved a programme, but not a definitive result," said CNPA chairman Albéric de Montgolfier. "The diocese will now give more precise details."

Many of the criticised changes,

such as projections of Bible quotes on walls or a rearrangement of old paintings, were not permanent and could be left for the Church to decide, the commission said.

The commission balked at modern stained glass chosen to replace bland nineteenth-century windows but there was no question that Notre-Dame's priceless rose windows and collection of Gothic glass around the choir had to remain.

Stone statues must stay in their places but the wooden confessionals can be moved, the commission said. A special central area for worshippers was approved but the type of pews proposed there was criticised. The commission rejected a special prayer section at the end of the choir, saying it

would damage the eighteenth-century marble floor there.

Fr Gilles Drouin, head of the archdiocese's renovation team, said this was normal in such projects. He added: "The extent of the polemics surprised us a bit but it shows that anything to do with Notre-Dame creates passion."

Entry by the centre door would stress the beauty of the interior, which would go from gloomy to bright after a thorough cleaning.

Before the April 2019 fire, tourists entered through the western facade's south door and had to walk to the centre aisle for a full view of the interior. Most entered the ambulatory on its south side, and so followed the medieval carvings there of the life of Jesus in the wrong direction.

FRANCE / Former Paris archbishop denies affair and considers legal action

Aupetit and Calmeyn hit back at critics

TOM HENEGHAN / in Paris

MICHEL AUPETIT, the former Archbishop of Paris, bowed out with a broadside against his critics, accusing a glossy magazine that hinted at a possible love affair of forgetting that his heart was focused on Jesus.

At a packed farewell Mass in Saint-Sulpice, the second largest church in Paris after the closed Notre Dame cathedral, he ridiculed the headline the weekly *Paris Match* put on its innuendo-filled report about him and a Belgian consecrated virgin.

"A journalist wrote 'the Archbishop of Paris is lost for love'," he said. "It's true, but she forgot the end of the sentence ... the full sentence is 'the Archbishop of Paris was lost for love of Christ.'"

Applause echoed throughout the cavernous church from devoted supporters of Aupetit, who critics say favoured an isolated and brusque management style that cost him the leading religious post in France. Among those

at the Mass were about a dozen bishops, more than 250 priests and many deacons, but not the papal nuncio Archbishop Celestino Migliore.

The *Paris Match* report splashed candid shots of Aupetit and theologian Laetitia Calmeyn strolling in a forest outside Paris only four days after Pope Francis unexpectedly accepted his letter of resignation after an initial scathing report by *Le Point* weekly.

Aupetit, 70, has denied the reports and is considering legal action. Pope Francis said the supposed liaison consisted only of hugs and massages with his sec-

retary, which were "not the worst of sins". The Vatican cut out the reference to the secretary in its transcript of the talk.

Dr Calmeyn, who was named as a consultant to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2018, said the scandal was "certainly not in friendship but in the evil one projects on this friendship".

"If it were a man next to Mgr Aupetit, would the media have reacted the same way?" she asked in the Catholic daily *La Croix*. "Must women in the Church be reduced to objects of suspicion, of fantasy, to the expression of jealousy or servility?"

Dr Calmeyn, 46, also said that she would take legal action: "There will be a complaint. We must avoid a repetition of this."

The swift acceptance of Aupetit's resignation and Francis' confusing explanation of it during the 6 December flight from Greece to Rome shifted media attention to the Pope. Commentators asked whether the Vatican now accepts sustained criticism and gossip as a reason to remove a bishop.

■ The recent report on sexual abuse of minors in the Church, which blamed priests for about two-thirds of the estimated 330,000 cases since 1950, has continued to make waves. Bishop Dominique Blanchet of Créteil, a suburb of Paris, said that he would sell his residence to raise funds to help compensate victims.

The Pope postponed a meeting due to take place on 9 December with the report's authors and met first with French bishops. Rome seems wary of the report's numbers and the bishops' admission of institutional responsibility.



PHOTO: CNS, PAUL HARRIS

Michel Aupetit celebrates Mass at Saint-Sulpice, Paris, in 2019

AUSTRIA

Catholic bishops support compulsory Covid jabs

AUSTRIA'S Catholic Church has become Europe's first to support compulsory nationwide vaccinations, ahead of their enforcement there in February, write *Jonathan Luxmoore* and *Fredrick Nawili*.

"Compulsory vaccination represents a serious encroachment on physical integrity and individual freedom – it is only permissible if all other options to protect the population have been exhausted, taking proportionality into account," the bishops' conference said in a statement.

"It is the responsibility of our rulers to assess whether the prerequisites for this are met and whether a temporary vaccination requirement now offers the appropriate means for protecting the common good within reasonable limits ... The goal must be to

protect health and freedom in equal measure."

The statement was issued before tens of thousands rallied in Vienna and other cities for the fourth weekend running against a government decree making Covid-19 vaccinations mandatory from February for all over-14s.

Tight movement restrictions remain in place for the third of the population of 8.9 million still without jabs in the traditionally Catholic country, which has seen 13,000 deaths since early 2020.

The bishops added that public attitudes were "dangerously polarised" and urged Austrians to acquiesce with a "salutary disarmament of words and gestures".

The Pope had described vaccination as an "act of charity", the statement continued, while the

centre-right government, currently headed by Chancellor Karl Nehammer, had made this a "temporary legal obligation" after concluding that "previous calls were not enough".

Other European church leaders have declined to endorse compulsory vaccinations but have strongly backed government anti-Covid campaigns. In Greece, where Orthodox priests have faced charges for spreading "false information" on vaccines, Orthodox leaders warned clergy could be laicised for questioning the vaccination programme.

In the Czech Republic, the bishops' conference president, Archbishop Jan Graubner of Olomouc, said in a weekend open letter he was against forced vaccinations, but believed citizens should "voluntarily sacrifice part of their freedom out of charity for the common good".

Catholic bishops in eastern Africa urged people to take the vaccine. Bishop John Oballa Owaa, the chairman of the Justice and Peace Commission of the

Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops, said: "We continue to encourage the faithful and other people of goodwill to not only take the vaccine but also abide by established practices and lifestyles to enhance their immunity."

Vaccine uptake in eastern Africa and most of Africa has been low due partly to limited access. Covid cases have also been low with a total of 8,660,000 reported in November. Bishops want access to treatments and vaccines increased, and at the same time are calling on governments to respect rights and liberties.

The Jesuit Institute South Africa has welcomed "significantly increased uptake on vaccination" as the Omicron variant spreads. The Institute's Dr Annemarie Paulin-Campbell, said: "We have a moral and spiritual responsibility to be vaccinated [as an] act of love." Meanwhile parishioners at St Agnes church in San Francisco asked Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone to reschedule his visit to their parish after he revealed he had not been vaccinated.

GERMANY

Pope asked to scrutinise Woelki's expense accounts

BISHOP Rolf Steinhäuser, the Apostolic Administrator of the Cologne archdiocese during Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki's leave of absence determined by Pope Francis, has asked Rome to look into the archdiocesan expense accounts, writes *Christa Pongratz-Lippitt*. These show that the archdiocese spent £2.4 million on consultants between 2019 and 2021.

Bishop Steinhäuser was alerted to possible irregularities by Gordon Sobbeck, the Cologne archdiocesan director of finance. In an interview for KNA, Mr Sobbeck explained that it was a case of investigating whether or not canon law 1277 CIC and the particular norm number 18 of the German bishops' conference had been adhered to. For sums over 500 000 euros, both the "Vermögensrat" (asset council) and the cathedral chapter would have had to be consulted, and it was not obvious that they had been. Cardinal Woelki spent the £2.4m between 2019 and 2021 on financial experts, media lawyers and communications consultants.

As soon as he was informed of these possible irregularities, Bishop Steinhäuser commissioned two canon lawyers to examine Cardinal Woelki's and his vicar general Markus Hofmann's expense accounts to see if they were in order. He also immediately informed the Vatican. The German bishops' conference will scrutinise the result of the examination and decide whether Cardinal Woelki acted correctly or not.

VIOLENCE AT SEA

'Defend rights of seafarers'

ARCHBISHOP Paul Gallagher, the Holy See's Secretary for Relations with States, has called for seafarers' rights to be upheld amidst growing concerns over violence at sea, writes *Ellen Teague*.

He told the International Maritime Organisation in London on 7 December that many seafarers are still being denied shore leave and access to welfare services, as well as being vulnerable to violence and abuse at sea, including pirate attacks and slavery.

VIEW FROM ROME

Christopher Lamb



IT IS sometimes argued that the synod which the Church has embarked upon is unlikely to have any concrete impact. While a consultation and a listening exercise might be a nice idea, sceptics say, at the end of the day the status quo will stay in place.

For Pope Francis, however, the process is as important as the outcome, and by throwing open the synod to a broad range of voices he has already created a space where small, yet historic, shifts are taking place. We saw one of these this week in the decision of the Synod of Bishops' office in Rome to include some groups previously cancelled or ignored by the Vatican because they are considered to hold views not in perfect alignment with the Roman magisterium. On its resources page (synodresources.org) – a platform where information on the synod is shared – both New Ways Ministry, a support group for LGBTQ Catholics, and Discerning Deacons, an English-language forum for discussion about the restoration of the female diaconate, are listed.

But this almost didn't happen. On 7 December a New Ways Ministry video, "From the Margins to the Center: a Webinar on LGBTQ Catholics and Synodality," was removed from the Synod office's website after it had been made aware that New Ways Ministry had been censured by the US Bishops' Conference a decade ago for its support of civil marriage for same-sex couples.

In 1999, the Holy See's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had also "permanently prohibited" the founders of the group from pastoral work with gay people.

But the synod office then reversed its decision. On 12 December, Thierry Bonaventura, its communications officer, offered a heartfelt apology "to all LGBTQ people and to the members of New Ways Ministries for the pain caused". He stressed that the synod team in Rome did not want to exclude anyone who wishes "to carry out this synodal process with a sincere heart and a spirit of dialogue and real discernment". It's been pointed out that this was the first time a Vatican official had apologised to LGBTQ Catholics. "In walking together, sometimes one may fall, the important thing is to get back up with the help of the brothers and sisters," Bonaventura added.

The apology came after details of two letters that the Pope had sent to New Ways Ministry emerged, in which he praised the group's work and described their co-founder, Sister Jeannine Gramick, as a "valiant woman".

Francis also thanked Francis DeBernardo, the executive director of New Ways Ministry, for telling him the "full story" of the group as "sometimes we receive partial information

about people and organisations," he said.

The rehabilitation of New Ways Ministry may seem like a small thing. Yet the apology, and the Pope's letters, are a significant step towards the creation of a more synodal Church, willing to listen and to learn from marginalised voices.

IS THE Church shifting in its position on LGBTQ matters? The Pope has not changed the Church's teaching that sexual activity outside the marriage of a man and a woman is sinful, but he's opened the way to a more inclusive and pastoral approach to gay and lesbian people. He has effectively overturned some of the Vatican's official documents on gay Catholics, including the 1999 ruling against New Ways Ministries' founders. Francis' support for same-sex civil unions also supersedes the CDF's 2003 document which declared that the "state could not grant legal standing to such unions".

Some argue that the Pope's letters and comments have little weight unless they are backed up with official rulings, and point out that last year he gave his approval to a CDF document blocking the possibility of the Church blessing same-sex couples. Yet the Pope is demonstrating that official rulings *alone* are not enough to settle a contested issue.

Time, as Francis says, is greater than space, and reality is more important than ideas. The critical test for any doctrine is how it is received by the Church community, and the Pope's response opens up a space for the conversation to continue.

THE Italian Catholic journalist and author Antonio Succi, who has long been one of Papa Bergoglio's most vociferous critics, accusing him of teaching error and even writing a book claiming that Francis is not the real Pope because Benedict XVI's resignation is invalid, appears to have had a change of heart. Although he says there has been "confusion" during this pontificate, Succi wrote this week that he had been "too harsh" on Francis, who some years ago had written to thank him for the flattering book he had written on his papacy. "Even criticism helps us to walk on the right path of the Lord", the Pope had told him, before promising to pray for Succi and his family.

"This Pope is 'not interested in having fans,'" Succi writes, but in "Christians with a burning heart who come out of the sacristies and bring everyone the embrace of the Saviour who has mercy on them, especially to those who are distant and lost." It is this truth, he says, that the Argentine Pope has tried to show the world.

To all readers of this column: Happy Christmas!

NEWS BRIEFING

FROM BRITAIN AND IRELAND

A report by the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) has highlighted the devastating effects of **in-work poverty** on children. The report, 'Stealing futures – in-work poverty and its impact on children and young people', pulls together existing research on in-work poverty and describes children and young people supported through its Mini Vinnies groups, as well as the SVP volunteers, staff and St Vincent's community support centres, which help people living in poverty.

Papal honour for Kyrke-Smith
Neville Kyrke-Smith, Aid to the Church in Need's national director, has received a papal knighthood in recognition of his leadership of the charity since 1991. A former Anglican priest, he was made a knight of the Equestrian Order of St Gregory the Great during a Mass last week presided over by Archbishop John Wilson of Southwark, who praised his "personal contribution in the most personal and missionary way to our brothers and sisters in the suffering Church".

Marking the 1,500th anniversary of the birth of St Columba at Mass at St Colmcille Church in Knockaconey, Co. Armagh, the Primate of All Ireland, Archbishop Eamon Martin, said that he was "a saint for our times". There was a

temptation for people to look at St Columba as "merely some historical figure in the past".



The Catholic Church in Scotland has appointed Lady Rita Rae QC (pictured) as the first board chair of the new Scottish Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, which will operate as a private company. Lady Rae, a recent senator of the College of Justice in Scotland, will begin to recruit board members in January.

The Catholic bishops of England and Wales are promoting the **#IamChurch** initiative of the Vatican's Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life. It aims to give a voice to people with disabilities who contribute daily to the life of every church community.

The director of research at the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research has called for "a complete overhaul" of the

Church's current teaching "on everything to do with sex". In an address given to members of the Association of Catholic Priests, **Dr Luca Badini** said that the subject was "arguably the most important topic driving the alienation of young Catholics from the institutional Church".

Jury clears climate activists

A jury has cleared six **Extinction Rebellion** activists who held up commuters at Canary Wharf two years ago to highlight climate change. Three are Catholic. Phil Kingston, 85, told *The Tablet*: "I was moved to tears of relief and joy; and then gratitude to God." The protest on 25 April 2019 focused on the financial industry's contribution to promoting climate emergencies.

Home Office minister Baroness Williams has said that "something needs to be done" to enable everyone to receive the last rites, following the murder of **Sir David Amess** in October. Baroness Williams said that it was "so sad" that Sir David's priest was not allowed access to the crime scene. She made the comments in a meeting secured by the Conservative peer Baroness Stowell, and attended by the Catholic Union.

The Anglican Bishop of Chelmsford has urged the Government to repay



its £400-million debt to Iran and take immediate action to secure the release of **Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe** from imprisonment in the country. In her maiden speech to the House of Lords, Iranian-born Bishop Guli Francis-Dehqani (pictured) said: "The British government has acknowledged that this country owes a debt to Iran that is now 40 years overdue."

Welby farm plea

Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has appealed for a Palestinian family farm near **Bethlehem** to be saved from demolition or confiscation. The 100-acre farm is surrounded by Israeli settlements and there have been attempts over the years to take the land. The Nassar family, Palestinian Christians, operate the farm as an educational and environmental example of peaceful coexistence.

Compiled by **Ruth Gledhill**.

EDITORIAL

Editor: Brendan Walsh

Chief Leader Writer:

Clifford Longley

Assistant Editor (Foreign News):

James Roberts

Production Editor: David Harding

Chief Subeditor: Iain Millar

Online Editor: Ruth Gledhill

News Reporter: Mador Cairns

Rome Correspondent: Christopher Lamb

Arts Editor: Joanna Moorhead

Literary Editor: Maggie Fergusson

Religious Books Editor: Alban McCoy

Newman Intern: Sebastian Milbank

Letters Editor: Guy Kelerly

THE TABLET

www.thetablet.co.uk

1 King Street Cloisters,

Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY

Tel: +44 (0)20 8748 8484

Email: thetablet@thetablet.co.uk

THE TABLET TRUST: CHARITY NO. 1173924

◆ ◆ ◆
**DISPLAY, RECRUITMENT
CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING & INSERTS**

Lisa Ottway

Email: lisa@ottwaymediasolutions.com

Tel: +44 (0)1905 534041

Mob: +44 (0)7958 046147

COMMERCIAL, MARKETING & ADVERTISING

Chief Executive Officer: Amanda Davison-Young

Marketing Manager: Ian Farrar

Email: enquiries@thetablet.co.uk

Fundraising and Events

Email: adyoung@thetablet.co.uk

SUBSCRIPTIONS

www.thetablet.co.uk/subscribe

Tel: +44 (0)1858 438736

Email: thetablet@subscription.co.uk

DIRECTORS

Mike Craven, Chair; Ben Andradi KSG, Catherine Baril,

Jimmy Burns OBE, Amanda Davison-Young,

Cathy Galvin, Katherine Jeffrey, Carmel McConnell MBE,

Paul Valley CMG, Brendan Walsh, Sarah Walsh.

PERSON IN THE NEWS



The Dalai Lama, talking to Fr Laurence Freeman OSB: "We really need the sense of one-ness ... all religion, especially Christianity, emphasises loving kindness. We are all created by one God."

PANDEMIC / Bishops issue guidance update and urge faithful to take the vaccine

'Avoid church if you have Covid symptoms'

RUTH GLEDHILL

CATHOLIC bishops have updated their pandemic guidance for churches following the statement by Prime Minister Boris Johnson that confirmed the nation's move to "Plan B" in light of the rapid spread of the new Omicron variant of Covid-19.

"People displaying any symptoms of Covid-19 should stay at home and not travel to church or participate in person," the bishops state in their new guidance.

The bishops have also relaxed their rigorous church cleaning rules. "There is now very strong evidence to support that the main mode of this variant's viral transmission is through aerosols, and that the risk from surface and touch transmission is very small indeed. As such, the strict regimes of church cleaning recommended



at the beginning of the opening of churches for public worship are no longer necessary. General church cleaning is sufficient."

They strongly urge compliance with the government's vaccination programme, stating that "a positive message encouraging people to get vaccinated and have the booster jab when able" is delivered whenever possible.

The government in its latest pandemic restrictions has required face coverings be worn by law in most indoor settings, that office workers who can work from home should do so and that from Wednesday this week, some venues and events will be required to ask for proof of vaccination, a negative test or exemption.

In the statement, signed by bishops' conference general secretary Canon Christopher Thomas, and distributed around parishes last weekend, the bishops say: "The requirements for NHS Covid passes will not apply to places of worship and the acts of worship associated with them. However, any social gatherings linked to events in churches will need to comply with new requirements but only when 500 or more people are involved."

The bishops note that although

face coverings have become mandatory in places of worship, exemptions are permitted for those leading worship, public proclamation of scriptural readings or prayers and those who are unable to wear face coverings and are exempt.

As regards singing, congregations should continue to wear face coverings but the government guidance states: "There is a reasonable excuse for someone to remove a face covering when it is reasonably necessary for them to sing, for example, if they are singing as part of a choir, or during a service, rehearsal or for a performance."

The bishops have clarified their recent statement on the Sunday obligation, emphasising there is "no sin" in not going to church on Sunday should "grave cause" exist in personal circumstances.

Call to recognise 'pandemic' of domestic abuse during lockdown

SOCIETY MUST recognise that domestic abuse is "a much deeper pandemic" which is exacerbated by lockdown, the president of Accord, the Catholic marriage and relationship agency in Ireland, has said, writes Sarah Mac Donald.

Describing the pandemic and its restrictions as "testing times", Bishop Denis Nulty, president of Accord CLG, said: "We are persistently experiencing the most challenging of times since World War II." In his graduation address at St Patrick's College, Maynooth, for Accord counsellors, the bishop focused on stonewalling as a form of domestic abuse, as well as domestic violence.

The new Omicron variant of the coronavirus had led once again to a greater level of restrictions, he said. "New public health instructions around mask-wearing in schools from third class, and the return of restrictions around nightclubs, hospitality industry and indoor

cultural, community, sport and entertainment gatherings have jolted all of us," the bishop said. It was another "reality-check" from a pandemic that began as a tiny microbe. "From a single viral particle that could not be seen by the naked eye, our world, as we know it, has been brought to its knees."

The agency's first concern must always be to heal the wounded and provide the listening ear of the counsellor to help a couple or individual on their journey to greater confidence and self-esteem.

The agency, which operates 55 centres throughout the island of Ireland, celebrates its diamond jubilee next year. Describing its record of service as something to be immensely proud of, Bishop Nulty paid tribute to Accord's clinicians, counsellors, facilitators, and centre administrators who demonstrated huge resilience throughout the pandemic.

We learn synodality by doing it, says Synod of Bishops under-secretary

TALKING ABOUT synodality is good but it is not enough, according to Sr Nathalie Becquart (inset), under-secretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, writes Sarah Mac Donald.

Addressing a webinar hosted by Family Solidarity in Ireland, Sr Nathalie said synodality is learned by doing it. "You need to have an experience of synodality to really understand it."

The French Xavière sister, the first woman given the right to vote in a synod of bishops, said that the challenge is to put synodality into practice at all levels of the Church from the family to the parish.

She said that there should be discussion about how communion is experienced within families, as domestic churches. "I hope that you and your network will have an experience of synodality that is

alive, and experience the life of the spirit when we gather together, pray together, and listen to the word of God. It is not just about filling out a survey."

Sr Nathalie said that the synod was a call to listen to all the faithful and to look at the Church through the lens of Pope Francis' image of a reversing of the pyramidal model.

Separately, Donal McKeown, the Bishop of Derry, has said that there is no synodal way forward without a rediscovery of a community journey which does not pit clergy against laity or highlight good insiders and bad outsiders. "If we start with the assumption that this will be a battle of the 'good' us against 'bad' others, we risk prioritising our partisan issues rather than God's mysterious way forward," he said.



IMMIGRATION / Csan warns of assault on rights that 'plays into the hands' of people traffickers

Borders bill threatens to create discriminatory two-tier system

ELLEN TEAGUE

JUSTICE AND Peace Scotland has criticised the passing of the Nationality and Borders Bill at its third reading in the House of Commons on 8 December.

Bishop William Nolan and Jill Kent, the president and chair, said last week that the bill "represents a disgraceful attack on vulnerable people" and "we share the concerns voiced by the UNHCR, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, senior police, and the unanimous voice of all those who work directly with asylum seekers and victims of modern slavery that this bill will not achieve its aims". The controversial overhaul of the immigration system will next be debated in the Lords before it can become law.

The Caritas Social Action Network (Csan), an official agency of the Bishops' Conference of

England and Wales, with 51 grass-roots charities, issued a statement on 8 December quoting both Cardinal Vincent Nichols (inset) and Pope Francis.

"Focused international cooperation, safe routes to sanctuary and joint efforts to tackle poverty are all needed in the face of a global flood of desperate humanity," said Cardinal Nichols, after 27 refugees drowned in the English Channel on 24 November. The Pope has urged that those seeking sanctuary, "be welcomed, protected, supported and integrated".

Csan underlined that in international law, it is legal for anyone to seek asylum in a country which is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the UK is a signatory. Csan warned that the bill would create a two-tier system which discriminated against refugees depending on method of entry to the country, adding: "The bill does not seek to create safe and managed routes for those

seeking asylum, which plays into the hands of the criminal gangs who traffic and exploit vulnerable people seeking safety."

The SVP and the Jesuit Refugee Service UK have produced a campaign toolkit, examining the bill in the light of Catholic Social Teaching and proposing responses.

Restore, a refugee project of Birmingham Churches



Together, said that its campaign would continue, for asylum seekers should have the right "to use their skills and contribute to the economy".

Clause 9 of the bill is causing particular controversy as it means people with dual nationality, or who were born outside the UK, could be stripped of British citizenship. Around 250,000 people so far have signed a petition to remove this clause.

Prayer vigils have been held for refugees, organised by Westminster Justice and Peace, the London Catholic Worker, and Columban Missionaries.

WONERSH

Nightclub images help bring about deal on removal of sacred items

ELENA CURTI

THE CHAPEL of St John's Seminary, Wondersh, can be stripped of its treasures ahead of being converted to secular use, but strict conditions have been imposed.

Members of the Southern Historic Churches Committee voted overwhelmingly to allow furnishings to be removed after they saw pictures of scantily clad dancers at a Halloween party at what was clearly once a church. The building, formerly St Peter's, Seel Street, is now a nightclub.

Wondersh's rector, Mgr Gerald Ewing, showed the images, during an on-site presentation as an example of what can happen if sacred items are not removed from churches before they are deconsecrated.

The committee gave the go ahead for the chapel to be emptied on condition that it is kept informed of the destination of each item. They also asked for details of removal to be given in advance to allow them time to raise concerns.

Objections were raised by the Victorian Society, Historic England and Waverley Borough Council.

Wondersh is closing and the buildings will be sold. The seminary, near Guildford, trained men for the priesthood and permanent diaconate for dioceses in the south of England and beyond.

Mgr Ewing, an old boy and former vice rector, described the seminary's closure as heartbreaking, but that falling numbers of students gave the trustees no choice. He said it would be folly to leave the sacred items in place and asked for permission to remove them "in a timely, ordered and careful fashion - using the appropriate experts as required".

Wondersh's library is going to a Catholic university and seminary in Macau, China.



JESUIT CHURCH OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
FARM STREET

Regular Mass & Service Times

Sunday 18:00 (Saturday Vigil)
08:00 9:30 (Family) 11:00 (Latin)
12:30 17:30
Weekdays: 08:00 13:05 18:00
Saturdays: 08:00 18:00 (Saturday Vigil)
Bank Holidays: 13:05

All Masses are currently livestreamed on our website.

Opening hours

The church is open daily from 07:30 to 18:30.

Confessions

Monday to Friday: 12:00-13:00
Saturday: 10:00-12:00

Also by request. Please phone to make an appointment.

Please phone 020-7493-7811 for more information
www.farmstreet.org.uk

Monks bargained over dissolution of abbey

A PREVIOUSLY unseen document detailing Henry VIII's destruction in 1537 of Furness Abbey, one of England's leading monastic houses, has been found, writes *Madoc Cairns*.

The document, uncovered in the National Archives by Dr Michael Carter, senior properties historian at English Heritage, demonstrates that the debt-ridden monks of Furness, 30 in number, bargained with the commissioners for a better deal, eventually being paid £2 each to leave quietly, and that liturgical instruments cast in precious metal were suspiciously scarce.

The speedy suppression of the monastery, in Cumbria, with buildings destroyed and inhabitants dispersed within a matter

of weeks, was to stand as a prototype for the dissolution across England.

Contrary to popular assumptions, the dissolution of Furness Abbey was peaceful, the product of negotiation, and had support - of a kind - locally, with "the men of Kendal" buying one of the abbey's bells for £80, then a significant sum of money.

Nearly £800 was made by the commissioners over the course of the suppression - but just £367 remained after the costs of the process were accounted for.

Furness was the first of the "greater monasteries" in England - those with more than 12 members and £200 in income per annum - to be wound up during the Reformation.

Another fine mess

N.O'PHILE

WINE CRIME is on the rise. It usually takes the form of robbery or fraud and, whereas the former is obvious, the latter is not so easy to detect. This has less to do with deficient police skills or insensitive palates and more to do with the madness that has overtaken the fine wine world whereby, for the fabulously rich at least, wine collecting has overtaken wine consumption as the main point of wine production.

A wine heist at one of Spain's most highly rated Michelin-starred hotel-restaurants, Atrio, in Cárceres, in the Extremadura region, reported recently in *The Daily Telegraph*, illustrates the point perfectly. The hotel holds the country's greatest wine collection, the pride of which is – or was – a collection of precious Château d'Yquem, the world's most expensive pudding wine. Its centrepiece was an 1806 bottle worth £295,000. This gem and 15 bottles from other starred years, along with 30 bottles of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, the world's most famous Burgundy, worth a total of £1.25 million, were stealthily secreted in holdalls and spirited away, allegedly, by two Swiss "guests".

Lamenting the loss of the prized 1806, Toño Perez, chef and co-owner of Atrio, said that his greatest hope was that whoever has it truly treasures it, adding: "This is a bottle to be cherished and loved. It should never be drunk." Never drunk? As any Aristotelian-Thomist



As any Aristotelian-Thomist would aver, the wine's purpose is ... to be drunk, with pleasure

would aver, the wine's purpose is part of its perfection; and its purpose is to be drunk, with pleasure. But even from a purely practical point of view, it is collecting wine rather than drinking it that makes wine fraud so easy to perpetrate and so difficult to prosecute.

In the case of fraud, if the criminal fraudster ever does come a cropper, it is usually due to stupidity or mistakes in labelling and bottling. Take the notorious case of the Sino-Indonesian, Rudy Kurniawan, who for 10 years and more enriched himself by selling fake fine wine for millions at top auctions in the United States, until finally caught in 2011 after trying to sell 1945 and 1971 vintages of

Clos St Denis from Domaine Ponsot, a wine that started to be made only in 1982.

So extrinsic factors rather than the wine itself usually give the game away. But even if your host actually did offer a legendary 1945 Château Pétrus, for instance, you would be unlikely to complain if it was less than you expected. And so, the fraudulent always have both the psychological and the practical advantage.

But enough of the dark side. With one week to go to Christmas, here are some last-minute suggestions for your festive table. For your first course, Marks & Spencer's Famille Brocard Chablis Organic 2019 (£15) is intense, floral and exceptional value. For the main course, the Co-op has three superb clarets: Château Beau-Site 2014 St-Estèphe (£22) or two Haut-Médocs, Château Beaumont 2017 (£16) and Château Sénéjac 2018 (£17). Or, as there is no more cheering sight on the Christmas table than a magnum, you may prefer Waitrose's Villa Cafaggio Chianti Classico 2018 (£22.49). For pudding, Aldi's Specially Selected Sauternes 2016 (£7.49 for a half bottle) is a remarkable bargain and for port, keep your eyes peeled for the return of Tesco's translucent Finest 10-year-old Tawny (£12), which will neither break the bank nor bequeath a Boxing Day headache. A very happy Christmas to all *Tablet* fellow-winebibbers.

N. O'Phile is *The Tablet's* wine writer. He is also a senior Catholic priest.

Glimpses of Eden

JONATHAN TULLOCH

I'VE BEEN out on the byways trying to choose my Christmas tree. There's no axe saw involved; I'm not looking for something to stand in the corner of our living room over the festive fortnight. What I've been searching for is the tree that most raises the spirits at this darkling time of year. Actually, I don't really need to look because the birch on the bridleway above the village will always be my go-to tree. My son and I planted it when he was smaller than the sapling itself, and though we put it in the middle of 50 treeless hectares of



intensively farmed land, somehow, it has survived. Our miracle tree.

There are many others out there to gladden the heart at Christmas, including

the crab apple on barn owl lane, whose autumn fruit still glows bauble-bright as we near Yuletide. Then there's the beckside white poplar that dances in the bitterest winter wind. And no list would be complete without my gentle giant, the huge sycamore rising on a hill half an hour's cycle from home. Its roots form the rafters of a badger's sett, and I can't count the hours I've sat under its branches, watching these secretive animals play. How wonderful to think it's still sheltering the black-and-white clan as they hunker down through the cold weeks.

Volume 275 // No. 9432 // ISSN: 0039 8837

Published 50 times a year. Periodicals postage paid at Rahway, NJ, and at additional mailing offices. **U.S. POSTMASTER:** Send airspeed address corrections to

The Tablet, c/o Air Business Limited, 4 The Martin Centre, Arrowood Way, St Albans, Herts AL4 0JW, UK.

© The Tablet Publishing Company Limited 2021. The Tablet is printed by Warners Midlands Plc, The Maltings, Manor Lane, Bourne, Lincolnshire PE10 5PH, for the proprietors The Tablet Publishing Company Limited, 1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GT 18/25 December 2021

‘... what makes these stories is the heart and soul’

NETGALLEY REVIEW

‘What I have attempted to do in these twelve chapters is retell some of the most powerful and moving stories in the Bible but through the eyes of view of a young person. More than anything, I wanted it to be engaging.’

ROBIN BENNETT

XII Paperback, £7.99
ISBN 9781916375178

**Available online and in
bookshops for Christmas**



‘Chronicles of the Old and New Testament in a way that is fresh and highly original: from Genesis to the Crucifixion.’

GOODREADS



 **MONSTER BOOKS**
www.monsterbooks.co.uk