

The NET

Sharing fruits of faith in Derry Diocese

ISSUE 82. DECEMBER 2022

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Wishing all a blessed Christmas celebration

See inside...



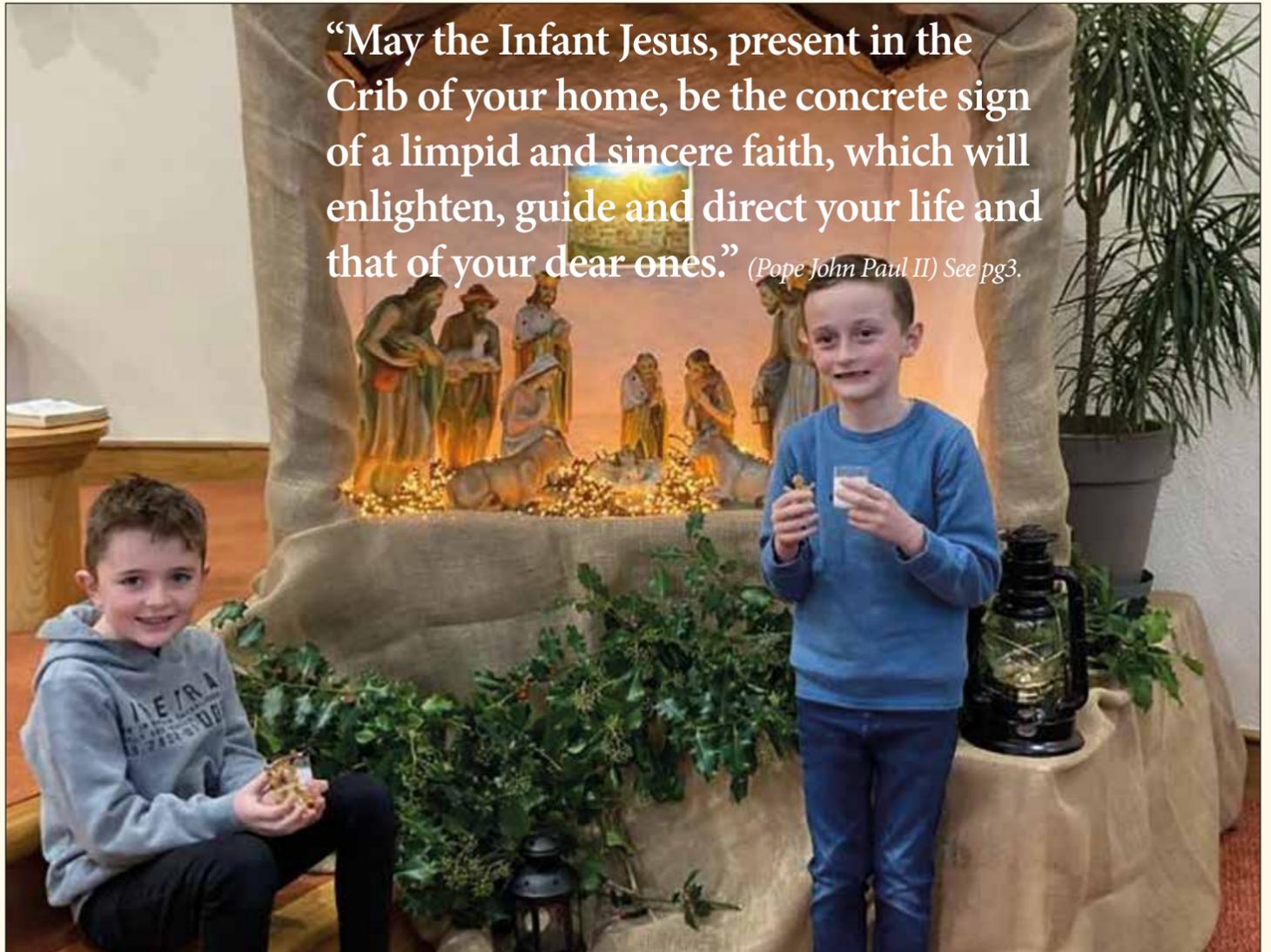
Baminelli Sunday - Steelstown



Diamond Jubilee - St Mary's PS, Draperstown.



Silver Jubilee - St Joseph's NS, Illies, Buncrana



“May the Infant Jesus, present in the Crib of your home, be the concrete sign of a limpid and sincere faith, which will enlighten, guide and direct your life and that of your dear ones.” (Pope John Paul II) See pg3.

Baby Jesus figures from Ballinascreen Cribs received a special blessing on Baminelli Sunday



Men's Day of Prayer - Long Tower.



Fr Kelly's Golden Jubilee - Dungiven

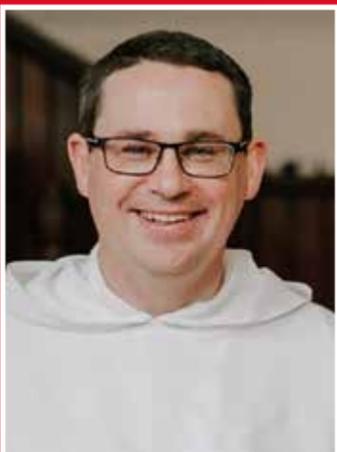


Syro-Malabar Celebration - Derry.



Search Youth Nativity - Steelstown.

People in focus



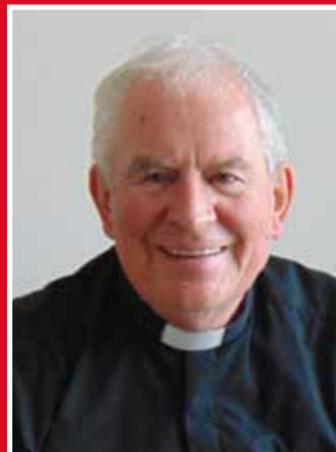
Bro Ruaidhri Grieve - Dungiven.



Fr Joseph O'Connor RIP.



Fr Patsy Arkinson, PP Donaghmore.



Fr Seamus Kelly, PP Dungiven.



Sara-Jane Olphert - Bready.

Also featuring: Young Writers share thoughts; Divine Child visits City Parishes; Santa surprise at Cursillo party; Omagh Crib Festival; Catholic Mothers' Retreat; St Joseph's Boys' School Jesse Tree; SJYP annual meeting; Pure in Heart reflections from across the Diocese; Children's Catechism Club - C3, Quiz...and much more...

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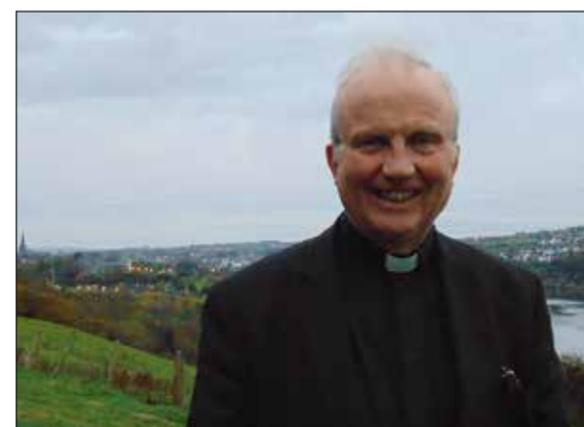
Bishop Donal reflects on the Pope's prayer intention for December... "For volunteer not-for-profit organisations: We pray that volunteer non-profit organisations committed to human development find people dedicated to the common good and ceaselessly seek out new paths to international cooperation."

Communities thrive when individuals are prepared to volunteer

THERE is a passage in St Matthew's Gospel where Jesus sees the crowd, dejected and harassed, like sheep without a shepherd. He says that the harvest is great but the labourers are few (Mt 9:35-10.1). He then sends out the disciples to proclaim

the Good News of the Kingdom and cure all kinds of diseases and sickness. Missionaries have always done this, speaking about the Father's mercy revealed in Jesus - and reaching out to the needy. The Kingdom of God begins

here and not just hereafter. As we see in Jesus' miracles, healing is for the whole person and not merely for the body or just for the soul. Education, health services, and care for the poor...in so many cases they were started and supported by people of faith who wanted to serve the Common Good. So many of the great charitable organisations around the world were started by people of faith



Bishop Donal McKeown

That is why the Preface of the Mass of the Feast of Jesus Christ the Universal King speaks about 'a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace'. Those who give generously of their time and talents in the service of others can bear witness to Christ, even without saying a word. And we all know that communities thrive when

individuals are prepared to volunteer. We only need to think about the number of voluntary organisations who are a blessing on the areas where they live. But they also face a culture which celebrates individualism and a situation where we expect the state - or 'somebody' - to provide for all problems. That paralyses so many as we think

that all we can do is to blame the politicians or the system. Pope Francis asks us to pray that generous hearts will give voluntarily of their time and energy in the service of others. And he wants us to be a sign of fraternity and solidarity in the face of those who want to build walls rather than bridges. He knows that this is where the Church will be renewed.

Ireland's fifth oldest person, Ruby Druce turns on Castlefinn Christmas lights



URNEY & Castlefinn parishioner, Ruby Druce and Fr Oliver Crilly at the Blessing of the Crib and switching on the Christmas lights in Castlefinn. The lights were switched on by 106-year-old Ruby, who is the fifth oldest person in Ireland. Ruby watches Mass daily on YouTube and says at least one Rosary every day, usually more.

The Apostles of Love present

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Derry City

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Cost: Donation kindly Accepted

Venue
Termonbacca Retreat Centre,
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Diary Dates

Cathedral Carol Concert: A Christmas Carol Concert will take place in St Eugene's on Tuesday, December 27, at 1 pm, as part of the Cathedral's 150th anniversary celebrations. There will be refreshments afterwards in the Cathedral Hall.

Life in Spirit Seminars: The Apostles of Love will be running 'Life in the Spirit' seminars in Termonbacca on the weekend of January 7 and 8, with testimonies, teachings, and praise and worship. For further information contact Jenny on 07761248975 or Mark on 07895003022.

Love Retreat: Pure in Heart is facilitating a retreat at Termonbacca entitled 'Pursuit of Love' on the weekend of January 13-15. It is strictly for those aged 21-35 years old, who are single and those who are ready to pursue, or are already, dating. For further information contact info@pureinheart.ie.

Reading with the Carmelites: The Carmelite Fathers at Termonbacca hold a monthly session of 'Reading with the Carmelite Saints', to explore

learning friendship with Christ through the example of the Carmelite Saints. The next gathering will take place on Thursday, January 19, at 7.30 pm.

Healing Night: The monthly Healing Night with the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal in St Joseph's Church, Galliagh, in Derry, takes place on the First Friday of each month, at 7 pm.

Lavey Youth 2000: Youth 2000 Prayer Group, for 16-35 year olds, meets in Lavey Parochial House, opposite the chapel, on Friday evenings at 7.30 pm.

Contemplative Prayer: The Contemplative Prayer Group in the Camus Parish, Strabane, meets on Mondays at 8 pm in the Prayer Room in the Parochial House. Entry by the Parish Priest's front door.

Three Patrons: On the First Saturday of each month, after 11 am Mass in St Brigid's Church, Carnhill, there is Adoration and Rosary, ending with Divine Mercy and Benediction at 3 pm.

On Thursdays, there is a Holy Hour for the Unborn & Expectant Mothers in Our Lady's Chapel, within St Joseph's Church building,

Galliagh, starting at 7 pm.

Vocations Holy Hour: There will be Vocations Holy Hour in St Mary's Church, Creggan, on the second Friday of each month, running from 8-9 pm.

Children's Rosary: Children's Rosary continues in St Patrick's Church, Claudy on the first Saturday of each month, at 2 pm. All are welcome.

Sr Clare Rosary: The Sr Clare Rosary continues every Monday night, at 8.30 pm, in St Joseph's Room, at the Carmelite Retreat Centre, Termonbacca.

The ministry of
The NET
was dedicated to Our Lady, through the intercession of St Maximilian Kolbe, in a ceremony celebrated by Bishop Donal McKeown on August 14, 2019.

The NET
Sharing the fruits of the faith in the Derry Diocese

Contacting us:
If you have a story that you would like to share or an event you would like covered by The Net, just drop an email to
editorthenet15@gmail.com
or ring/text 07809292852

Blessing of the Bambinelli



for a blessing after the Angelus, so that families may carry that blessing home with them in preparation for Christmas.

“Today, we’ll bless the Baby Jesus figure of the Church’s Christmas Crib and the figures of the Baby Jesus that people have brought here to Mass,” he said, adding that the blessing would extend to the figure of the Baby Jesus in the Cribbs of those watching the Mass online, who had their Christmas Crib on display in their home.

During the well-attended mid-day Mass in Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Fr John invited all the children with Baby Jesus figures to come forward to the altar, where they were blessed.

Fr John directed his homily towards the children, so that they could really appreciate the meaning of Christmas, and their excitement was tangible when they brought their Baby Jesus figure to the altar to be blessed.

All could see that the children really enjoyed being part of this special Mass celebration.

SOME parishes in the Diocese celebrated Bambinelli Sunday with parishioners bringing along the Baby Jesus figures from their Christmas cribs for a special blessing.

Children at the Third Sunday in Advent Mass in Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Steelstown, and Holy Rosary Church, Draperstown, in the Ballinascreen Parish were invited by Fr John McDevitt and Fr Dermot McGirr to bring forward their Baby Jesus figurines for the blessing.

The Blessing of the Bambinelli is a tradition that began in Rome by Pope John Paul II. The word ‘Bambinello’ is the Italian for ‘little baby boy’ and it is the name for the Baby Jesus of the Christmas Crib.

Fr Dermot explained to the congregation that the tradition is that, each year on the Third Sunday of Advent, the Pope invites children to bring the Baby Jesus figure from the family Christmas Crib at home to St Peter’s Square



St Mary's Draperstown remains a strong, connected and faith-filled school community 60 years on

ST Mary's PS Draperstown celebrated its 60th anniversary with a joyful Mass on Monday, December 12, in Holy Rosary Church, Ballinascreen.

Fr Peter Madden, PP, was the main celebrant and was joined on the altar by Fr Seamus Kelly, PP Dungiven, former PP Ballinascreen, Fr Dermot McGirr, Fr John Downey and Fr Sean McGuigan, former St Mary's teacher. The church was filled with past and present staff, pupils and members of the local community.

Principal, Corinne Coyle thanked the past and present staff and pupils who participated in the Mass by sharing their musical talents, reading and dancing. She commented that their contributions were rich and plentiful.

She was also proud to say that St Mary's PS Draperstown remains a strong, connected, faith-filled

school community, 60 years on. The present Catholic School system in Ballinascreen had its beginnings in 1823. The Parish Priest at the time, Dean Murphy, set up two schools, one in Straw and another in Moneyneena. Schools popped up all around the townlands, with no less than three in Moykeeran. In 1831, the National School Board was established. Two years later, in 1833, Draperstown National School was set up in the home of teacher, John O'Kane. From 1887-1987, 13 primary schools were recorded within in the Parish of Ballinascreen.

Draperstown National School was built by Fr Magee, the Parish Priest, in 1875 and had 70 pupils. It was known as the Burnside as the Burn stream ran along the back of the town.

This school remained in use for 87 years, until 1962. The old school property was sold to Peter

Donnelly, who operated it as a car showroom. It was used for Mass and Confessions in the late 1970s, while the old Oratory was being demolished and the Holy Rosary Church was being constructed. After 1979, the building was converted into a supermarket and remains so today.

The new St Mary's PS was built by Heron Brothers and opened its doors on Monday, April 30, 1962. The first all-female staff included Mrs Sarah McGurk, principal, Jane Bradley, Bernadette Regan, Mary McKernan and Rosemary Heron. This staff of five and the pupils moved up to the new school on the Magherafelt Road from the old school at Burnside, and finally said goodbye to the Parochial Barn and McKernan Barn.

On Tuesday, May 8, 1962, Bishop Farren blessed both St Mary's PS and St Colm's High School.

The present staff consists of eight full-time teaching staff, three part-

time teaching staff, 12 Classroom Assistants, one Clerical Assistant, one Building Supervisor, one Crossing Patrol, four Cleaning Staff and Six Catering Staff.

Past pupil and chair of Mid-Ulster Council, Cora Corry, hosted a Civic Reception in Magherafelt Council Offices on Friday, December 2, for past and present staff and governors, in recognition and celebration of 60 years of St Mary's PS, Draperstown.



Likening Catholic education to a diamond that is constantly in a state of transformation, Ballinascreen PP, Fr Madden offered...

Congratulations to St Mary's Draperstown school community on shining so magnificently on its Diamond Jubilee

THOSE who caricature Catholic education and Catholic schools today as places of exclusion obviously know nothing of why they existed in the first place, or nothing of the reality that makes them still so popular, and not just with Catholic parents.

Ballinascreen parish priest, Fr Peter Madden made this comment during his homily at the Diamond Jubilee Mass for St Mary's PS, Draperstown, when he reflected on the history of the school and the many pupils and staff who have come through its doors down the years, "and together, and in their own individual ways, shaped the school and made it the wonderful centre of excellence and Catholic education that it is today."

Remarking how much things had changed, Fr Peter went on to say: "I can't for the life of me imagine, and I mean no disrespect, the late Fr Michael Collins in 1962 setting out on 76 laps of the playing fields to get a marathon medal, or his dog following on behind him either for that matter, as Dash and I did during the month of October."

"Nor can I imagine myself having today the sense of ownership of a school a parish priest in those years had, when it wasn't unusual for the principal in St Mary's, or indeed St Colm's High School, to come face-to-face on a Monday morning with a teacher they had never set eyes on before, only to be told the parish priest had appointed them over the weekend. That's a sense of ownership I wouldn't want. Yes, how things have changed."

Highlighting that St Mary's and the local community had

been blessed with the foresight of Fr Collins, he commented on how he had "worked tirelessly for the people to have had opened not just one school but two, and both on the same day, by the then Bishop of the Diocese, Neil Farren."

He continued: "That St Mary's is the resounding success it is in 2022 is very much down to the vision that Fr Collins, and not a few other parish priests in Catholic parishes in the North, had in the 1950's and 1960s to ensure that their flocks had quality education. Even if we had to pay for some of it ourselves in our weekly offerings at Sunday Mass...and we did for many years."

Referring to the saying 'eaten bread is soon forgotten', Fr Peter went on to make his comment about "those who caricature Catholic education and Catholic schools today as places of exclusion, obviously know nothing of why they existed in the first place or nothing of the reality that makes them still so popular, and not just with Catholic parents."

He added: "For in the fine example we have here in St Mary's, Catholic Education at its best provides a sacred space for each child to grow to their full potential. And without mentioning the names of those who were entrusted with the school all down these past 60 years, they all, and some are here this evening or watching online, shaped the school of their day, adding to its multi-faceted splendour just a like a diamond."

"In many ways, Catholic education is like a diamond

that is constantly in a state of transformation. Unlike real diamonds that form when carbon deposits deep within the earth, approximately 90 to 125 miles below the surface, are subject to high temperature and pressure and take sometimes millions of years to materialize, Catholic education is formed before our eyes in the daily practice of running a school, providing the conditions where staff and pupils are happy and content, and becoming a community where everyone's place is cherished and valued. I've rarely come into this school and not been greeted with smiles as broad as the playing fields."

Noting how St Mary's parents and teachers work closely together, and along with the Board of Governors, to make the school what it is today, Fr Peter said: "The interaction between school and home takes place these days on a level that was never imagined in the early years of the school. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, home-school links, and See-Saw are just some of the means whereby the school becomes an extension of the home and vice versa. The 'Do this in Memory of Me' programme and, since Covid, the practice of the local priest administering the Sacrament of Confirmation, have also transformed the parish-home-school links in a way we could never have imagined. And as the number of priests in parishes fall, school-home-parish relationships will look different too, in the years to come."

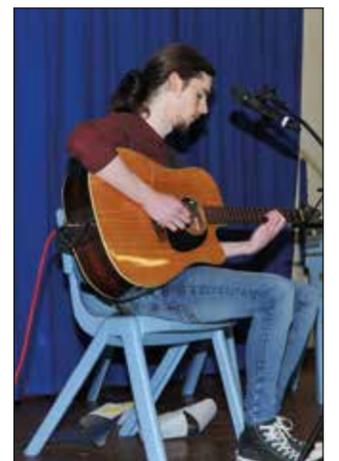
He added: "Yes indeed, St Mary's is forever in a state of becoming and it is the role of

each successive principal and school staff to put their shine on what has been entrusted to them. What I have to say about our present principal and her staff and board of governors holds true for all those who led from the front in the past. On behalf of all of us in Ballinascreen, I want to offer Corinne Coyle and the whole school community our congratulations for making this diamond shine so magnificently.

"We are rightly proud of St Mary's but we know too it doesn't happen by chance. The long hours, when pupils and others have all gone home, the marking that takes place late most weeknights, and the energy required to come back in to school the next day to do it all again.

"Well this is the commitment that, as Parish Priest of Ballinascreen, I am privileged to salute. In the years to come, there will be other principals and teachers, boards of governors and parish priests, and whole new generations to pupils too, but at this moment in the school's history, Ms Coyle and St Mary's Primary School can be proud of what they have achieved, learning, caring and sharing together. Learning about God's love for them by caring for one another and sharing with others the gifts they have received."

"When we celebrate a jubilee of any kind there is a sense of something having been completed and platform provided for the next chapter," said Fr Peter, concluding: "Sixty years of Catholic education in St Mary's Primary School is a perfect springboard for the next 60."



Joyful Illies celebration of 25 years' education at St Joseph's NS Buncrana



THE 25th anniversary Mass for Scoil Naomh Iosaf, nestled in the Illies countryside, outside Buncrana, in Co Donegal, was a beautiful celebration, with the combined Children's Choir and newly formed Scoil Naomh Iosaf Community Choir giving a very extra special touch to the occasion.

Friday, December 16, was an extremely cold winter's day, but parents, grandparents, past pupils and special guests braved the elements and slippery road conditions to gather in support of this small but growing centre of education on its Silver Jubilee.

Bishop Donal was the main celebrant of the Mass, and he was joined by Fr John Walsh, Fr Paddy Baker, and Fr Francis Bradley, parish priest, who added his own musical touch to the music ministry during Mass with his flute playing, in accompaniment to the piano playing principal, Ms Andrea Long.

Offering the Mass in thanksgiving for St Joseph's National School, the pupils, staff and local community, Bishop Donal paid tribute to the strong voice of the community that insisted on getting a new school

in their midst for the education of their children.

He remarked: "You have a healthy number enrolled here and, please God, it will keep growing."

Talking to the young people about St Joseph, the Patron Saint of their school, and the tough time he and Mary had in keeping the Baby Jesus safe when Herod wanted to kill Him, the Bishop encouraged them not to be afraid during times of difficulty in their lives, but to put their trust in God and everything will work out well in the end up.

He added: "God so loved the World that He sent His only Son. His Son did not come in a fancy car or live in a posh hotel or have tattoos. He was born in a stable and through His death on the Cross, God had mercy on the World."

"This school was built because the community wanted you to have the best and to know that you are loved," continued Bishop Donal, "and for the next year I want you to celebrate people's love and faith in you, and their desire for the best for you. Celebrate God's love for the World. There is a lot going on in the world today but, like St Joseph, trust in God to take care of you."

During the Offertory Procession a number of items were brought forward to mark the special anniversary, including: a time capsule to symbolise the school remembering the past and looking forward to a bright future; a football representing the sport that enables the young people to work as a team and build trust and belonging, both in school and community; a piece of infant class work to symbolise the work that helps the children build for their future; a piece of work from 6th class to symbolise the preparation for the next step in

their journey, that they may have the resilience and strength to meet new challenges; water to represent the humanity of Christ; wine to represent Christ's Divinity; and bread to symbolise the Word of God, which nourishes the people.

Offering his congratulations and praise to the community of St Joseph's NS, Fr Francis Bradley said: "Lessons have been going on here in the townland of Connagh-Kinnego these past 25 years, as they went on for many a long decade before that on the hill opposite, in Lower Illies.

"As with everything that goes on here in Scoil Naomh Iosaf, the children today have been front and centre, with the parents and guests coming a close second. All of this is facilitated by Miss Long and her very dedicated staff. There is always a great welcome here for callers - and today has been no exception."

"This school is all that it is supposed to be," he added, "it is the living heart of this tightly-knit rural community. Whether it be the Tuesday night cheilidhes, the newly formed Naomh Iosaf Community Choir, or the way the children here just bring everyday life into the school, this school is firmly embedded in this place.

"The Old Testament says that without a vision, the people perish. Fr Joe Carolan and those who saw to the building of this new school 25 years ago certainly had vision and determination. Brendan Coyle who, at no cost to the parish, readily gave the land on which this school is built, embodied the generosity which is typical of here. Even the decision to contribute independently to make this hall bigger when it was being built, so that it could be used as a community hall for the area, was inspired."

Paying tribute to the late Sr Philomena Donaghey, of

Stranaclea, and the Board of Management, Fr Francis said: "She was, until her untimely death at well over 100 years old during the summer, the oldest and much prized past-pupil of The Illies National School. It is truly fitting that her nephew, John Grant, is the Chairperson of the Board of Management here. I thank the Board of Management, and the Parents' Association for all their dedication to this school."

He also thanked the school staff and principal, Miss Long for the learning environment they create and maintain in St Joseph's, adding: "First among equals, I must thank Miss Long herself for the life and energy which she has brought to the school. The happiness and contentment of the children here reflect her own love of this place, and that of the staff."

And, he thanked the children for their "generosity of spirit in all the ways they contribute to the life of the parish through their singing at Cockhill Chapel", as well as the parents, grandparents and families of the school, whose ongoing support, he said, was so appreciated.

Fr Francis concluded by thanking Bishop Donal for braving the elements and delighting them with his company and prayers, and thanked all who came to join in the celebration.





Uplifting Carol Service closes week of Silver Jubilee celebrations for St Joseph's NS

THE week of Silver Jubilee celebrations at St Joseph's National School in the Illies, Buncrana, came to a close before the Christmas holidays with a wonderfully uplifting Carol Service.

The celebrations began with a Christmas Musical performance, followed by a mid-week Night Show and the Anniversary Mass on the Friday, concelebrated by Bishop Donal, Fr Bradley, Fr Walsh and Fr Baker.

Welcoming everyone to the School's Carol Service to close the celebrations, the principal, Ms Andrea Long assured them they were in for another treat, with the newly formed Scoil Naomh Iósaf Community Choir and the

School's Children's Choir both performing.#

Ms Long took the opportunity to thank the Board of Management for its continued support and dedication to St Joseph's, all the staff for providing a happy and successful teaching and learning environment for the children each day, and the Parents' Association for all the wonderful work that they do in helping to keep the school a hive of activity.

"We are blessed with an amazing team and we thank God for that," said Ms Long.

She went on to pay tribute to the pupils of Scoil Naomh Iósaf: "The children have been amazing all week throughout the various

events. However, it is important to note that they are amazing every day. They work hard, they are resilient and, most importantly, they have fun and are happy."

Wishing the children well each and every day, Ms Long went on to them: "Always remember the words of our new song - 'I've Got the Power in Me' and continue to believe in yourselves. You can do it! Keep praying and God will guide you."

Paying tribute to the newly formed Scoil Naomh Iósaf Community Choir, she said: "When I sent out the note to recruit people, I wasn't sure how many members we would have. I am delighted that we have such a

wonderful group. We've had fun over the last few weeks with many laughs. It has been great!

"All worked so hard and were willing to do what was necessary to make this the musical extravaganza that it was. 'Andrea's Angels', I am so proud of you and I thank you very much. As I said the other night at practice, let this be the beginning".

And there was a special thank you to the two males involved, Bernard, one of the parents who accompanied the choir on guitar, helped with the sound system, and made a great cup of tea, and Fr Bradley, "an amazing parish priest and shepherd", who was a great inspiration to them all.

Beautiful prayer preparation for Christmas as City parishes welcomed Divine Child

by Aoife O'Neill. Photographs by Patsy McCallion.



ON Thursday, December 8, Termonbacca began this year's nine-day Novena praying to the Divine Child in preparation for Christmas. This Novena is inspired by the old Carmel tradition dating back to the time of St Teresa of Avila. In this tradition, the image of the Christ Jesus from the crib would spend nine nights moving from cell to cell, and the nun or monk would hold a 24-hour time of prayer, keeping vigil with the Child.

During this period, they prayed and venerated the infant Christ Jesus, reminding themselves of the whole purpose of the incarnation was 'the word becoming flesh and living among us' (John 1:4).

It was that Child who went to the Cross for each and every one of us. Emmanuel, God had pitched His tent among us.

This year, I could relate to Mary and Joseph knocking at the doors of Bethlehem, asking: "Is there any room at the inn?" My knocking came in the form of emails to parishes, asking if they would make room in their Church to keep vigil with the Christ Jesus for 24 hours of our Novena. Unlike the Holy Family who found that there was no room for them, the parish priests of Derry answered "Yes".

So, the Christ Jesus statue from the crib at Termonbacca journeyed around the city, spending 24 hours in a different parish before moving on to the

next. Each night, we journeyed in a prayer walk to the parish, which was followed by Mass and novena prayers.

Parishioners were able to add their own prayer intentions, which were written on a 'straw' strip and placed in the empty manger to prepare a bed for the Christ Jesus.

Despite low temperatures and icy footpaths, every night people showed up to accompany the Christ Jesus on His journey.

On night one, the Christ Jesus made the journey from Termonbacca to St Mary's Church, Creggan. Fr Daniel received the Christ Jesus into the Church with prayer and song. Once the child was in place at the altar, Fr Stephen Quinn OCD celebrated Mass for the Feast of the Annunciation, concelebrated by Fr White.

Fr Stephen pointed out to those gathered that just as much as God addresses Mary in the Annunciation, He addresses each one of us: "My Son! The source of every blessing. He's for you! He wants to be part of your life. He wants to be everything to you. Will you take Him? Do you want Him? Mary simply says, 'Join your yes to mine'."

On night two, the Divine Child travelled to St Columba's Church, Long Tower, where Fr Michael Spain OCD received Him and celebrated Mass. On the way, we bumped into the sisters and priests from the Home of the Mother who were on pilgrimage, visiting Sr Clare's grave and hometown with over 20 teenage boys. The group joined in our prayer walk and the excitement of the boys added much joy to the pilgrimage.

Holy Family

On Saturday evening, Fr Gerard Mongan bade farewell to the Christ Jesus as He left and made the journey to Holy Family, Ballymagroarty, where Fr Joe Gormley received the Christ Jesus into the Church. Fr Kevin

Mulhern celebrated Mass along with Fr Cajetan Apeh OCD.

Fr Kevin told parishioners: "We have the Child in front of us tonight - the Christ Child, the reminder of the hope of Bethlehem, the reminder of the joy that rests there for us. Let us be happy and glad as Christians as we are in this time of Advent. Let us be glad that we are awaiting the birth of Christ. Let us open our hearts to the reality of what that means for us.

"What does it mean to you, to prepare your heart to welcome the Christ Child? What have you done to prepare your heart to welcome the Christ Child? Because that is what Christmas is about."

On night four, the Christ Jesus made the journey to St Joseph's Church, Galligh. Fr Michael Spain OCD received the Christ Jesus and celebrated the Mass. He reminded the people gathered: "The God that Jesus wanted to communicate to the world was the God whose very being was love."

On Monday evening, Fr Sean O'Donnell welcomed the Christ Jesus to St Brigid's Church, Carnhill. Fr Sean celebrated Mass with Fr Stephen Quinn OCD. During the preaching, Fr Stephen explained that the pilgrimage journey with the Christ Jesus was simply an external expression of the journey that should be going on within each one of us.

Reflecting on the role of Joseph in God's plans for salvation, he spoke about what it might have been like for Joseph when he went to pray before the Holy of Holies: "What truly mattered at that moment was not what he was thinking in his head, not the words that he could put together, but simply that his heart was moving, that his will was moving, that he was wanting someone.

"So often when we go to pray, we are so preoccupied with good things to think. We try to think good thoughts and come up with good words. But so often, those words are just empty. What

matters is not that we are thinking much or saying much, it is that we are wanting much, that we are loving much. And that much is always the person of God."

On night six, Fr Sean blessed the Christ Jesus with incense and prayer and led the procession from St Brigid's Church. The Child journeyed to Our Lady of Lourdes, Steelstown, and was received by Fr John McDevitt, who celebrated Mass with Fr Cajetan.

Moving from Steelstown on Wednesday night, the Christ Jesus journeyed to St Patrick's Church, Pennyburn, where Fr McCaughey received the Christ Jesus and celebrated Mass with Fr Michael Spain.

On night eight of the novena, the Christ Jesus made the journey across the Peace Bridge and into St Columba's Church, Chapel Road, Waterside, where Fr Michael Canny celebrated Mass and Fr Cajetan led the congregation in the prayers.

Finally, on Friday, December 16, we collected the manger, which was overflowing with prayer intentions from across the City, and the Christ Jesus made the return journey to Termonbacca.

Fr Stephen celebrated Mass and reminded us all that Christ is the light of the world; that He shines that light on the world in everything that He does, maybe nowhere deeper than in becoming a tiny baby, a child who reaches out to receive and give love without anything holding it back.

"He holds his hands out to each one of us, to be taken, to be shared," said Fr Stephen.

This year's Novena has been a beautiful experience of journeying through our City and joining with all those parishes in prayer and preparation for Christmas.

Thank you to all the priests and parishes who participated, and all who joined in praying this novena. May the Divine Child Jesus bless us all this Christmas.

Creggan



Long Tower



Ballymagroarty



Carnhill



Long Tower



Termonbacca



Steelstown



Galliagh



Santa surprise at Cursillo Children's Christmas Party



Search youth delight with their Nativity story

OUR Lady of Lourdes Church, in Steelstown, was the setting for an eight-person Nativity Drama by the young people of Derry Search Group entitled 'A Story of Now and Then'.

Parishioners were joined by parents and friends of the young dramatists in enjoying the Nativity story, which included characters speaking from the original Christmas story, including Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and donkey, and characters relating to life today.

This was followed by the beautiful singing of a number of Christmas songs, and then a 'light and shadow' re-enactment of the Christmas story.

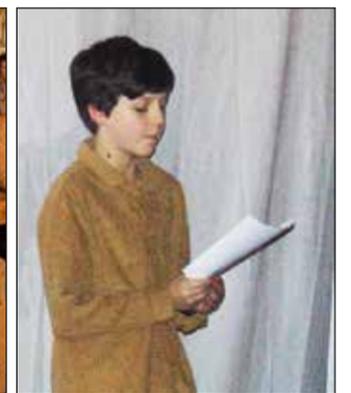
The production closed with a Christmas message delivered by a member of the new Search 13+ Programme.

Delighted to welcome the young people of Search and their leaders, and all who came along to the support them, Fr John McDevitt, PP Steelstown, said that he hadn't known what to expect.

He added: "When we are open to new ways of hearing the Nativity story, we can be surprised."

The evening ended with refreshments in the Conference Room of the Church building.

Photographs by Patsy McCallion & The Net.



Reflecting on importance of their role in the home and in the lives of their children...

Catholic Mothers take time out for inspiring retreat

THE Catholic Mothers' Association recently held a beautiful time of prayer and reflection in Termonbacca Carmelite Retreat Centre. Over 40 mothers gathered together for the day away from the 'busyness' of motherhood to get some spiritual nourishment.

This was the third Retreat Day held by the Catholic Mothers Association and it was a huge success.

Speaking on behalf of the Association, chairwoman, Sinéad Strong said: "We started with our first retreat at the end of August as a one-day, one-off idea. We usually organise days out and events for mums and children or family days, but I had been approached by a few friends asking if I would consider organising something just for mums.

"The response has been huge and there is so much hunger out there for more like this. We are planning more of these days around the country in the New Year."

The Retreat began with a Welcome and Testimony from Sinéad, followed by a talk on God's Call to Holiness by Fr Joe Gormley, PP Holy Family, Ballymagroarty. There was also Mass, Adoration and Confession throughout the day.

In his homily during the Mass, Fr Joe referred to the readings on the Immaculate Conception and the call to be holy, saying: "As Catholics, we have been so poorly catechised that so often people think that the Immaculate Conception is the conception of Christ. The Immaculate Conception occurred at the conception of Mary, so that she would be conceived without Original Sin; the sin of our first parents. She is preserved from that. This grace was given to her before time because of what Jesus had to do for us on the Cross.

"It is hard for us to get our heads around that something could happen before like this, but God is linear. His grace and mercy is timeless and is freely given to us; the grace to become the person we were called to be, just as Mary was called to who She was created to be.

"God has said that He came to do great things in us and through us. It is not our achievement but our co-operation. We will not be saved without Christ, but He can't save us without our 'yes'."

Fr Joe went on to highlight that while Mary "had the privilege of giving birth to Jesus", she "also had to watch Him die on the

Cross." Encouraging the mothers to always trust God, who always fulfils His promises, he said: "Trusting in God is what keeps us going. We are in a spiritual battle. There is a spirit that wants us to lose heart, to lose trust. In those moments, call on Mary, saying 'Mary be a mother to me now'. Mary is someone who is in the midst of our suffering.

"The spirit of discouragement is never from God. It can dress itself up as saying you are not as holy as someone else. Beware of that. Wherever we are at is where we are meant to meet Christ."

Asking the mothers to pray for him, in his life as a priest, to trust God, Fr Joe told them: "I really don't know how you do what you do, day in, day out. You are depending on a power higher than yourself. We give praise to God for that."

Jennifer Kehoe, a Catholic wife and mother, gave her ever popular talk on the 'Four Temperaments' and how we can grow in our family through understanding them.

The Servant Sisters of the Home of the Mother joined the Mothers for the day, providing music and guided prayer, and the Retreat was brought to a close with a candlelight Service.

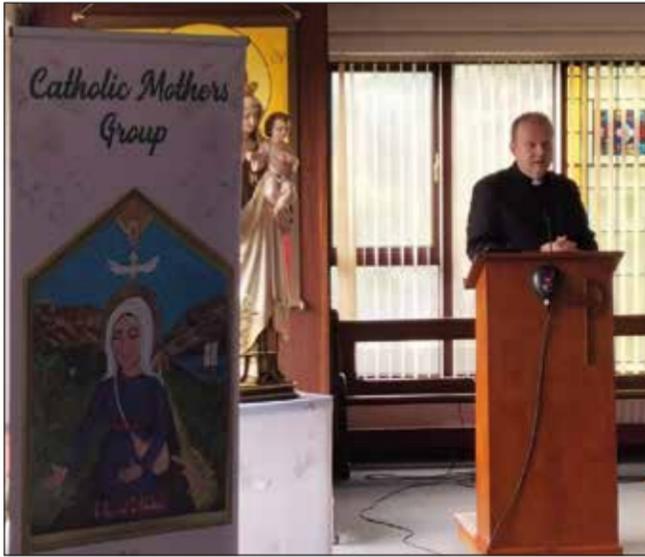
"Everyone had such a great day and got so much out of it; the break away from home, the inspiring talks and the sisterhood with other mothers," remarked Sinéad, adding: "It was such an uplifting experience and a great start to the season of Advent. We are looking forward to holding more days like it in the future."

The Catholic Mothers' Group started in 2015 with a mother who saw the challenges both she and her friends were facing bringing their children up in the Catholic faith.

The group is designed to support women in the many roles they have in life as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters and friends. It is a ministry about women bonded by their vocation and their Catholic faith, who come together to share the joys and struggles of motherhood.

This was very much the inspiration for the day; allowing mothers time to listen to talks and time to talk to each other, helping them to realise the importance of their role in the home and in the lives of their children.

For more information on the Catholic Mothers Association please email catholicmothersirl@protonmail.com.



Guest speaker, Fr Joe Gormley, PP Holy Family, Ballymagroarty.



Sinéad Strong, chairwoman of Catholic Mothers' Association.



THIS month 'The Net' welcomes another young writer, Evan Curran, who is from the Waterside and is a pupil at St Joseph's Boys' School.

For his first article, Evan has written about the gift of his school's Oratory, which is a place close to his heart as a sacred space.

With Christmas approaching, Bronagh shares her experience of the Samaritan's Purse 'Operation Christmas Child' project during her years at St Colm's School, in Draperstown, while John reflects on the great gift that Christmas offers all, and Peter highlights the need to remember those living and fighting in war zones this Christmas, and those working for peace in our world.

Drawing attention to growing challenges to the environment, Niamh writes about awareness campaign, World Soil Day.



Hollie Frystal, Co Tyrone Deanery. Bronagh Doherty, Co Derry Deanery. Peter Grant, Inishowen Deanery. Jodie Kennedy, Derry City Deanery. Eimear Doherty, Derry City Deanery.



Niamh O'Kane, Co Derry Deanery. John Augustine Joseph, Derry City Deanery. Zara Schlindwein, Derry City Deanery. Shea Doherty, Derry City Deanery. Evan Curran, Derry City Deanery.



World Soil Day addresses growing challenges *by Niamh*

WORLD Soil Day was conceived on December 20, 2013, to encourage us to spread environmental awareness in order to make the best possible use of the earth's resources without damaging them.

The consequences of climate change are becoming increasingly unpredictable and are accelerating the rate at which natural disasters are taking place. World Soil Day 2022 campaigned to raise awareness of the importance of maintaining healthy ecosystems and human well-being by addressing the growing challenges in soil management, increasing soil awareness and encouraging governments to take action.

The loss of nutrients within soil proves to be detrimental to the world's population, where this degradation is recognized as one of the most global critical problems regarding food security and sustainability.

According to the UN's Food and Organisation, 95% of our food comes from soils. By 2050, we, as humans, will be in danger if agricultural production does not rise by 60% before this. Proper soil management could easily prevent the world's population from starving.

'Keep soil alive, protect soil biodiversity' was the theme of this year's World Soil Day, and 780 events took place around the world to spread awareness, reaching around 820 million people.

Pope Francis speaks out about the importance of maintaining the soil in 'Laudato si', where he stresses that "soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God."

He calls on Christians to take action and believes that it is a sin to do otherwise: "For human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life - these are sins."

Peace to the World *by Peter*

POPE Francis has met 6,000 schoolchildren and teachers and expressed his belief in achieving peace across the globe, following in the footsteps of, in his words, "modern day prophets" such as Pope St John XXIII, Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi.

Throughout history, there were many prophets and peacemakers around the world that achieved the main goal of peace in politics and war.

As an island, peace was achieved in Northern Ireland by many key people, such as David Trimble and John Hume, and others from even outside of the country, like Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, as they came together to try and end the violence and ruction that people have lived through for four decades.

These leaders weren't just inspired by other peacemakers in history, but by Jesus' teachings and actions towards others that didn't believe in Him and God. Like many of these peacemakers believed in, Jesus believed that war or violence was never the

answer to solving a problem or achieving anything people desired the most. In his teachings, forgiveness was the word that He used most often to bring people together and forget the troubled and unsettling past that people fought over. A teaching in the Bible that sticks out for me the most is Jesus' encounter with the greedy tax collector, Zacchaeus, who often took money from the extreme poorest people, which made him a hated person within society. Jesus showed his bravery by talking to him and showing him that by his greedy actions, he's treating others poorly and unfairly in taking what they need to survive. Zacchues showed that he was truly sorry for what he had done to others, and Jesus forgave him for his actions and ended the dispute.

Through these teachings, many people within our society have learned how to put aside differences with others and accept different views people have, to prevent violence and arguments from happening.



Today, unfortunately, war is still happening in many parts of the world, such as in Ukraine, over political views and beliefs people have of one another. Many organisations are helping people to get to safety and provide food for those in the middle of conflict, as many governments across the world come together to find solutions to achieve peace in war zones, and send aid and peacemakers to countries affected by them.

This Christmas, we must think of families that are stuck in war zones and have no shelter or food and forced to flee. We must also

keep in mind those who are doing all that they can to help and aid people in war zones across the world, especially peacemakers and many organisations that are putting their lives at risk on the war front, aiming that one day peace will be achieved as Jesus guides them to achieving that goal.

And we must think of those that are fighting in war, that they may show forgiveness and set aside of their political or religious differences.

We keep all of them in our prayers this Christmas.

Spreading the Love at Christmas *by Bronagh*

THE magic of Christmas has begun. The Nativity plays have hit show time and the Christmas cheer is everywhere. Not for everyone though; children in over 160 countries would not experience the magic of Christmas without the help of Samaritans Purse: Operation Christmas Child.

Samaritans Purse is a non-denominational Christian organisation providing aid to people in the poorest countries ravaged with war, poverty, natural disaster, disease, and famine. Their main motivation is spreading the love of God to others. God taught us to live like Him, and His Son died for us, giving up His life, so Samaritans Purse urges us to give up some time and create a gift for a child.

Samaritans Purse has helped over 186 million children in over 160 countries experience the love and happiness of Christmas time in a world filled of war, poverty,

and disaster. (Samaritan's Purse 2022).

It has outstanding support from people across the UK, all volunteering to pack shoe boxes, purchase items and deliver shoe boxes.

Every year, since primary one, my family has taken part in the Operation Christmas Child project, and it always marked the beginning of Christmas for my family.

We used to source the shoeboxes, often keeping them from throughout the year for this purpose, and go shopping; picking items that we thought the children who would receive the boxes would like, choosing toys, pencils, crayons, colouring books, teddys and hats, and scarves, etc.

Then it came to packing the boxes and handing them into school. This was always a visual reminder of how supported Operation Christmas Child is, even from the most rural parts

of Northern Ireland, as the boxes were stacked high in the foyer.

Each year, around 2,000 schools in the UK, take part in operation Christmas Child, packing thousands of shoeboxes to send to countries around the world to children who would not, without the help of Samaritans Purse, receive anything at Christmas.

Then it was over to Samaritans Purse to distribute the boxes. Several church groups volunteer

to travel with the boxes to distribute them in various countries.

In 2020, children in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Central Asia received 265,975 shoeboxes. In 2022, the boxes will be going to countries such as Belarus, Albania, Nigeria, Moldova, Serbia, and central Asia, to put a smile on the faces of the children (Samaritans Purse 2022).



"The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" is the great gift Christmas offers to us *by John*

THE 2022nd Year of Our Lord has been for me quite a novel year. In general, it seems pretty normal, but relative to the last couple of years, 2022 may seem a bit odd. Nevertheless, the first highlight of the new Liturgical Year approaches - Christmas.

Christmas, the days preceding and succeeding it are days of great jubilation and excitement for me and others. Decorating

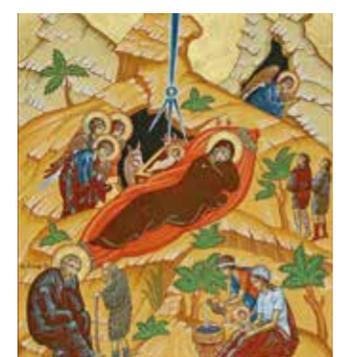
our homes with lights, putting up the Christmas tree and buying presents, are all things that many families usually do as they prepare for the big holiday. People book flights, make food, and gather as big families to celebrate the end of the year through this great holiday.

Whilst many look forward to Santa Claus and Christmas dinner, we often forget the

primary focus of Christmas, Jesus.

"The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us"; that's the great gift Christmas offers to us, and yet many among us choose to neglect this wonderful mystery. That's their choice.

But this year, I believe it is time to change, to be radical, and to go back to the roots of what Christmas is meant to be. To



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return to God the Father and celebrate the wonderful gift that He gave to this world, 'His begotten son' – Jesus.

This year may have given us many obstacles, but in my eyes, they are only challenges to overcome, and I think that it is the best way to look at it.

As an Eastern Catholic, it is quite traditional for us to prepare for Christmas, during the season of Advent, by abstaining from certain foods, praying more regularly, and giving more to charity, just like one would do as if it were Lent.

Instead of preparing for Christmas, by the usual overindulgence and commercialisation which has

overtaken our homes and our cities, this year, it would not only make financial sense but spiritual sense, to wait and to prepare for the baby in the manger through these spiritual means.

The experience of forgoing something dear to you, to talk to God more often and to help those in need, each year during Advent allowed me to better understand the mystery behind Christmas. And there could be no better time than this year to start this new tradition of preparing for Christmas like you would for Easter.

And when Christmas comes, enjoy it, and remember the reason for it, Christ, who is always with us.



Thank God for our school Oratory and chaplain so we can have morning Mass *by Evan*

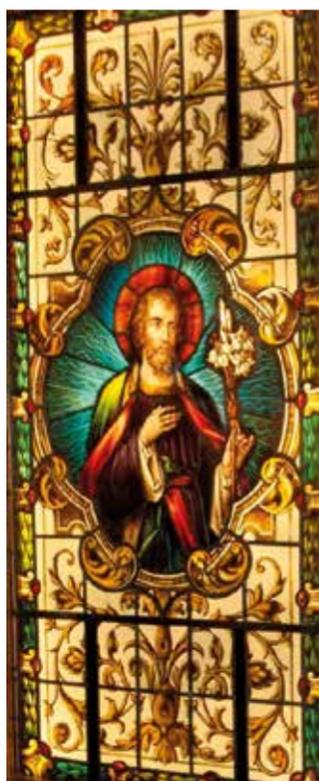
THE sacrifice of the Mass is the central act of worship for any Catholic, and it is very special that at my school, St Joseph's Boys School, we have an Oratory.

Having this sacred space allows pupils to sit in the presence of God and reflect outside of the classroom.

Our Oratory is extra special due to the origin of a few things within it. For example, our Altar and Tabernacle belonged to the late Dr Edward Daly, Bishop of Derry, and our stained glass window depicting St Joseph, our Patron Saint, was donated by the Sisters of Mercy.

This is a great example of community spirit and of God working through those who helped St Joseph's pursue their dream of having this overdue Oratory.

We have Mass every Tuesday morning at 8.30 am, which I set up for and read at. Our celebrant for the morning Mass is our school chaplain, Fr Roni, who we are so blessed to have. He has been very dedicated to the School, alongside Deacon Michael McCaul, who is a member of our newly formed Liturgy team, and who will be ordained in January 2023.



Without them, we couldn't have our Tuesday morning Mass, as if there is no priest there is no Mass, and if there is no Mass there is no Eucharist. So, we are thankful to God for blessing us with them and our Oratory.

St Joseph's Boys' Jesse tree spurred great interest in Jesus' family tree

YEAR 8 students in St Joseph's Boys' School, Derry, celebrated Advent this year in a wonderfully creative way along with their teachers.

During one of the School's liturgy team meetings, Deacon Michael McCaul suggested creating a Jesse Tree as a way of preparing for Advent by journeying through the stories on Jesus' family tree.

Each day of Advent, Year 8 read a Bible story about someone on Jesus' family tree and hung an ornament symbolizing the story on the Jesse Tree.

As they decorated the tree, they saw how God prepared for Jesus to be born through many generations.

In an extra incentive to the project to celebrate Christmas, every class in Year 8 was given the opportunity to win a sustainable bike, reconditioned by Monica Downey and her team from Zero Waste.

The boys wasted no time creating work using techniques involving Minecraft with Mr Hegarty, laser cutting with Mrs Hagan, construction and languages with Mrs Meehan, and stain glass effect with Mrs McDermott. The results were fabulous!

The competition was judged by Bishop Donal and the winners were: Jack 853; Josh 807; Michael 820; Tiernan 821; and Samuel 846.



Dungiven and Killygordon Golden Jubilee celebrations for Fr Seamus Kelly

MASSES of thanksgiving for the 50th anniversary of Fr Seamus Kelly's ordination to the priesthood have been celebrated in his home parish of Killygordan and in Dungiven, where he serves as parish priest.

Both churches where the Masses were celebrated are dedicated to St Patrick, and our national Patron Saint was, no doubt, smiling down upon the people of faith who filled the pews in gratitude for the faithful ministry of the Golden Jubilarian.

Bishop Donal celebrated the Mass in St Patrick's Church, Dungiven, and remarked afterwards to 'The Net': "It is always good to look back with gratitude when we have anniversaries to celebrate. This year, we celebrate the Golden Jubilee of a number of priests who have served around the diocese since 1972. They have had to cope with huge challenges and changes.

"I thank God for the grace and the people that have sustained Fr

Seamus Kelly and other priests over the last five decades. Because we celebrate God's faithfulness in the past, we can face the future with trust and confidence."

The Dungiven ceremony began with a tribute from parishioner, Liam Begley, representing the Parish Pastoral Council, who spoke of having known Fr Seamus for almost 60 years after first meeting as boarders in St Columb's College in the 1960s.

"He had the same gentle nature, commitment to task and devilish sense of humour that he has today," noted Liam, adding: "I know he wants no eulogising so suffice to say that we, who have known him during his two tenures in Dungiven Parish, have been truly blessed. We have had the benefit of his wise counsel, his spiritual, emotional and temporal support and his unique delivery of matters liturgical."

Thanking Fr Seamus for his "amazing service", he continued: "We ask God to bless you with continued good health and

happiness, and we pray that you have many more years' fruitful ministry in our parish."

Following the celebration of Mass, Dr Eugene McElhinney, of the Parish Pastoral Council, invited pupils and their teachers representing the seven schools in the parish to come forward to present small gifts of appreciation to Fr Seamus, for his chaplaincy work and help in preparing children for their First Holy Communion and Confirmation. He then invited Sr Ethna McDermott, an iconographer from Derry whose late father, Michael had been from Dungiven, to present Fr Seamus with an Icon of Our Lady of Tenderness that had been created by local parishioner, Patrick McMacken, who was unable to attend the ceremony.

Thanking everyone for their cards, gifts and best wishes, Fr Seamus took the opportunity to share some of his priesthood story before inviting everyone to join him and some members

of his family in St Canice's GAA Clubhouse for refreshments.

The following morning, Fr Seamus concelebrated Mass with Fr Patsy Arkinson, PP Donaghmore, in St Patrick's Church, Crossroads, Killygordon, where he had been ordained by Bishop Eugene O'Doherty 50 years ago.

Speaking at the end, Fr Patsy offered hearty congratulations to Fr Seamus on behalf of the people of his home parish, and wished him many more years' good health to enjoy priesthood.



Celebrating 50 years of priesthood...

Fr Seamus Kelly shares how experiencing Jesus' great love led to wanting to share it with others

CELEBRATING the Golden Jubilee of his ordination to priesthood, Fr Seamus Kelly has taken up the invitation to share the story of his vocation with readers of 'The Net', revealing not only the richness of his ministry over the past 50 years, but also a rich and beautiful faith steadily nourished over the seven decades of his life to date.

The Co Donegal native was born on April 18, 1948, into a family steeped in the Catholic faith. His late parents, James and Sally (nee McHale from Castlederg) passed on their strong faith to the young Seamus and his older brother, Patrick, in the family home in the townland of Ballyard, Killygordon.

While Patrick's love of farming ensured the family farm was in good hands for the future, their mother often expressed the hope that her youngest son would want to follow the pathway to priesthood, saying: "That would be one for the Church and one for the farm." However, she always made sure to let her second born know that that decision would be his.

"I was very close to my mother, and she was a big influence on my faith," remarked Fr Seamus, adding: "When I was a very young child I wanted to be Pope. Then when I was a bit older, I thought about how there is only one Pope in the whole world, so I decided that I would be a bishop."

"My uncles had gone through college with Eugene O'Doherty, who became the Bishop of Dromore, Neil Farren who became the Bishop of Derry, and Anthony McFeely, who became the Bishop of Raphoe, and were friendly with them. When I was a child, Bishop O'Doherty would have come to stay in our house. He would have said Mass with us and I would have served at it. All of this would have influenced me in those days."

"I also had a first cousin, Pat Kelly, a priest in the Liverpool Diocese who died recently, and

a cousin, Patrick Kelly from Morecambe, who went on to become an Archbishop of Liverpool and is now retired. They would have stayed in our house during the war, so we were very close."

As a 10-year-old, Fr Seamus went to stay with his aunts in Castlederg for a year to experience the education system in the North.

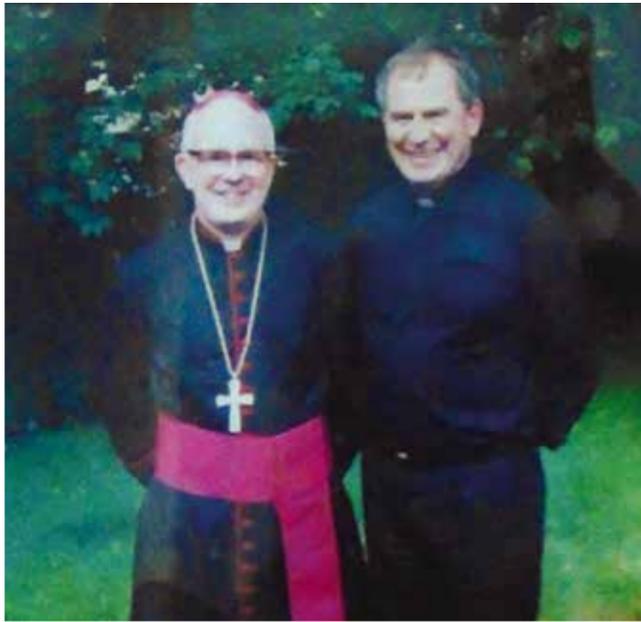
He explained: "One of my aunts was the principal of a school in Aghyaran, in Tullycar. She was an amazing teacher. If you wanted to be a priest for the Diocese of Derry you had to go to a minor seminary school, which was St Columb's. We were in Donegal, at the edge of the Derry Diocese, so I went up to stay with my aunts for a year to get used to the Northern system. They were very religious people and so I would have been influenced by them as well."

Speaking about his faith life later as a boarder in St Columb's, which he attended from 1960, Fr Seamus said: "I was always very devotional, and would have prayed a lot as a child and when I was in the College. I enjoyed my own company and went to Mass any time I could, as my mother always went to Mass."

"In my second last year in College, I thought about if I really wanted to go into the priesthood. I probably would have gone into electronics only the thought of priesthood was always there."

"I remember a number of priests would come along to advertise their different religious orders. One said that if any of you are thinking of being a priest then try to be a holy priest. That stuck in my head, as he did not try to get us to join his particular Order."

Recalling that the boarder food had not been good in St Columb's, he shared how this led to a Lenten practice that helped him to grow in his relationship with Jesus: "We would get a package every week or fortnight from home. During Lent, we hardly ever went off sweets or crisps as, if we had,



Fr Seamus and his cousin, the now retired Archbishop of Liverpool, Patrick Kelly.

we would have starved. So, some of us did the Stations of the Cross for Lent. We had supper at 6.30 pm and were free from 7-7.30 pm, and in that half hour of break, I and a number of other fellas went to the chapel to do the Stations.

"One time, in 5th Year, it was well into Lent, and I was looking at the Second Station when I had an experience in my heart that Jesus was no longer historically present but was with me. I felt a great love. It was an amazing experience. I sat down in the seat for a while to think about it. Then the bell went to go back to study and I had to fly around to finish the rest of the Stations."

"That intimate experience of God drew me towards priesthood and I put my name in for the Diocese. I wanted to be a priest before I had that experience of love from Jesus and I wanted to bring it to other people."

Fr Seamus went on to share another experience that he felt confirmed his priesthood, when Latin was required to get into Maynooth in those days and he couldn't "make head nor tail" of the language.

He recalled: "I got something like 29 out of 100 in O'Level, so I

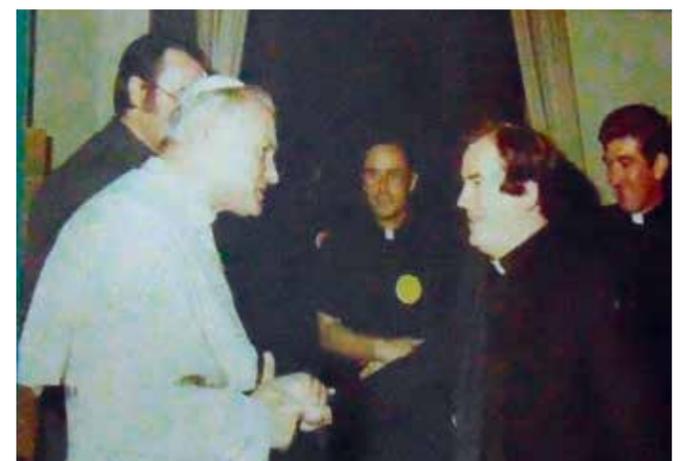
went to Fr Paddy McGoldrick and he helped me, but when I repeated the exam my mark went down to 23. You had to do a translation of Latin for the Bishop's exam, so I was coming to the realisation that I probably couldn't go to Maynooth, when someone said that you could do a Matriculation exam, so I thought about this."

"Bishop Farren sent for me. He said you want to be a priest. Then he told me that he had decided to send me to Rome, where Latin wasn't needed. God works in mysterious ways."

Rome

Going on to talk about his time in Rome, he said: "When I first arrived there I knew nobody. I went into a Church and I said, 'Lord, I know you and it is wonderful to be here'. The experience of Jesus being with me was still there."

"I was in Rome for six years. We went to the Lateran University and the lectures were mostly in Latin and Italian, but I had good notes in English. I did my BPh in the first two years and then my BD in the second and, during the last two years, I studied Sacred Theology and completed my STL."



Fr Seamus meeting Pope John Paul II.



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I was praying about the exam for this as it was a big exam.

"The exams then were all oral, which was unusual, and you went to the different subject professors. That day, the Professors allowed us to do the oral in English, although some of the Professors did not have good English. Also that day I got a 'Quidvis', which means speak on your favourite topic. In most of the subjects, I got the second highest in the class. It was amazing how things worked out for me."

Saying that he loved his time in Rome, Fr Seamus continued: "We were up very early in the morning, 5.30 am, for meditation and Morning Prayer. I was always a good riser and so the others asked me to get them up. We used to take a lunch with us and go on walks out to the hill towns around Rome and went to different churches, and we went on holidays to other countries as well."

During his time in Rome, he got the opportunity to travel to Austria to support his older brother who was representing Ireland there in the European Young Farmers' Task Competition, and ended up getting first place for tractor reversing.

"There were farmers there from all over Europe and Austria," he recalled, "and I became good friends with those I stayed with during that week. I decided to learn German, which I studied in Rome, and went back to visit them. Then, in my last year, I decided to go and work in Germany in a takeaway service and learnt a lot more of the language."

Ordained on April 5, 1972, by Bishop Eugene O'Doherty in his home parish Church of St Patrick in Killygordon, Fr Seamus went back to Rome to do his STL degree exams that June.

The year following his ordination, Fr Seamus' mother died and he recalled a special experience while visiting a church in Lisieux sometime after that.

"My mother had a huge devotion to St Therese," he said, "and did the Novena every year and she always got a rose. Once she was in hospital for it and so got no rose, but my father went to visit her with a box of chocolates and when she opened it there was a picture of a rose. There was another time that she got no rose

on the Feast Day, and when she went into the bedroom that night to go to bed there was a wonderful smell of roses.

"So it was very special when I stepped into a church during a visit to Lisieux and a woman there handed me a rose. I just felt that it was from my mother, who had died the year after I was ordained."

Fond of St Therese himself, Fr Seamus added: "I read her book and what she told about her great love for Jesus blew me away. So my early days in the priesthood were blessed with great consolation and prayer. It got darker as life went on but I received blessings."

Recalling that he had the summer free after his ordination, he said: "I ended up working on the farm and my first job as a priest was spreading slurry. I was 24.

"I got my first appointment after Christmas. There were so many newly ordained priests for positions at that time, so I went to ask Bishop Farren about getting work somewhere else, like the Dublin Diocese, but he sent me to Bellaghy, where the PP was Johnny Carlin. He had been curate in my home parish so my family knew him."

Commenting on the three-and-a-half years he spent in Bellaghy, which he loved, he said: "They had never seen a young priest before in their lives. While there, I set up the scouts and became chaplain to the Legion of Mary branch that had been started by Sr Eileen McElhone.

"When I was in Rome I heard about charismatics and a few priests got together to have charismatic prayer. So, when I heard that there was going to be an international charismatic conference in the RDS in Dublin, I asked the Legion of Mary members to come with me.

"There was hand clapping, singing and praising the Lord, and some of the ladies said that they weren't interested in that. However, we were booked in for the three days with accommodation etc all paid for, so we stayed and found that as time went on we all got into it and the Holy Spirit started moving in us. We prayed the Rosary as prayerful as we ever had.

"I wanted to start up a charismatic prayer group in the parish, but when I mentioned it to Fr Martin in Portglenone, he said to start it there, and it is still going."

Adding that he first met his housekeeper, Martina, at the Bellaghy Legion of Mary, he said: "I had been in the house on my own and Fr Carlin said that I needed a housekeeper. I said that I was a good cook and didn't need a housekeeper, but he said the problem was that people were coming to my house and I was never there, so they always then were coming to his house.

"I thought about it. Martina had been a hairdresser and cut my hair. She was very close to Sr Eileen and had been interested in religious life. She wanted a break from hairdressing so she said that she would give it a go when I asked if she would like to be my housekeeper, and is 48 years with me now. She is my Anam Cara (soul friend) and we do a Holy Hour and Divine Office every day."

Creggan

After Bellaghy, Fr Seamus was appointed to Creggan, where he joined Fr Frank O'Hagan, Fr Declan Boland and the PP, Fr George McLaughlin.

Sharing his memory of arriving in Creggan, he said: "There was a phone call about a mortar bomb planted close to the parochial house and that we had to leave. I decided that I wasn't leaving and the mortar bomb was defused. A lot of time was taken up with the Troubles. There are many traumatic stories about that."

Fr Seamus started a charismatic prayer meeting and the Legion of Mary while he was there, and found that a lot of young people attended them because he was young.

He remarked: "I have noticed that a priest tends to draw people of his own age. I was also chaplain to a huge youth club there. We used to go camping and on other trips with young leaders. I was invited to join a new Search Youth Group after a few people came over from America to talk about it and lead the first weekend in Buncrana.

"There were the usual Masses to do and a few schools/classes each to look after in the parish. From the prayer meeting I formed a school retreat team, made up of 10 lay people and three priests. There were live testimonies and some were very dramatic. These retreats were so powerful."

After 11 years in Creggan, Fr Seamus said that he felt he needed a change, so took three months out to go on a renewal course in Navan.

"Part of it was a directed silent retreat, which was a new experience," he recalled, adding: "I enjoyed it, and when I came back from that Bishop Daly asked me if I would go to Dungiven, where Mgr Austen Duffy was PP."

Recalling that period, he said: "There was a charismatic prayer meeting in Dungiven before I arrived, so I went to that. I started

the scouts and went camping with them, and the Girl Guides were already going, so I was involved with them as well. I was also very involved with the schools and started the Search Youth Group up in that parish too, and in Maghera and a number of other places.

"I then got a message from Bishop Hegarty to say that there was a new parish starting in Culmore and he wanted me to be PP there; that was 26 years ago. I was 15 years in Culmore and set up a Search Youth Group there too. It was a very good group. We took them away to retreats in Donegal, where we had midnight Mass and a BBQ on Stroove Beach.

"I remember a young lad from our Search Group came to me to say that he was interested in priesthood. I told him to come back to me in a year if he still wanted to be a priest. It was Daniel McFaul and he came back to me and I mentored him. He went to Maynooth and I journeyed with him all the way. We are still very close friends."

During his time in Culmore, Fr Seamus was asked to be the Diocesan Lourdes Pilgrimage Director by Bishop Seamus Hegarty. He undertook this role for five years, and started bringing young people there on pilgrimage with the help of Lumen Christi teacher and chaplain, Stephen Doherty.

With the help of the Pastoral Council in Culmore, Fr Seamus started weekly house visitations, where he brought the Blessed Sacrament around houses, led 15-20 minutes of prayer and gave a blessing. Very fond of Liturgy, he also introduced readers, Eucharistic Ministers, and Adult altar servers, and set up a voluntary choir and folk group.

He added: "I had a lot of plans for a new church in Culmore and we had started saving for it, but then I was asked to go to Ballinascreen by Bishop Hegarty.

"In 2015, Bishop Donal asked me to go back to Dungiven. It was very hard to leave Ballinascreen but it was good to be back in Dungiven, and I hope to keep going in my ministry here depending on my health.

"The priesthood for me has been a very happy life. I would do it again and I would encourage others to do it. It is a sacrifice and I had my difficulties, but I got through them. I was blessed to have Martina with me."



Derry Syro-Malabar community gather to celebrate Catechism anniversary and Parish Day



Fr Dr Joshy Parokkaran, chaplain to the Derry Syro-Malabar Community.

THE Catechism anniversary and Parish Day of St Mary's Syro-Malabar community in the Diocese of Derry was celebrated with much enthusiasm on November 26, in Lisneal College, Waterside.

The celebration began with a thanksgiving Holy Qurbana (Holy Eucharist) acknowledging God's many blessings to the community. Rev Fr Dr Joshy Parokkaran, Chaplain of the Syro-Malabar Community, Derry, and curate at St Columb's Church, Waterside, presided over the Holy Qurbana.

In his homily, Fr Joshy mentioned that every annual celebration is an occasion to look into the past and to thank the Lord, as the Psalmist says, "I will give thanks to you,

Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds" (Ps 9:1).

At the same time, he added that it is also a day to look into the future with hope, as the prophet Jeremiah declares, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jer 29:11).

The celebration of Holy Qurbana was followed by the public meeting. Rt Rev Bishop Donal McKeown, Rev Fr Dr Joshy Parokkaran, Mr Joseph Chierian Kalayil, Mr Sojan Cyriac Puthenpurayil, Mr Joseph Augustine Kariyapurayidom, and Mr Joemon Joseph Madathamcheril were present for the public meeting.

The prayer song by the Catechism teachers marked the opening of the public meeting. In the presidential address, Rev Fr Dr Joshy Parokkaran reminded the community of the need to be the real witness of Jesus wherever they are planted, through the practice of their Catholic faith and tradition. He also lauded and appreciated the relentless efforts of the Catechism teachers.

The presidential address was followed by the inauguration of the public meeting by Rt Rev Bishop Donal McKeown. In his inaugural speech, the bishop appreciated and remarked on the

vibrant faith and rich tradition of the Syro-Malabar community in the Diocese of Derry.

He exhorted the community to preserve, deepen, and hand over the rich heritage of the Syro-Malabar faith and tradition to the coming generation. Moreover, he added that the Syro-Malabar community should be a witnessing model.

The inaugural speech was followed by the presentation of the annual report by Mr Joseph Augustine, Catechism headmaster. In the annual report, Mr Joseph appreciated the efforts that the parents put in bringing children for Catechism classes. He also stated that the parents have to shoulder a collective responsibility of leading their children in the right direction.

The annual report was followed by the felicitation speech by Mr Joemon Joseph, who wished God's continued blessing for the community.

The felicitation speech was followed by the words of acknowledgment and appreciation to outgoing trustees: Mr Joseph Chierian Kalayil; Mr Sojan Cyriac Puthenpurayil; and council members.

The new trustees, Mr Jolly Joseph Vandanaath and Mr Anil Thomas Ellimoottil, Council secretary, Mrs Maria Ranjeevan Mattathinanickal, and all council

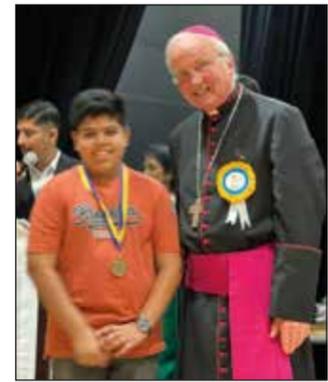
members, were congratulated and wished God's blessing. The new office bearers were symbolically handed over the responsibilities by Bishop Donal.

The couples who celebrated 25 years of married life were also congratulated and acknowledged. The children and adults who won prizes in various competitions conducted by the Catechism department were awarded by Bishop Donal.

Soon after the prize distribution, the children, as well as the adults, performed various talents that wonderfully embellished the day. The stage performance was followed by the vote of thanks by Mr Joseph Chierian Kalayil. Bishop Donal then graced the dinner and the community, along with the bishop, enjoyed a sumptuous dinner.

The Syro-Malabar community continues its journey while remembering the words of St John Paul II: "You have not only a glorious history to remember and to count, but also a great history to be accomplished. You have to look into the future where the spirit of God is sending you in order to do even greater things."

Relying fully in the providence and love of God, may the Syro-Malabar community continue to be inspired by the past to involve in the present, and to initiate into the future.





St Joseph's Hall welcome for all visiting Omagh Crib Festival



With his brother, Finbar, mother, and uncles, Pius and Leo Devine, his Aunt Ella Devine, cousin, Bobby Devine, and brother, Cathal.



With members of his Novitiate Group - Ciaran Egan, member of the Oratorians, Fr Columba Toman OP, and Fr Peter O'Kane, Derry Diocese.

Following a life of prayer, Adoration and ongoing conversion...

Dungiven's Bro Ruaidhri Grieve ordained to Diaconate with Dominicans

FORMER Dungiven parishioner, Ruaidhri Grieve has been ordained to the Diaconate six years after having joined the Irish Dominicans.

The 44-year-old is one of a set of triplet boys born to Mary and Christy Grieve. Members of the family travelled to the Dominican St Saviour's Church in Dublin on Saturday, November 26, to share in the joy of his ordination as deacon by Bishop Eamon Walsh.

Reflecting on the life of prayer and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament that has helped guide him on the pathway to priesthood, Ruaidhri expressed appreciation of the strong faith of his grandparents and mother that was influential in the formation of his faith in his childhood and youth.

Educated in Carnhill Primary School, Derry, from P1-3 and then Termoncanice PS, Limavady, from P4-P7, before moving on to St Patrick's College, in Maghera, he recalled one particular teacher who had left a deep impression on him in his senior primary school years regarding his faith.

"I remember my primary school teacher, Lawrence McCreanor mentioning how he prayed and that has stayed with me. There was just something about the way he expressed his faith," remarked Ruaidhri.

Another influential experience was a visit by the SMA Fathers when he was a student at St Patrick's, Maghera.

"They gave us a prayer for Vocations, which is one of the prayers that I still say today," said Ruaidhri, adding: "I also loved praying from the prayer book that I received for my Confirmation.

"All of this had a quiet impact on me, as well as my mother's uncle being a priest, the late Fr Robert Devine, and the people in my parish, such as those who read."

On leaving St Pat's Maghera, he went to study Physics at Queens University, in Belfast, and got involved with the chaplaincy there.

"I was probably in my 20s when I first thought about priesthood," he recalled, adding: "My faith ebbed and flowed as I searched for the truth, which is probably one of the reasons I was attracted to the Dominicans. The thought of priesthood stayed with me and grew, as prayer led to conversion and God became first in my life."

Having worked for a period and completed his PhD in Melting Behaviour in Two-Dimensional Crystals, while keeping in touch with the Vocations director for the Derry Diocese, Ruaidhri took the step of entering the seminary for the Diocese.

He recalled: "I went to St Joseph's, which was attached to St

Malachy's College, in Belfast, and did some of my studies at Queens and some at St Malachy's, as well as modules in St Mary's.

"I did this for about two years and then took time out. I decided to do a teaching diploma and went on to teach Science for about five years in St Patrick's Maghera. I then decided to join the Dominicans and have never looked back.

"I did think about religious life before I went for Diocesan priesthood, but I thought it was too much of a big step. However, that changed when I found that religious life suited my personality better."

During his time out of the seminary, Ruaidhri found Eucharistic Adoration very helpful in his discernment process, and he is thankful for the opportunity he had to be involved in the Eucharistic Adoration Committees both at parish and Diocesan level.

Path

Reflecting on his joining the Dominicans, Ruaidhri remarked: "It is the people that God puts in your path. I had met more Dominicans than any other religious order, and found them less daunting than the Jesuits.

"I also had some interest as a teacher, and from my physics background, in the influential Italian Dominican, Thomas Aquinas and the clarity of his method of thought, his belief that faith and reason aren't contradictory. He also had a great devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.

"I found that the Dominican way of life suited my personality better. They have an idealistic view of things, and put great emphasis on Grace and Salvation being a gift from God, and giving thanks for that through praise."

He continued: "It is a life-long journey to grow and change and to learn to cooperate with Grace and give thanks for that journey of life through Creation and revelation. The Rosary is a big part of that. Rosary and Eucharistic Adoration is that expression of finding time."

Ruaidhri entered the Dominicans in 2016, and while he took the religious name, Brother Canice, he prefers to go by the name, Brother Ruaidhri. He spent a year in the Novitiate in Cork before moving to the Dominican Studium at St Saviour's in Dublin, where he studied Theology and lived with the community in the St Saviour's Priory, on Dominick Street. He also did pastoral placement.

"After I finished my theology study, I did Clinical Pastoral Education in the Mater Hospital.

I did two units there and some placement time in St James," said Ruaidhri, adding: "Then I got ready for the Diaconate and living in community."

Following his ordination to the Diaconate, he has been officially assigned to Holy Cross, in Tralee, which is a Dominican public Church in the Parish of St John's.

Commenting on this, Ruaidhri said: "I will be in Tralee at least six months until my ordination. I am doing some preaching and assisting at Mass, as well as helping with community life. I hope to start pastoral placement, maybe in a hospital or a school."

Saying that being ordained a deacon had felt somewhat daunting, he added: "I tend to worry, but I am getting used to the idea of being a deacon and to the new role. I was a bit nervous about preaching but I like it. So it is just getting used to that."

"I have more free time at the moment, so that gives me more time to put into preparing sermons. But as time becomes less free, it will be more difficult, so I am trying to practice that skill of preparing homilies.

"I am also aware of being from the North and now in Co Kerry, so I have to ensure that people in the congregation will be able to understand me. So far, it is going ok and the people have been very kind."

Ruaidhri is also aware of the promise to lead a life of prayer, saying: "I need to remain conscious of the commitment that I have made and be faithful to living that. The groundwork has been laid for me at this stage, but I have to continue on that path and way of life.

"It is very easy to get into a rut; that is part of human life, so it is about staying awake to the Christian way of life, but in a particular way being conscious of that."

Offering advice for anyone thinking of a vocation to priesthood or religious life, he said: "Stay close to the Lord through personal prayer and reading Scripture carefully. Sharing faith with others was important to me and helped me to grow and to change. It is not always easy but it is worth it, and always thank God for things."

There are currently 12 Brothers in the Dominican Studium, including Darren McGlinchey from Limavady.

Saying that he missed home from time to time, with modern communication being a great advantage to staying in touch more but not being the same as being present with loved ones, Ruaidhri is looking forward to spending a few days at home in Dungiven over the Christmas period.



Ruaidhri being congratulated by Fr Anthony Kavanagh OP



Bishop Eamon Walsh, Fr Joseph Dineen OP, Prior, Ruaidhri, and Bro Benedict OP

Celebrating 40 years of priesthood, Fr Patsy Arkinson shares the story of his vocation which was encouraged on hearing...

You don't need to be holy to be a priest... all you need is a willingness



Fr Patrick Arkinson PP Donaghmore, Co Donegal

EARLIER this year, Fr Patsy Arkinson celebrated the 40th anniversary of his ordination to priesthood amongst the parishioners of Donaghmore, in Co Donegal, whom he has served faithfully for the last 21 years.

Blessed to have Net Youth Ministries based nearby in Ballybofey, Fr Patsy's Ruby Jubilee Year has been made all the more special with another blessing... the arrival of the Home of the Mother Servant Sisters, who have taken up residence in the newly refurbished Parochial House at Crossroads, Killygordon.

Reflecting on his vocation, the 65-year-old noted that his parents, Mary and the late Jim Arkinson, had been the biggest influence on his faith formation growing up in the family home in Castleberg, where he was the eldest of seven children; three boys and four girls.

It was during his time as a student at the Christian Brothers' School in Omagh that the quiet thoughts he had of possibly going for priesthood, where strengthened.

"Occasionally, a priest would come to the school to talk about vocations," recalled Fr Patsy, "It was an excuse for me and others to get out of class, but one particular talk by a Vincentian priest stood out for me.

"During his talk, he said: 'You don't need to be holy to be a priest; all you need is a willingness.' This line stuck with me."

He continued: "When our priest at home at the time, Fr Tom Devine, died, I remember thinking that if people did not step forward, who was going to fill in when priests died. And that was what really influenced me in entering the priesthood, and I felt that God could use whatever gifts I had in my life as a priest."

In his final year at the Christian Brothers, he had applied to study Accountancy at Queen's University, in Belfast, and was accepted, however, while he had taken up the Accountancy degree offer, he continued to feel drawn to the priesthood and ended up going to Maynooth instead, in September 1975.

He recalled: "I didn't really discuss it with my parents as I wanted it to be my decision, and I also didn't want any fuss if I decided to opt out.

"In the seminary in Maynooth, you have a spiritual director to bounce off. My spiritual director was a Vincentian, and I would have talked with him every so often. At times, you would wonder 'should I or should I not', but the advice was that if you felt calm about it, then it was right."

Fr Patsy's memories are of an enjoyable time in Maynooth, where he followed up his love of running and found that he benefitted from the discipline involved in that for his life as a priest.

He was ordained by Bishop Edward Daly in St Patrick's Church, Castleberg, on June 6, 1982; the same month as his classmates, Eamon Graham, Noel McDermott, Michael Porter and John Meehan were ordained for the Derry Diocese.

Following his ordination, Fr Patsy spent a year ministering in Malin, then moved to Creggan for seven years, from 1983-1990, and onto Melmount from 1990-2001, before arriving in the Parish of Donaghmore in 2001 as curate. Seven years later, in 2008, he was appointed as parish priest on Fr Robert Devine's retirement.

Commenting on his experience of priesthood, Fr Patsy said: "People have been very good willed towards the office of priesthood, and that is what amazes me. I have been the recipient of tremendous goodwill and respect, and have some good friendships from people I have met along the way."

He added: "I have no regrets about entering the priesthood, but if I was to re-run the course I would do some things differently, such as setting boundaries. I know I have hurt people and if I could undo that, I would. Unfortunately, I can't.

"I still feel that I should be a priest, though priesthood is not easy. I try to give my best to it. It is certainly a different Church today. The faith will always be the

faith, but the church is a different one from the one I was ordained into. The footfall is not there, but people are very friendly. In all the reality of less faith, the goodwill of people is still there."

And, he noted that the Servant Sisters have also been the recipients of the goodwill of the people since their arrival, and he is hopeful of what their presence will add to the parish, as well as to the Diocese.

"At the moment, the Sisters are trying to find their feet and the people are very good to them," remarked Fr Patsy, adding: "I find a lovely peaceful, calm spirit in



the house when I visit them. They are a prayerful presence amongst us and point to God."

With regards to words of encouragement to anyone considering priesthood, he said:

"My only line to them would be the one that resonated with me... 'You don't need to be holy to be a priest; all you need is a willingness.'"



Fr Patsy with two of the Sr Mary and Sr Ruby of the Servant Sisters who have set up in the Derry Diocese, in the Donaghmore Parish, Co Donegal.

St Joseph's Young Priests' Society praised for enormous service over last 130 years



CELEBRATING the annual Mass for St Joseph's Young Priests' Society in the Derry Diocese, Bishop Donal commended those gathered for their great support of vocations to the priesthood.

Speaking afterwards to 'The Net', the Bishop said: "St Joseph's Young Priests' Society has done an enormous service for the Irish Church in the last 130 years; promoting vocations to the priesthood and supporting those who are in seminary."

"But," he added, "this is also a movement for the sanctification of its members."

He continued: "It was great to be able to join representatives from parishes across the Diocese as the members gathered for their annual Mass and meeting."

"I encourage branches to join in encouraging families to promote vocations from their members, and young men to consider a life depicted to the service of Christ the High Priest."

The Mass and meeting took place on the Feast of Christ The King, Sunday, November 20, in the Carmelite Priory, Termonbacca.

Delegates from the various branches attended the Mass which was concelebrated by Bishop Donal and Fr Daniel McFaul, chaplain of the society. This was followed by the meeting, which was chaired by the Diocesan president, Christina McLaren, who welcomed all present.

Christina spoke of her disappointment that some branches have been inactive since the Covid break. She suggested that if branches were struggling, it would help if they amalgamated with another neighbouring branch, noting that this arrangement works well in the Strabane area.

Remarking that there were a good many parishes in the Diocese with no SJYP groups, Christina said that she had previously written to these in the hope that more branches could be established. She added that she planned to contact these parishes again after the New Year.

A very comprehensive report was given by Annie Mullan, President of the Claudy SJYP branch, and on the previous meetings, from Margaret, Pennyburn, and from Glendermott branches.

Christina gave a report on her recent meetings in Dublin, where the importance of prayer for priests and for Vocations had been emphasised.

Regarding finances, it was stated at the Central Council meeting that bequests were very important. Funds to assist students in formation are generated by yearly subscriptions and from donations by generous benefactors. It was noted that fundraising is more difficult now in branches because many of the members are ageing.

Christina then paid tribute to



Buncrana centenarian, Maureen Farren, now 103 years old, retires from her role in St Joseph's Young Priests' Society

Maureen Farren, of the Buncrana SJYP Branch, who has retired: "Maureen has worked hard in Buncrana and she is now 103. We wish her many blessings and thank her for all her hard work".

The president also informed those present that Headquarters is drawing up an updated Constitution, as required by the

government. She said that the Society was in a healthy financial state and continued to assist students here and overseas.

Following the meeting, tea was enjoyed by all.

The next Diocesan meeting will be held on Sunday, February 12, 2023.

More news of great joy for Derry Diocese!

MORE news of great joy for the Church in the Derry Diocese as we approach the celebration of Christ Our Saviour's birth!

Bishop Donal has announced a few significant dates for our Church, amongst which is the ordination of Deacon Michael McCaul to the priesthood on Friday, January 6, 2023, in St Eugene's Cathedral, at 3 pm.

And before that we will be celebrating the ordination of Stephen Ward, from the parish of Cappagh, in Co Tyrone, as a Deacon in St Columb's Church,

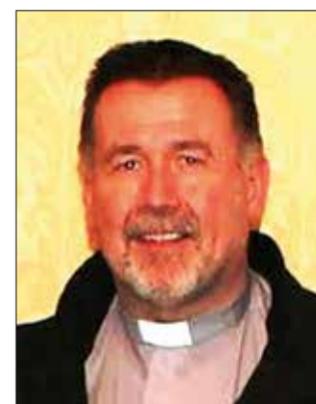
Waterside, on the Feast of the Epiphany, Friday 6 January 2023, at 12 noon.

Then, on Friday, February 10, 2023, the Diocese will welcome its fourth Consecrated Virgin, with Shauna Clifford, from Holy Family Parish, Ballymagroarty, taking vows as a Consecrated Virgin in St Joseph's Church, Galliagh, at 11 am.

In addition, David Stott, from Lavey parish, and Lexie Morrison, from Three Patrons Parish, will be heading off to the Scots College, Salamanca, Spain, in early January

2023, to begin their studies for the priesthood.

Asking that each of the above be kept in our prayers, Vocations director for the Diocese, Fr Pat O'Hagan said: "It's great news for the Diocese. The Diocesan Vocations Council sees all of these, not to mention the number of men currently discerning a vocation to the priesthood for the Diocese, as the fruit of the Year of Prayer for Vocations, which continues until St Patrick's Day next year. Please keep the intention in your prayers."



Fr Pat O'Hagan, Diocesan Vocations' Director.

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If this is of interest to you, please contact the Diocesan Vocations Director, Fr Pat O'Hagan on (+44) 07703444280 or (028) 7938 6452



Bless, in a special way, Your servant Father, Send your Spirit upon him So that he may always walk in the path of faith, hope and love, in the footsteps of Christ, the eternal priest, who offered Himself on the cross for the life of the world. Amen.

Remember in prayer:

- Fr John McDevitt (Dec 1st)
- Fr Micheal McGavigan (2nd)
- Fr Kevin McElhennon (3rd)

Pope's monthly intention

The Holy Father has asked for prayer during December for:

Volunteer not-for-profit organisations:

We pray that volunteer not-for-profit organisations committed to human development find people dedicated to the common good and ceaselessly seek out new paths to international cooperation.

Prayer for Priests

Heavenly Father, I ask you to bless our bishops and priests and to confirm them in their vocation of service.

As they stand before us as ministers of Your Sacraments, may they be channels of the love and compassion of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be served but to serve.

Give them the grace they need to respond generously to you, and the courage to proclaim your Word of justice, love and truth.

- Fr Daniel McFaul (4th)
- Fr Dermot McGirr (5th)
- Dr James McGrory (6th)
- Fr Brian McGoldrick (7th)
- Fr Neil McGoldrick (8th)
- Fr George McLaughlin (9th)
- Fr James McGonagle (10th)
- Fr Edward McGuinness (11th)
- Bishop Donal McKeown (12th)
- Fr Con McLaughlin (13th)
- Fr Peter McLaughlin (14th)
- Fr Anthony Mailey (15th)
- Fr Peter Madden (16th)
- Fr Gerard Mongan (17th)
- Fr Colm O'Doherty (18th)
- Fr Kevin Mullan (19th)
- Fr Patrick O'Hagan (20th)
- Fr Seamus O'Connell (21st)
- Fr Kevin Mulhern (22nd)
- Fr Kieran O'Doherty (23rd)
- Fr Francis O'Hagan (24th)
- Fr David O'Kane (25th)
- Fr Peter O'Kane (26th)
- Fr Arthur O'Reilly (27th)
- Fr Michael Porter (28th)
- Fr Sean O'Donnell (29th)
- Fr Gerard Sweeney (30th)
- Fr Joseph Varghese and Fr John Walsh (31st)



Blessed are the Pure in Heart...

IN December, in the lead up to our celebration of Jesus' birthday, we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, on December 8. Conceived without sin, Mary was immaculate so that she could be the Mother of God's Son.

Reflecting on the complete purity of Mary so that she could bring Our Saviour into this world, a number of people from across the Diocese have shared their thoughts on how we should all strive for purity in thought, word and deed in preparation to receive Jesus in the Eucharist, not only out of respect for His Divine Presence, but also that He may be able to touch more deeply our hearts and so the hearts of those we encounter through the beauty of purity.

Mother Mary points us to Jesus through prayer and the sacraments *by Anne Kelly*

ADVENT, the beginning of the Church Year, is an opportunity to reflect on where we are on our spiritual journey.

Too often we find ourselves caught up with the preparations and excitement of Christmas that we feel overwhelmed.

It is at times like this that the Bible story of Martha and Mary come to mind (Lk 10:41). Martha, with all good intention, was too busy preparing food that she missed quality time with Jesus when He came to visit. Mary, on the other hand, was content to sit at His feet.

It is understandable that we are going to be occupied with daily chores and work, but it is important to find time to develop our faith and relationship with Jesus through daily prayer.

Still wounded by sin, Jesus gave us His body, blood, soul and divinity in the sacrament of the Eucharist. How do we approach this mysterious gift?

Our Blessed Mother Mary is the perfect example of love and obedience to God. The Immaculate Conception teaches us that Mary was free from sin from the moment of conception in the womb of her mother Saint Anne. God chose her to be pure



Anne Kelly, Omagh

and humble so that she could carry Jesus, the gift of salvation in her womb.

Trusting in her intercession and guidance, our Mother Mary points us to Jesus through prayer and the sacraments. Regular Confession is beneficial for giving us a picture of the times when we did not respond to God's love.

Enriched with strength and grace we can approach the Blessed Sacrament with awe and wonder and begin again our mission of carrying love to others.

Purity of body is a key element of purity of heart

by Bishop Donal

AMONG the Beatitudes of Jesus, with which he announces His mission, is the phrase: "Happy the pure in heart, they shall see God." (Mt 5:8).

The pure in heart are praised alongside the poor in spirit, the gentle, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the peacemakers and those persecuted in the cause of right.

Mary's Immaculate Conception preserved her from the stain of sin, and emphasises how "God has chosen us all in Christ to be holy and spotless and to live through love in his presence" (Ephesians 1:4).

Purity has to do with purity of

heart, which is reflected in how we live our lives.

It is difficult for many people to cherish the dignity of our bodies. Pornography and sexualisation of young people are all around. These are framed in the language of freedom.

But we know from Adam and Eve that we can become slaves to our hungers and thirsts. Real freedom is the ability to choose the right thing, despite pressure to conform and 'obey your thirst'.

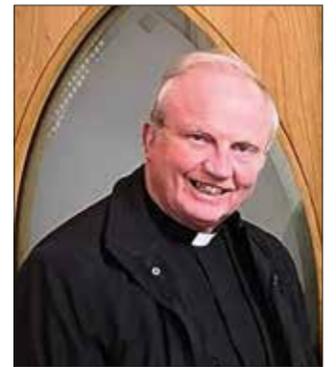
Christ's message tells us that God took flesh and dwelt among us. Our bodies are Temples of the Holy Spirit, anointed with Oil and recipients of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. And our

bodies will be raised up on the Last Day to share Christ's glory.

Thus, purity of body is a key element of purity of heart. Where we are warped in how we treat the body, spiritual growth becomes very difficult. Those who have been sexually abused, especially in a church context, can struggle with relationships and intimacy for much of their lives.

Purity of heart is not merely about sexual thoughts and actions. Purity of heart means letting grace cleanse our hearts from greed, anger and resentment.

Jesus said: "From within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft,



Bishop Donal McKeown

murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly" (Mark 7:21-22).

That is the purity of heart which promises us the sight of God.

In each Eucharist we are invited to receive the Word of God and allow Him to change us

by Aoife O'Neill

ON December 8 we celebrated the Feast of The Immaculate Conception. When we contemplate the great blessing of Mary's Immaculate Conception and her purity, it can be hard to imagine how we can even begin to follow her example. Just as the angel asked Mary if she would bear the Son of God, we too are invited to do the same thing.

In each Eucharist we receive, we are invited to renew the effects of the Incarnation in ourselves, to receive the Word of God and allow Him to change us. We are called, like Mary did, to say "Yes", to carry the Word of God within us, to cultivate the fertile ground of our hearts so that we may bear fruit by being an image of what we receive.

Just as Mary carried Jesus in her womb, we too carry Him when we receive Him in the Eucharist. For this reason, we should all strive for purity in thought, word and deed so that we may receive Him worthily. This is important, not only as it shows the respect we have for His Divine Presence, but also that He may be able to touch more deeply our hearts and so the hearts of those we encounter through the beauty of purity.

Believing we are unworthy to receive the Eucharist can be a battle for many of us, especially when we are aware of our shortcomings, knowing that we are nowhere near as pure as the Blessed Virgin Mary. However, this is something that Our Lady can help us with. St Louis de Montfort points out that Mary is called by St Augustine the "living mold of God." In her, Christ Himself was formed, so anyone giving themselves to Mary will also be formed into Christ. Through Mary, Christ came to us, so in the same way we can also go

through her to Him.

We can do this by inviting Mary to assist us when we receive Holy Communion. If we give ourselves to Mary and ask that she lends us her heart, she will adorn us with her virtues so that we will receive her Son with the same purity and faith with which she received Him at the Annunciation.

Asking for Mary's assistance, she herself can bridge any gap in us, making us worthy to receive Christ. This was the whole reason for St Mary being immaculately conceived in the womb of her own mother, St Anne: so that Mary, pure and spotless, could be a worthy vessel to carry the most precious Body and Blood of Jesus. She, then, is the best one to get us ready to receive Him also at Holy Communion.

St Therese, in her autobiography, often speaks of her joy at receiving the Eucharist. She approached Jesus in the Eucharist through Mary, the Gate of Heaven. She tells of the little prayer she used to prepare herself:

"When I am preparing for Holy Communion, I picture my soul as a piece of land and I beg the Blessed Virgin to remove from it any rubbish that would prevent it from being free; then I ask her to set up a huge tent worthy of heaven, adorning it with her own jewellery; finally, I invite all the angels and saints to come and conduct a magnificent concert there. It seems to me that when Jesus descends into my heart He is content to find Himself so well received and I, too, am content."

Like Therese, we too should call upon the help of Mary. We may be able to some extent to intellectually grasp what is going on when we receive Holy Communion, however, our fallen nature prevents us from fully

understanding what is happening. So, we need our Mother's help, just as a young child needs help to cut up their food in order to eat. Mother Mary helps us to receive the Holy Eucharist so that, by her purity and merits, we can receive Him as she did, and not miss out on any of the graces due to our fallen immaturity.

Not only can Mary assist us before and during Holy Communion, but she can also play a part in our thanksgiving. Again, like a little child we often get distracted from the reality of Our Lord's presence in us and become preoccupied with life's stresses and strains. Calling on our Blessed Mother to take charge of our thanksgiving, we can be assured that Our Lord will be properly thanked for this great gift. When we adore Jesus with and through the heart of Mary, our prayer can become more pleasing to Him by the fact it has gone through Mary, who is spotless and pure.

May we give thanks to God for the great gift He gave us in Mary's Immaculate Conception. The fact that she was made sinless within



Aoife O'Neill, Galliagh.

the womb of her mother so that she could be worthy to carry the Incarnate Word within her own womb, means we have much to be thankful for.

Through her Immaculate Conception, Mary is able to mediate for us the graces of Holy Communion. May we never ignore any opportunity to be more open to these graces. Let us join our voice with Mary and always proclaim:

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



We follow Jesus seeking to be like Him for He is the epitome of purity

by Ann McCay

WHEN we celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we celebrate Mary Immaculate.

"The Gospel which tells the story of the Annunciation helps us to understand what we are celebrating, above all through the greeting of the angel. Gabriel addresses Mary with a word that is not easy to translate, that means 'lavished with grace', 'created by grace', 'full of grace' (Luke 1:28). Before calling her Mary, he calls her full of grace. We too call her this in every Hail Mary. What does full of grace mean? That Mary is full of the presence of God. And if God dwells in her completely, there is no room for sin in her. She is the only 'oasis ever green' of humanity. The only one uncontaminated, created immaculate in order to welcome fully with her 'yes' the God who was coming into the world and in this way to begin a new history". (An extract from Pope Francis' book Ave Maria)

The Holy Spirit dwells deeply in the heart of Mary. She declares herself to be the servant of God, pure, holy, open and ready to follow the God who created her out of Love. The purity of Mary came to her directly from God in preparation for the great mission He had called her to before she was born. She is unique.

The Lord says to us as he said to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew You...I called you to be mine." We are called to be in the world but not of the world. Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes that those with a pure heart will see God, will be able to perceive Him. God wants to reveal Himself to each of us and if we desire to see Him, to perceive Him, we must attain purity of heart. If we want to become more aware of His presence, to understand Him more, then we need to be pure of heart.

We can achieve this by looking after the orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27), and not allowing ourselves to become polluted by the world but rather be influencers in the world by our thoughts, our words and our deeds, which have been dictated not by the standards of the world around us but by the higher standards of God; a God of justice and mercy.

If we have sinned against God by not showing love for Him and love for others, then we must think again, confess our sins, change our ways, as we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth at Christmas. We are called not to take our example from the world but to be an example, a reflection of God's goodness to the world.

In the Gospel readings, the story of the miraculous healing of the centurion's servant who was close to death is told by both Matthew and Luke. As He enters Capernaum, Jesus hears of the serious nature of this servant's illness. He makes His way to the centurion's home. In Matthew, the Centurion himself comes to meet Jesus; in Luke, He sends friends to Jesus with a message. Whichever way it happens, Jesus hears the words of the Centurion, "Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof but only say the word and my servant shall be healed." Jesus is struck by this man's humility and faith and, in response, the servant is miraculously healed there and then.

As Catholics, the Eucharist is central to our faith. Before receiving Holy Communion at the Eucharist, we say along with the priest, "Lord I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof but only say the word and my soul shall be healed", so we are asking like the centurion for a miracle, but this time within our souls so that our hearts may be purified at that moment.

When we come in humility and faith, God will surely answer our prayer, 'say the word' and we will be healed and ready to receive Him.

Healed

In our choir, we used to sing these words to music, 'Lord, we are not worthy to receive you but say the word and we shall be healed'. The Granny of one little girl who used to sing along with us in the congregation told me she sang, Lord we are not worth it, we laughed at the thought of this. Maybe we are not, worth it, to ourselves and others, but He loves us anyway, and was willing to die on the cross so that we would be set free, was willing to pay the price for our sins. He did this because He loves us, with an everlasting love that does not grow cold, or fade with time, or change with the seasons.

As we enter the final week of Advent, the psalm for the fourth Sunday of Advent reminds us to cleanse our hearts, purify our intentions to prepare for the coming of the Christ Child.

"Who may climb the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who desires not worthless things who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. They will receive blessings from the Lord and vindication from God their Saviour, such is the race who seek Him, who seek your face, God of

Jacob." (Psalm 24)

We must get to know God and imitate Him in our thoughts in our words and in our deeds; this is how we attain purity of heart. This is how we know a person with a pure heart, they are imitating Christ in thought, word and deed because they have gotten to know God.

Jesus says to us, "no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6); "to have seen me is to have seen the Father" (John 14:9), and so we follow Jesus seeking to be like Him for He is the epitome of purity. He is all pure, all holy, all good. In Matthew 23:26, we are left in no doubt of what is expected of us...

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean."

So goodness and purity come from within, from the inside out and not from the outside in, although positive example from people around us can have a good influence on us to help us find inner purity.

When Christmas is over and our lives return to normal, whatever that is, let us not forget Him.



Ann McCay, Columba Community.

there is work to do. The story of Christmas does not end at the manger, it begins there. As we kneel before the Lord and adore Him along with the angels, the shepherds, the wise men, and all of God's creation, let us think about what we can do to bring Christ's love, grace, beauty and holiness into our troubled world and then let us set about doing it. Come Lord Jesus.

I will leave you with the words of a Christmas song I wrote some years ago. It has two titles, 'A Hundred Thousand Welcomes' and 'Jesus Son of Mary', both contained in the first line of the piece. We would sing it every Christmas Eve at Mass in Columba House and every Christmas morning in St Eugene's Cathedral.

Jesus, Son of Mary

Words and Music - Ann McCay

A hundred thousand welcomes to you, Jesus, Son of Mary A hundred thousand welcomes to you, Jesus, Son of God. A hundred thousand praises to you, Jesus, Prince of Peace. And may You be praised for evermore. God's people sing, God's people sing,

God's people sing, Alleluia, Glory to our King, God's people sing, Alleluia, Sing Alleluia, Sing Alleluia to the King of Kings.

In Bethlehem in David's land a child is born of Mary God's promise to His people, Him of whom the prophets told Beloved of the Father's heart, The Word of God Incarnate With joy all creation honours Him.

God's people praise, God's people praise God's people praise and adore Him Saviour of the World God's people praise and adore Him,

Bow down before Him Praise and adore The Mighty Prince of Peace.

Lord, I am not worthy by Brenda Deery

ADVENT and Christmas are a time for reflection, which will only happen if we can step away from the continuous noise of commercialism. They are timely reminders to us to look deeper at the beauty of God's plan for us all throughout the generations.

The humility of our God is shown in the Virgin's birth and we are called to reverence, awe and wonder. When our eyes are opened to the wonder of God's ways, we realize our 'nothingness' in His presence and our only response can be gratitude.

The Old Testament is full of events where God was at work preparing His chosen people for their Saviour. Every time they strayed, God, through signs, wonders, prophets, chastisements etc, called them back to His Way. God continues to do that in our days, but our tragedy is that secularism, materialism, atheism, etc, dominate our media outlets and dim the reality of our need for reverence and worship of God.

I know in the busyness of everyday it is difficult to find time to reflect on the higher realities of life. In all our rushing, we can come to Sunday Mass with our minds absorbed by the many distractions. For me to contemplate the beauty of God's plan, I need to take time every day to switch off from these many distractions. When I do this, I always feel more at peace in our world and more confident in the power of God at work in our world. I seek a mature relationship with God which requires effort on my part; although I think I am making slow progress on this journey but fall away too many times.

Due to this busyness, I often approach the Lord without the proper dispositions and too many times in an unworthy state. For that I am sorry. The proper disposition requires humility, purity and surrender to God. However, 'purity of heart' in today's culture seems unachievable. Everything is being promoted to wreak havoc on the virtue of purity.

For me, I have had to take time to work through all the false teachings regarding this, but I know from personal experience that my heart, soul and spirit are never at rest/peace when my life is out of sequence with God's plan.

Advent is a timely reminder of the importance of waiting, patience and penance (hardships) in our journey as pilgrims, as revealed to us through Mary and Joseph. I know that God loves us so much that He continues to come to us through the Holy Eucharist and the sacramental life of His Church, despite our wounded humanity. Many of us, starting with myself, need



Brenda Deery, Faughanvale.

to continually 'recalibrate' the directions of our lives and turn back to seek the eternal plan God has for each one of us.

The words reverence and worship in our Irish culture have been redirected towards idolising fashion, exercise, gyms and the many more secular activities, drowning out our need for God. Sundays have been replaced with many of these activities. God 'rested' on the seventh day to show us, as human beings, an essential ingredient for our human and spiritual development. He set apart Sundays for worship and rest. We so need to restore this truth as it is necessary for spiritual growth in the virtues of faith, hope, charity and joy, which is so needed today.

Regardless, despite these distractions, we each have to make the decision on how we live our lives; how we approach Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and in the sacraments. The only worthy response to God is to bow down and worship Him. We can only do this when we first-of-all address, on an ongoing basis, all the sin that has filtered into our lives in their many forms. We need to continually examine ourselves to conquer the enemy without fear, scrupulosity and with the knowledge and assurance of God's mercy.

Reverence and worship of Our God is our pathway to Heaven. "Lord I am not worthy, but only say the word and I shall be healed" – what joy this prayer brings. As soon as we acknowledge our sins in the presence of God through the sacrament of Confession, God's forgiveness, mercy and grace are there for us. One of the greatest of all presence (presents) available to us pilgrims throughout the year is Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and in the Holy Eucharist.

Our model for reverence and purity of heart is Our Blessed Lady, the first tabernacle, who

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served Her Lord in worship, humility and obedience. Mary, through her silence and study of scripture, recognized God's plan for Her and with His grace responded to it. To reach the state of reverence and worship acceptable to God, we need to turn to Mary, Mediatrix of All Graces. Mary is the means to 'climbing the mountain' to God and serving Him worthily in this life.

I know I will never be in a proper state to meet Our Lord and receive Him in Holy Communion without the assistance of His Blessed Mother. I know if I entrust my Holy Communion and my works to Our Lady that She will

ensure all the graces given to me through the sacraments and service will not be lost. Mary, the first tabernacle will continue to be my Tabernacle as I sojourn this 'Valley of Tears'.

The Christmas story reminds us of the service Mary gave to Her Lord from the moment of her Immaculate Conception. Her life was centered on worship of God's and fulfilling His work of salvation. This is the Good News that the world so needs to hear and embrace. This is the message of Advent and Christmas and this is the reason for the prayer, "Lord, I am not worthy but only say the word and my soul shall be healed."

Mary is a sign and promise of what The Lord will do for all who follow her example of fidelity by Robert Glackin

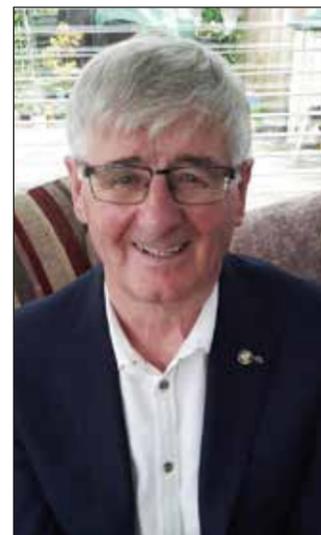
THE Immaculate Conception of Mary shows that no stain of Adam's sin touched the Blessed Virgin. That says something about Mary, of course, but it points us in two other directions as well. Firstly, it says that this privilege accorded to her was in virtue of her role as Mother of Jesus in order to make her a worthy dwelling for Him. Secondly, it is a reminder that through Christ's redeeming death and resurrection, all believers have the stain of original sin washed from their souls in Baptism.

Our prayer to Mary is intended to be a means by which we are led to a deeper union with her Son. True devotion to Mary never obscures the uniqueness of Christ, because we know that the only command of Mary recorded in the Scriptures is one that must be scrupulously obeyed: "Do whatever Jesus tells you" (Jn 2:5).

Mary is a sign of hope for us. In Mary, God returned humanity to the innocence of Eden; She is a sign and promise of what The Lord will do for all who follow her example of fidelity. In the scriptures, Mary prophesied that "all ages to come shall call me Blessed" (Lk 1:48). We consider it a privilege to fulfil that prophecy.

As we ask Mary to pray for us (Hail Mary), she asks us to believe and trust with Her that God keeps His promises; that He has redeemed the world, that He will bring us to share His happiness.

If, like Mary, we want to live out our faith, we need to take shelter under the umbrella of God's promises in all the events of our lives. In the beautiful words of the 'Hail Holy Queen', we can say,



Robert Glackin, Waterside, Derry.

"Pray for us, most Holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ."

Prayer...

*Immaculate Conception, Mary my Mother,
Live in me, Act in me, speak in and through me,
Think your thoughts in my mind,
Love through my heart,
Give me your dispositions and feelings,
Teach, lead and guide me to Jesus,
Correct, enlighten and expand my thoughts and behaviour,
Possess my Soul,
Take over my whole personality and life,
Replace it with yourself,
Incline me to constant adoration and thanksgiving,
Pray in me and through me,
Let me live in you, and keep me in this union always,
Amen.*

Purity is the commitment of a person's whole life to God by Martin Harran

WHEN we think of purity, there is an inclination to think in carnal terms, not least when Mary's purity is so often aligned with her perpetual virginity. Whilst sexual morality is a core part of it, however, purity extends far beyond that, it is the commitment of a person's whole life to God.

One of the Bible verses I find most potent is Luke 1:38, "And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word."

Mary was a young woman, undoubtedly looking forward to her wedding and probably a comfortable life as a wife and mother, married to a tradesman. She did not appear to fully understand what the angel was telling her, but she trusted completely in God and accepted His plan for her.

The other aspect of purity that we may, perhaps, find difficult is that the standard of purity achieved by Mary might seem so far beyond our ability that we could easily give it up as unattainable.

In that regard, I think we can do well to turn to the example given by Thérèse of Lisieux, and her wise perception that holiness is not achieved by doing extraordinary things, it is achieved by doing ordinary things extraordinarily well, and the holiness she talks about is just another word for purity.

So what sorts of ordinary things can we try to do? One area that springs to mind at this time of year is our attitude to people less well-off than ourselves. How easily we forget that Mary, a heavily pregnant woman, at the stroke of a ruler's pen had to make an arduous journey to Bethlehem on the back of a donkey and, when she got there, could find nowhere to stay.

Are there echoes in that of those who have undertaken dangerous journeys and are now homeless in our land?

How easily we forget that shortly after the birth of Jesus, He and His parents became migrants and asylum seekers in Egypt.

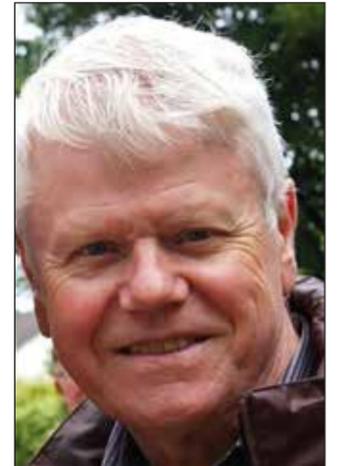
Again, are there echoes in that of those who have had to abandon

their homes and everything they own to seek asylum in our land?

That does not mean that we have to undertake outstanding activities to help those people. Some of us will give generously of our time and money, but most of us will settle for the ordinary things, the things that St Thérèse told us can take us to holiness and purity when done with the love of God.

When distressed people arrive in our community, do we treat them with suspicion, try to avoid them and perhaps even support the groups who oppose refugee settlement in their locality, whinging about the pressure it will put on schools and medical services? Or do we do as God would want us to do - greet them with a welcoming smile and give them whatever help is within our means to give, accepting that will require some sacrifices on our part, though those sacrifices will pale into insignificance when compared to what some of these people have suffered?

It may be as simple as a friend or colleague talking negatively about



Martin Harran, Urney & Castlefin.

homeless people or refugees being lazy or seeking to take advantage of our generosity; do we nod our heads in tacit agreement or do we challenge what they are saying?

We seem to live in a world where the increase in affluence has led to a decreasing spirit of generosity. Many people don't mind helping people so long as it doesn't impact their own comfortable lifestyle. Mary didn't worry about what she was giving up to fulfil God's will; neither should we.

We respect the Body of the Lord when we receive Holy Communion in a state of grace by Oliver Barrett



WHEN Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, 1854, he affirmed what the People of God believed for centuries. It did not take long for the early Church to affirm St Mary's role in the salvation of humanity.

As early as 451 AD, the dogmatic definition of the Council of Chalcedon referred to St Mary as the 'Theotokos' - mother of God. Over the centuries, the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, developed a theology of St Mary. This culminated in Pius IX defining Mary as one who is immaculately conceived.

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception proclaims that, from

the moment of her conception by the singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, St Mary was born Immaculate, that is, free from the stain of original sin. The dogma affirms that yes, St Mary was conceived in the natural way, but she was born without original sin. This dogma has both its opponents and proponents even within the Church. The belief that St Mary was born without original sin did not become generally accepted until the 16th Century, after the Council of Trent.

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception is firmly rooted in the Scriptures. In Genesis, we see the figure of a woman emerging,

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15).

The early Church Fathers, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, referred to St Mary as 'The New Eve'. The identity of the woman in Genesis is revealed in Luke's Gospel when the Angel Gabriel greets St Mary (Lk 1:28). Only one person in the entire Bible is greeted with the words "Hail, full of grace", indicating St Mary's importance.

This dogma teaches us St Mary is a new creature because of her sinlessness. She is unlike anyone who existed or will exist. St Mary is the one who is chosen by God to restore original justice through her obedience, purity, and grace.

What I love about St Mary is that she lived humbly and obscurely in Nazareth, far from the rituals of the Temple in Jerusalem. And yet it is St Mary who is chosen to be the 'Theotokos' - the mother of God. As the prophet Micah stated, "But you O Bethlehem Eph'rathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" (Micah 5:2).

Canon 916 of the Code of Canon law states that anyone who is conscious of having committed



Oliver Barrett, Leckpatrick.

a grave sin may not receive the Eucharist without previously having been to Confession.

What this canon is teaching us is that to receive the Body of the Lord properly we need to be, like St Mary, free from sin. We respect the Body of the Lord when we receive Holy Communion in a state of grace. I understand purity to be intrinsic to being in a state of grace, that is, I do not think it is possible to be impure and to be in a state of grace.

Canon 916 does provide leeway when it teaches that if we do not have the opportunity to get to Confession before Holy Communion, then we should make a perfect act of contrition and have the resolve to go to

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Confession as soon as possible. Canon 916 rightly sets the bar, for reception of the Eucharist, very high.

Knowing the frailty of my human nature, I need someone who will teach me how to be pure and remain in a state of grace. When I am striving for purity, there are three I turn to: St Mary, St Joseph, and St Maria Goretti.

St Mary's response to the Angel Gabriel, in Luke chapter one, is contrasted with Zechariah's response of disbelief (Lk:1-18). Therefore, St Mary is a model of the Church because of her faith.

St Joseph is another I turn to when I am striving for purity. We owe the preservation of both Mary and Jesus' purity to St Joseph. Therefore, we pray to St Joseph as patron of the family. Nowhere in the scriptures do we have a quote from St Joseph. There is not one word of St

Joseph's contained in the entire Bible. What is important for the authors of the New Testament is how he protects the Holy Family, and this is well documented. St Mary is incorruptible thanks to the protection of St Joseph.

St Maria Goretti is another I pray to when striving to be pure. I had the privilege of seeing a relic of St Maria Goretti on retreat. She is amazing because she was able to forgive her attacker on her death bed. She teaches us the value of purity because, at the age of 12, she resisted the advances of her attacker only to die later from stab wounds she received during the attack. Before she died she prayed for her attacker, Alexander, to be forgiven. Amazingly, he was released from prison after serving 27 years and was present when Maria was canonized on July 25, 1950.

“Be Holy as your Heavenly Father is Holy” (Mt 5:48)

by Rhonda McColgan

WE recently celebrated the Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception, on December 8. It wasn't until I first completed the 33-day Marian Consecration did I understand this most beautiful feast and celebration. I always thought that the 'Immaculate Conception' referred to Jesus being immaculately conceived. Fr. Michael Gaitley talks about this in his condensed version of the St Louis De Montfort's 33-day preparation for consecration to Jesus through Mary.

This amazing Marian dogma touched my heart in a most profound way and, at times, left me speechless thus allowing me to enter into an even deeper richness of our Catholic faith. A few things happened around the same time as I began what I refer to as, a deeper conversion within my Catholic faith. One thing was that Fr Michael Gaitley came to Ireland in 2017 to ask all Irish Catholics to carry out this Marian consecration. I heard about this retreat he was doing in Maynooth and so I attended. It is no wonder that as my heart began to turn towards the light of Christ, like a rose bud turning to the sun, did God in His goodness have me begin this journey with Our Lady.

My limited understanding here does not do it justice but in short, Mary, by God's grace, was conceived in the womb of her Mother, St Anne, without any stain of original sin. This unique grace given to Mary by God was to fulfill the Lord's plan for our salvation. Mary, therefore, if she agreed to carry out God's will, would become a suitable dwelling



Rhonda McColgan, Iskaheen

place for His Son, Jesus. This unique grace that Mary was given by Jesus was as a result of her redemption.

Fr Columba Jordan CFR, in his YouTube series, 'Called to more, little by little', suggests that by God's mercy, Mary was made free from all sin by the grace of prevention. He likened this to how St Therese of Lisieux was saddened as she learned that those that have been forgiven much, love much.

“Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47).

St Therese knew that during her life she did not carry out great sins and therefore feared that she would not be able to love much, as this scripture suggests. She finally came to understand that it was by the grace of God that her sins weren't major. She acknowledged that if left to her own capabilities she would have been a great sinner. As a nurse, I

The Immaculate Conception, Advent and Christmas

by Noel Bradley

AFTER a short discussion on these topics with someone, I was challenged to look at them more closely. My thoughts about the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, celebrated on December 8, always focused mainly on her conception in the womb of her mother (traditionally held to be St Anne), original sin, purity and sex, but that can be a distraction if you can't make sense of it all.

According to Herbert McCabe, “the first thing to say about this is that it is not a teaching about the mechanics of Mary's generation; it is not about a process that went on in the womb of her mother. It says that she was and is radically holy” ('God Matters' p210). I find that much more helpful.

What does it mean?

In our case, through our faith and baptism we begin to be citizens of a future kingdom of God and cease to be subject to the prince of this world. Christ begins to rescue us from all the self-righteousness, hypocrisy, cruelty, greed and violence in which we are enmeshed, the state of original sin.

Mary, on the other hand, unlike us, did not first come into existence as a subject of the prince of this world, and then have to be rescued. There never was a time when she was the property of this world. From her beginning, she belonged to the kingdom of God. This realisation grew over the centuries out of a need to speak to her in prayer and to praise her holiness as Mother of God.

I say this because such a doctrine is nowhere in Scripture and, therefore, difficult for many

non-Catholics to accept. Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John or Paul do not mention it. Later on in history, St Bernard and St Thomas Aquinas explicitly deny it.

“The tradition was handed down not as a piece of information but as recognition, a growing and more and more liberated recognition, of our right to praise her beyond all other creatures, to say that she was as holy as a redeemed creature could be” (McCabe p211). He goes on to say that “Mary is more thoroughly redeemed than we are and has greater, not less, cause for gratitude to Christ than we have”.

It was popular Christian devotion throughout the ages that eventually triumphed in the consciousness of the people of God, in spite of opposition from theologians, saints, and bishops.

Virgin Israel set apart for Yahweh

This stress on Mary's holiness has its roots in the Old Testament, according to McCabe. Israel was to be a holy people, a people set apart from the nations around her. Holiness consists in being set apart from the profane or secular. She is spoken of as the Virgin Israel, set apart from the world, reserved for Yahweh. In Mary, the union of Yahweh with the Virgin Israel takes place. In her, the holiness of the people of God is concentrated, so to speak, in one person.

During this time of Advent we hear the words: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you and therefore the child to be born of you will be

called Holy, the Son of God”.

The virginity of Mary, according to McCabe, like the virginity of Israel, symbolises her holiness, her being radically set apart from the dehumanised world and from the prince of this world. The Holy Spirit begins in radically preserving her from sin, it leads her to her consent to the Incarnation (“Let what you have said be done to me”), and finally to the birth of Jesus.

The Spirit is the Spirit of love. We can say that ‘it takes a radical hold on mankind as Redeemer in Jesus, and as redeemed in Mary’ (McCabe p 213). She shows us what it means to be redeemed.

In Advent, we look forward to our redemption, to the resurrection of the body, and in this Feast we celebrate the one who is already totally and radically redeemed. In Mary, we see what we are to be. We see the destiny of virgin mother Church, the people of God that is to be “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that she might be holy and immaculate” (Eph 5:27). To assert this doctrine is to assert that we too are to become radically holy, to the roots of our being. Even like Mary, not just forgiven sinners but we should be as though sin had never been for us because in God's love our sins will become part of our holiness.

God's love like a motorway

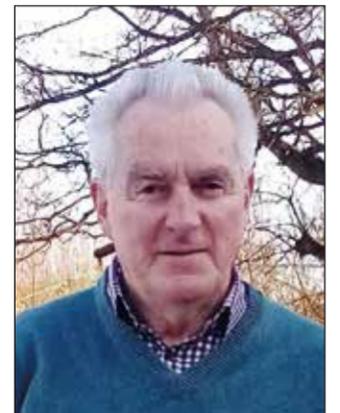
In Advent, we also hear the words: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the even ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.” God in His love makes everything smooth.

flame of love that brings our souls into the deepest union with the Holy Spirit. This flame has the same effect on the soul as a flame burning through a log of wood. The soul is purged for union with God, just like the wood turns black and then becomes the fire itself, total union.

Peace

I remember at the time noting how my Mam's body literally was slowly being chipped away as cancer gripped her. Looking back now, my Mam had finally found a peace that I never knew her to have. She became very close to God over the last few years of her life, even before her diagnosis. I felt that this Saint was in some way part of her journey. I thought that maybe she had developed an insight into the spiritual journey, as she carried her illness with great dignity and, in hindsight, she had totally surrendered all to God.

A great place to start this preparation in our journey



Noel Bradley, Buncrana.

Herbert McCabe in a different but much lighter book, 'God, Christ and Us', sees God's love as a big motorway with no awkward turns, hills, valleys or uneven ground. He likens the awkward turns, hills, valleys, uneven ground to the difficult, selfish, greedy, unfriendly, and violent people in our lives.

The way of God's love is more like a motorway. It doesn't care whether it meets easy or difficult, uphill or downhill, good or bad. It doesn't care how important or unimportant we are. He cuts straight through all the mountains and valleys, the heights of sanctity and the depth of depravity. The motorway can do terrible things to the country side as it cuts through it. God's love can do terrible things to you and I. It can make us kind and considerate and loving; even to the point of being in compassion with the sufferings of others as Mary stood at the foot of the cross of her Son.

All this is part of Advent and the mystery of Christmas. “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.”

understand this concept. A doctor may prescribe prophylactic medication for certain conditions to prevent people from becoming sick, just as medication is given after patients fall ill.

Fr Chris Alar, a Marian Father of the Immaculate Conception, suggests that this unique grace given to Mary was because she gave Jesus His human nature and, therefore, could not have passed on a broken nature. My understanding is that although Mary was free from all sin, including the stain of original sin and was, 'Full of grace' (Luke 1:28), she was still, in her free will, given that choice to cooperate.

Mary didn't dwell in that grace, she continuously looked to the Lord. Her first thought after the Annunciation was to visit and serve her cousin, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant. She was always choosing the Father's will, unlike Eve, created before the fall, who chose disobedience. This kind of purity must come from great love.

Reflecting on the purity of Mary

encourages me to contemplate how I should continuously prepare to welcome Jesus into my heart. As Christians, we know that He will come again, but as a Catholic I have the gift of receiving Jesus in the Eucharist.

A priest in Confession once told me that we are all called to holiness. “Be holy as your heavenly Father is holy” (Mt 5:48). He said that this was stressed by Vatican II. So, it is not just for priests and religious, it is for all. This, I thought at the time, seemed like a tall order, but as a pilgrim on a journey, I soon realised that I can do nothing without the grace of God. My part is in the choosing. Choosing God in turn chooses life, a life built on a foundation of love. It is love that transforms us.

My Mam died on December 13, 2015. At her funeral, the priest mentioned how we celebrated the Feast of St John of the Cross on December 14. I remember trying to find out information about this saint. He spoke about the living

towards Holiness is through prayer. If you're thinking like this, St Teresa of Avila tells us that it is God Himself giving us this desire to come closer. If we respond to, and continually respond to, that grace as we move forward we begin to grow in love. At the start of our journey, it may feel like we're doing all the work by perhaps reciting prayers but, after time, it is God Himself that does the work.

In silent meditation, which I found in Lectio Divina prayer, I began to experience moments of complete joy and, without a shadow of a doubt, I know that the Lord was drawing me in deeper. This desire and love for Him increased and pretty soon I noticed how He was removing obstacles to my growth, such as relationships, attachments and things that were mini idols in my life. This, for me, felt like a purging and sometimes felt difficult to let go, especially if it is a dear friendship.

Our God is a jealous God; He

continued from page 23

is jealous for me and for you. He wants the whole 'me'. The more time I spend with Him, the more I feel transformation in my life. I understand that He sends me trials to test how far I've grown and to teach me about the areas in my life that need further growth. In painful situations, I often ask the Lord "Why?", "Why did that situation have to happen?" Now, I realise that it is in those patterns of pain in my life that God is inviting me to tackle with His help; to invite Him in, to ask for help in order to transform this continuous vomit of my sin, thus changing these patterns. He wants me to be free, to be free for Him. The more I allow Him to Love me away from the broken situations in my life, the more I will be graced to Love other people away from their pains, hurts and woundedness; to be that lighthouse that points to so much more.

Recently, I sat in front of the Blessed sacrament during Adoration. I felt the Lord in my heart saying, "Just sit with me Rhonda." I looked around at the crib and to the Christmas tree. All of a sudden, I remembered how my brother spent that Christmas in hospital. My brother had cerebral palsy, could not communicate verbally and often suffered from chest infections and needed to be hospitalised. I remembered visiting him in St James' Hospital with my family. Although he couldn't speak, we knew he loved to see us, always trying to smile.

I loved my brother beyond anything. He was the definition of love to me. He was not capable of sinning or hurting anyone, he suffered a lot with his health and yet continued to love us with that smile. As it was Christmas, I remember feeling anxious to get back to my presents and to see my friends on the street where I lived in Dublin. However, my brother died the following April. If only I could bring back that last Christmas, I'd stay at his bedside all day, I thought. Christmas brought that memory to me every year since.

So, in that quiet Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, as I contemplated the suffering of Jesus Christ, my heart became pierced. As I gazed upon Him, He made me aware of that great love I have for my brother and how I was now feeling that great love for Him, Jesus. My heart broke and I began to weep like never before. Every part of me longed to prostrate myself before the Lord, but I did not want to become a distraction to the other two worshippers in the chapel. This is love; this is a glimpse of union. Not the pain and the cross of that memory, but the joy of love, true unconditional love.

The more encounters I have with God like that in prayer, the more love He pours into my soul, which will ultimately, God willing, lead to transformation and union. Finally, "Where there is no love, put love and you will find love" - St John of the Cross

We live in God's light when living in purity and become beacons of hope, love and charity by Rory McGilligan

I really appreciate living in the Northwest of Ireland. The beautiful scenery that is on our doorstep is something to behold. I love going for walks, especially in the Sperrins. When alone in nature, I feel the presence of God all around me as I am often in awe of His Creation. It is a blessing to be able to walk around those quiet mountain lanes, but also a blessing to appreciate what He has created.

I often think when out walking about those children in Fatima or Saint Bernadette in Lourdes, and how they encountered Our Lady when they were going about their daily chores in the rural parts of Portugal and France. Even those people that witnessed the apparition in Knock, they too would have been people from a rural setting. I often wonder why Our Lady chose such souls to appear to, and I feel it has to do with their innocence and purity. Maybe the outside world, with all its darkness, did not at that time reach such remote places.

As I grow closer to Christ, I too seek to be purer. We often hear the line, "May Christ increase and I decrease". I am often aware of how unworthy I am before receiving Christ in Holy Communion. At times, I wonder why God would

want to be united to a sinner like me, but I am consoled by the thought that He created us in His image, so we may decrease and He may increase, so that our lives will reflect our Lord's Divine love for all mankind.

Dr Scott Hahn, the Catholic American theologian, put it beautifully in an interview recently: "We humans are like new-borns held in the arms of a loving father (God); the new-born invariably will always throw up (sin) but the father will continue to love the child, hold the child close in his embrace."

On December 8, we celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Our Lady was conceived without sin. She is a spotless vessel, unblemished by the stain of sin. She was created pure and will remain that way for eternity. She could not have been conceived any other way as she is the Mother of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Purity is not a fashionable word these days. It is considered by many to be out-dated, have no relevance or importance, something that may be even sneered at. This may be true to the superficial world, but to the soul that wants to grow closer in relationship with Jesus and Mary,

we strive to be purer every day, in our hearts, in our thoughts and in our deeds. In trying to be more like Jesus we follow God's Will not our own will.

We hear at Mass, "He humbled Himself to share in our humanity so that we could share in His Divinity." So what does sharing in His Divinity look like? Well, first preparing to share in His Divinity, we must be serious about being pure. Using Jesus and Mary as our examples, we must live our lives facing them; by living only to God's plan and not our own selfish agenda will we become pure.

When on this journey, we will see our wretchedness before our Loving Father, and we strive to be pure like Him so that we can receive Him in the Eucharist. But also, when living in purity, we live in God's light and become beacons of hope, of love, of charity, fulfilled by God's grace beautifully and quietly. Let's remember God did not come in the storm but the gentle breeze.

This Christmas and New Year, may it be a Holy one, may the gifts you receive and give be that of Love, Charity and Hope. May we approach Our Lord in the Eucharist aware of our past, but with the resolve that we grow



Rory McGilligan, Dungiven.

more like Him in purity. May we also stay close to our Blessed Mother by saying the Rosary daily, letting her help us and guide us on our journey towards our Father in Heaven. May we use the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a real Christmas gift and let it help wash the stain of sin. May we become purer, more innocent, like the children at Fatima, Saint Bernadette or the visionaries at Knock. As we journey through life, may we be instruments of God's love.

Wishing you all every Blessing this Christmas and New Year.

Following in the footsteps of purity by Sharon Gorman

FOLLOWING in the steps of Mary, on which I am to pattern mine, is not that easy! How do we strive for purity in mind, body, soul and spirit as Mary did?

Mary was immaculate so she could be the Mother of Jesus. She had no original sin. She was pure from the beginning. She was perfect in every way; a reflection of God's image, a beautiful vessel for the king to enter the world.

As for myself, I have to be honest, I still don't have the respect or comprehend in Mass that it is Jesus Himself upon the altar. From my human point of view, it is hard to imagine and that's when I invite the Father to step in and take the wheel.

This is when I hand myself over into His grace and call upon the Holy Spirit to rest upon me, to enlighten my mind, body, soul and spirit in all things of His beauty and spirit. It is at this point in the Mass that I place myself into the flames of His love for me, that I may be cleansed of all stains and sin. Then I surrender my body and I unite myself with Him in His passion as an offering



Sharon Gorman, Galliagh.

to the Father in reparation for all the Holy Souls in Purgatory.

The Father has bestowed on us the gift of living in His will, all for the love of Christ, our true love, at the foot of the cross.

It is the fullness of God's grace, love and light that we are blessed to be a part of Jesus in His passion death and resurrection in Mass. How great is our God to bless us with His presence, to touch our hearts with the sweetness of His voice. Amen.

Hundreds of men on knees in Long Tower in answer to call to help renew faith

THE call for over 500 Irish Catholic men to help renew the faith in the Real Presence of the Eucharist attracted hundreds more than that to St Columba's Church, Long Tower, on Saturday, November 19.

Men of all ages travelled from various parts of the Derry Diocese and island of Ireland for the day of prayer and talks in the Long Tower and the Iona Retreat Centre, Termonbacca.

The programme consisted of Eucharistic Adoration, Confessions and the praying of the Rosary in St Columba's Church, followed by talks on Fatherhood and the Eucharist, and the celebration of Mass in Termonbacca.

Speaking afterwards, Bishop

Donal told 'The Net': "It was most encouraging to see so many hundreds of men on their knees for three hours before the Blessed Sacrament in St Columba's Church, Long Tower.

"There is a rediscovery of spiritual growth for men. This is based on a hunger to meet Jesus, who called disciples 2,000 year ago. It is also a journey of discovery for men, seeking to discern a new role for men in a society that has changed much over the last decades.

"I pray that men can continue to discover Jesus, the young man who is the face of the Father's mercy. In Adoration before the God made man, men can rediscover their identity and mission as followers of Christ."



What reason do you give for the hope that you have... (1 Peter 3:15)

My faith journey by Sara-Jane Olphert



Sara-Jane Olphert

I was born on February 1, 1990, and have five older brothers. I grew up in a village in Northern Ireland called Bready, and was baptized into the Church of Ireland faith as a baby. My mum sent myself and my brothers faithfully to Sunday School and church each week. When I was 14, I got confirmed. After this, sadly, I stopped going to church and would only attend for a special service, a wedding or a funeral.

When I was 16, I attended a praise service that was organised by my old Sunday School teacher, Rev David McBeth, who in later years was my minister. I only went to this service because it was being organised by Rev David and he was a really good friend.

I can't remember who the speaker was that night or what the talk was on, but I remember starting to cry and cry. I didn't understand what was happening or why I was crying. I spoke to David at the end of the service and told him what I experienced, and he said: "Sara-Jane, God is speaking into your heart. He is calling you to salvation."

He then organised for me to go to Christian organisations for young Christians, but peer pressure took over; my friends laughed at me and I turned my back on God.

At 17, I started going out and partying, drinking alcohol and getting drunk. This continued right until I was almost 27. On January 7, 2017, I was sitting at home and texting my neighbour,

who was a Christian. At the time, he was going to Cornerstone City Church, which is a Pentecostal Church, and I was asking him what Cornerstone was like.

He said: "Sara-Jane, why don't you come along to a service sometime," and I said to him: "Yeah, I might."

Secretly, in the back of my mind, I had no intention of going, but in that moment I started feeling a real sense of guilt and, again, I started to cry and cry. I spoke to my neighbour and told him what had happened.

He said: "Sara-Jane, God is speaking into your life. He is trying to save you." In that moment, I dropped to my knees and cried out to God to save me, to come into my life. I remember feeling a sense of love, that God really loved me and that I was a child of God.

The next day, I went to a Young People's Convention, that was for Christians, with my neighbour and I bumped into people I knew. I was delighted telling them what had happened to me the night before. The following week, I started attending Cornerstone Church. I spent a year there and enjoyed my time at it, but I didn't feel fulfilled.

In November 2017, I visited All Saints Clooney Church, which is Church of Ireland. I remember walking in and feeling a real sense of home that I hadn't been feeling when I was at Cornerstone. In February 2018, I started going to All Saints Clooney Church full-

time, under the ministry of Rev David McBeth and Rev Rhys Jones.

Rev Rhys quite quickly became a very good friend and an amazing mentor. I spent two-and-a-half years in All Saints Clooney Church and made some great friends. I really grew in my faith. Also in 2018, I did an Alpha course, which helped me understand more about the Holy Spirit and how to grow in faith. The following year I went and did Alpha again, but this time I was in the leadership team.

I lost a woman very close to me in October 2018. This woman was like a granny to me and I remember being angry with God, and saying: "Why, God, have you taken my granny from me?" I remember crying and saying: "Why God?" and hearing a voice saying: "I brought her home to me". It was at that moment that it clicked with me that my granny was a Christian lady and that she was in eternal glory with the Lord.

In January 2020, I started to go through a dry period. I found it difficult to pray. I wasn't hearing God's voice. I was struggling to read my Bible. I felt really disconnected from God. I felt myself slipping into my dark past.

Worship

On February 15, I went to an all-night worship vigil organised by the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, with which a really close

“ After my Confirmation, I continued to go to Mass regularly and Adoration as often as I could. There is no better pastime than to sit in front of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and talking to him is really like talking to your best friend. ”

friend was involved. It was the last place I wanted to be and I only agreed to go because my friend was part of the organisation. On my way into the chapel, there was a young lad who said to me, "It's on until 6 am and Mass is at midnight." I remember thinking to myself: "I will be long gone before Mass."

Throughout the vigil, I sat playing games on my phone. It was the last place that I wanted to be. There was a priest there that night called Fr Columba cfr,

and he got up and spoke. He said: "There is someone sitting in this room that is really disconnected from God." At that moment, I froze, and thought to myself, "That's me."

Again, I started feeling really guilty and I went and spoke to my friend. He prayed with me and I could not stop crying. I stayed for the Mass that night and ended up staying for the entire worship vigil.

It was from this vigil that I started to be attracted to the Catholic faith. I then went to a Catholic day retreat and Mass with another friend, and a Bible Study group called 'Living Disciples'. This is run by the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal. I could not stop thinking how amazing it was and how true the Catholic teaching is.

One Sunday, I was in Ards Capuchin Friary, in Donegal, and I spoke to a priest about my desire to convert to the Catholic faith. He advised me to speak to a parish priest. That day, I rang Fr Columba and asked to meet with him. Due to unforeseen circumstances and then the lockdown, I never got to meet with Fr Columba.

I continued going to 'Living Disciples', and that summer I started facing some difficulties with friends and arranged to meet with Fr Charles cfr for advice and guidance. I then started going to Mass on a regular basis and it was from this that I really felt at home. I knew God was calling me to the Catholic faith.

Fr Charles became my spiritual director and mentor, teaching me the Catholic catechism. I was confirmed and received my First Holy Communion on Sunday, May 21, 2021, which was Pentecost Sunday; the day that the Holy Spirit came down amongst the apostles, what a day to be received into the Catholic Church.

After my Confirmation, I continued to go to Mass regularly and Adoration as often as I could. There is no better pastime than to sit in front of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and talking to him is really like talking to your best friend.

I pray my Rosary daily, and I really feel our beautiful Blessed Mother close by when I pray it.

I have continued to grow in faith by going to the 'Living Disciples' Study group, and I have enjoyed growing deeper in my faith in the Lord and making great friends along the way.

It wasn't always plain sailing. Months after my Confirmation, my mental health started to deteriorate. I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression, and referred for counseling. I can thankfully say that, through professional help, my faith,

praying and going to Mass, my mental health has greatly improved.

Since being confirmed, a very close friend approached me to start up a faith page on Facebook. I kept saying 'no', as I felt that this wasn't for me. In January this year, the same friend mentioned it to me again so I prayed about it and felt that it was the right time to do it. So, with the help of my friend and the Holy Spirit, I created a Facebook page called 'Live By Faith'.

It started with me just posting daily inspirational quotes and developed to doing Novenas and praying the Rosary. It has gone

from strength-to-strength, with people from as far as America contacting me with prayer requests.

I was contacted earlier this year to see if I would run a bus to Knock. I wasn't sure if there would be much interest, but when I put up a post to gauge this there were a lot of comments from people wanting to go. So, I booked a bus and, in July this year, I took 52 people to Knock and a beautiful, blessed day was had by all.

I hope to plan many more trips in the future and can't wait to see what the Lord does in the next chapter of my life.

For singles and those ready to pursue or are already dating ...

Pure in Heart

Choosing a Catholic spouse Men you are called to Greatness

Marriage are you ready? How do you go on a date?

Authentic Femininity

LOVE

13/01/23 - 15/01/23

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PURSUIT OF LOVE RETREAT

£80 for 2 nights BnB, full meals, talks with special guests including Patrick & Thérèse McChrystal, young couples testimonies with daily Mass, Adoration, Confession, Benediction & Ceili Dancing on Saturday night. Limited spaces must email info@pureinheart.ie to book & reserve spot. Strictly ages 21-35.

Termonbacca to host 'Pure in Heart' retreat in New Year by Aoife O'Neill

PURE in Heart is a community which was founded in the 1990s, when a small group of young people responded to Our Lady's invitation to prayer.

'Purity amongst the youth', a reoccurring prayer intention caught the attention of their spiritual director, Fr Aidan Carroll.

In the year 2000, while in Rome for World Youth Day, the group decided they would become proactive and reach out to young people! Today they do a lot of work with young people through prayer meetings, retreats etc.

From Friday 13 - Sunday 15 January, 2023, Pure in Heart

will be hosting a weekend retreat entitled 'Pursuit of Love' in Termonbacca Carmelite Retreat Centre.

The retreat is aimed at people aged 21-35 years, either single or dating. Talks will cover areas such as choosing a Catholic spouse, how to go on a date, and marriage...are you ready?

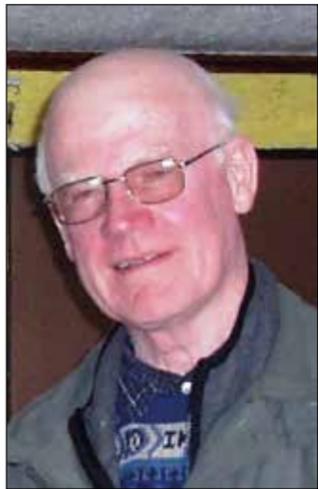
The weekend will also include time for prayer, Adoration, Mass, Confession and a social Ceili evening.

The cost is £80 residential or £50 non-residential, which includes all meals. Further information and booking can be done by contacting info@pureinheart.ie

One God and many Voices

...“They’ll know we are Christians by our love...”

by Fr John McLaughlin ssc



Fr John McLaughlin SSC, Moville.

“Infant Jesus meek and mild, look on me a little child, pity mine and pity me and suffer me to come to thee. Heart of Jesus, I adore thee, heart of Mary, I implore thee, heart of Joseph pure and just, in these three hearts I put my trust.” And that was part of my morning’s prayer for many a day!

Of course I knew, and still need to know, that Jesus grew up, and not just at Christmas time. So, I set myself to take a run through some of the influences outside maybe the strictly Catholic sources, where I came to experience a bigger and broader vision of Jesus... and Mary.

Here, in Moville, just a few weeks ago, I shook myself out of the chair and went over to the celebration of the Harvest Festival in the nearby Presbyterian Church; not for the first time, but with a different Minister and other voices.

The Harvest meant the adornment of the building with signs of the harvest, and the reading shown on Power Point was of the Gospel of the Sower. Rev James Poots spoke in clear and non-ecclesial phrases. We were led through the various types of soil mentioned in the Parable, and given a couple of seconds to identify ourselves with the thorns or the stones or brambles in our own lives, pausing between the verses on the screen. The Prayers of Intercession were equally down-to-earth and attentive to the World, where we are sowing our seeds. I felt satisfied and uplifted. And I enjoyed a short chat with the pastor during the later relaxation over tea and cakes, where I also met, a few, other Catholics who had responded to the invitation from their Presbyterian friends. It was a well-spent hour and something enriching in many ways, not least the community singing.

In another period of my missionary life in Chile, I had quickly come to know of the Vicaría de Solidaridad in Santiago. It was the response of the Churches to the abuses that accompanied the dictatorship

of General Pinochet, and we all had occasion to visit there to make a ‘denuncio’, or a ‘recurso de amparo’ (habeas corpus), after some violence, or a detention in the parishes where we worked. Cardinal Raul Silva had been the principal leader in its convocation, and other religions, such as the Christian, Jewish and Moslem, were also involved, as the best lawyers and other agencies were brought in, with a monthly newspaper distributed freely around the parishes.

One terrible memory in that building was the public mourning and funeral of the three young professionals who were assassinated (degollados) in a lonely field outside the city by a right-wing group of zealots. The three were communist professional lawyers and activists who worked under the Vicaría, and their names would mark a new low in the experiences of those who opposed the military dictatorship in those years.

In those years, and also at a national ecumenical level, the National Holiday would be marked on September 19 by a solemn Te Deum in the Cathedral, where all the religions took part, in the presence of politicians and members of the armed forces, and judiciary. The keynote address came from the Archbishop of Santiago, where all the main issues were addressed on the social and political issues of the day, and attention was drawn to the many abuses and restrictions then affecting the lives of the ordinary citizens.

I always listened and watched (on one occasion being present physically), trying to pick up the nuances of the finely couched phrases, in which the Spanish language is so rich. The choirs and indigenous groups often lent another dimension to the solemn intonation of the Te Deum, which stirred up all the patriotic flames of those present or tuned in on the airwaves.

Growing up in my younger years as a priest, I found that we were blessed with the number of publications available to the readers amongst us which invoked the ecumenical spirit. Periodicals like ‘Herder Correspondence’, ‘The Dutch Catechism’, and monthlies such as ‘The Bible Today’, and ‘The Furrow’ in Ireland, all offered a wider view of the meaning of Christianity for the new world emerging. I was stirred by books on the apartheid issues in South Africa from people like Trevor Huddleston (Naught for your Comfort), Bishop Tutu, Alan Paton (Cry the Beloved Country), as well as the reports from Russia of Edward Crankshaw in Russia

in the Sunday Observer, to which my father subscribed.

C S Lewis and his books ‘Mere Christianity’, the ‘Screwtape Letters’, the ‘Problem of Pain, Surprised by Joy’, and others, was for me the brightest and most readable on religion and all its questions. He was contemporaneous with the early years of my priesthood in the 1960 ++ period. Then, at an academic level, we had the great CH Dodd to bring alive for us the Parables of Jesus, and The Jerusalem Bible and other versions (SVD) then emerging, urged on by Fr Wilfred Harrington, OP, then a very young and blessed addition to the staff of St Patrick’s College, Maynooth.

At a later period, I was introduced to the writings of Rabbi Kushner (‘Bad things happen to Good People’), leading to Lionel Bloom and others, like Jonathan Lord Sachs of that faith, Dag Hammarskjöld, the then United Nations Secretary General had a book of very Christian reflections and poems, some of which stayed with me. So also did the novels of Solzhenitsyn (‘The First Circle’ is one), opening up the world of Russia and its Orthodoxy to me.

In the late seventies, I joined a Cook’s Tour to Russia, which also included Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, where the subject of Religion surfaced often. In Armenia, we visited their Cathedral in Yerevan and saw where the Holy Oils were blessed and distributed to Armenian Christians now dispersed by persecution all over the world.

Enriched

So, I had been meeting Jesus and His Church in a large and wider circle and always been enriched by the Ikons in Moscow and in Leningrad, and in the now kingdom of .Belarussia and a Smolensk church. I still feel the hunger to explore the depths of the Ikon and have a special one in my room, cut for me, on my 50th, by Sr Veronica Maguire, now an established iconographer.

During an extended course in CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) in the United States, I came under the scrutiny and warm advice of Gerry Wyrwas, a Methodist leader who displayed an admiration for the Columbans who had passed through his courses in the Bons Secours Hospital. Gerry, by his insightful comments, gentleness and charity, opened to me a new dimension of human living and awareness in my relationships with others, that have accompanied me in the years since as a special gift.

In the early years of the pontificate of St Pope Paul VI,

I was enriched by reading his Encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* and an approach to the Christian and other major world religions, and the dialogue that must accompany that.

“The Circles of the Church’s Care: There are a number of other places in which the circles of humanity to which Catholicism believes itself obliged to relate are considered. One is *Ecclesiam suam*, the first encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI, which he issued in 1964, just a year before the promulgation of *Lumen gentium*. Although overshadowed by LG it is a text that still repays attention, not just for getting a sense of the preoccupations of the moment in which Paul VI began his pontificate, but for what it has to say particularly about dialogue. It was one of the ‘buzzwords’ of 1960s theology, taken up in a serious way by the new Pope, who offers what seems to be the only sustained theological reflection on the concept of dialogue in any conciliar or papal document....Regarding the circles of humanity, the Pope presents them in the opposite direction to that taken by the Good Friday prayers. Thus, he speaks first of the Church’s dialogue with unbelievers, next of its dialogue with believers in God, then its dialogue with other believers in Christ, and finally he speaks of dialogue within the Church.” (The Spirit of Catholicism by Vivian Boland OP)

And modern commentators would stress that it has to be real dialogue and more than mere toleration, as we have come to learn. Watching recently an interesting presentation of the former Master General of the Dominican Order, Timothy Radcliffe, from St Martin in the Fields in London, I was struck by that some impassioned emphasis on our relationships with leaders and people of other faiths, as he named places and visits to churches across the world in his own period of leadership of the Order. It has been a challenge and a grace in my own life in these years of priesthood.

In one of the many patches of poverty that I have come to know in Santiago de Chile, in the area of La Lecheria in Puente Alto, I was edified by the Pastor who opened his Departamento and store nearby to the vagrants of the streets, during a particularly wet and stormy period, and regarded it as just normal.

In my Journal of a couple of years back, I wrote of a Moville experience:

“Then, also in the rain, I joined the little group in St Saviours Church of Ireland, invited by Rev Suzanne, to celebrate the

reopening of the Church after some major works (repair of the Spire). The occasion was a part of their Harvest Festival for Mission, called ‘The Harvest of Mission’, being a one-man animated drama in two acts on the life of J Hudson Taylor, well-dramatized emphasis on that missionary period of the late nineteenth century, the Protestant Missionary Society, early failures and loneliness, medical work combined, primitive conditions, the power of the Spirit and the Word, mishaps and lack of protection on a sacking by locals, on supposed baby disappearances, the mob attacks. Return to England and disquiet at the lack of interest, then a great benefactor (10,000 pounds) and advances in candidates, the Boxer Rebellion and setbacks.

“It was all a good presentation and well delivered, reminding me of the SSC (Columbans), Fr Edward Galvin with his passion for the Mission to China, Fr John Blowick, co-founder of the Society, and the China Batch by Fr Barney Smith, and visits to Moville from Fr Paddy Maguire, a native of Derry, and a family friend, with his years in the Columban Mission to China. It was a pity there was such small representation of the Catholic community there! There was a prayer and motivation from the C of I Archdeacon David Huss, with whom I exchanged a few words at the side of Rev Alison Gallaher, the Methodist leader here, and I talked of the growth of the Anglican and other churches in China, that is much bigger now than in Europe, and also of the BBC documentary on the theme of a couple of years back.”

In relation to our devotion to Mary the Mother of God, I felt warmed and enthused by the ideas and quotes in the book

by Fr Tom Casey of Maynooth, ‘Mary in Other Traditions’. He gives a simple outline of what the Ikon can bring to our own devotion, as it does to the Eastern Churches. He might surprise many in the texts he offers from Luther and Bonhoeffer on Mary: in an economic production of Messenger Publications.

Reconnection

Early after my return to Moville, and joining the Library in Derry, I took out a book by Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, and found his addresses and homilies were indeed fascinating. So much so, that I set about copying out some personal preferences, and had to restrain myself in that: “Climate Crisis: The Christian story lays out a model of reconnection with an alienated world. It tells of a material human life inhabited by God and raised transfigured from death; of a sharing of material food which makes us sharers in eternal life; of a community whose life together seeks to express within creation the care of the creator. In the words used by both Moses and St Paul, this is not a message remote from us in heaven or buried under the earth: it is near, on our lips and hearts (Roms. 10, 6-9; Deut. 30,10-14). And, as Moses immediately goes on to say in the Old Testament passage, ‘Today I am giving you a choice between good and evil, between life and death...choose life’ (Deut 30,14-15,19) pp 207. (Ethics Economics and Global Justice)

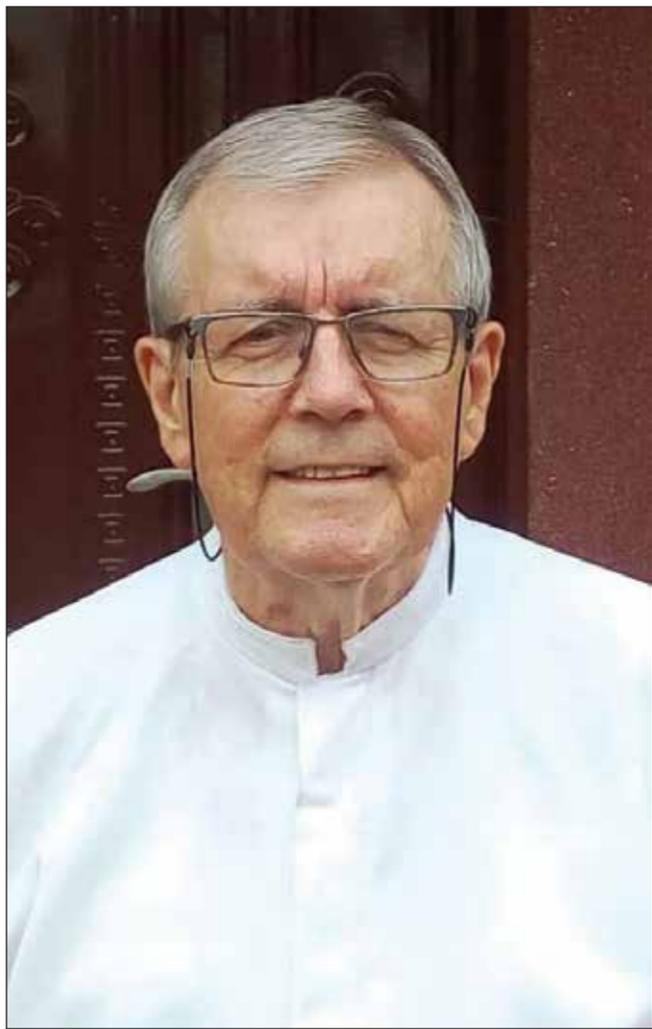
In conclusion (pages 223-224) let me suggest three central aspects of a religious – and more specifically Christian – contribution to the ongoing debate, which may focus some more detailed reflection:

1. Our faith depends upon



A renewed call to holiness and humility

by Fr Peter McCawille SMA



DURING the past year, parishes all over the world have been inviting parishioners to come together and express their opinions on how they view the Church and how they and their families could participate more actively in parish life.

The objective of the whole Synodal exercise is to provide an opportunity for us to embark on a journey in which we can discern together, and prayerfully reflect together, how God is calling us to find newer and better ways of experiencing and communicating the joy of the Gospel, so that we can be more active participants in Church worship and in the life of the community.

During these 'listening sessions', a massive volume of opinions, comments and suggestions was accumulated and presented as Ireland's response from the 26 Dioceses and from 29 other groups, eg, missionaries, religious, diocesan clergy, a variety of lay organisations and minority groups, survivors of sexual abuse.

A Synodal Steering Committee, whose chair was Dr Nicola Brady, was entrusted with the herculean task of compiling a synthesis of all this material, amounting to more than 40 submissions, into a National Synthesis Document which was presented for consideration and eventually finalised at a pre-Synodal Assembly, comprising 160 delegates, which was held in Athlone on June 18, 2022.

Bishop Brendan Leahy, deputy

chair of the Steering Committee, set the tone for the Assembly: "The Church approaches this Synodal Process with great humility, conscious that there is much work to be done to build relationships of trust within and beyond the Church. We are called, not only to listen respectfully to one another, but to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church as a whole. There was concern for those who do not feel included and a desire to think creatively as to how we might reach more people with the invitation to engage with the synodal process and with the local Church community more widely..."

In the midst of the great variety of submissions, there were many common themes. The common themes (only a few of which space allows us to comment upon) included the following: a role for women at all levels of Church life; the clerical child abuse scandals; Catechesis and adult faith formation; clergy, liturgy; youth; the family; lay ministry and co-responsible leadership; the concerns of LGBTQI+ and minority groups; refugees and the impact of Covid-19.

1. Role of women in Church life. As pastors (particularly those who have ministered as missionaries abroad) we are very aware how active and faithful women are in almost every aspect of Church life. This issue was mentioned in all of the submissions and included a call for women to be treated equally at all levels of leadership and decision-making, including

ordination to the permanent diaconate and priesthood.

2. Clerical child abuse scandals. The issue of clerical child abuse was also mentioned in all the submissions and must be seen as the core issue within which any renewal in the Church must be viewed.

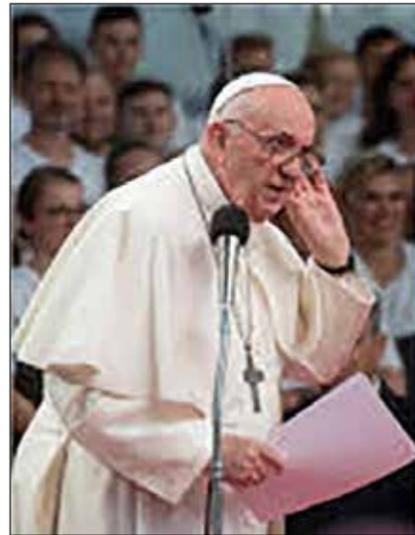
More recently Archbishop Eamonn Martin, in an interview in the Sunday Independent on clerical abuse in Ireland, said that "It is like an open wound that has never been able to heal..." and added, "There is no doubt I am horrified because of the impact of that childhood trauma and how it has hugely impacted how people view the Church and their own personal faith".

While strong safeguarding structures and procedures have been established many people still feel that the Church has not yet shown enough remorse for the crimes committed by clerical personnel.

3. Catechesis and adult faith formation. Every group expressed strong opinions on the dire need for urgent attention to be given to the provision of better catechesis, religious education and faith-formation for both adults and young people. It was widely felt that a whole new strategy needs to be implemented involving: the provision of significant personnel and financial resources for faith-formation programmes; for the setting up of catechetical and scripture formation groups in every parish, groups which should be linked to the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, reconciliation and the Eucharist.

4. Liturgy. Submissions generally indicated that people appreciate the quality of the liturgies at times of baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals and anniversaries. Many submissions highlighted a growing dissatisfaction at the uneasy link with preparation for the sacraments within the school context rather than within the parish. There was also much criticism of the quality of Mass homilies which were seen as too long, irrelevant and too often incomprehensible.

5. Lay ministry and co-responsible leadership. The majority of lay people feel that authority in the Church is disproportionately exclusively controlled by the hierarchy (bishops and priests) and it



is strongly felt that lay men and women, by virtue of their baptismal calling, should be more involved at the levels of ministry, community leadership and decision-making.

6. The concerns of LGBTQI+ and minority groups. (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual). The submissions on these issues reflected a deeply-held conviction among many that the Church must present a more human face, and become a more welcoming community that recognises and accepts difference in its various manifestations.

This conviction also included a strongly-held belief that a greater acceptance must be shown towards minority groups, eg, LGBTQI+ members, those in second relationships, single mothers. In this regard it is also worth noting that many of the submissions appealed for a certain caution and advised against the Church meekly capitulating to the self-styled liberal secular agenda associated with much of modern culture.

7. The impact of Covid-19. The challenge presented by the Covid-19 pandemic was unprecedented. The enforced closure of churches caused much pain and a sense of disillusionment, mitigated only marginally by the provision of virtual participation on digital platforms. Clearly the restrictions imposed by the pandemic adversely affected and, to some extent, permanently transformed many aspects of Church life. In the aftermath of the pandemic, different challenges have emerged which call for both a greater resilience and more imaginative ways of being church in the

future.

The National Synthesis Document marked the completion of the first phase of the Synodal journey in Ireland. It was forwarded to Rome as part of the worldwide synodal process of listening and discernment

Continued from p26

the action of a God who is to be trusted: God keeps promises. There could hardly be a more central theme in Jewish and Christian Scripture, and the notion is present in slightly different form in Islam as well. Thus, to live in proper harmony with God, human beings need to be promise-keepers in all areas of their lives, not least in financial dealings.

2. As we have noted more than once already, the perspective of faith understands human beings as part of creation not wholly in control, though gifted with capacities that allow real and significant powers over the environment, bound to material identity and unable to escape material need. Living in faith is living in awareness of this created and limited identity without resentment or fantasy.

3. Living as part of creation brings with it a sense of the common destiny and common predicament of humanity. But more specifically, the Scriptural understanding of our calling, especially as set out in the letters of St Paul, who sees the ideal human community as one in which the welfare and giftedness of each and the welfare of all are inseparable. What is good in God's eyes for human beings is not something that is altered by differences in culture or income: we can't say that what is unwelcome or evil for us is tolerable for others.

So, trustworthiness, realism or humility, and the clear sense that we must resist policies or practices which accept the welfare of some at the expense of others, there is a back-of-an-envelope idea of where we might start in pressing for global economic order that has some claim to be just.

It can't be too often stressed that

launched by Pope Francis in October 2021. This process will culminate in the 1st Session of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which takes place in Rome from October 4-29, 2023.

we are not talking about simply limiting damage in vulnerable societies far away: the central issues exposed by the financial crisis are everyone's business, and the risks of what some commentators (Timothy Garton Ash and Jonathon Portitt) have called a 'barbarizing' of Western Society, as a result of panic and social insecurity, are real enough.

Equally, it can't be too often stressed that it is only the generosity of an ethical approach to these matters that can begin to relate material wealth to human well-being, the happiness that is spiritual and relational and based on the recognition of non-acceptable human worth. There is much to fear at the moment, as always, more to hope for, so long as we turn our backs on the world of unreality so seductively opened up by some of our recent financial history.

Patience, trust and the acceptance of a world of real limitation are all hard work, yet the only liberation that is truly worthwhile is the liberation to be where we are and who we are as human beings, to be anchored in the reality that is properly ours. Other less serious and less risky enterprises may appear to promise a power that exceeds our limitations, but it is at the expense of truth, and so, ultimately, at the expense of human life itself. Perhaps the very heart of the current challenge is the invitation to discover a little more deeply what is involved in human freedom, not the illusory freedom of some fantasy of control."

So, I can read that and other texts, in company with 'Laudato Si' and continue to learn about God and Jesus in the world of a Christian believer today!



Saints we celebrate in December *by Fr Michael McGoldrick ocd*



St Francis Xavier

St Francis Xavier

Francis Xavier was born on April 7, 1506. He was sent to study at the University of Paris. There he met and was heavily influenced by Ignatius of Loyola. He decided to join the new order that Ignatius wanted to found, which would become known as the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits.

Francis was ordained on June 24, 1537. Pope Paul III asked the Jesuits to take a mission to India. Ignatius sent Francis, who arrived in Goa on May 6, 1542. While ministering there, he learned about the native people of the Pearl Fishery Coast that had been baptized a decade earlier but not taught the faith. He ministered to them.

Xavier later travelled to the Maluku Islands to evangelize the people and spent about two years there. While there, he met a Japanese man who invited him to go to Japan. Francis arrived in Japan in July 1549 but was forbidden from making converts. He established a few congregations but with great opposition.

While on his way back to India, Francis was asked to meet with the Chinese emperor and argue for the release of several Portuguese prisoners. He departed India for the last time in April 1552 and reached an island off the coast of China in August. While waiting for a boat to take him to China, he became ill with a fever and died on December 3, 1552.

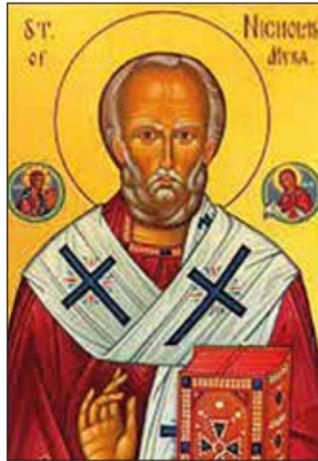
Francis is the patron of Catholic missions, and his Feast Day is December 3.

St Nicholas

St Nicholas of Myra (traditionally March 15, 270 – December 6, 343). Little is known about the historical St Nicholas. He is said to have been born in the Greek seaport of



St Stephen



St Nicholas

Patara, Lycia, in Asia Minor.

In his youth, he is said to have made a pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine. Shortly after his return, he became Bishop of Myra. He was later cast into prison during the persecution of Diocletian, but was released after the accession of Constantine.

An early list makes him an attendee at the First Council of Nicaea in 325. Because of the many miracles attributed to his intercession, he is also known as Nicholas the Wonderworker.

St Nicholas' legendary habit of secret gift-giving gave rise to the tradition of Santa Claus. His Feast Day is December 6.

St Ambrose

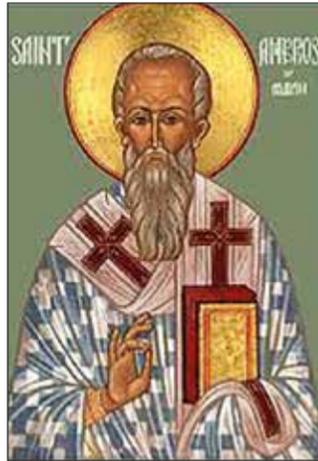
Ambrose was born around 340 to a Roman Christian family, and grew up in Trier, Germany. After his father passed away, Ambrose was educated in Rome, where he studied law, literature, and rhetoric.

He received a place on the council, like his father, and became Governor of Liguria and Emilia around 372. Ambrose's headquarters were in Milan. After the Bishop of Milan died, he attended the election to prevent any trouble between the Nicene Church and the Arians. While giving an address, the assembly began calling for him to become the next bishop. However, being neither baptised nor trained in theology, he was within a week baptised and ordained.

Ambrose was ordained Bishop of Milan on December 7, 374. As bishop, he donated all his land and his money to the poor. In 387, he baptised Augustine, who he had a profound influence on. His theological writings had profound influence on many popes.



St John Evangelist



St Ambrose

He studied mainly on the virginity of Mary and her role as Mother of God. He composed many hymns and the 'Te Deum' is attributed to him.

Ambrose passed away on April 4, 397. He is a Doctor of the Church, and his Feast Day is celebrated on December 7.

St Juan Diego

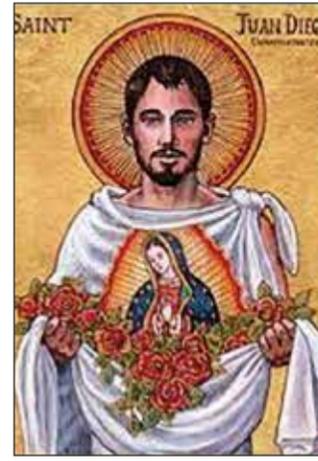
Juan Diego was born in 1474 in Mexico. Following the early death of his father, Juan Diego was taken to live with his uncle. From the age of three, he was raised in line with the Aztec pagan religion. When a group of Franciscan missionaries arrived in Mexico in 1524, he and his wife, Maria Lucia, converted to Catholicism.

Juan Diego was very committed to his new life and would walk long distances to receive religious instruction at the Franciscan mission station. On December 9, 1531, he was on his way to Mass for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. However, he was stopped by the beautiful sight of a radiant woman, who introduced herself, in his native tongue, as the "ever-perfect holy Mary, who has the honour to be the mother of the true God." Mary asked him to request the local bishop to build a chapel in her honour on Tepeyac Hill, which was the site of a former pagan temple.

The bishop asked for proof that the apparition was real and truly of heaven. Juan Diego went straight to Tepeyac and, once again, encountered the Virgin Mary. She asked him to climb to the hill and collect the flowers growing there. He obeyed and found many flowers blooming in December on the rocky land. He filled his tilma (cloak) with flowers and returned to Mary. The Virgin



St Thomas Becket



St Juan Diego

Mary arranged the flowers within his cloak and told him this would be the sign he was to present to the bishop.

Once Juan Diego found the bishop, he opened his cloak, and the bishop was presented with a miraculous imprinted image of the Virgin Mary on the flower-filled cloak. Today we know the image as Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Juan Diego later moved into a little hermitage on Tepeyac Hill and lived a solidarity life of prayer and work until his death on December 9, 1548. His Feast Day is celebrated on December 9.

St Lucy

Lucy's history has been lost, and all we really know for certain is that she lived in Syracuse and lost her life during the persecution of Christians in the early fourth century.

Her veneration spread to Rome, so that by the sixth century the whole Church recognized her martyrdom.

Many legends grew up around St Lucy. According to the one which has passed the test of time, she was a young Christian woman who vowed to live her life in service of Christ. Her mother tried to arrange a marriage for her with a pagan. Lucy knew her mother could not be swayed by a young girl's vow, so she devised a plan to convince her mother that Christ was the better partner for life.

After several prayers at the tomb of Saint Agatha, Lucy saw the saint in a dream. St Agatha told Lucy her mother's illness would be cured through faith, which Lucy used to persuade her mother to give the dowry money to the poor and allow her to commit her life to God.

While Lucy and her mother were grateful to God, the rejected bridegroom was deeply angered and betrayed Lucy's faith to the governor, Paschasius, who had her executed.

Her Feast Day in December 13.

St John of the Cross

St John of the Cross was born Juan de Yepes y Alvarez, in Fontiveros, Spain, in 1542. His father was employed by wealthy family members as an accountant, but they disowned him when he married a poor woman from the lower class. As a result of his



St Lucy

family's poverty, John's family suffered greatly.

His father died when he was three, and his older brother, Luis, died two years later. John's mother eventually found work weaving, which helped her to feed her family. As a child, he was sent to a boarding school for poor and orphaned children. As he grew older, he went to work in a hospital, while attending a Jesuit school.

In 1563, John joined the Carmelite Order and was ordained priest in 1567. He considered joining the Carthusian Order, but in a meeting with St Teresa of Avila, she asked him to wait and join a new community of reformed friars, which she went on to found in 1568.

In 1572, John travelled to Avila at the invitation of Teresa to become her confessor and spiritual guide. He remained in Avila until 1577. While there, he had a vision of Christ and made a drawing that remains to this day called, 'Christ from Above'.

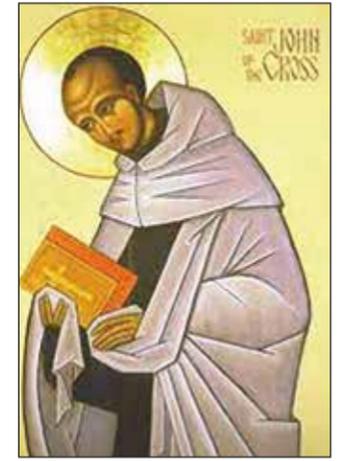
On December 2, 1577, a group of Carmelites kidnapped John and took him by force to the Order's main house in Toledo. He was brought before a court and placed on trial for disobedience. He was punished by imprisonment in a cell that was so small he could barely lie on the floor. To pass the time, he wrote poems on paper that was smuggled to him by the friar charged with guarding his cell. Some of these would become spiritual classics.

After nine months, John managed to pry his cell door from its hinges and escape. He joined Teresa's nuns in Toledo and spent six weeks in the hospital to recover. He found time to author books that were to become masterpieces of spirituality: The Spiritual Canticle, The Ascent to Mount Carmel, The Dark Night of the Soul, and the Living Flame of Love, as well as poems and other minor works.

During the last few years of his life, John travelled and established new houses across Spain. In 1591, he became ill with a skin condition that resulted in an infection. He died on December 14, 1591. His Feast Day is December 14.

St Stephen

The name Stephen is Greek, and chapter 6 of Acts of the Apostles tells us that he was a Hellenist



St John of the Cross

(a foreign-born Jew, who spoke Greek). He lived in Jerusalem and became a Christian.

The Hellenist converts, who probably formed a minority in the early Christian community, complained that the care of their elderly widows was neglected by the Hebrew-speaking majority. The Apostles presented the matter to the congregation and instructed it to select seven deacons for this community service.

Stephen, who became the best known of the seven, was recognized as a man with unique gifts as an evangelist. He engaged in religious discussions in synagogues of Diaspora Jews in the capital. Growth in the number of Jewish converts, including many of the priests, provoked a reaction. He was summoned before the Sanhedrin and charged with speaking against "this holy place and the law."

His defence of his faith before the rabbinic court enraged his Jewish audience, and he was taken out of the city and stoned to death. His final words were a prayer of forgiveness for his attackers which echo those of Jesus on the cross. He was the first Christian martyr.

His Feast Day is December 26.

St John Evangelist

St John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee and Salome, was one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus. He is considered the same person as John the Evangelist and the Beloved Disciple. John is believed to be the longest living apostle and the only one not to die a martyr's death.

John, along with Peter and James, were the only witnesses of the raising of the daughter of Jairus and the Transfiguration, and were the closest witnesses to the Agony in Gethsemane.

John and Peter were the two apostles sent by Jesus to prepare for the Last Supper. During the meal, John sat next to Jesus, leaning on Him rather than lying along the couches.

He was the only one of the Twelve Apostles who did not forsake the Saviour. He stood by the Cross with Our Lady and was entrusted with her care by Jesus.

He is believed to have been exiled around AD 95 to the Aegean Island of Patmos. The date of

Continued on p29

The Christmas Angels *by Vera McFadden*



*One snowy Christmas eventide,
so full of joy and full of pride,
a little boy stood there beside
a lovely Christmas tree.
He gazed at the fairy lights,
the shining tinsel gleaming bright,
so full of wonder and delight,
beneath the Christmas tree.*

*And as upon it he did stare,
he saw a lovely angel there,
and so aloud he breathed a prayer,
beneath the Christmas tree.*

*Dear angel, I've heard mummy say
that, in a stable, far, far away,
a Babe was born one Christmas
Day,
as poor as poor could be.
But Angels came with shining
winds,
and Shepherds too, and wise, wise
kings,
they brought Him gifts and golden
things
for his poor Christmas tree.*

*Dear angel, if you think it is right
please take it up to Heaven tonight,
and leave it by His tree so bright,
with lots of love from me.
The little boy went back to bed,*

*upon his pillow laid his head,
and dreamt of all the things he said
beneath the Christmas tree.*

*When he awoke at early dawn,
the room with heavenly splendour
shone,
and lo! The little car was gone,
from off the Christmas tree.*

*He gazed upon each fairy light,
the shining tinsel gleaming bright,
so full of wonder and delight,
beneath the Christmas tree.*

This little song and its lovely melody were composed by my brother, Anthony. I was living in Belfast at the time and I was very proud when the music shop across the road from the City Hall played it on the loudspeaker so that all the shoppers passing by would hear Marie's lovely soprano voice singing the story.

I like to think that the little boy's mother told him about his own angel, and that he was praying to this special helper and not the artificial representation on the tree.

True, we use the ornamental ones of paper, plastic, tinsel, or Delft, to remind us at Christmas of the first Christmas night. I have a lot of these, of various sizes and materials as, for several years, my daughter gave me an angel every Christmas. They all go round the edge of the crib, some of them with one wing broken, many of them holding musical instruments.

While our ornaments and cribs remind us of the first Christmas night, they can never capture its glory. Of all the people in the world, God chose some shepherds who were watching their sheep in the countryside near Bethlehem. These were the people who would be given the all-important news of the birth of Jesus.

Suddenly, an angel of the Lord was there beside them and the

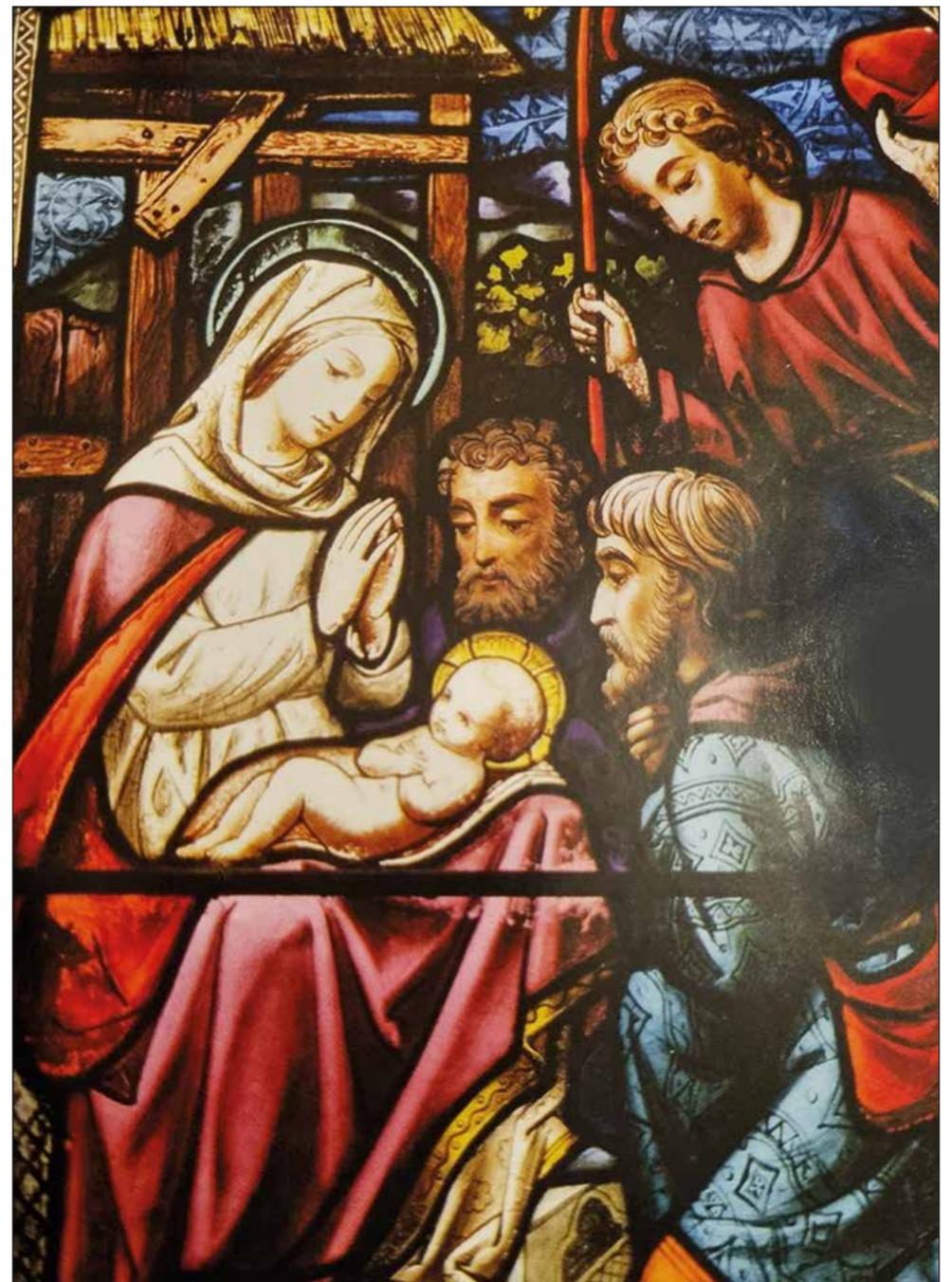
Glory of the Lord shone over them. They were terrified at this unusual happening. The angel told them not to be afraid. "I bring tidings of great joy for you and all the people, for this day is born to you a saviour who is Christ the Lord in the city of David, and you will find Him wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

After the angel had told them this, many angels came down from Heaven, singing, "Glory be to God on high and on earth peace to men of goodwill." Then the Angels went back up to Heaven. The shepherds discussed what had happened. They all had had the same experience. They decided to go to Bethlehem to find the child of whom the angel had told them.

How had the shepherds seen the angels? Angels are pure spirits, but God allowed that these ones would take a comprehensive shape that the shepherds might see with their "inner eye."

What was the heavenly music like? We have many great orchestras and choirs and wonderful pieces of music that would lift any mind and heart to God. However, when I first heard a big number of people singing in tongues at the charismatic conference in St Columb's College, I was enthralled; so many different types of voices, singing at different pitches, singing words from different languages, all at random. Surely, it should have been too cacophonous. But it was not. It was the most beautiful, harmonious, heavenly music that I ever heard. But then, of course, it was led by the Holy Spirit. Maybe the angelic music sounded the same, only maybe even more beautiful still.

The only ears that heard it were those of the shepherds – with their inner ears. They went to Bethlehem and found the stable. They adored the new-born saviour and told Mary and Joseph about



their vision of the Angels and their message, and the heavenly music. Mary pondered it all in her heart. If she or Joseph had seen any angels in the stable, they never mentioned it. Of course, she had seen the Angel Gabriel at the time

of the incarnation, but she had never told Joseph about that.

Of course, their Guardian Angels were there all the time, whether they saw them or not. And a few weeks later, an angel awoke St Joseph from his sleep and told him to take the child and his mother to safety in Egypt.

When we celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Christ, we can know that our angels are celebrating too. Though we cannot see them, they are aware of us all the time. And they constantly see God and constantly praise God, with the same heavenly music as the shepherds heard.

My Christmas Creed *by Grainne Doherty*

CHRISTMAS calls us to declare the deepest part of our incarnational faith: we believe that over 2,000 years ago, in a small town in a distant land, the most incredible and wonderful event happened. The God in whom we believe...the source of all creation...was born.

By becoming human, our God chose to become intimately and lovingly involved in our world and in each one of our lives. Jesus' incarnation is the most profound revelation and reminder that we are all created in the image and likeness of God, created out of love, and created for love.

Claiming such a belief this Christmas has implications for how each one of us understands and responds to the families, the communities, the world in which we live.

If I claim to believe this Christmas Story, that God is lovingly involved with each one of us, then I cannot believe that there is any justification for the needless suffering that countless millions suffer daily throughout our world. I cannot dare claim that homelessness and poverty, and war and famine are "just the way of the world", as if I am not partly responsible.

For this little baby in the manger tells each one of us equally, regardless of gender or creed or colour or sexual orientation: "I have come that you may have life and have life in all its fullness."

And if I dare claim to believe this Christmas story, that God's becoming embodied, infuses all of creation with sparks of the divine, then I am called to not judge or dismiss others just because they are different to me. I am compelled

to see and love the unique and gifted persons in the midst of their brokenness, their addictions, their vulnerabilities. I am challenged to hope in the innate goodness at work in every person, in myself, and in the world.

For this little baby in the manger overlooks all our limitations and tells us...each one of us: "You are the Light of the world and Your light must shine before others."

And if I dare believe this Christmas story, then I cannot believe that war and hatred and aggression will have the last word, or that the pain of loneliness or isolation or grief has come to stay forever.

For this little baby says to each one of us, out of his own humanity and brokenness: "Come to me all you who are heavy burdened and I will give you rest".

For this is what I believe:

*Unto us a child is born,
And unto us a Son is given,
And the government shall be upon
his shoulder
And his name shall be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
The Everlasting Father, the Prince...
of Peace.*



Continued from p28

his death is unknown. St John, Apostle, and Evangelist's Feast Day is celebrated on December 27.

St Thomas Becket

Thomas Becket was born on December 21, 1119 or 1120, at Cheapside, London, the son of Gilbert and Matilda Becket. At the age of ten, he was sent as a student to Merton Priory, southwest of the city in Surrey. He later attended a grammar school in London, perhaps the one at St Paul's Cathedral.

Around the age of 20, he spent about a year in Paris, but he did not study canon or civil law at the time and his Latin skill always remained rudimentary. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Theobald entrusted him with several important missions to Rome, and sent him to Bologna

and Auxerre to study canon law.

In 1154, Theobald named Becket Archdeacon of Canterbury, and other ecclesiastical offices. His efficiency in those posts led Theobald to recommend him to King Henry II for the vacant post of Lord Chancellor, to which Becket was appointed in January 1155.

He was nominated as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. Becket vacated the role of Chancellor and was ordained a priest on June 2, 1162, and on June 3, 1162 was consecrated as archbishop.

He engaged in conflict with Henry II, King of England, over the rights and privileges of the Church, and was murdered by followers of the king in Canterbury Cathedral on December 29, 1170. His Feast Day is December 29.

Family Love... A vocation and a path to holiness by Fr Johnny Doherty, CSsR



Fr Johnny Doherty CSsR

IT is hard to believe that it is just over four years since the ninth World Meeting of Families took place in Ireland in 2018. There are all kinds of memories of that great occasion. Many of the public memories are of the visit of Pope Francis and these memories are a mixture of celebration and controversy.

My memories are of the few days in the RDS. Thousands of people gathered there to express their commitment to the vital importance of marriage and family life. This was not just a commitment in words. It was also shown by the variety of ways that people from around Ireland, and other parts of the world, are actively supporting every aspect of marriage and family life.

World Meeting of families 2022

At the end of the meeting in Ireland, it was announced that the next one would be held in the Diocese of Rome in 2021, following the arrangement that it would be every three years. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, this had to be re-arranged and it took place in Rome on June 23-27, 2022.

The theme for this five-day gathering in Rome was: 'Family Love: a Vocation and a Path to Holiness'. I want to reflect on each part of this theme in this article.

Family

Until comparatively recently the words marriage and family life went together and were clearly understood. Most women and men got married, they had their children, and the vast majority made a success of their family life, not without problems of course and, at times, with great sacrifices.

We now live in a different world and society and Church.

• Most couples still get married, but it is no longer taken for granted that they will marry in Church – many other venues are available for them today

• Many marriages break-up for various reasons. Some of the people involved in these break-ups marry again.

• Many couples choose to live together. Some of them have their children and then decide whether to get married or not.

• And we now have the question of same-sex marriage. That is a question that was unheard of until very recently. But it is an important question that has implications for all of us.

All of these changes in adult relationships give rise to a great variety of family combinations.

• There are married couples with children

• There are married couples who do not have children

• There are cohabiting couples with children or maybe without children

• There are lone parents with children. Some of these may have been married, or divorced, or bereaved. Many of them may not have been married.

• There are divorced and remarried couples with children, often with each person bringing children of their own into the new family and then having children together.

• There are single people who never had children and who live

alone or, perhaps, with siblings.

• There are same sex couples, some with children and some not.

Serious implications

These lists are not exhaustive but rather are indications of how things have changed and are changing in relation to family life. All this rapid change has serious implications for both Church and State. The State responds to these changes mostly through legislation, at times with a lack of reflection on the effects they are having on family and society.

We, too, as the Church, need to respond to them. The questions and responses are not theoretical. Most, if not all, of the forms of relationships and families are present in every parish and faith community.

Our responses have to be filled with love and respect, while keeping an eye on how the legislation of the Church can or cannot change to meet the new realities.

Family Love

The common denominator of all these forms of relationships and of families is, undoubtedly, love. It is that which makes them sacred in themselves. One of our strongest beliefs as followers of Christ is in the statement that "God is love. Those who live in love live in God and God lives in them."

This wonderful revelation does not have any ifs and buts. It applies to all situations of love and applies where there is faith and where there is none.

Inclusion, not exclusion

In the life of the Church, many of us are inclined to exclude those who do not measure up to our ideals of marriage and family. People have often said to me that we should not talk about marriage of a woman and man because so many others will feel excluded.

Equally, other people have said that we should not include same sex couples on the list of families because we might be seen to go against God's word.

In his letter, 'Amoris Laetitia The Joy of Love', Pope Francis had to face this tendency by addressing the question of those who are divorced and remarried. There are those who say that people like this are excommunicated. He says clearly that they are not! The Church community has a great responsibility to ensure that they can find their proper place within the Community.

The same needs to be said about all those in other forms of relationship. Our main task has to be to discover the ways in which all can find a home among us, because each form of family relationship is sacred.

Faith values that need to be lived out

For us, as Catholics, there are several values that need to be held together as we look at the way things are today.

I suggest the following:

1. The right to life and full dignity of every human person from the moment of conception to the time of natural death. This is central to all our considerations.

2. Every family, whatever its combination, is a sacred place where Christ lives. This is particularly true where there is Baptism.

3. The marriage of a woman and man who choose to get married in and into the Church is one of the seven Sacraments of the Church and, as such, is due particular reverence and support from all of us.

4. We are in Communion with the Universal Church, the Regional Church, the Diocese, and the parish. We take our lead in terms of teaching from this Communion.

5. We can only deal with the complexity of today's Church and world when we bring it into prayer, especially as parish communities where people live their lives.

Family love, a vocation

The main responsibility for a family is with the adults in the home. Parents are seen as the primary teachers of their children. They call on many other resources to help them in this, particularly our Catholic schools.

When parents bring their child to the Church for Baptism, this primary role is also recognised. They have to declare that they want this Sacrament for their child. They then promise to bring their child up in the faith of the Church. And I am sure that every parent at that time means it, when they say that they will do this.

But they cannot do it on their own. Nor should they have to do it on their own. A very important part of every Sacrament is that the community of the Church promises to support these parents in every way possible, so that they can fulfil their promise.

Baptism, the source of vocation

All the baptised have the same vocation; to be followers and disciples of Jesus Christ. This is lived out in a variety of ways: as married; as single, including children; as parents; as priests and deacons; as religious.

It is in each family that this sense of purpose is nurtured and strengthened by the quality of love in each home. That is why each family needs to experience the support of the parish community in their particular circumstances. Without that active support, they can see themselves as not included.

Family love, a vocation and a path to holiness

So, we come back once more to the theme of the World Meeting of Families in Rome on June 23-27. Family, based on love as it is, is a major source of holiness for all involved. This holiness grows

through the quality of love that is consciously developed by adults and children through giving good, regular, creative time to each other; through loving each person as s/he is, not by how you might want them to be; by building a family in which praise, affirmation and thanksgiving are in the very atmosphere and where criticism is banned; where affection is freely expressed in word and in action.

In other words, a family home where each person is glad to be. This takes effort and it takes constantly making decisions to love.

Wrapped in prayer

When you see that heading, some may immediately think: 'Here comes the holy bit!' But part of the purpose of prayer is to help us all to know that our love is 'the holy bit'. God is the origin of our vocation; God is where the path to holiness leads us; and ultimately God is the one in whose image we are made, individually but especially as a family.

We need to develop:

• Couple prayer, so that those who are married may go beyond the limits of love that they set for themselves and constantly grow in love and affection for one another

• Family prayer, so that we can know that Christ lives in us and among us in our homes

• Prayer with the Parish Community, especially Sunday Mass, so that we make a new beginning each week in our love and in our faith commitments.

• Prayer by the Parish Community, so that we can grow in compassion for each person and each situation by praying regularly for one another.

Conclusion

'Family love, a vocation and a path to holiness' can and should become more than a theme for the World Meeting of Families in Rome on June 23-27. It should become the motto of each family and the aim of each Parish Community.

Believing God loved him, the late Fr Joe O'Connor did best to serve Him and help others do the same



The Late Fr Joe O'Connor

THE large congregation that filled Sacred Heart Church in Plumbridge, Co Tyrone, at 12 noon on Friday, October 28, for Requiem Mass for Fr Joseph O'Connor was a clear reflection of the high esteem in which the 84-year-old was held.

Born on March 17, 1938, in the

village of Elphin, Co Roscommon, and reared in St Eugene's Parish, Derry, Fr Joe was ordained in St Patrick's College, Maynooth, for the Derry Diocese on June 23, 1963. He went on to minister as curate in Mourne (1963-1966), Greencastle (1966-1967), Omagh (1967-1971), Coleraine (1971-1976), Aghyaran (1976-1983), Knockmoyle (1983-1995), and then, as parish priest in Plumbridge (1995-2011), and moved back to Cappagh when he retired.

Over 20 fellow priests attended, with Bishop Donal the main celebrant and Fr Joe's former classmate, Fr Jim McGonagle the homilist. The congregation heard how Fr Joe was "comfortable in any company, no matter what rank or state", with Fr Jim adding: "He was always able to be on good terms with whoever he was

dealing with."

Describing his late friend's faith as "very simple", Fr Jim continued: "He believed that God loved him and he did his best to serve Him, and he tried to help others to do the same."

He noted that Fr Joe, the youngest of six, lost both of his parents before he was two years old: "The family was suddenly split. The oldest five were able to stay as one unit with an aunt, while Joe found himself in Derry with his father's sister, Mollie, who was married to Mickey McDermott.

"Joe suddenly found himself with a new mother and two new sisters, Peggy and Renee. He had very little contact with his siblings in Roscommon until later in life. He went to Christian Brothers PS and then St Columb's, followed by a year out to reflect on what he might do. In 1956, he, myself and

two others headed for Maynooth, and three of us were ordained on June 23, 1963."

Saying that Joe's time in Maynooth hadn't been an easy one, Fr Jim recalled: "He was whisked away to hospital with terrible head pain and was in a coma for 10 days. Word came back that he wouldn't make the morning and we were asked to pray for his happy death. About three weeks later, he walked back into Maynooth and continued his studies.

"It was Meningitis and it did have an effect on his health down through the years. In the last 15 years, he had more than enough visits to Altnagelvin Hospital and over the last three weeks of his life he had other problems. His memory had also been affected a bit, but that did not stop him in any way."

Fr Jim went on to highlight that Fr Joe had many talents, including acting, being a very strong swimmer and long distance runner, and played "a mean game" of billiards, snooker and cards, as well as golf, and enjoyed travelling to different countries.

"It was always a wonder to be with him," he added, "He was great company."

Fr Joe is survived by Fr Kevin, Benny, Aideen and Annie, and at the end of the ceremony, Fr Kevin spoke about his brother, saying: "Joe had two families. He had two homes, and was brought to Roscommon for a visit every year. The only memory I have of him as a child is of an occasion where I grabbed him by the ankles and held him up, and he just giggled.

"In 1950, I joined the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and I didn't meet Joe during that time. In

1958, a couple of weeks before my ordination, I was taken to visit him in hospital. He was unconscious. I was ordained and a couple of months later Joe recovered. Then I went to America and spent 52 years there. I used to come back every five years for a couple of weeks' holidays and that is when I got to know Joe. He had a wonderful singing voice and a wonderful laugh."

"I am so grateful that he had so many loving people in his life," added Fr Kevin, "He was so well loved and, of course, he loved you. I have very happy memories of Joe and I am happy that he was also so happy in his ministry and that the parishes took such good care of him."

Fr Joe was buried in the adjoining graveyard, and everyone was invited for refreshments in the local hall afterwards.

Children's Catechism Club - C3

by Veronica Harley

HELLO children. C3 welcomes you to the month of December. This is a very exciting time of year as we prepare during Advent for the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. The month of December is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, which is celebrated on December 8.



Immaculate Conception

On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception we celebrate and honour the holiness and innocence of Mary. Our Catholic faith teaches us that God kept Mary free from original sin. She was conceived immaculately, which means that from the moment of her conception she was free from original sin and in a state of grace, pure enough to be the Mother of Jesus (CCC 490-493). She was a fitting tabernacle to hold within her the body the flesh and blood of Jesus our Saviour. When we receive Holy Communion we also hold within us the Body and Blood of Jesus, so we should try not to sin and to be pure and holy like Mary.



The Advent Wreath

The use of the Advent wreath with the five candles has been a tradition for hundreds of years. The wreath is a symbol of the four weeks in which we prepare for the birth of Jesus, with a candle being lit each week, three purple candles and one rose candle. The green branches remind us of the new life we have in Jesus, the circle signifies the eternity of God's love for us (with no beginning or end) and the candles represent hope and light, which Jesus brings into a dark world. The fifth candle is lit on Christmas Day as a symbol of Christ, born as the Light of the world.

Saints of the Month:

St Ambrose – December 7
St Lucy – December 13
St Stephen – December 26
St John – December 27



Christmas Day

Christmas Day is celebrated every year on December 25. The word 'Christmas' comes from the combination of Christ and Mass; it is the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ (CCC 525). This was the day Jesus was brought into our world to reveal God to us. Christmas is a very special feast and it is one of only three feast days of which the Catholic Church celebrates birthdays. The other two are the births of the Blessed Virgin Mary and John the Baptist. All three of these birthdays have one thing in common – John the Baptist, the Blessed Virgin Mary and Jesus were all born without Original Sin.

Christmas is a special time when we gather together to celebrate the Birth of Jesus. We exchange gifts in our homes and give thanks to God for the wonderful gift of his Son to us.

Feast of the Holy Family

The Feast of the Holy Family is celebrated on the first Sunday of Christmas. This feast day is dedicated to the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. We ponder their life together in Nazareth and pray for our own families.

The Gospels do not tell us anything about Jesus' life when he was growing up in Nazareth. The last story St Luke tells us is the finding of Jesus in the Temple (Lk.2:41-52) and so we have the hidden years of Jesus' life (CCC514). We know that during this time Jesus' relationship with Mary and Joseph helped him as he grew to maturity, increased in wisdom, and found favour with God.

The Holy Family provides us with a perfect model of how to live: they loved God and one another. Families are like 'schools of love', for within our families we learn how to receive and share love (CCC 2207). God's love is transmitted



to us through the love of our families, through the ordinariness of family life, God is present. The family has been described as the 'domestic church' (CCC 2204) - a place of ecclesial community and a communion of persons, an image of the Triune God.

Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic churches. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph graciously hear our prayer.

Amen

Comites Christi- Companions of Christ

The Catholic Church celebrates the Christmas Octave each year; an octave means eight, like an 'Octopus' which has eight legs or an octave in music which has eight notes. In the Church, the Christmas Octave means eight days, beginning on Christmas Day and



ending on January 1, with the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God. During this time, we not only remember the importance of Jesus coming into the world but we also celebrate the feast days of several saints. You might think it is rather strange to be celebrating other feast days near the time of our Lord's birth, but the Church, in her wisdom, deliberately positions them here as they have a special connection to Christ.



The feast days immediately following Christmas Day are known as the 'comites Christi', the comrades of Christ. The Latin word 'Comes' not only means 'companion', but is also the Latin word for the noble title of a 'count'. The Church is suggesting that the 'comites Christi' are somehow closely spiritually connected to Jesus, in the same way that royal associates are close to their king.

The companions which accompany Jesus are Stephen, the first martyr, on December 26, John the Apostle and

Evangelist on December 27, and the Holy Innocents, the children Herod had killed, on December 29.

These feast days show us what it is like to be a companion of Jesus, and how we should always be prepared to accept any consequences which we may meet for the sake of Jesus' friendship. Some also feel that these feast days represent the three forms of martyrdom; voluntary and executed (Stephen), voluntary but not executed (John), and executed but not voluntary (Holy Innocents).

A martyr is someone who suffers voluntarily to die for their beliefs or endures great suffering for their faith. St Stephen was the first martyr; he suffered a red martyrdom as he was stoned to death for his faith. St John suffered a white martyrdom as he was exiled to the Island of Patmos. The Holy Innocents suffered an innocent martyrdom as they were born at the time of Christ and Herod had them all killed, in an attempt to find the baby Jesus.

The Holy Innocents did not choose martyrdom, they not only died for Christ but instead of Him, and for this reason they are known as the 'flores martyrum' - the 'flowers of the martyrs'. St Augustine speaks of them in a beautiful way: "They are the first buds of the Church killed by the frost of persecution."



Quiz Time with Lawrence

1. In the story of the Nativity, by what name are the 'Magi' usually referred?
2. With what song did Robbie Williams and Nicole Kidman hold the 2001 Christmas No 1 spot?
3. What renowned comedian died in Switzerland on Christmas Day 1977?
4. Billy Bob Thornton played the title role in which 2003 festive film?
5. At which racecourse does the King George VI steeplechase traditionally take place on Boxing Day every year?
6. In what year did the iconic Coca Cola truck make its first TV appearance?
7. In the movie 'Elf', what was the first rule of the Elf Code?
8. Which country has an officially recognised postcode of H0H 0H0 for children to send letters to Santa?
9. What iconic New York landmark boasts the city's brightest Christmas tree, adorned by more than 25,000 lights each year?
10. Which former England cricket captain and opening batsman was born on Christmas Day 1984?
11. What author wrote the 1976 book 'The Father Christmas Letters', which chronicled notes between his children and Santa Claus?
12. The world's oldest annual Christmas Market dates back to the 1600s and takes place in which German city?
13. A huge straw statue of what animal is a major part

Quiz Answers: 1, Three Wise Men. 2, 'Somethin' Stupid'. 3, Charlie Chaplin. 4, Bad Santa. 5, Kempton Park. 6, 1995. 7, Treat every day like Christmas. 8, Canada. 9, The Rockefeller Center. 10, Alistair Cook. 11, JRR Tolkien. 12, Nuremberg. 13, The Gävel Goat. 14, Westlife. 15, Die Hard. 16, Jingle Bells. 17, Purple. 18, Twelfth Night. 19, PDC Darts. 20, An old silk hat. 21, John Lewis. 22, Nine. 23, Once in Royal David's City. 24, Stollen. 25, First-footing.

of Sweden's Christmas celebrations?

14. The 1999 Christmas No 1 was a 'Double A' side featuring the songs 'I Have A Dream' and 'Seasons In The Sun' by which group?
15. In what film was Dulles Airport, in Washington, taken over by terrorists on Christmas Eve?
16. Which popular Christmas song was originally written to celebrate Thanksgiving in the USA?
17. What colour is the first candle lit on an Advent wreath?
18. Which William Shakespeare play is a Christmas love story between a man dressed as a woman and a woman dressed as a man?
19. Which sporting World Championship is held in London from mid-December to early January, breaking off for the Christmas holidays?
20. In the song 'Frosty the Snowman' what made Frosty come to life?
21. What company's 2022 Christmas advertisement is aimed at highlighting the issue of children in care?
22. Including Rudolph, how many reindeer are said to pull Santa's sleigh?
23. From which Christmas carol do the following lyrics come...
'Day by day, like us, he grew
He was little, weak and helpless
Tears and smiles like us he knew.'
24. What German-based cake started life as a Christmas treat?
25. The Irish often bring coal, and the Scots bring shortbread or whiskey, to mark what early morning New Year's Day tradition?

Aghyaran, Ardmore, Ardstraw West & Castlederg, Ballinascreen, Ballymagroarty, Banagher, Bellaghy, Buncrana, Carndonagh, Claudy,

Let Your Light Shine!

"Thank God for the grace and the people that have sustained Fr Seamus Kelly and other priests over the last five decades."
(Bishop Donal)

Moville, Newtownstewart, Omagh, Plumbridge, Sion Mills, Steelestown, Strabane, Swatragh, Templemore - Long Tower and St Eugene's, Three Patrons, Waterside

Clonmany, Coleraine, Creggan, Culladuff, Culmore, Desertmartin, Donnyloop, Drumquin, Duramnanagh, Durngiver, Fahan, Faughanvale, Garvagh, Gortin, Greencastle,



Greenlough, Iskaheen, Killyclogher, Killygordon, Kilrea, Lavey, Leckpatrick, Lifford, Limavady, Maghera, Magilligan, Malin, Melmount,