THE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

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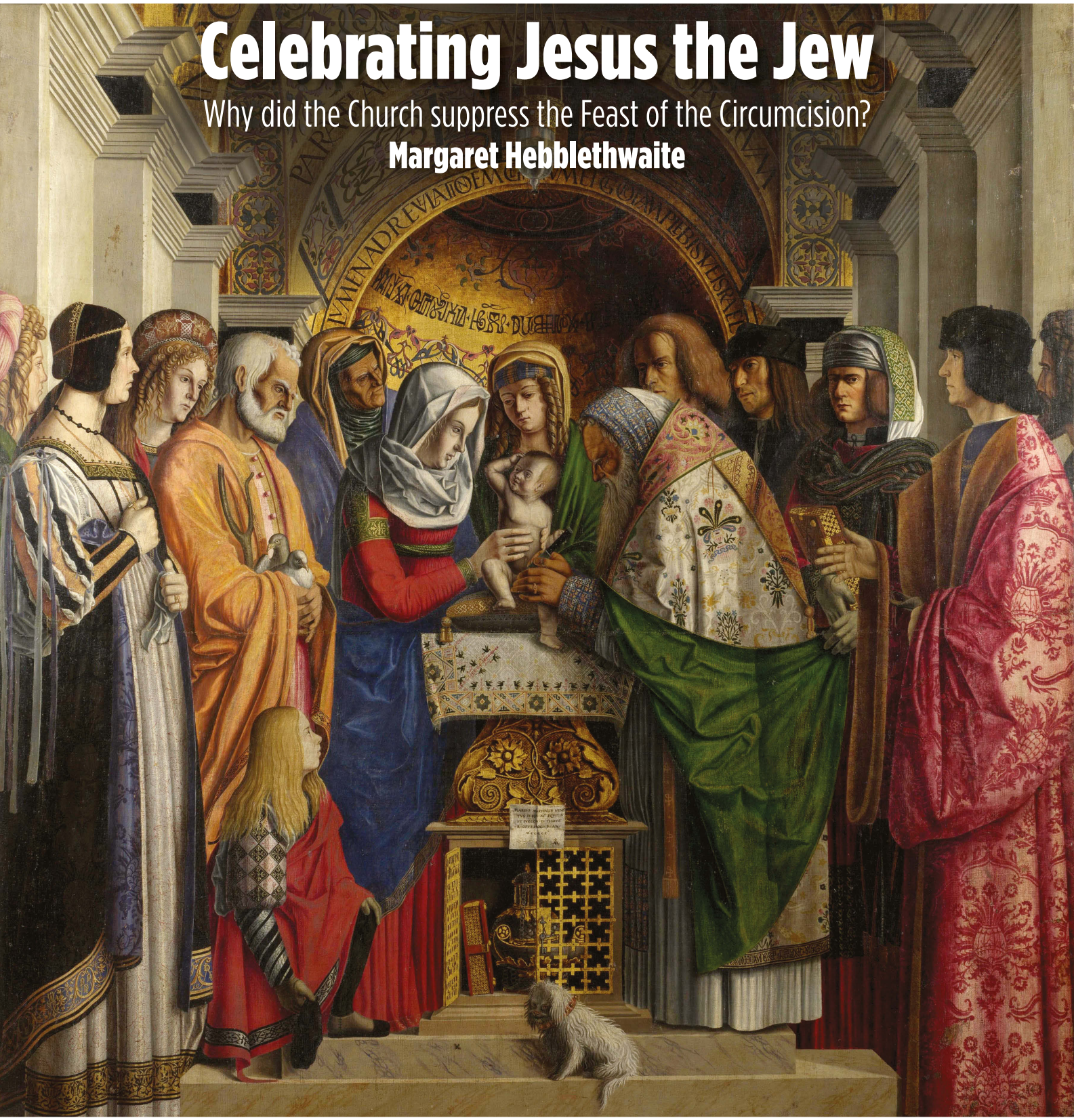

Celebrating Jesus the Jew

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THE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY
FOUNDED IN 1840

STARMER'S CHOICE

BRITAIN MUST DECIDE: EUROPE OR THE US

Events across the English Channel and Atlantic Ocean present choices that Britain has been trying to avoid. At its simplest, does the United Kingdom now turn towards the United States under Donald Trump, or mend bridges with the European Union in the aftermath of Brexit? Although Sir Keir Starmer might be trying to keep his options open, in the end the UK will have to choose which of these opposing stars to steer by.

British foreign policy still follows Lord Palmerston's maxim that Britain should have no permanent allies, only permanent interests – chiefly but not exclusively economic. Hence alliances need to be manipulated in the interests of Great Britain, which as a relatively small nation cannot dictate terms. The United States' foreign policy under Trump seems to be reverting to following George Washington's advice, in his Farewell Address to Congress, to avoid international entanglements and stay out of foreign quarrels, though with a strong undercurrent of "manifest destiny" – America's allegedly God-given "exceptionalist" place in the world.

But on top of that comes Trump's philosophy of "the deal", which is not necessarily a free and mutual agreement between equals, but the use of the United States' financial and military power to persuade or coerce smaller nations to accept arrangements that align with its interests. European Union foreign policy, meanwhile, is a conglomeration of the goals of individual member states, among which the preservation of the peace of Europe is paramount.

Part of the choice between these alternatives is a cultural one: does Britain want to be more like the rest of Europe or more like the United States? Britain admires American energy, but does not wish to emulate most of the package contained under the label "Make America Great Again". Trump's contribution has revealed its dark side. Britain does not want to import a gun culture or unhealthy food; it does not seek the mass deportation of its migrants, even those whose papers might not be in order; it prefers its community and race relations to those of most American cities; its welfare state and National Health Service express a collective bond between its citizens that American individualism abhors. Even the British version of "woke" is a non-ideological protectiveness towards the underdog. There is a mildness about the UK, a spirit of tolerant pragmatic compromise, that the British like and many others admire.

Among whom most of Europe would want to be included. Given a choice between an American and a British model of a civilised society, the Dutch and the Danes, the Poles and Portuguese, the Romans and Romanians – and perhaps even the Irish – are more likely to look across the English Channel than the Atlantic. Indeed, the part of North America called Canada leans to a culture and temperament that is more British than American in character. Speaking of which, a visit to Ottawa by the King of Canada would be very well timed.

Britain's emotional and cultural affinities lie with its European (and Canadian) friends and neighbours. For all the energy and likeability of its people, Trump's America is already beginning to take on the look of a failed experiment. The Continent, in all its rich human and cultural complexity, beckons. Europe needs Britain, and Britain needs Europe.

AXEL RUDAKUBANA

A PSYCHOPATH'S HUMANITY

Axel Rudakubana may well be a psychopath, in which case he represents a challenge to almost every idea on which civilised society depends. A national debate followed news of his sentence – life imprisonment with a very unlikely option for parole only after 52 years – as to what the appropriate punishment should have been. He had pleaded guilty to the murder of three young girls who had been attending a dance class in Southport, a Lancashire seaside town, and to 10 attempted murders.

Yet without a sense of right and wrong, a psychopath has no empathy, compassion or conscience. Nor is it easy to embrace them with the Christian offer of rehabilitation and redemption. The idea that one's moral choices determine one's eternal destiny breaks down. Even in a traditional religious moral framework, the doctrine that mortal sin can lead to hell and damnation fails to address the case of someone who cannot help being wicked. Can such a person even sin?

Psychopathic tendencies have been observed among some successful businessmen, often combined with good manipulative skills. But mostly psychopaths are encountered in the criminal justice system, which, frankly, does not know what to do with them. Public reaction to the Southport killings has sought to find a punishment which fits the crime, based on assumptions that Rudakubana, then 17, chose to do evil when he knew he ought not to have done. But if he is a psychopath, that may not be true. Nevertheless the desire for retribution is natural. The savage murder of three innocent children demands an appropriately severe response, to show that society honours the lives that have been lost.

But psychopaths do not respond to punishment. Rudakubana came to the attention of the authorities on various occasions prior to his horrific killing spree, and even his parents knew he was dangerous. But what could they do? The law does not allow the imprisonment of psychopaths because of what they might do in the future. Nor are psychopaths deemed mentally ill, so they cannot be detained against their will for treatment. Not that treatment is available. There is tentative evidence that cognitive behavioural therapy can modify behaviour in psychopathically-inclined teenagers, but that is not a cure.

The Christian response is not to treat psychopaths with a psychopathic response – to be deliberately cruel. Their humanity must be respected. As nails were driven into Jesus' flesh on Calvary, he cried out: "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do." Axel Rudakubana will probably never understand what he did. But God's mercy is infinite.

PHOTO: SIMON ANNAND

18 Seventy years since its inception, Robert Bolt's play about Thomas More returns to the English stage

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The Feast of the Circumcision – marked by other Christian Churches on 1 January – was removed from the Roman Calendar in 1960, stripping Latin-rite Catholics of a celebration of Jesus' initiation into Judaism / **By MARGARET HEBBLETHWAITE**

Celebrating Jesus the Jew

PHOTO: PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

Purification of the Virgin (1461-62) from an altarpiece by Benozzo Gozzoli

WHEN POPE Francis visited the Great Synagogue of Rome in 2016, a delightful elderly Jewish gentleman greeted him warmly and proposed that he restore the Feast of the Circumcision. "It would be a good idea, wouldn't it?" said the gentleman, whose name is given by John Allen of Crux as Nereo Musante. Allen reported that Francis and his attendants roared with good-humoured laughter. But it *would* be a good idea, and the hilarity was misplaced. Jesus was a Jew, and all his teaching sprang out of his commitment to Judaism. Abolishing the feast, celebrated on 1 January until the General Roman Calendar of 1960 removed it, has stripped us of the foundational moment of affirming the Jewishness of Jesus. In 1974 Paul VI rededicated 1 January to "Mary the Holy Mother of God", but she already had a plethora of feast days.

The sacrifice of the foreskin represents in Judaism the decisive moment in which a male is committed to the covenant with God – irreversibly, but not cheaply, with a sign marked by pain and blood. Today some Jewish scholars are reassessing the necessity of circumcision for Judaism (notably Leonard B. Glick and Lawrence A. Hoffman), but this is a conversation in which Gentiles like myself should not presume to participate. As far as the Christian Church is concerned, however, we reached an early decision (Council of Jerusalem, *c.*AD 50, Acts 15) that circumcision was no longer necessary for followers of Jesus – not wrong but unnecessary, for "real circumcision is a matter of the heart: it is spiritual and not literal" (Romans 2:29). Jesus, after all, made the New Covenant in a form that incorporated us into his flesh and blood, and spared us the need to sacrifice physically any part of our own bodies. Because he was circumcised, and because he was crucified, we do not need to be.

> There is something beautiful about a permanent physical sign of a covenant, like a wedding ring that won't come off

Why should I be writing about the Circumcision now, when we are poised to commemorate the Presentation (Luke 2:22-40) on 2 February, 40 days after Jesus' birth? The Circumcision, by contrast, was done eight days after his birth (Luke 2:21; Leviticus 12:3), which by inclusive reckoning falls on 1 January. It is not just that both are moments of infant commitment to God, but also because I have found, to my amazement, that the two events are frequently conflated in Christian iconography. Is this a mistake by the painters, who copied one another? Or were some of the artists consciously expressing a deeper theological truth?

Today, when charges of antisemitism are hurled around in disputable contexts, it is more important than ever to rid the Church of the relics of its genuine historic antisemitism. We would benefit from a feast of Jesus the Jew. But over the centuries, the Church has commemorated the Circumcision not so much as Jesus' rite of initiation into Judaism, as for more specifically Christian reasons: as a prefiguring of baptism (e.g. Augustine); as an example of obedience (e.g. Bede); as a proof of his fully human body against the heretics (e.g. Thomas Aquinas); as a warning against concupiscence bearing in mind that original sin is transmitted through the penis (Aquinas again); and, most importantly, as the first step in Jesus' redemptive sacrifice of blood (e.g. Ambrose, later popularised in the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend*: "On this day he began to shed his blood for us … and this was the beginning of our redemption").

The artists sometimes reflected this last point: a number of manuscript illuminations show baby Jesus holding out his arms in cruciform shape as the knife approaches. Then, in Passion paintings from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the blood from the Cross is seen trickling down into Jesus' groin. Leo Steinberg, in *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, calls it "a blood hyphen between commencement and consummation". John Milton in his poem "Upon the Circumcision" recalls the blood and pain which link the two salvific events, as Jesus:

> … seals obedience first with wounding smart
> This day; but Oh! ere long
> Huge pangs and strong
> Will pierce more near his heart.

If the Circumcision is a difficult event to understand, so too is the Presentation, with some confusion arising from Luke's account, where the Redemption of the firstborn male (after the first month, Numbers 18:16) is slipped in alongside the Purification of the mother after childbirth (after 40 days in the case of a boy child, Leviticus 12). But there is no reason why both could not be done on the same day. The family went to the Temple "when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses" and "they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord')". The confusion is increased by the feast being traditionally called Candlemas, apparently because a procession

of candles honours the one Simeon will call "a light for revelation".

It was not really "their" Purification, but Mariam's (my preferred name for Jesus' mother, following the original language of the New Testament), except in the sense that the whole family were drawn together in this visit. They offered a sacrifice of "a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons", and this was the option for less well-off families at the Purification. But it is the Presentation that forms the focus for Luke's account, and also gives its name to our 2 February feast day. There are echoes of the presentation of the child Samuel to the priest Eli, as his mother Hannah dedicates him totally to God, to live permanently in the "house of the Lord" (1 Samuel 1).

Simeon is a "righteous and devout man", prompted by the Spirit to go to the Temple on that day. He has no official role there and is not a priest, though he emerges as a seer on this occasion. He takes the baby in his arms – what a beautiful touch – and proclaims what is known by its Latin title as the *Nunc Dimittis* … – "Now you are dismissing …" – which speaks of peace, salvation, light and glory. The parents are amazed, and then Simeon addresses Mariam: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Biblical scholars play down the connection between this "sword" and the Virgin of Sorrows devotion, which is more connected with the fourth gospel's account of Mariam at the Cross. A sword can signify not just pain but piercing judgement, as here: "The Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword …; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare" (Hebrews 4:12-13).

At this point a second witness comes up, Anna, who has a more established role in the Temple: she lives there permanently, fasting and praying, her ancestry is well known and is given by Luke and she is even introduced as a "prophet". (Most translations, including the ESV, but not the NRSV, still use the outdated term "prophetess", parallel to "poetess" or "manageress".) She is a widow and is "of a great age": the scholars are split on whether she is 84 years old, or has been a widow for 84 years, which would make her at least 103, like Judith, who beheaded Holofernes and lived to 105 (Judith 16:23). No matter – she gets a burst of energy, praising God and talking about Jesus. Feminists are disappointed that she is given no actual words, unlike Simeon, and see this as typical of Luke's gospel, where there are plenty of man-woman pairs but the woman is usually given a slightly lesser role.

For Jesus' mother, there would have been a complex mix of emotions in both events. She will have desired to bring the experience of childbirth into the realm of God, and the adult Jesus would not have thanked her had she omitted to have him circumcised. But it must have cut her to the quick to hear her baby's cries of pain. At the Presentation (if we follow the literary reconstruction of Simeon's words), she would have been proud to hear Jesus proclaimed as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel". But her joy would be tempered by puzzled fear at his prophecy that a sword would pierce her soul.

In the iconography, both positive and negative emotions are also seen. It was a surprise to me to discover that there are a huge number of paintings of the Circumcision, many of them brutally explicit. We rarely see them reproduced, but Steinberg has highlighted the huge attention paid to Jesus' penis in art, until the Counter-Reformation crackdown put an end to it. Images of the Circumcision begin with manuscript illuminations, and graduate on to full-scale paintings, particularly from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

WHEREAS THE HISTORIC Circumcision of Jesus would probably have been carried out at home, the paintings present a different picture. Mariam takes her baby to the Temple where a vested priest – usually identified as Simeon (who was not actually at the Circumcision and was not a priest) – wields a knife to the naked boy upon an altar. Joseph or another attendant carry the two turtle doves, establishing the conflation with the Purification story. In the painting by Marco Marziale (reproduced on the front cover), the identification of the circumcising priest with Simeon is confirmed by the words of the *Nunc Dimittis* written over the arches. The baby turns to his mother with some puzzlement to seek reassurance as the knife reaches his private parts; she holds him in her steady gaze; Joseph, holding the turtle doves, looks on with concerned compassion; overall, this is a solemn moment, but a holy one.

In a twelfth-century antiphonal in Salzburg, Jesus actually stretches out his arms in welcome for the knife, as his mother presents him, holding open one of his legs. Many other images show a devout Mariam, sometimes with her hands joined in prayer, or crossed reverently across her breast. Sometimes she quietens her child with a hand on his head and shoulder, or by holding hands with him in his anxiety. They need each other for support, but Mariam is usually tranquil. Fra Angelico's *Circumcision* shows the spread-eagled child held firmly in place by Mariam and by Joseph (who spreads his legs) but the expression on the faces of all three is of devotion and not alarm.

But some other portrayals are more ominous, with Mariam looking intensely worried, like any Jewish mother, or kneeling nervously on the floor with hands joined, unable to intervene. Sometimes the naked baby turns to his mother, holding out his arms not so much for reassurance as in a desperate plea for her to save him from the knife. In a picture by Rubens, the red-clad Mariam looks away in distress, but above her cherubs open a light-filled gateway into Heaven. In some of the most negative portrayals, antisemitism is clearly dominant, as stereotypically wicked faces are seen on the agents of the surgery.

One of the most beautiful and contemplative images is that of Benozzo Gozzoli's *Purification of the Virgin*. There is no knife visible here, although the child in the priest's gentle arms has his naked body exposed, suggesting some cross-influence from the other mystery. Mariam and Anna are the chief figures, framing the baby and the priest: Mariam on the left with hands joined in prayer and Joseph with doves behind her; Anna on the right with an enormous scroll of words flowing down from her hands, as though to defy Luke's silence on what she said.

When the Feast of the Circumcision was abolished in 1960, no doubt the intention was well meant – to spare the faithful the embarrassment of commemorating the cutting off of a foreskin on a major day of festivity, New Year's Day. But there is something beautiful about a permanent physical sign of a covenant, like a wedding ring that will not come off. The covenant is not made without pain, whether by Circumcision or by Crucifixion, and for us who reap the benefits so painlessly, that cost is recalled on the face of the mother as she watches, her emotions as naked as the body of her son.

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

Newly released government papers show how, at the turn of the century, political leaders still considered faith communities to be potentially powerful allies / **By ABIGAIL FRYMANN ROUCH**

Politics, principle and pragmatism

PHOTO: ALAMY, PA IMAGES

Former Prime Minister Tony Blair with Archbishop Rowan Williams in 2006

ALTHOUGH Alastair Campbell may later have softened his famous throwaway line, "We don't do God", it has passed into folklore as representing the previous Labour government's general line on religion. In fact, relations between Downing Street and faith leaders reached a high watermark in the early years of Tony Blair's premiership. He realised after his election in 1997 that pursuing policies such as debt cancellation in the developing world would be easier with the backing of the Churches and faith communities. But after the invasion of Iraq began in March 2003, those relations with faith leaders cooled considerably.

The National Archives have released a cache of documents detailing meetings and correspondence between Blair and religious leaders in 2003 and 2004, including the audience with Pope John Paul II in Rome on 22 February. Though this was supposedly private, international media interest was "intense" according to a letter from Kathryn Colvin, then ambassador to the Holy See, to Sir Michael Jay, then permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office.

In a lengthy briefing to Francis Campbell, then Blair's private secretary, Colvin recommended that the Prime Minister "share his thoughts on the moral argument for military intervention ... [and] reassure his interlocutors that we are thinking about 'day after' issues (should action be taken) and even the day after that, in order to prepare for the Iraq of the future where there would be a place for Christians", a precarious community clearly on Rome's radar.

The Pope, Colvin writes, "has difficulty walking and his speech is frequently unclear" but "he can be sparky", joking to the wife of the former Polish President, Lech Walesa, "Danuska [sic], I couldn't make out if that was you or your daughter." She describes Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Secretary of State, as "forceful in argument and can get carried away by his own importance" and Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, Secretary for Relations with States, as "something of a wine connoisseur" who "will not give much away".

Afterwards, Colvin records that Blair had spent 20 minutes with the Pope, and that his wife Cherie joined them for a further seven. Blair then had a longer meeting with Sodano and Tauran. While what was said in the papal audience remains private, Blair "told Sodano and Tauran he had had a good meeting, and found the Pope in good form. Talks ... covered Iraq, MEPP [the Middle East Peace Process], and the European Constitution." In his meeting with the Secretary of State, Sodano "did most of the talking, frequently breaking into Italian (which he barely left time to be interpreted), with occasional interventions from Tauran. The dialogue was not structured, but consisted of a somewhat random list of the Holy See's arguments against the use of force in Iraq, to which the Prime Minister responded."

> **Blair had spent 20 minutes with the Pope, and ... his wife Cherie joined them for a further seven**

Blair added that he had explained to the Pope that post-9/11, Americans felt that "ignoring hostile elements outside the US could present dangers internally" – including Iraq. He stresses he had tried to explain to the US the need to deal with the causes of terrorism, such as poverty, at which point Sodano asks if there was a terrorist link to Iraq. Blair said that "the link was not proved, but that one day the [weapons of mass destruction] would reach the hands of terrorists". Sodano suggested it would have been better if the US had spoken about a "defensive" war, which Catholic just war doctrine accepts, but not a "preventative" one. History records that weapons of mass destruction were not found, and Iraq became a haven for terrorists only after the invasion led to a breakdown in law and order.

Some months earlier, Archbishop of Westminster Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor had added a handwritten note to a fax he had sent to Blair of an article he had written for *The Times*, setting out why he was opposed to an invasion. "I ... have slightly altered it in the light of your comments. Of course I understand and appreciate the difficult decisions to be made and hope the enclosed will contribute to the discussion now taking place. With kindest wishes and prayers ..."

A visit to the UK by Tauran had been planned for April. Colvin's briefing to Campbell before military action began reveals that he had been scheduled to meet four cabinet ministers (Jack Straw, Clare Short, Paul Murphy and Helen Liddell) as well as Stephen Wall and David Manning; a separate note records he was also due to have dinner at Lambeth Palace with Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. Clare Short, then Secretary of State for International Development, told me that the nuncio to Britain, the Spanish archbishop Pablo Puente, had came to see her in the run-up to the Iraq war. "He ... was worried about the proposed war in general and the likely consequences for the Chaldean Catholics. If I remember

right, he talked of a visit by a senior Catholic. He stressed how very senior he was – I think he said 'foreign secretary equivalent' – and how significant it would be." Short, who would resign that May over the invasion, added: "I doubt that he came, given the war and its consequences, and the UK position. I was still in the government in April and did not see him."

Another concern of the Vatican in the early 2000s was the proposed – later abandoned – EU constitution. Rome wanted it to include an article committing the EU to maintaining a structured dialogue with the Churches, and a mention in the preamble of the continent's religious heritage. Sodano turned to Blair for help. When they met, he complained that France was the only opponent, and suggested Blair, who said he was "personally sympathetic", could intervene. Blair confessed he was "not always very persuasive with the French", to which the Bordeaux-born Tauran drily remarked that "the French were the Ayatollah of 'laicism' [sic]".

In a note prepared for a meeting between Blair and Rowan Williams for a meeting in September 2003, the Zimbabwean Churches' efforts to play a "watchdog role" criticising human rights abuses were welcomed. "The Catholic bishop [sic] of Bulawayo, Pius Cube [sic]", who would later be apparently honey-trapped by Mugabe's regime, "has been particularly active," it added. A letter to *The Tablet* from Anglican Bishop of Southwark Colin Buchanan is enclosed, noting that the Anglican Bishop of Manicaland, Sebastian Bakare, had taken an equally brave line.

As for the Middle East Peace Process, according to Colvin's note Sodano asked Blair to convey to President George Bush "the Holy See's disappointment that the situation in the Holy Land had been allowed to worsen. The Americans could do more. Israel was doing what it liked. Tauran added that the construction of the wall and the continuing settlement activity was unbelievable. Sodano commented that the Palestinians also had their faults …"

Concerted efforts were made in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq to repair relations; Blair, Brown, Murphy-O'Connor, Williams and others sought issues on which they could collaborate. Tim Livesey, a former diplomat and adviser in turn to both the Archbishop of Westminster and the Archbishop of Canterbury, told me that Blair and Brown believed that having people like John Paul II and Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor on your side "was a very, very good thing, whereas today, it's just so much more transactional … they genuinely understood that many people listen at least as much to these major spiritual figures as they do to their local politicians." Livesey recalled that Blair and Brown were "quite pragmatic" but also "genuinely respectful and admiring". He added that it will be harder for Sir Keir Starmer to tap into religious leaders' influence on moral issues such as climate change "because I don't think he has the natural empathy that those guys had".

Abigail Frymann Rouch is a former foreign editor of The Tablet.

PATRICK HUDSON

If you think altar girls are behind the vocations crisis, you have other problems

IF ALL EYES are on the altar servers, something has gone wrong. I mostly stayed out of trouble when I served Mass with my sister in our funny little village parish, where all we really did was press our hands piously together and ring the bell at the consecration – a parishioner's grandchildren dubbed us "The Janglers".

But once, at a midweek Mass, we missed our cue and sat staring into space during the preparation of the gifts; our parents, sitting at the back of church, gestured to us to get up and help, whereon my sister started energetically ringing the bell. The more frantically they waved to her to stop, the more frantically she rang. This went on for 30 seconds that felt like an hour, while I fixed my horrified gaze on the opposite wall and kept my hands stuck together like a tombstone effigy. Good old Fr John carried on with the liturgy, entirely unfazed. We didn't serve a midweek Mass again, and "The Janglers" stuck.

That servers should be seen and not heard is also true in the Church's public life: if somebody is making pronouncements about them, there's a row going on somewhere. The latest bust-up is in Sri Lanka, where Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith wrote a letter in October telling his priests not to let girls serve Mass because that might "affect the number of candidates that enter the seminaries, a risk we cannot run". When this circulated a couple of months later, people who know about these things enjoyed parsing the meaning of 1990s Vatican edicts (in brief, bishops can allow female altar servers, but Rome can't force them), commenting variously on what the letter implied about the condition of the Church in Sri Lanka and Cardinal Ranjith's episcopal discernment. Suffice that, if you think altar girls are behind a vocations crisis, you have other problems.

I ASKED Paul Briers, the president of the Archconfraternity Guild of St Stephen, what he made of it all. The guild is the international organisation for altar servers, and by Briers' estimate one of the biggest youth movements in the UK. Stories like this – at the heady intersection of sexism and liturgy to enthuse all shades of partisan – miss what serving is all about. "It's a vocation," he tells me, "a fundamental role." If that fosters other forms of vocation, so much the better, but serving is its own thing. Done properly (he talks about "being intentional") it can express something about the mission of the Church beyond the 11 a.m. on a Sunday. "We've got this role to play, like other parts of the parish, to help the priest to enter more fully into his ministry because he doesn't have to worry about what's going on around him." It's an expression of trust.

The reverse is also true: there's a throwaway, *un*intentional way of talking about serving that expresses a less healthy vision. When Pope Francis was grasping for the right term for the slavishness of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in 2022, he warned him not to become "Putin's altar boy". The late John Wilkins once reported, in an elegant appeal for collegiality, that Chicago's Cardinal Bernardin had complained to him during a visit to Rome: "You know, they treat us like altar boys here." It's such an evocative pejorative that it takes a moment to realise there's something off – an unthinking sense that altar serving is as low as it gets.

WHICH SHOULD, of course, make it the highest honour. A corporately organised hierarchy isn't much good at articulating some fundamental ideas: that Christ came not to be served but to serve, that his service is perfect freedom, that the successor of Peter is the servant of the servants of God. Foot-washing set pieces aside, these aren't easy things to visualise. As serving at the altar is meant to be unobtrusive, it's easier to ignore, or to denigrate, and a truer service for it.

At the Rome session of the Synod on Synodality in October, the Vatican's doctrine chief Cardinal Manuel Fernández argued that ordination to the diaconate wasn't the best way to "promote" women in the Church because male deacons don't do much as it is – "How many times are they just ordained altar boys?" And what, eminence, is so disgraceful about that?

The calumny that the women's ordination movement is only after power and prestige comes from the same misconception that treats altar servers as pawns on the ecclesiological chessboard, as proto-seminarians who are there to do as they're told. Nobody left the Janglers Mass under such an illusion.

PHOTO: ALAMY, NEIL TERRY

Danny Kruger: there are legitimate questions about how much scrutiny the bill will have

The right connections

The highest-profile evangelical Christian in British politics tells **Peter Stanford** that he opposes the legalisation of assisted dying not for religious reasons, but because it threatens the most vulnerable in society

THE ASSISTED DYING BILL, approved by the Commons before Christmas, has now reached the next stage of its progress through Parliament, or "the nitty gritty" as Danny Kruger calls it. He is one of nine MPs who voted against Kim Leadbeater's private members' bill who is sitting on the committee of 22 that is scrutinising it "line by line" before returning it for further votes in the Commons and Lords.

"There are legitimate questions about how much scrutiny it is going to have," reflects Kruger, the 50-year-old Conservative MP for East Wiltshire, as he stretches out in a too-small armchair in his Palace of Westminster office. "And how much improvement we will be able to make. The committee is chosen by Kim Leadbeater."

Not that he is in any mood to give up the fight. Hitherto best-known for writing David Cameron's touchy-feely "hug-a-hoodie" speech in 2006, and because his mum is *The Great British Bake Off*'s vibrantly colourful judge Prue Leith, Kruger has emerged in recent months as the most articulate opponent of the embrace of assisted dying in England and Wales.

Beside the many mentions of him in print or in the broadcast media, the words "evangelical Christian" are usually included, as if this proposed legislation sets believers against the rest of their fellow citizens. It is true that the Churches made public their opposition to Leadbeater's bill, but in the Commons' vote those with a religious faith were represented in both voting lobbies. And, anyway, would Kruger call himself an evangelical Christian?

"Thank you for asking me because I find the label very uncomfortable. I'd never describe myself as that, except in so far as it is a denominator of a movement within the Anglican Church. If that is what being an 'evangelical Christian' is, then fine, but I don't like the phrase because it is basically being used as a synonym for 'fundamentalist', or 'extreme', when I just think of myself as a mainstream, orthodox Christian."

In other words, an Anglican? "But again, that implies some major difference between me and the dissenting Churches or indeed the Catholic Church. I think these distinctions are both profound and petty. You can't argue away these differences in doctrine, but I don't think they need to be obstacles."

KRUGER, WHOSE accent reflects better his Eton education than his parents' upbringing in South Africa, is married to drama teacher Emma and is a father of three. He has `that diffident, relaxed but slightly detached charm (his eyes rarely meet mine) that we have all learnt to recognise in recent years thanks to his old school friends (and subsequently employers) David Cameron and Boris Johnson. What is most striking, though, is quite how much he enjoys turning a conversation into an exercise in batting around theories and ideas. In one laudatory profile on the Conservative Home website, he is described as "more inclined to lie in the bath thinking great thoughts than to do the washing up".

His membership of the committee on what is officially the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill should help banish that image of him disdaining the routine and the run-of-the-mill, especially since his attendance has to be fitted around his role as a junior shadow minister (covering defence) under Kemi Badenoch, not to mention chairing Only Connect, a charity he set up with his wife in 2006 to support newly released prisoners. But Kruger really does like a structured back-and-forth. Was his faith, I ask, part of why he opposed the assisted dying bill?

"That's a very good question," he congratulates me. "I think two things: I don't make faith-based arguments against assisted dying. The arguments against it are practical. They are not metaphysical. They are about the risk to the vulnerable. You don't need to be a believer in any religion to see they are very real on this bill."

And second? "I'd also say that we all bring our faith to work. We apply it to our politics, and politics is ultimately an ethical business. We are deciding on questions of right and wrong all the day. Right and wrong proceeds from reality. It is about what is practically

good and bad for human beings. It is not about some abstract rules that have no concrete relevance to us."

He is not, then, repeating the time-honoured Christian argument (and that of other faiths) that life is not ours to end, but God's? "I don't make that argument," he parries. But do you believe it? "I do think you are not your own. We derive our value from something outside ourselves. We are created, not self-creating, but that doesn't entail me in thinking we should have no agency at the end of our life."

He is, he explains in case I'm not keeping up, exploring the nuance in his own argument against prolonging life artificially in all circumstances. "And I'm not against the termination of life, when it is in the interests of the person or somebody else."

Now I am really not sure what he is referring to. "I believe in having armed forces," he explains, appropriately enough for a shadow minister of defence. So what they do is assisted dying? "That's not the right word but I think it can be appropriate and legitimate to take life."

It takes me a moment or two to think of an example. Such as the death penalty? "I don't have an absolute moral objection to the death penalty, largely on similar grounds to assisted dying. I think it is dangerous, the risks [of wrongful convictions] outweigh the benefits, though if we could determine the death penalty just for certain groups for whom everyone recognises it would be appropriate, I would not object. Certainly, I'd want a terrorist to be shot before he does any harm."

His use of "everyone" is a bit loose. Pope Francis, I venture, doesn't appear to believe that the death penalty is ever appropriate. "Well, the Pope probably has all sorts of views I'd probably disagree with, so that is fine. I'm not in your Church."

DANNY KRUGER grew up at home in Oxfordshire with his parents – Prue Leith and Rayne, a property developer and author, who died in 2002 – in what he describes as "a totally atheist household. Perhaps I'm exaggerating. A religiously indifferent household. If pushed, my father would have described himself as a materialist. He didn't believe there was anything out there. I grew up with that attitude."

In his early twenties, though, he started to shift. "I had passed through Eton without any touch of the divine but in my twenties, by the time I met Emma, I had already become what we call a cultural Christian, believing in the genuine positive value of the Church and Christianity." It was part and parcel, he explains, of his social and political outlook. "I've been a Conservative always. I can't remember a time when I wasn't."

It was, then, Emma's influence – she was already part of the evangelical wing of the Church of England – that caused him to convert. "As well as C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. I can't tell you which page but between its covers."

What spoke to him was the argument that Lewis made for belief. "The compelling argument in the early part is," Kruger recalls, "whether you have a formal belief or not, everyone refers their judgement to some objective standard of right or wrong, so refers to a set of values that are outside themselves. And, unless you are prepared to say that comes from somewhere, you are basically saying that you base your whole world view on a nonsense. We are programmed to worship and we need to direct ourselves to and be reflective of something beyond us."

> 'I don't have an absolute moral objection to the death penalty, on similar grounds to assisted dying'

I wonder if he regrets that absence of faith in his formative years. "There is some value in being a convert," he replies and, with a flashing, boyish smile, adds, "and, as we know, additional zeal. I am pleased to have made my own faith in adulthood, something I have chosen, but that is much outweighed by my regret I wasn't a believer earlier. I think I am a lot happier and a lot better for being a Christian than I was."

He and his wife have some connection with the evangelical powerhouse of Holy Trinity Brompton when they are at their London home. "The church we go to is connected to that network, but we have never made HTB our church. I've been there and, yes, done the Alpha course, well sort of, some of it. In Wiltshire, we just go to our local church."

There is a strong social dimension to the Krugers' faith. As well as Only Connect, which for a while became part of the bigger Catch22 charity but is now back under their control, he has taken a stance in his political life as an MP since 2019 (and before, he would argue) around family-oriented policies. "The family," he starts to explain when the subject comes up, "is not just the essential unit of society and the economy, it is the most important thing to almost all of us."

Some people, of course, have bad experiences of family, and deliberately turn their backs on them. "We don't want a model in which you can't do that," he corrects himself, "so you need to have freedom to make your own choices but a society can't sustain itself without strong families. Many of our social problems are directly, obviously, the consequence of family breakdown."

He is, therefore, a supporter of giving tax breaks to families. "We are already radically influencing family life because tax and benefits are enormously influential." And he would like to see governments encouraging marriage. "We should be supporting families [where the parents are married] who look after themselves by supporting people who have children, or who look after their elderly … it makes good sense for the people themselves and for wider society if we incentivise marriage." Including same-sex married couples? "Since we have legalised gay marriage, we should apply it to everybody."

THERE IS SOMETHING refreshing about Kruger's candour. He doesn't duck questions, he isn't ashamed of owning his faith in public and he embraces causes that many thought were lost years ago. It must, though, require a certain resilience. "I feel nervous all the time. I worry about insulting people and causing hurt, but even if I am talking in general terms about the sort of society we want, it is still always interpreted [when his words are reported to the public] through the lens of, 'What is he saying about me?' So it feels like I am criticising their lives, which is not my intention."

Yet, whatever his doubts, he clearly aims to continue doing the same, on the assisted dying bill committee and elsewhere. "I think it is right and it is true [to do so] and if not me, then who? As an MP, I am not only here to improve the bin collections."

Even if it prevents him rising to Cabinet rank where he would stand a better chance of seeing his theories and ideas implemented? "The good news is it is perfectly possible to be a Christian in Parliament. In terms of career, you can be an eccentric Christian on the backbenches. Beyond that I am going to see."

The health inequalities experienced by the most vulnerable, and the deaths of her parents, convinced the Labour MP, who pioneered protections for women seeking an abortion, to vote against the assisted dying bill / **By RUPA HUQ**

Change of heart

BEING AN MP in the mother of parliaments is a mighty honour. You are entrusted by your fellow citizens to pronounce on their behalf in the shadow of Big Ben one minute, then practically problem-solve the next. Your tasks range from meeting a minister (or even the PM) to discuss the intricacies of policy, to holding an advice surgery in a dusty hall where constituents queue up to share their woes about potholes and broken pavement stones.

In autumn last year, my inbox and postbag were increasingly dominated by the assisted dying bill – or the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill as it is formally known – which would give adults in England and Wales with just six months to live the choice to end their lives. MPs voted on the measure on 29 November. It was a "free vote", a rare occasion when we were afforded the freedom to follow our conscience and depart from our party positions.

As the vote on the bill grew closer, the balance of communications I received tipped from "for" towards "against". This was *a* factor but not *the* factor in my vote. I'm old enough to have served in the 2015 Parliament, when assisted dying last came to a vote. Elected earlier that year by a slender margin of just 274, my office told me I must vote "for" as the number of constituents writing in about the legislation, overwhelmingly supportive of it, exceeded my majority. Back then, I listened to the entire debate, sitting next to Rob Marris, mover of the motion. A sketch writer described how Dr Death was flanked by me and the MP on his other side – I forget who – but my head was turned by the speeches. I first entered the "aye" lobby, then "no", the one cancelling the other out (active abstention); I was relieved when the bill was defeated.

This time I had the confidence to vote against the bill – though, like most London and most ethnic minority MPs, I now found myself on the losing side. This may appear surprising. On abortion, I have always believed in freedom of choice, and I steered legislation through Parliament for buffer zones to be introduced outside abortion clinics. I recognise people have very different, long-held and sincere views on abortion, but in my view this measure is necessary to protect women who choose to access a legally available service from intimidation and harassment. But so-called "assisted dying" is a very different issue. While women seeking to terminate a pregnancy are almost always voluntarily making choices affecting their bodies, I cannot say the same for those in the last six months of life. They are among the most vulnerable in society. And potential risks of error and manipulation abound.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Rupa Huq MP: 'If the broken NHS was fixed ...'

Constituents who will have to administer assisted dying have written to me identifying all manner of hazards. The introduction of a law that would allow medical practitioners to assist their patient to die – whatever the circumstances – would fundamentally change the nature of the relationship between the doctor and the patient. Doctors and nurses would be put in an impossibly difficult situation. What happens if the patient's attempt to take a lethal dose goes wrong? What of the Hippocratic Oath sworn by medical professionals, which includes the promise "never to intentionally cause harm to my patient"? They are supposed to heal and protect, not to enable people to short-circuit matters and take a lethal poison.

Some of those in favour of assisted dying (some MPs were probably assisted themselves by Sir Keir Starmer's support for the bill) propagate the line that its opponents were funded by neocon religious groups. My objections to the bill are commonsense practicalities. Can we ever be sure that someone has only six months left to live? Real life is littered with examples of those given that long who far exceeded the time span. Many who could have been tempted to end it all if given the choice have gone on to live fulfilling lives.

I fear that once this "way out" becomes an *option*, coercion can easily rear its head. Elderly people might be tricked out of significant assets by greedy relatives. Probate brings out the worst in families. Under this process no post mortem is required. And unselfish elderly people might convince themselves that, given the cost to their cash-strapped families of six further months' care home fees, it'd be best for all if they were out of the way. Seeking an assisted death might seem to them the "right" thing to do.

Every disability rights group opposes assisted dying. Covid exposed the liberal slapping of Do Not Resuscitate notices on to wheelchairs by health professionals who could not see past the apparatus to the person who was sitting in it. Conversely, representations from supporters of the bill at advice surgeries have been from articulate folk protesting at the £10k minimum cost of using Dignitas to help loved ones end their lives, with the threat of prosecution hanging over them – few Bame or disabled among them. Of course patients do suffer excruciating pain. But as Gordon Brown has noted, the NHS has the longest waiting lists ever and palliative care is in a parlous state. If the broken NHS was fixed then perhaps patients could have a real choice. But if assisted dying is legalised, the incentive

to repair the NHS will be reduced to zero.

The bill was put forward with the best of intentions by my Labour colleague Kim Leadbeater MP, and she has insisted that the legislation would include "the strictest safeguards anywhere in the world". But everywhere similar legislation has been introduced has seen a widening of access to assisted dying to the point that in some countries in Europe depressed teenagers can be euthanised. Under our current equalities legislation, those excluded from access to assisted dying could legally challenge the restrictions. I fear that the inevitable doctor-shopping and the dragging in of unqualified judges to scrutinise whether or not there has been coercion will gradually lead the process to become an exercise in rubber-stamping.

MY DECISION to vote against the bill has been influenced not just by 10 years of constituency surgeries and seeing real-life cases weekly, but by the deaths of my own parents. We know that people with disabilities and those belonging to ethnic minorities are among those who suffer the worst health inequalities. I have personal experience of how those belonging to such categories are sometimes presumed to lack all agency.

My folks were born in what was India and migrated from pre-independence Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in the 1960s. Dad (born in 1935) was recruited by the Prudential to train in actuary as a clever boy from the colonies. He took the Tube in London from Hanger Lane to the Pru' head office in Holborn; he worked hard and died of prostate cancer in 2014 never having seen my change in circumstances from university lecturer to MP. By the time Mum died in 2017, her dementia meant she was not aware that I had been elected to Parliament. Despite working in English for BT until retirement in 2002, she eventually regressed to repeating phrases from her childhood, before losing the power of speech altogether. I found her hospital team pretty much raring to pull the plug. I remember hearing the horrible term "bed blocker". It took my two sisters and me asserting ourselves and a doctor relative turning up to apply pressure for her case to be taken more seriously. Not all vulnerable people can rely on such support.

We're told opinion polling shows the public massively support assisted dying, but it all depends on the question asked. The terminology itself is misleading: "dying" is something we all do. When the question is, "Do you support legalised suicide?", the numbers change dramatically. Every year, we have a "suicide prevention awareness week"; why are we choosing to make assisted suicide legal? Trotting out "freedom of choice" simplistically reduces the choice between life and death to picking a pair of trainers at TK Maxx. Maybe I am hardening in my old age, but to my mind this bill is the thin end of a far too dangerous wedge.

Rupa Huq has been the MP for Ealing Central and Acton since 2015.

Like most leading sculptors of his day, Brock was responsible for some ludicrous statuary

I DON'T USUALLY sit on the floor of a taxi, but it was interesting the other evening to undertake a good exploration at that level. Normally I monitor the wallflowers round the Victoria Memorial.

The wallflowers are coming on nicely this year. The Victoria Memorial opposite must be one of the least looked-at constructions in London. Tourists usually look at Buckingham Palace from its steps. It's a pretty big thing to ignore, 82ft high, with an 18ft statue of Queen Victoria facing away from the palace.

At the memorial's unveiling in 1911, King George V was so pleased by it, even before it was peopled with four lions in the care of allegorical figures, that he took out his sword and knighted the sculptor on the spot. This was Sir Thomas Brock (1847-1922), responsible, like most leading sculptors of his day, for some obviously ludicrous statuary.

In 1880 Brock completed *A Moment of Peril*. It shows a North American Indian in the moment of plunging a spear into the open mouth of a huge python that has wrapped itself round the hindquarters of his horse. Snakes often come in handy for sculptors by way of support for spindly legs. In this case, the back half of the horse has also conveniently been dragged to the ground.

The sculpture won the Royal Academy's Chantrey Medal and was later taken on by the Tate Gallery. But the sculpture isn't there now, having been loaned to Leighton House for the garden. As an expert on Brock puts it, he "would have had no contact with any Native Americans and could not have known that the stereotyped 'feathered headdress Indian' depicted here is considered offensive by many".

Brock has been called a "forgotten sculptor" but he was responsible for some memorable statues, including Henry Irving outside the National Portrait Gallery and, outside the Admiralty, Captain Cook. But his most influential portrait must be that of Queen Victoria on the nation's coinage from 1893, with a widow's veil half covering her diadem. It replaced an image with a strangely long neck and a little crown on top that looked as though it was going to fall off.

FOR EXPERIENCE, skill and reliability, Brock was a natural choice for the Victoria Memorial. It features quite a bit of nudity, which the Victorians seldom missed a chance to contemplate in artistic contexts. Justice, for example, is represented by an angel protecting with a sword a nude girl while the scales of Justice are held by a chubby nude little boy. To get the four lions on the memorial right, Brock paid visits to the lion house at London Zoo, for he favoured the naturalism of the New Sculpture movement, which also embraced his friend Lord Leighton, who had got in first snakewise with his bronze *An Athlete Wrestling with a Python* (1877).

Leighton's athlete depicted the same model as Brock's blacksmith on the memorial (representing Manufacture). He was Angelo Colarossi, born in Picinisco, 70 miles from Rome, in 1838, and thus getting on in 1911, when the blacksmith was modelled in plaster. His son, also Angelo, born in Shepherd's Bush, modelled for Alfred Gilbert's statue in Piccadilly Circus that we all call Eros. (A marvellous photo exists of Angelo the younger aged 72 in a tweed jacket and spectacles in 1947, when Eros was returned to its plinth after the war.) The father was thought to be the chiselled-cheekboned model used by the great Julia Margaret Cameron for the photograph she took in 1867 that she called Iago. Perhaps, though, it was his brother.

I COULDN'T see the Victoria Memorial from the floor of the taxi. I was looking for a button that had just fallen off my suit. Night had fallen. I only had a limited time to search. Since I didn't know how to turn on the little light on my mobile, I typed in a request on Google, which soon told me.

"Ah! What's this?" I exclaimed triumphantly, only to discover that the round black disc on the floor was a sort of rivet holding on the lino. For once, St Anthony seemed to have rejected my modest request to help find the thing. So, one button down but with no hard feelings, I paid the driver. Reaching in my pocket for a tip, what should I fish out among the coins but the button? Really, St Anthony makes Jeeves seem like a beginner.

Christopher Howse is an assistant editor of The Daily Telegraph.

Laws supposedly designed to prevent forced conversions are deepening religious divisions across India and are failing to deal with the discrimination and oppression surrounding Hindus seeking to become Christian or Muslim by choice / **By RISHABH JAIN and SALMAN SALEEM**

The converts' trial

ON 13 MARCH 2024 villagers in Badeproda, in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, attacked their neighbours Govind Mandavi, Shobha Kashyap, Sumitra Mandavi and their families – local converts to Christianity. Many were left with serious injuries and were hospitalised. The attackers destroyed their homes and their crops. The families filed a formal complaint at the local police station in Badanji, but saw no action against the perpetrators.

Three months later, on 12 June, members of the same families were attacked again, some beaten unconscious, and taken to the office of the *panchayat* – the village council – where they were threatened with losing their family burial rights if they did not give up their faith. The families filed a formal complaint two days later, which again went unanswered. The threats continued, forcing Badeproda's Christians into hiding.

In its annual report published last month, the United Christian Forum (UCF) in New Delhi recorded 834 such incidents of violence against Christians in India in 2024 – 100 more than in 2023, and equivalent to over two attacks each day. Charlie Prakash, a human rights lawyer, links the rising rates of violence to the passage of anti-conversion laws: state-level legislation that requires individuals to obtain government approval to change their religious affiliation. The avowed purpose is to prevent forced conversions. The first laws appeared in the 1930s, to counter the efforts of British missionaries. There are now 12 states (out of 28) with anti-conversion laws – some more severe, some targeting particular religious groups. Most are governed by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Under this law, any individual wishing to convert must apply to the district magistrate (DM) whose office will post a public notice," Prakash told us. "My first question is: if I want to follow a particular religion, who is the DM to decide for me? Why should the state have any role in determining what religion I practise?" Prakash points out: "The validity of this law itself is questionable. Article 25 of the Constitution guarantees the freedom of religion, along with Articles 18, 19, and 21."

Crowds surrounded the Evangelical church in Fatehpur, Uttar Pradesh, on Maundy Thursday 2022, after allegations that Hindus were being converted inside. Police and local officials detained women, children and pastors, filing reports under various sections of the anti-conversion law despite lacking evidence that any conversion was coerced. They were obliged to release the detainees on bail. The UCF's national coordinator, A.C. Michael, tells us the anti-conversion laws "impose unrealistic restrictions on one's privacy and personal choice and further impose criminal charges on to such draconian statutory regulation".

Michael says Christians are portrayed as pursuing converts by all means. He claims that centuries-old hospitals, schools and other institutions run by churches face allegations of forcing vulnerable individuals to convert, while converts themselves face widespread discrimination. But Anoop Valmiki, a BJP regional minister in Uttar Pradesh, says poor Hindus are vulnerable to exploitation by foreign forces. "There are certain conspiracies in which young girls are deceived, converted and then forced into prostitution. Many families have suffered. Some cases even involve coercion." He insists "the anti-conversion law is necessary".

VALMIKI SAYS THE LAW is designed to protect children who are not mature enough to make the decision to convert – there are documented cases of manipulation, of converts regretting their decision, even of young girls converted and murdered by predatory groups, their bodies hidden in suitcases or refrigerators. "If someone is under 25 years old, their mind is still impressionable," says Valmiki. "If someone above 25 converts, it's their personal decision. Yet even voluntary conversions often come with societal pressures or hidden agendas. For instance, in cases where young girls elope, families are left devastated. Parents nurture dreams for their children, but when such incidents happen, their dreams are shattered."

Most of those prosecuting cases filed under anti-conversion laws struggle to produce evidence. Police have twice arrested Pastor Vijay Masih of Fatehpur's church but have released him both times. In October 2023 a study by the investigatory outlet Article 14 of over 100 police reports filed under anti-conversion laws found that 62 per cent of cases resulted not from complaints by alleged victims but from interventions by third parties – including Hindutva organisations like the Vishva Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

A.C. Michael argues that the legislation threatens vital Christian institutions but also wider social services. Cases take up police and court time, and mean that complaints from religious minorities – such as the Badeproda Christians – are neglected. Anti-conversion laws have been challenged as constitutionally invalid in several states, including Uttar Pradesh. In January 2023 the Supreme Court consolidated a series of challenges into a single petition which it referred to itself, but two years later has yet to hear the case. Amid these proceedings, few have asked why so many members of marginalised communities choose to convert to Christianity (or Islam – mosques and Muslim groups have long faced similar accusations and attacks). Ram Kumar, a founder of the Direct Action Group and a former parliamentary candidate for the Communist Party of India, says that many converts are undoubtedly drawn to benefits such as access to education for their children. He notes, too, the place of conversion in the history of the Indian state: Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who chaired the committee that drafted the constitution, publicly converted to Buddhism in 1956 on the grounds that Hindu society was inherently unequal. Hundreds of thousands of his supporters followed him. The International Dalit Solidarity Network reports that 200 million people are left vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and violence by the caste system. "While the state should focus on ending discrimination," Kumar says, instead "it is busy passing anti-conversion laws."

A.C. Michael accepts that some laws are appropriate to prevent forced conversions – but says they should extend to safeguards for converts. He wants them monitored by independent bodies who can identify instances of religious discrimination and ensure that adults can practise or change their faith without fear of attacks or coercion from any group. "Many anti-conversion laws are vague and are misused against converts. They need to be repealed. There is also an urgent need to revise penal codes to criminalise hate crimes specifically targeting converts or individuals practising minority religions."

States including Uttar Pradesh have introduced laws that prohibit conversion for marriage, particularly of Hindu brides to Muslim husbands – so-called "love jihad". At the same time, religious divisions have deepened. The Supreme Court will not settle questions about the laws' constitutional status any time soon. And regardless of its verdict, it will leave untouched the discrimination, inequality and oppression that drives so many conversions.

Rishabh Jain is a freelance journalist based in New Delhi, primarily covering religion, human rights, climate change and sustainability. **Salman Saleem** is a freelance journalist based in New Delhi.

The ancient accounts of Saint Brigid– whose feast day is celebrated on 1 February – tell us something about the part that women played in the early centuries of Christianity in Ireland and offer a hint of how women can change the Church today / **By NANCY FITZGERALD**

‘Bishop’ Brigid’s mantle of hope

ONCE UPON A TIME, on the plains of Kildare, in the Irish province of Leinster, there was a nun named Brigid. She was a woman of remarkable holiness, renowned for her care of the sick and the poor. She cured a local king of an illness, and in return, the king promised to grant her whatever she asked for. *Here’s what I’d like*, she replied. *Give me all the land my cloak will cover*. The king thought he was getting off easy. As the sun was setting, Brigid and her sisters began to spread the cloak. By the time the morning dew had fallen, the cloak was draped across thousands of acres of what came to be known as “Brigid’s pastures”.

That was the last time anyone underestimated Brigid. She used some of her land for her monastery, which became a centre of learning, pilgrimage and hospitality. The story of Brigid’s mantle may be folklore – a charming tale about a harmless nun getting a few acres at the expense of a clueless king. But it shows that Brigid knew exactly what she was doing. Spreading her cloak was an act of subversion, turning the king’s false generosity upside down and revealing the harmless little nun as someone to be reckoned with. She had holy work to do, and she put her rugged, persistent, can-do faith up against the power of the king, betting that God would come down on the side of the poor and the hungry at her door.

The story survives, a sign of the power of the people on the margins and a reminder to those on the brink of forgetting about them. Across Ireland, Brigid’s mantle is still being spread. On the eve of her feast day, 1 February, people hang a cloth outside their door, knowing that the saint will bless it as she goes by. It is, after all, their *brat Bhride*, a symbol of Brigid’s cloak. She’s still at work today. (African-American womanist folklore might call this “making a way out of no way”.) It’s been centuries since Brigid travelled the bog roads to spread the Gospel. But her influence still lingers, if you know where to look for it.

In my research for a book about St Brigid I went looking at the ancient holy wells in rural Ireland, with origins going back to the pagans. There may be a thousand or so sacred springs in Ireland, and a few hundred belong to Brigid – more than those dedicated to any other saint. Each one tells us something not only about this woman but also about the part that women played in the early days of Christianity in Ireland. And Brigid’s holy wells offer a hint of how women can change the Church today.

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

A window depicting St Brigid in the church of St Mary of the Rosary, Cong South, Co. Mayo

A near-contemporary of Patrick, Brigid was born of a druid father and a mother who was enslaved. Said to have been baptised in milk, a link between the old and the new, her childhood was marked with acts of generosity and kindness that set a path she’d follow for the rest of her life. She gave away treasures, from her father’s sword to her mother’s newly churned butter. Nobody in her family was surprised when she dedicated her life to the new religion. After all, they’d noticed flames shooting from her head since infancy; they must have guessed that she was destined for something great. And she was: along with Patrick, she nurtured Christianity on her island outpost at the edge of the Atlantic.

MOST OF WHAT we know about Brigid comes through oral history that made its way into hagiography – the lives of the saints. Embellished with flights of fancy and meant to be taken with a grain of salt, they weren’t quite what we’d call history. But, says church historian Anne Thayer, they’re “an important historical source if read with considerable care. There is usually some ‘there’ there.” Within a hundred years of Brigid’s death, her story had been committed to paper – and listeners found it entirely plausible.

For generations of communities in Ireland, Brigid is exactly what her stories claim: a woman who preached the Gospel, administered a diocese, celebrated the liturgy, absolved sins, and lived a life of prayer and service in imitation of Christ. Which sounds pretty much like what a bishop does. And that’s because Brigid probably *was* a bishop. In one of the earliest hagiographies, composed in the eighth century, Bishop Mel is depicted conferring episcopal orders on her as a fiery column rises from her head.

In later centuries, that ordination would be dismissed as a fluke, performed by a drunken bishop. But Brigid’s life shows her, time and again, clearly living out her episcopal orders – and passing her episcopal authority on to her successor abbesses in Kildare. Her ordination was no accident. And it was no accident that it’s been forgotten. The Church did its best to wipe out the evidence – and blot out the memory – of women’s roles in earlier times. But here and there, fragments of the story escaped the purge: in Brigid’s *Lives*; in the Irish annals; in scraps of lost ordination liturgies. But to her communities, she was always understood as a bishop, just like the apostles on Pentecost, with those signature tongues of fire. Her communities, the collective authorities on her life, knew Brigid was an equal to Patrick; like him, she was a descendant of those first bishops, the apostles anointed in the upper room by the flames of the Spirit.

The Church has tried to transform Brigid from a firebrand who out-preached Patrick, trained up a generation of missionaries, and rivalled Jesus himself by turning bathwater into beer. But today, people continue to remember her as something more. And instead of finding her at church, they’re finding her at her wells. In my travels in Ireland, I spoke with the Brigidine sisters in Kildare, who continue her tradition of prayer and hospitality. I met historians and musicians and farmers. I met a grandmother in Kerry who gave me directions to a well and asked me to say a prayer to Brigid for her.

The Church throughout the world is still keeping women on the margins. But the people of God are still searching for a spark of the divine. The story of Brigid is helping to ignite that spark, spreading a mantle of hope and joy across an old and battered world.

Nancy Fitzgerald is an award-winning writer and editor. This excerpt is from Brigid’s Mantle: Finding the Fiery Saint of Kildare at the Heart of Celtic Spirituality, to be published by Paulist Press later this year.

While its neighbours promptly came to Ukraine's aid after it was invaded by Russia, most of the Orthodox world has turned its back on Kyiv and taken the side of Moscow / **By ANDREJA BOGDANOVSKI**

Left in the cold

WHILE UKRAINE is scrambling to find a way out from its torturous war agony, time seems to have stopped for the Orthodox Churches, who are ignoring another battle – for the existence of Ukraine's independent Orthodox Church. At a conference in Kyiv in December, Viktor Yelensky, who leads the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Ensuring Freedom of Conscience, excoriated the "astonishing silence" of the Orthodox world since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces began almost three years ago.

There have been calls for peace from Orthodox leaders without naming the aggressor. Some still use the term "fratricide" to describe the war. None has directly confronted Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, who has given unreserved support to President Vladimir Putin and what he describes as his "Holy War".

The Slavic bond with Moscow is still strong. In spite of tensions and the dissent of some clerics, the Orthodox Churches of Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia have sided with Ukraine's rival Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (known as the UOC-MP), which has been under Russian dominance for most of Ukraine's recent history. The push-back against Russia's neo-imperial aspirations in the Orthodox sphere has come almost entirely from the Hellenic Churches.

The indifference of these Churches to the independent Orthodox Church in Ukraine (OCU) is keenly felt by Metropolitan Epiphanius Dumenko, its 45-year-old Primate. Last month, his Church celebrated six years since it was formally bestowed with autocephaly by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, traditionally recognised among Orthodox leaders as the "first among equals". Epiphanius says he will always remember the day OCU "regained dignity and equal standing among the sister Churches".

METROPOLITAN EPIPHANIUS had a cordial private audience with Pope Francis in Rome in December, and he and Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, leader of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, met last month, and agreed to deepen their ties. Yet his Church is still struggling to establish itself in the Orthodox world. Ten out of 14 autocephalous Orthodox Churches still don't recognise the OCU. Only the Greek and Cypriot Churches and the Patriarchate of Alexandria – all close to the Ecumenical Patriarchate – do.

Belarus enabled Russia's aggression, but other Central and Eastern European nations have been at the forefront of supporting Ukraine politically and militarily. This has not been mirrored in the Orthodox world. While President Zelenskyy has successfully garnered support for Ukraine from the international community, Epiphanius' OCU has largely been ignored and sidelined by its closest counterparts.

The explanation is intricate. Some Orthodox Churches have adopted a wait-and-see approach, delaying any intervention. Others have decided to use Ukraine's frail position to advance their own political agendas. Some even question the canonicity of the Ecumenical Patriarch's intervention in Ukraine. Disunity regarding the OCU's status was on display at the funeral of Bulgarian Patriarch Neofit in March 2024, when many Orthodox delegations came to show respect. Epiphanius came too, although certain hierarchs in the Bulgarian Church said he hadn't been invited. His presence angered the Russian ambassador to Bulgaria, Eleonora Mitrofanova, who called it a "provocation". Speaking to journalists, Neofit's successor Patriarch Daniil indicated that his Church will not rush to make any decisions about recognition of the OCU until the war ends.

ACCORDING TO Jordan Georgiev, the Bulgarian editor of the international Orthodox online news outlet Doxologia Infonews, this position is problematic. "No one knows when the war in Ukraine will end. Patriarch Daniil, probably on the orders of external aggressive forces from the north, wants to tell us that if Ukraine loses the war, the OCU will not be recognised." According to Georgiev, the Bulgarian Church remains deeply politicised and is still not entirely cleansed of its communist legacy. Its leaders' decisions are guided by the interests of another state, or some group or organisation, not by the interests of the Bulgarian people or its Church. Russian pressure weighs heavily on certain Bulgarian hierarchs, Georgiev told me. "Moscow holds leverage through financial means, compromising video content, documents and photographs."

The main reservation the Romanian Orthodox Church has in recognising the OCU can be traced to the advancing of the interests of the ethnic Romanian communities in Ukraine. It says it wants to establish a Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine to cater for ethnic Romanians. Neither the authorities in Kyiv nor the OCU has agreed to this demand, accusing the Romanian Church of ethnophyletism, the importing of nationalism into church structures and boundaries.

PHOTO: UGCC DEPARTMENT FOR INFORMATION, UGCC.UA/EN/

Metropolitan Epiphanius Dumenko, Primate of Ukraine's independent Orthodox Church

George Enache, a historian at the "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, in eastern Romania, says the Romanian Church hasn't made a move towards recognition of the OCU because, like the Bulgarian Church, it is waiting to see what "the political reality" will look like when the war ends. Despite his close friendship with Bartholomew, Patriarch Daniel of the Romanian Church has resisted requests to recognise the OCU.

Enache notes, however, that "unlike the other Orthodox Churches close to Moscow, the Romanian Church did not condemn Ukraine's autocephaly." He doubts that the Romanian Orthodox Church is genuinely interested in expanding its jurisdiction into Ukraine. Romanian communities in Ukraine are caught in the middle of the struggle between the UOC-MP and the OCU, who are both exerting pressure on them to switch to their jurisdiction, and Bucharest is using its claim as leverage to force the Ukrainian Churches and political authorities to adopt a clear stance on the issue.

A big part of the hesitation of the Orthodox Churches in the region to recognise the OCU is the fear of retaliation from the Russian Orthodox Church if they step out of line. There was havoc when hierarchs from Bulgaria concelebrated with the Ecumenical Patriarch and five OCU bishops in Istanbul last year; the ROC cut ties, splitting the Bulgarian Church into pro-Russian and anti-Russian factions. Bribery, corruption and the threat of fomenting internal discord or even schism sponsored by Moscow are strong enough reasons for many of the Slavic Churches to want to maintain the status quo until the war is over.

Andreja Bogdanovski is a Skopje-born writer and journalist based in Edinburgh specialising in Orthodox affairs.

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A farewell in Bayswater

THE SOCIAL REFORMER, peacemaker, psychotherapist and loving matriarch Marigold Johnson, who died on 14 December aged 92, was given a fittingly joyful, stylish and vivacious send-off in London at her parish church, St Mary of the Angels, Bayswater, last week.

Marriage to the brilliant and difficult historian and arguer Paul Johnson – who died two years ago – came with his Catholicism attached, and Marigold embraced each of these mixed blessings with grace, wit and patience. Granddaughters carried in her coffin while grandsons cradled her great-grandchildren. In an opening flurry of short eulogies, her children and grandchildren all found the right words; "kindness and love" were the two her son Cosmo lighted on, and everyone agreed he had hit the spot. In his homily, Mgr Keith Barltrop recalled Marigold's tact and wisdom. Her eldest son, the journalist Daniel, read from the sonnets Heaney wrote after the death of his own mother ("The space we stood around had been emptied / Into us to keep, it penetrated / Clearances that suddenly stood open").

The church was chocker with grandees and grandes dames from the worlds of literature, politics and academia, and hacks, shopkeepers

and neighbours squeezed in among them. It was Marigold's hairdresser who showed me the way from the church to the reception at her home in nearby Newton Road, and he brushed aside a tear as he remembered his visits there. "She never let me leave the house without giving me some small thing to take away," he whispered. "She was always so interested in me."

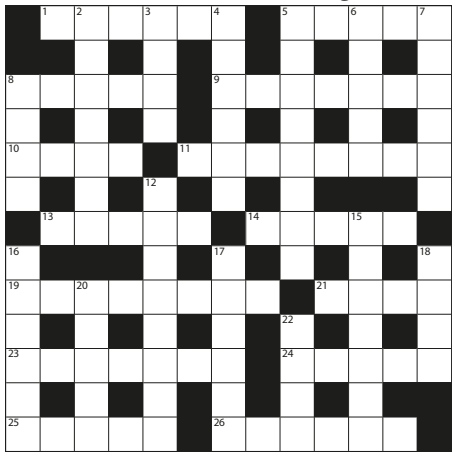
WE REPORTED last week that Bernadette Hunston, a Sister of Charity of St Jeanne Antide, was awarded a Westminster Diocesan Medal for her 60 years of service. Our old boss Catherine Pepinster, editor of *The Tablet* between 2004 and 2016, tells us that Sr Bernadette taught her English and RE at St Anne's Convent in Ealing. She went on to teach at Catholic comprehensives in north London and taught spiritual theology and served as spiritual formator at Allen Hall Seminary in Chelsea for more than 20 years.

"What was inspiring about Sr Bernadette," Catherine tells us, "was that she encouraged us to think and read more deeply. As a novice nun, she had attended the first Yeats Summer Schools in Sligo. As well as imparting her own thoughts, she introduced us to different ideas. I didn't read English at university but, when I talked to people who did, I learnt that the way we were encouraged to go into texts as sixth-formers with her was akin to first-year undergraduate English classes. She taught us everything from Chaucer to D.H. Lawrence. We explored all kinds of writers. English in Sr Bernadette's hands was truly exciting."

Sr Bernadette taught RE at St Anne's with the help of *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults*, the famous "Dutch Catechism". Although it had the imprimatur of the vicar general of the Westminster Diocese, it was viewed with alarm by more conservative prelates. Catherine recalled: "Sr Bernadette made faith interesting and inspiring – like her."

PUZZLES

PRIZE CROSSWORD No. 938 Enigma



Across

1 Dancers need a word with no vowels (6)
5 When told the cost, I remain unemotional (5)
8 There's a broken clasp on top of my head (5)
9 A biblical personage is alone at the start of the week (7)
10 Laughter in an eighteenth-century garden (4)
11 An emporium for chess players (8)
13 A secondary thoroughfare can be wide (5)
14 The time is right for the bishop to acquire it (5)
19 You play that instrument like a demon, Leo! (8)
21 Part of the tambourine you left in the church (4)
23 A hug for the pair that brought me up (7)
24 To be accurate, it used to be part of the play (5)
25 We're looking at a modern woman, it appears (5)
26 The sailor's song won't greet the first of the yachts (6)

Down

2 Hear about the plant (7)
3 Clearly, in the end, breaking the pot was a mistake (4)
4 A little accident caused by mum in the ship (6)
5 Who killed the wasp? Len did. Wonderful! (8)
6 The first man to spin a hoop had exciting qualities (5)
7 Provide cover for an American state confronting a wild pony (6)
8 The proviso holds in this part of London (4)
12 Inside a ship there is also a container to help with flood defence (8)
15 There's a little bit left over for the rent man (7)
16 Terribly simple forces (6)
17 Many fall asleep starting National Service (6)
18 Refusal becomes a habit (4)
20 It's defamation to write that I broke the bell (5)
22 A male artist portrays a goddess (4)

As regular puzzlers may have spotted, Crossword no. 937 in our last issue was compiled by Alanus, not as stated.

Please send your answers to: Crossword Competition 1 February, The Tablet, 1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY. Email: thetablet@thetablet.co.uk, with Crossword in the subject field. Please include your full name, telephone number and email address, and a mailing address. **Three books – on Saints, Monasticism and Philosophy of Religion – from OUP's Very Short Introduction series will go to the sender of the first correct entry drawn at random.**

SUDOKU | Easy

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

Each 3x3 box, each row and each column must contain all the numbers 1 to 9.

Solution to the 11 January puzzle

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

Solution to the 11 January crossword No. 935

Across: 1 Egmont; 5 Afton; 8 Babel; 9 Aladdin; 10 Lois; 11 Canberra; 13 Bleak; 14 Brute; 19 Augustus; 21 Owen; 23 Khedive; 24 Harty; 25 Theta; 26 Staffa.

Down: 2 Gabriel; 3 Orly; 4 Trajan; 5 Adalbert; 6 Tudor; 7 Ninian; 8 Bala; 12 Faustina; 15 Tower of; 16 Basket; 17 Rubens; 18 Envy; 20 Glebe; 22 Rhea.

LETTERS

·THE EDITOR OF THE TABLET·

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

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

Mid-East peace

● Edward Kessler prompts us that: "Lasting peace can only be achieved when we are reminded that being human means truly seeing others as human"; and that: "The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will not be resolved in the long term by military means" ("Peace through the sharing of memories", 25 January).

He further stresses that: "There can only be an end to the conflict if there is political compromise and territorial concession."

It is surely the party holding the greater power that has the greater room to compromise. One only has to see how much territorial concession has already been made by the lesser party to the conflict.

The author also fails to mention the other dynamics which have great bearing on achieving peace: the undeclared agenda of Israel, viz possession of the land with as few Palestinians as possible. Religious zealotry is intrinsic to the settler movement which has driven the "redemption" of the land.

Western powers have played their part in driving and sustaining this conflict – Britain from 1917, and the theme taken up since World War Two by the US – and whose purposes are served by "managing" the conflict.

(DR) DAVID TOORAWA
HEMEL HEMPSTEAD, HERTFORDSHIRE

Wolfe's theology

● A.N. Wilson argues in his masterful review of Judith Wolfe's *The Theological Imagination* (Messages from God, 18 January) that Wolfe is subtler than C.S. Lewis ("her hero") in applying everyday experience to theological discovery.

There is one further player to place upon the canvas, who offered a further critique of Lewis's theological understanding of the imagination: Austin Farrer. Wolfe has herself argued that Farrer finessed Lewis in certain areas of understanding the relationship between the imagination, theology and the place of images.

A passage from *The Glass of Vision* (Farrer's Bampton Lectures) crystallises this: "I would dare to hope that sometimes my thought would become diaphanous, so that there should be some perception of the divine cause shining through the created effect, as a deep pool, settling into a clear tranquillity, permits me to see the spring in the bottom of it from which its waters rise."

Here the integration of the imagination and theological truth becomes complete. Rowan Williams, whom Wolfe also quotes, has conjectured that Farrer was the most brilliant theologian spawned by Anglicanism in the twentieth century.

STEPHEN PLATTEN
BERWICK-UPON-TWEED, NORTHUMBERLAND

Cost of net zero

● Clare Gardner's letter (25 January) suggests that, because the UK emits only a little over 1 per cent of the world's emissions, we shouldn't be investing in "clean energy projects and to assist with energy security", but spend the money to help the victims of climate change.

The hard fact is that we have to do both. We will only beat the global climate crisis if the whole world takes action. Britain has shown real leadership and led that action. It's not yet enough, but we would not have got the huge change we have wrought if we had told the big emitters to act and not done it ourselves. If we want other countries to get to net zero, we must lead the way.

After all, it was our industrial revolution that has caused the problem from which we have grown rich. That's why we also

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

Bishop Budde speaks truth to power

IN THE GENERAL gushing celebration of Trump's ascent to power, it was left to a diminutive and quietly spoken woman to change the triumphalist narrative into a reminder of the words of Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount.

I am moved to say God Bless Mariann Budde, the Bishop of Washington. Before all the swooning and the glamour of the congregation assembled for Trump's inauguration, Bishop Budde spoke quietly, effectively and with grace, reminding all the grandees and Trump followers of the power of compassion and love for the reviled and outcast, the low-paid and the immigrant.

Observe the pained and embarrassed faces of the grand as they listened in shock to the bishop's humble and resonant address. It was like "casting pearls before swine". Thank you, Bishop Budde.

ELIZABETH FLEETWOOD
CHIPPING CAMPDEN, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

I HAVE READ in recent editions of *The Tablet* that ordaining women to the diaconate is still under investigation. I also read that an argument made against ordaining women is that "a woman cannot image Christ" ("An open question", 21-28 December 2024).

I have rarely if ever encountered a male Roman Catholic bishop who imaged Christ as powerfully as did Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde, the Episcopal bishop of Washington. As I listened to Bishop Mariann, I felt I was watching a true apostle, preaching good news to the poor and not afraid to preach the Gospel, graciously and respectfully, before one of the richest and most powerful men in the world, and one not noted for his concern for the poor and marginalised.

To me, Bishop Mariann is the living proof that God does call women to the ordained ministry, as powerful witnesses to and images of Christ, even if not yet in the Roman Catholic Church.

PAUL SYMONDS
BELFAST

THE WOMEN of the Anglican communion are holding us all to a new standard – Bishop Helen-Ann Hartley of Newcastle calling out the systemic cover-up of child abuse, and Bishop Mariann Budde preaching mercy and the gospel of the poor face-to-face with President Trump.

They certainly offer the surest route to making Anglicanism great again and are a powerful illustration of what the Catholic Church loses through its rejection of women's ordination.

ANDREA KELLY
LONDON N1

AMONG THE newly inaugurated President Trump's radical executive orders is one seeking to revoke birthright citizenship. Although protected by the 14th Amendment, if birthright citizenship is revoked, it will affect all children of undocumented immigrants. Who in the US Church today will be our Bonhoeffer?

DANNY SULLIVAN
BASINGSTOKE, HAMPSHIRE

LETTERS

have to help pay for those who have not had our advantages to move to a renewable energy future, without the dirty stage which threatens us all.

So, cutting foreign aid is a disgrace. As so often it's "both and" not "either or".

LORD (JOHN) DEBEN
LONDON SW1

Shared worship

● It was a wonderful and joyful occasion at Westminster Cathedral on 21 January when the choir and clergy of St Paul's Cathedral conducted the Anglican service of Choral Evensong. The invitation was returned on 24 January, when the choir of Westminster Cathedral sang the first evening prayer at St Paul's Cathedral.

So it was with a sense of sadness that I read your report ("Churches lack of unity saddens bishops", 25 January) about the lack of mutuality that still exists between our Churches on sacramental welcome for Holy Communion as a shared experience of worship.

Maybe we should look again at the words of Pope St John Paul who in his profound contribution to ecumenical theology *Ut Unum Sint* asserted that: "Catholic ministers are able, in particular cases, to administer the Sacraments of the Eucharist, Penance and Anointing of the Sick to Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church but who greatly desire to receive these sacraments."

Many Anglicans and Roman Catholics would greatly welcome urgent further discussion on shared worship.

(THE REVD) NICHOLAS ROBERTS
RICHMOND, GREATER LONDON

● Your coverage of recent travails in the Church of England (18 and 25 January) misses a crucial element: namely how much all Britons, especially modern English Catholics, should care about, and lean in solidarity to, the Church of England and the Anglican Communion.

From the capacious Christian welcome of cathedrals and Westminster Abbey to the detailed defence of benefits for the mentally ill by Lords Spiritual, to the raising up of divines as diverse as Ann Loades, Kenneth Leech and Chad Varah, we all owe a great debt to Anglican genius.

Flourishing Anglican life adds to the flourishing of us all.

(PROF.) FRANCIS DAVIS
SOUTHAMPTON

Foreign aid cut

● Clifford Longley's column (25 January) was entirely right in highlighting the need for the government to restore the 0.7 per cent of GDP on overseas aid and development, as also to separate the handling of that budget from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Whilst the changes to the winter fuel allowance and the two-child benefit cap have received much criticism, overseas aid has received virtually no comment.

When the Tory government reduced this budget from 0.7 to 0.5 per cent, there was an outcry from the Labour party, as indeed from many members of the Tory party. As Longley points out, our obligations to former colonial territories demand we reinstate this fund as soon as possible.

CHRIS LARKMAN
LONDON SW20

A time to listen

● The new lectionary is presenting great difficulties for parishes and I agree with your correspondents apart from the point raised by Tim Gillett (Letters, 18 January) about members of the congregation "following" the Mass in their Missals.

This was the case prior to Vatican II, but today the Church urges us to listen to the Word of God. As Readers, we are trained to proclaim the Word and make eye contact with the congregation. It is sad to see noses in books and deflating to the Reader who is speaking to you.

STELLA CORDINGLEY
GREAT YARMOUTH, NORFOLK

Cézanne's passion

● Delighted to see Cézanne on your cover (18 January). As John Updike said so well: "Cézanne, grave man, pondered the scene; and saw it with passion of orange and green; weighted his strokes with days of decision, and founded on apples theologies of vision."

BRENDAN STAUNTON SJ
DUBLIN

Catholic films

● Your "Top 20 Catholic Movies" (25 January) put me in mind of a spoof headline mocking one of your less illustrious Catholic weekly competitors: "Catholic Budgie Rescued From Catholic Chimney by Catholic Fireman".

Nonetheless, 20 great films.

EILEEN FITZPATRICK
ILKLEY, WEST YORKSHIRE

The editor received several letters suggesting films missing from our list of "The 20 best Catholic films", and they are still coming in. We will reproduce the best of them in Word from the Cloisters and award a small prize to the reader we think makes the most convincing case for the best film that Isabelle Grey and Mark Lawson overlooked.

THE LIVING SPIRIT

AND LITURGICAL CALENDAR

Be silent about great things. Let them grow inside you. Never discuss them. Discussion is so limiting and distracting. It makes things grow smaller. You think you swallow things when they ought to swallow you. Before all greatness be silent: in art, in music, in religion. Be silent.

FRIEDRICH VON HÜGEL
FROM *LETTERS FROM BARON FRIEDRICH VON HÜGEL TO A NIECE*, EDITED BY GWENDOLEN GREENE (J.M. DENT & SONS, 1929)

I will do what I so often did with my fettered hands and what I will gladly do again and again as long as I have a breath left: I will give my blessing. I will bless this land and the people; I will bless the Church and pray that her fountains may flow again fresher and more freely; I will bless all those who have believed in me and trusted me, all those that I have wronged and all those who have been good to me – often too good ... May God shield you all. I ask for your prayers. And I will do my best to catch up, on the other side, with all that I have left undone here on earth. Towards noon I will celebrate Mass [in my cell] once more, and then in God's name, take the road under his providence and guidance.

ALFRED DELP SJ (EXECUTED IN NAZI GERMANY, 2 FEBRUARY 1945)
FROM *PRISON WRITINGS* (ORBIS BOOKS, 2004).

How can they follow Christ, who are held back by the chain of their wealth? How can they seek heaven, and climb to sublime and lofty heights, if they are weighed down by earthly desires? They think that they possess things, when they are rather possessed by them. These times and these men are indicated by the apostle, when he says, "Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs."

CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE (210-258)

CALENDAR

Sunday 2 February:
The Presentation of the Lord
Monday 3 February:
Ss Laurence, Dunstan and Theodore, Archbishops of Canterbury
Tuesday 4 February:
Feria
Wednesday 5 February:
St Agatha, Virgin & Martyr
Thursday 6 February:
St Paul Miki and Companions, Martyrs
Friday 7 February:
Feria
Saturday 8 February:
Feria or St Jerome Emiliani or St Josephine Bakhita, Virgin
Sunday 9 February:
Fifth Sunday of the Year

✦✦✦

For the calendar for the Missal of 1962 go to **lms.org.uk**

· COMING SOON ·

ANIMAL FARM, Rose Theatre, Kingston upon Thames (4–8 February and then nationwide tour) • **I'M STILL HERE**, directed by Walter Salles (in cinemas 7 February) • **EXULTATE SINGERS**, Grand Tour of Italy, St George's, Bristol (1 March) • **MALGORZATA MIRGA–TAS**, the Whitworth, Manchester (opens 11 April)

A play for all seasons

Robert Bolt's Thomas More is back in UK theatres, with Martin Shaw playing the lead role in a national tour. **Mark Lawson** reflects on what makes this drama such an enduring masterpiece

PHOTOS: SIMON ANNAND; ALAMY/ALLSTAR PICTURE LIBRARY

Robert Bolt's award-winning play, touring with Martin Shaw as Thomas More (right, with Orlando James as Henry VIII); above right, Paul Scofield in the 1966 film version

AUDIENCES TODAY, used to choosing between hundreds of networks, streamers and podcasts, would be shocked to know consumers on Monday 26 July 1954 at 9.15 p.m. had only four options, all provided by the first and still then only British broadcaster.

The BBC Television service offered *Back of Beyond*, an Australian wildlife documentary; the Third Programme (now Radio 3) the third act of Weber's opera *Der Freischütz;* and the Light Programme (now Radio 2) *The Name's the Same,* in which panellists guessed with which famous person contestants shared their names. But more important for posterity was the offering on the Home Service, precursor of Radio 4. It served up a play, *A Man for All Seasons,* by a Manchester schoolteacher who took the credit R.O. Bolt.

The following year, with the launch of ITV, the corporation no longer owned the airwaves. On New Year's Day, 1957, the commercial network put out a variety show, *Val Parnell's New Year Star Time* – and BBC Television competed by screening a TV version of *A Man for All Seasons,* the writer now calling himself Robert Oxton Bolt.

Oaks from acorns grow, and there was certainly quite a growth from these seeds. Three years later, the name Robert Bolt was blazing outside the Globe Theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue. Paul Scofield played Sir Thomas More there for a year before going to Broadway, where the play won Tony awards for Bolt and Scofield, to which both added Oscars for the 1966 movie version.

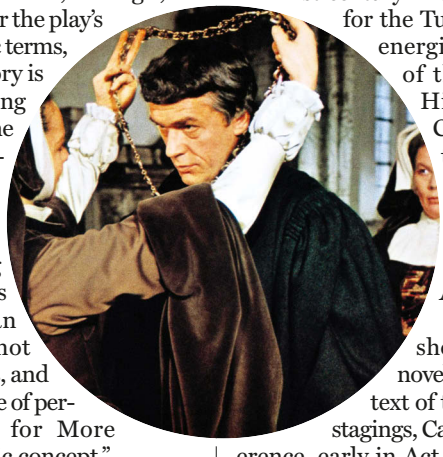
Proving the endurance of the story seven decades on, *A Man for All Seasons* ranked fourth in the Top 20 Catholic films on these pages last week and a new production of the stage version has just started, at the Theatre Royal Bath, a UK tour starring Martin Shaw.

Shaw as More may seem surprising actuarially. More was 57 when he died, and Scofield was 37 when he first played him. Shaw, though, celebrated his eightieth birthday this month, and he first played More 19 years ago. But Scofield was often cast older (he played King Lear at 40) and Shaw tends to play much younger. And he powerfully shows what a great role for an actor Bolt wrote in the man who is prepared to die rather than sign an oath declaring King Henry VIII supreme head of the English Church.

Because More is a saint and attempted to prevent the birth of the Church that led to the martyrdom and marginalisation of English adherents to Rome, he is a figure of veneration and fascination for many Catholics – and, as we acknowledged last week, the resulting movie is clearly strongly Catholic.

Bolt, however, was specific that the protagonist's faith was an incidental aspect of his interest. In an introduction to the 1960 first edition (the script has remained in print ever since), Bolt wrote: "I am not a Catholic nor even in the meaningful sense of the word a Christian. So by what right do I appropriate a Christian saint to my purposes? Or to put it the other way, why do I take as my hero a man who brings about his own death because he can't put his hand on an old black book and tell an ordinary lie?"

The dramatist's candour, though, touches on one reason for the play's long success. In dramatic terms, a weakness of More's story is that he isn't strictly making a choice, usually key to the psychology of great fiction. As Bolt reflected: "More was a very orthodox Catholic and for him an oath was something perfectly specific. It was an invitation to God, an invitation God would not refuse, to act as a witness, and to judge; the consequence of perjury was damnation, for More another perfectly specific concept."



So, once the king offered a pledge as an intended way out to More, he had no more choice about his fate than did his model, Jesus Christ. Bolt does not inject false jeopardy about the inevitable outcome – More, unlike Christ at Gethsemane, is never given a moment of serious doubt – but finds rapt action in the magnificent intractability of the character's faith and conscience.

Bolt was strongly influenced by Arthur Miller's drama *The Crucible,* in which two Massachusetts farmers, John Proctor and Giles Corey, die rather than sign a false confession. Learning from Miller, Bolt uses the story of More to ask questions such as: how could they be so purely brave? And, could we possibly imagine enacting our own morality so seriously? The author Gore Vidal liked to joke of various politicians that, when they wrestled with their conscience, they always won. Sir Thomas, like Proctor and Corey, lost and submitted even to death.

In the new production, Shaw's More well captures this supernatural (in every sense) stubbornness. Like many Ibsen protagonists, he is both admirable and unlikeable. Abigail Cruttenden's Lady Alice radiates the horror and show of having married someone who puts love of God before his for you and your children.

As there are simply not enough of More's co-religionists to have sustained the play for so long, others must have been drawn to its broader considerations of conscience and resistance to the state.

As with many dramas written in the late 1940s and '50s, the issue of Nazi collaboration in Germany and France is implicitly invoked. Bolt was a supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and so the concept of conscientious objection in a military context is also present. In common with all long-lasting old dramas, the play is also inflected by the new times in which it is seen. We may wish that both the Catholic and Anglican Churches, during the child abuse scandals, had found more Mores in their ranks, unable to lie or turn an eye. And, though he this time won a victory handsome by every democratic metric, President Trump again seems set to rule a court of Tudor whim and insecurity.

But surely the biggest reason for *A Man for All Seasons* being back on stage is the twenty-first-century British cultural enthusiasm for the Tudors that has been re-energised by the conclusion of the TV adaptation of Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell trilogy with this winter's *Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light,* a likely multiple nominee at the approaching Bafta TV Awards.

The new production shows vividly how those novels have changed the context of the play. In pre-Mantel stagings, Cardinal Wolsey's first reference, early in Act One, to "my secretary, Master Cromwell", and Cromwell's first appearance soon afterwards, went for relatively little; he was implicitly a supporting character.

From the audience in Bath last week, though, his name and entrance received the sort of audible susurration that is common when celebrities are mentioned. In a way that would not have arisen for earlier audiences, Bolt's Cromwell is now a thrilling antithesis to Mantel's. In his character notes, Bolt describes Cromwell as having a "self-conceit that can cradle gross crimes in the name of effective action. In short, an intellectual bully."

Bolt, who died in 1995, would have been surprised by Mantel's nearly heroic Cromwell – a silky fixer, often conscience-stricken, whose portrayal by Mark Rylance on TV seemed at times deliberately to channel the pinched agonies of Scofield's More.

Reflecting the enlarged status of Cromwell, director Jonathan Church casts him with a substantial actor, Edward Bennett, who has played Shakespearean leads and whose bruising self-advancement and malleable morality give tremendous power to the pivotal scenes with Shaw.

In some ways, the play has aged. The narrator figure of the Common Man is cut from some productions (as from the movie) and could have been sacrificed here, although Gary Wilmot charmingly does all that can be done with the part. And certainly, as it has ever since that proto radio version, *A Man for All Seasons* remains an enthralling debate about the meaning and consequences of integrity.

A Man for All Seasons tours to Chichester, Malvern, Cheltenham, Oxford, Guildford, Canterbury and London.

RADIO

'I'm smiling, you nitwit'

His mother's memory destroyed, a loving son grapples to connect

D.J. TAYLOR

Illuminated: The Memory Catcher
BBC RADIO 4

THE TITLE OF this intriguing half-hour (now on BBC Sounds) is rather a red herring. There were hardly any memories to be caught in the photographer Julian Lass' sit-downs with his elderly mother, merely a series of "glimpses" – intermittent and fugitive – into the person she once had been. Neither was there much in the way of a relationship. As he ruefully put it, "You can't have a relationship with someone who doesn't remember what you said to them five minutes ago."

What gives *The Memory Catcher* its considerable frisson is the sense of something that might have been generic knocked steadily out of kilter. Eighty-something Mrs Lass, first found in her care home welcoming her son and daughter, sounded full of beans, declared that she was "happy", approved of her surroundings ("we're in a very nice place …") and wasn't, as the programme proceeded, averse to a little maternal asperity ("I'm smiling, you nitwit").

In fact, Mrs Lass proved not to be suffering from dementia but what her daughter described as a "million to one" medical catastrophe. In her fifties the former primary school teacher contracted encephalitis. Twenty years later its effects were compounded by an attack of meningitis, which left her with no short-term memory. Her long-term memory was all but obliterated, although an occasional gleam of time past floated up through the murk.

If Mrs Lass seemed perfectly content, enjoyed the company of her grandchildren and liked being taken out to tea, then her children quietly agonised. The most poignant moments came when Julian's sister asked him why he spent so much of his time with her taking photographs (his mother seemed not to mind the endless sessions, objecting only to the results). He explained that it took the stress out of visiting her, gave him something to concentrate on beyond the repetitive conversations and enabled him to commemorate a relationship that no longer existed.

All this is by turns sad – as when Julian admits that he had stopped grieving for his mother, as there was nothing left to grieve for – and unexpectedly upbeat: Mrs Lass, out with her grandchildren, although constantly having to have it explained to her who they were, is clearly having a whale of a time. There is no sense of a twilit diminuendo, merely a life full of constant surprises. "I don't believe you," she retorts, with a kind of cheery exasperation, when told the age she has reached.

TELEVISION

Keeping hope alive

Making music in a death factory

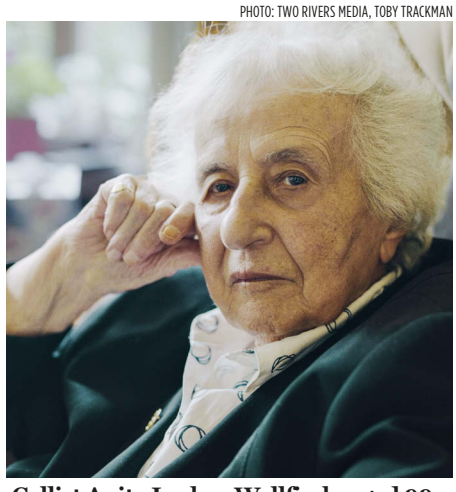
LUCY LETHBRIDGE

The Last Musician of Auschwitz
BBC TWO AND IPLAYER

THE INMATES OF the death camp at Auschwitz were liberated 80 years ago, and few are left now to bear living witness to its horrors. Among them is cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who is 99. A German Jew, she is the only surviving member of the Women's Orchestra at Auschwitz, one of 15 orchestras at the camp whose members used their skills as musicians not only as a means to live but to create. Music became a form of resistance, of a defiant beauty amid degradation. Many of the finest musicians in Europe played in these orchestras – some celebrated, others unknown.

In *The Last Musician of Auschwitz*, we meet Anita. We hear the music of composer Szymon Laks, who played at Auschwitz; the conductor Adam Kopycinski; poet and songwriter Ilse Weber; and the anonymous Roma singers who left behind their own testaments to the Gypsy Holocaust. In the Nazi hierarchy of culture Romani music was negligible, subhuman. But songs, fragments of folk culture, will not be extinguished. On one night alone,

PHOTO: TWO RIVERS MEDIA, TOBY TRACKMAN



Cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, aged 99

4,000 Romani Gypsies were murdered – and from this unspeakable evil comes a song which begins, "There is a big house in Auschwitz, where my beloved sits."

The experiences of those who were at Auschwitz are, literally, indescribable (a word that comes up more than any other in the interviews here). It is often left to the next generation – Lasker-Wallfisch's cellist son Raphael, for example, and Laks' son André – to try to put words and context into the spaces. "I have seen everything with my own eyes," says Lasker-Wallfisch, drawing on another cigarette. She was asked to play Schumann's evocation of a childhood idyll, *Träumerai*, for Dr Josef Mengele: "People ask me how did you feel. I didn't feel anything." André Laks recalled that his father was haunted all his life by guilt that he had not suffered as much as others.

In Auschwitz, the orchestras played not only for the delectation of the Nazis but also to "march" the slave labour in and out of the camp every day, often in sub-zero temperatures. Music made islands of resistance and secret groups formed to sing banned Yiddish and Polish songs – "In this way, you don't forget yourself." Laks wrote a piece in the camp that he practised with his string quartet. When an SS officer heard it, he asked who it was by and Laks named an obscure Austrian; the officer nodded approvingly, saying he could tell it was German by the quality.

Kopycinski wrote a lullaby, dedicated to a small child. Did the child die? We don't know. But it is a "bright and optimistic" piece. Lasker-Wallfisch says now: "I sometimes think of this as being very strange, to have fine music playing in a death factory." But music salvaged humanity, even hope, in Auschwitz where both seemed to have been destroyed.

This is a compelling and powerful documentary – although it succumbs to the fashion for re-enactment, in this case with young actors dressed in 1940s clothes reading other people's words and not always as if they completely understand them. It feels unnecessary: the music is what's powerful here.

MUSIC

Not quite their night

Europe's first ethically diverse orchestra has much work to do

ALEXANDRA COGHLAN

Chineke! 10th Anniversary Concert
QUEEN ELIZABETH HALL, LONDON

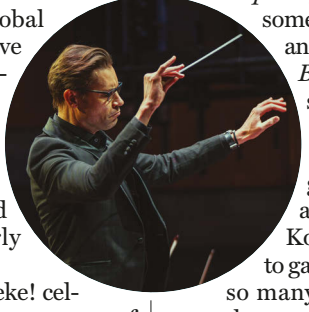
IN 2015 a ground-breaking orchestra took to the stage of the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London for their first concert, unsure if there would ever be a second. Ten years on and Chineke! – Europe's first majority black and ethnically diverse orchestra – has managed plenty more.

A junior orchestra now runs alongside the senior ensemble; the group has won awards, recorded extensively and carved out a regular slot at the BBC Proms. It has even performed alongside Stormzy at the Brit Awards. Now a resident orchestra at the Southbank Centre, Chineke! a few days ago returned to the stage the musicians debuted on a decade ago to celebrate the anniversary.

It's tricky timing: the group's charismatic founder and artistic director Chi-chi Nwanoku was suspended last month pending investigation into "potential breaches of the foundation's code of conduct". Nwanoku's name was raised again and again on stage, but the double-bassist herself was notably absent from a musical party celebrating a legacy without a clear sense of where it might head next.

It's an interesting question. In 2015 only 2 per cent of UK orchestral musicians were from an ethnic minority, despite representing about 15 per cent of the population. But, with no more recent figures available, it's hard to measure progress or its absence. We do know that only 4 per cent of the repertoire performed in the classical concert hall internationally today is by global majority composers, who receive only 6 per cent of classical commissions and are underrepresented in music colleges and conservatoires. And in 2021 63 per cent of black musicians in the UK reported experiencing racism. Clearly there's still work to do.

PHOTO: CHUKO CRIBB



But for one night only Chineke! celebrated the wins in a programme of contemporary works, all commissioned or premiered by the orchestra itself. The lineup was impressive – coronation composer Shirley J. Thompson, jazz musician Julian Joseph, baritone and composer Roderick Williams, alongside rising talents Ayanna Witter-Johnson, James B. Wilson and Daniel Kidane – a vibrant living tradition, stylistically as well as racially diverse. Even more impressive were the players' own biographies: students and professionals representing many of the best international music colleges and ensembles.

So why wasn't it a thrilling evening? Something didn't quite coalesce in a concert of bite-size chunks that lacked Chineke!'s signature energy. Joseph's *Carry That Sound* found a deliciously woozy, bluesy spirit for its central "Gene Kelly moment", Witter-Johnson's brief "Creation" (part of the multi-composer *Song of the Prophets: A Requiem for Climate Change*) generated some ravishing orchestral colours, and Williams' song-cycle *Ethiopia Boy* injected wit as well as a stand-out solo by saxophonist Mebrakh Haughton-Johnson. But the challenging programme felt under-rehearsed and timid. Conductor Matthew Kofi Waldren (inset) did his best to galvanise his musicians, but with so many short works, too much onstage chat, and an issue-loaded programme, it was hard to build momentum.

The relationship between activism and art is unequal: a great cause doesn't necessarily make for great art. At their best, Chineke! represent a synergy between the two – an exhilarating social and musical statement. This wasn't their night, but the next decade, the next generation of careers, the next shot across the bows, is theirs to make and shape. Better brace for impact, because this band is just getting started.

·OUR REVIEWERS·

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MARKIE ROBSON-SCOTT is a freelance writer • **CHRISTOPHER BRAY** is the author of 1965: The Year Modern Britain Was Born

Living in sin

Throughout a political career spanning more than 60 years, Gladstone was also pursuing an inner life he described as 'dubious, vacillating and complex'

IAN BRADLEY

William Ewart Gladstone: The Heart and Soul of a Statesman
MICHAEL WHEELER
(OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 240 PP, £30)

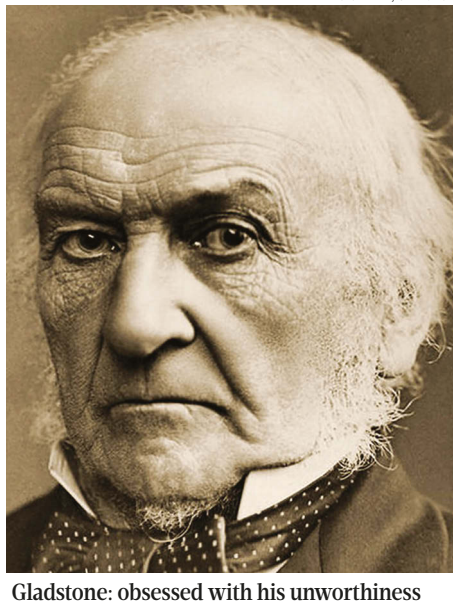
WILLIAM EWART Gladstone is an obvious subject for OUP's Spiritual Lives series, which aims to explore the religious dimension of prominent figures whose eminence is based on other aspects of their lives. Bestriding the Victorian political world like a colossus, delivering 12 budgets as chancellor of the exchequer and serving four times as prime minister, he was also deeply religious and arguably the leading lay theologian of his age, writing weighty treatises on the Eucharist, the doctrine of incarnation, eternal life and church-state relations.

Michael Wheeler is ideally placed to probe Gladstone's spiritual life. An expert on Victorian religion and literature, he gives the impression of having read a good proportion of his subject's extant writings, which run to 25,200 diary entries, 5,000 annotated books and 70,000 family letters, all housed in the library in North Wales which now bears his name, and 750 volumes of manuscript letters, sermons, essays and speeches in the British Library.

Sensibly eschewing Gladstone's political career, which has been exhaustively covered elsewhere, Wheeler focuses rather on his inner life which the Grand Old Man himself described in a characteristic exercise in anguished self-examination as "extraordinarily dubious, vacillating and complex". The main theme of this biography is the agonised nature of Gladstone's spiritual state. A lifelong preoccupation with his own sinfulness and unworthiness stood at the heart of his faith. "No other religion but Christianity meets the sense of sin," he wrote, "and sin is the great fact in the world to me."

His own overwhelming sense of sin sprang in large part from a prodigious sexual appetite which led him to erotic literature, masturbation and his famous encounters with prostitutes as he walked the streets of London late at night carrying out "rescue work". Wheeler devotes two chapters, appropriately entitled "Manifest in the flesh" and "Fight the good fight", to these encounters which often involved strong physical attraction and romantic involvement and regularly led Gladstone to self-flagellate on returning home. He concludes that the interactions were "something more than adultery of the heart, but less than penetrative sex outside marriage". He also observes that "the quality newspapers were reticent about such matters, to a degree that would baffle modern journalists".

PHOTO: ALAMY, GL ARCHIVE



Gladstone: obsessed with his unworthiness

ALTHOUGH IT WAS never completely subdued, Gladstone's consciousness of his own sinful unworthiness was alleviated by regular attendance at worship and devotional reading. As well as turning to the Psalms, he returned repeatedly to Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, "a golden book" which became his most constant spiritual companion.

Just as in political terms – he started as the "rising hope of those stern and unbending Tories" and ended as a Liberal of progressive and even advanced views – so in his Christian faith he moved from the narrow evangelicalism of his upbringing to a more catholic outlook. Wheeler traces the beginning of this change to Gladstone's Confirmation at Eton which inspired a 13-page teenage outpouring on the mystery of the Holy Eucharist. Also influential was a visit he made to Italy just after going down from Oxford which gave him a sense of the importance of the Church and tradition as key foundations of the Christian faith alongside the Bible.

At university, Gladstone had been closely involved with many of those at the forefront of the Oxford Movement. Wheeler takes the view that, although he can undoubtedly be regarded as a High Churchman, he was not a full-blooded Tractarian and had Broad Church sympathies while sensibly avoiding ecclesiastical party labels. His conviction that politics was above all a moral crusade, exemplified in his fervent campaigns on the Bulgarian and Armenian atrocities, made him the darling of Nonconformists; but he remained first and foremost a staunch Anglican, believing that the maintenance and defence of the Church of England was essential to combatting the rising tide of unbelief which he saw as one of the great evils of the age.

Although catholic in his own theology, he had little time for Roman Catholicism, denouncing Vaticanism and ultramontanism, regarding the conversion of his close friends James Hope and Henry Manning as acts of infidelity and describing Newman's departure from the Church of England as "a catastrophe". He did, however, retain close friendships with two liberal Catholics, Ignaz von Döllinger and Lord Acton.

Aside from the obsession with sin, what this beautifully written and sympathetic but not sycophantic study brings out above all is Gladstone's enormous energy and wide range of interests. The day before delivering his first budget, which lasted four-and-three-quarter hours, he gave a sermon to his household and attended three church services. A typical day during his second premiership involved travelling from Yarmouth to London, chairing the Cabinet, speaking in the Commons on the Eastern Question, entertaining 12 guests to dinner and retiring early to bed to finish reading Dickens' *David Copperfield*.

He spent his eightieth birthday pushing wheelbarrow-loads of his books to the residential library at Hawarden which he founded as a place of "divine learning" and which remains his most tangible legacy. This book should be required reading for those who come to stay and study there – and for today's politicians seeking that "hinterland", spiritual, cultural and intellectual, that so many of them lack.

ILLUSTRATION: ALAMY/SANDENA

Hear, hear!

Julian Margaret Gibbs on four outstanding audiobooks

SET IN SRI LANKA in the Eighties and Nineties, V.V. Ganeshananthan's **Brotherless Night** (Audible, £12.99), winner of last year's Women's Prize, tells the story of Sashi, only daughter of a middle-class Tamil couple, whose family, like so many others, is destroyed by the civil war.

Sashi is in love with her brother's childhood friend, the brilliant K. Both ambitious medical students, they could have married happily. But oppression and pogroms against the Tamils draw K, along with two of Sashi's brothers, into the Tigers. They "become something else": heroic and heartless. Helping in the Tigers' Field Hospital, Sashi too must fit in with the demands of these "terrorists" whose acts she judges cruel. Yet K and her brothers never entirely lose their humanity, and the moral ambiguities of war are explored with extraordinary gentleness throughout the book.

Like many novels written in the first person, this one works superbly as an audiobook. Nirmala Rajasingam reads with urgency and tenderness, and the effect is so personal that I was surprised to discover that the author left Sri Lanka before the war began. Fiction can be a marvellous vehicle for the truth. Sashi herself develops a new role as a truth-recorder, helping, as the violence continues, to document the abuses committed by all sides. Having being quite ignorant about the Sri Lankan civil war before listening to this book, I have a sense now of its importance; the protagonist's mission is, in part, a metaphor for the novelist's own.

TOM BALDWIN's biography **Keir Starmer** (Audible, £12.99), published before the election, explores the personal aspect of politics in a very different way. Written with Starmer's blessing, but not "authorised" (Starmer didn't control the content), it gives limited but fascinating insight into the early life of our PM. During the election we heard a lot about Starmer's toolmaker father: this solitary, difficult man was clearly a deep influence on his son despite their lack of emotional connection. Grammar-school educated, like Starmer's mother profoundly left-wing but lacking ideological companionship in their Surrey village, he presided over a strict house: silence at mealtimes, little television, classical music in place of pop. His dedication to his wife, the warm-hearted Jo, who suffered from Still's Disease, was, however, complete. Though Baldwin does not say so, Starmer's determination to forge on, regardless of what others in the Labour Party think, probably owes much to his father.

Keir's political shifts since winning the leadership are less profound than they seem, Baldwin argues. More persuasive is his emphasis on Starmer's keenness to get stuff done. Ken Macdonald, Keir's predecessor at the Crown Prosecution Service, remarks that Keir was determined rather than radical: "He wanted to run a competent and efficient CPS." This biography, read with a manly-sounding firmness by John Sackville, makes a convincing case that Starmer will have the same aim as PM.

ONE LEADER who made a tragic hash of running the country was Mary I. The last in Alison Weir's Tudor Rose novel trilogy, **Mary I: Queen of Sorrows** (Audible, £16.99), is brilliantly researched and read by Julie Maisey with a liveliness that partly compensates for its pedestrian style. The author traces Mary's determination to restore England's Catholicism to the loss of her blissful childhood. Torn from her devout mother at 13, cast into an uncertain world where those she loved were often put to death, Mary showed superb strength of character. But this hardened into obstinacy when she became queen. Much loved initially, she ignored her subjects' horror at her foreign marriage and at her burning of heretics (her tally was much higher than her father or sister's). Her final years, deserted by her husband and nursing phantom pregnancies, were desolately sad.

MOURNING AND SADNESS are the very themes of Sally Rooney's latest novel, beautifully read in calm, lilting tones by Éanna Hardwicke. The two brothers of **Intermezzo** (Audible, £18.99) have just lost their father. Peter, 32, successful, sophisticated, is plunged into a drug-fuelled encounter with "the catastrophe he has made of his life". He still loves his erstwhile girlfriend Sylvia, an academic, who, suffering long-term pain from an accident, can no longer enjoy sex. But he is also intricately entangled with witty, slutty Naomi, far younger than he is.

Peter's relationship with his 22-year-old brother is also difficult. Nerdy chess buff Ivan has met 36-year-old Margaret and is discovering the wonder of sexual intimacy. When Peter reacts negatively to this news, Ivan responds with the fury of one who has long felt overshadowed. Rooney is good on the intensity of sibling relationships.

She is also marvellous on the joy of physical togetherness. *Intermezzo* is, stylistically, her most ambitious novel yet, its "streams of consciousness" recalling Joyce. In other ways too she seeks to surprise her readers. Christianity is startlingly prominent. Sylvia's love of Christ is "transcendent". Peter, mentally tormented, feels "terror" of him. Ivan has "a sense of being loved by God, almost". Both brothers, lingering by a church, confide that they try to believe in him. Rooney's characters push traditional boundaries in their relationships but remain deeply connected to religious belief and doubt.

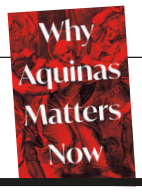
Missing links

MARKIE ROBSON-SCOTT

Confessions
CATHERINE AIREY
(VIKING, 480 PP, £16.99)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £15.29 • TEL 020 7799 4064

CATHERINE Airey's extraordinarily assured debut novel, narrated in a clear, spare style, is a gripping three-generational story set in Donegal and New York. It starts dramatically in the vivid voice of Cora, a 16-year-old in Brooklyn, who's been skipping school and taking drugs with an unsuitable older boyfriend. But then her father, Michael, who works at Cantor Fitzgerald in the World Trade Center, dies in the 9/11 attacks,



RECENTLY PUBLISHED **Why Aquinas Matters Now** / OLIVER KEENAN /BLOOMSBURY CONTINUUM, £16.99; TABLET PRICE £15.29
A study of how Aquinas' non-violent philosophy can teach us how to be human in a dehumanising world

Point-scoring polemics

CHRISTOPHER BRAY

You Can't Please All: Memoirs 1980-2024
TARIQ ALI
(VERSO, 816 PP, £35)

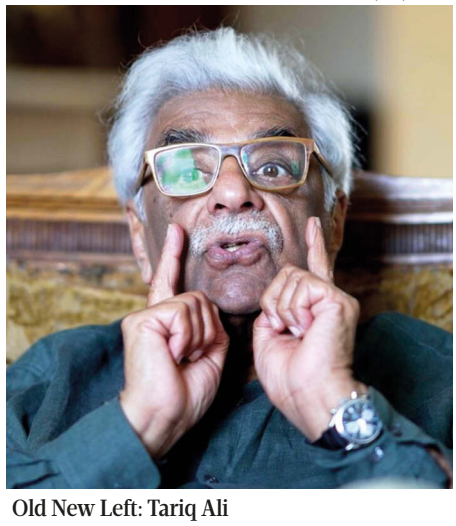
TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £31.50 • TEL 020 7799 4064

FIFTY-ODD years ago, Frank Kermode's series of Fontana Modern Masters published a volume on that high priest of the New Left, Herbert Marcuse. Written by Alasdair MacIntyre, the book was highly critical of Marcuse, calling the Freudian Marxist out as an elitist irrationalist who "invokes the great names of freedom and reason while betraying their substance at every important point".

Marcuse's supporters were damning in their turn. Robin Blackburn wrote a takedown of MacIntyre's book that occasioned much laughter in the Soho offices of Tariq Ali's Sixties screamsheet *The Black Dwarf*. It happened that one of Ali's colleagues had been in Collet's (a now defunct radical bookshop on the Charing Cross Road), where he had spied MacIntyre reading Blackburn's piece. He watched "as [MacIntyre] pored over Blackburn's assault, turned puce, threw the paper back on the pile and walked out". "We were thrilled," Ali writes in *You Can't Please All*. "It was rare to witness the immediate impact of a text on its target."

And there you have not only Tariq Ali but, I'm afraid, the whole of the New Left and its infantile game-playing. What counts for this

PHOTO: ALAMY/ATCD/PROD. DB



Old New Left: Tariq Ali

clown show is not standing up and setting out your beliefs in the hope of convincing Jack and Jill Six-Pack that you are on their side. No, what matters are point-scoring polemics in shoestring publications designed to affront those with whom you disagree while preaching to the converted.

In the introduction to this second volume of his memoirs, Ali confesses that his parents disapproved of what they saw as his "juvenile ultra-leftism". But it was their friend, a retired major called Bill Short, who best saw through him. In 1968, when the New Left were at their most posturingly silly, Short told Ali's mum and dad that they should "instruct the boy [who was then 25] to grow up. There will never be a revolution in this country again. The first one alerted us for ever. You must be mad to believe that English working men are interested in any Marxist nonsense ... Harold Wilson is the farthest left this country will go." Now 81, Ali acknowledges the wisdom of that closing point. Praise be for small things, though it would be better if Ali had at least begun to wonder whether his street-fighting antics haven't helped keep Wilson's party out of power for many of those subsequent years.

MERCIFULLY, this memoir isn't all agitprop. Ali disarmingly admits that he isn't the greatest writer (the "art of sentence arrangement has never been one of my strong points", he says, correctly enough – though nothing could prepare you for the doggerel he offers up when attempting to write verse in the manner of Tony Harrison). On the other hand, he is a signally good reader. His chapter on Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* series will have even those convinced by Auberon Waugh's claim that Powell was no better a stylist than Ali reaching for the novels again. As for his essay on *Don Quixote* (a book he once turned into a stage play), though its claim that Cervantes was anti-Catholic is fatuous (he was anti-Inquisition, a rather different thing), it's an otherwise sensitive and suggestive reading that will open the eyes of even its most devoted fans.

No less eye-opening are the number of howlers in this book. The journal that published Robin Blackburn's demolition job on Alasdair MacIntyre was *Telos*, not *Black Dwarf* – as Ali, the editor, ought surely to have known. Dennis Potter called his cancer "Rupert", not "Murdoch". I'm sure Peter Kellner is "usually the gentlest of souls", but since the late Tony Judt once recalled his Cambridge chum jumping on the roof of Denis Healey's car during an anti-Vietnam demo, he patently wasn't gentle all the time. As for Harold Wilson, whatever his faults, he kept us out of that war. Now that really was radicalism in action.

PHOTO: X (TWITTER)

NOVEL *of the* WEEK

jumping, so Cora believes, from the 104th floor.

Her deeply unstable mother, Máire, an artist, has drowned eight years previously, so Cora is alone, wandering the streets of Manhattan, looking obsessively at missing-people posters. Yet there seems to be something missing in her own history. She knows that her parents met in Burtonport, Donegal as teenage sweethearts, that her mother got a scholarship to study at art school in New York and that eventually her dad followed her there, but she's never wondered much about what they left behind.

This is not a chronological story. It ducks and dives between the decades, tracing intergenerational trauma. Airey (above) tackles themes of mental illness, addiction, creativity, rape and motherhood – so many unwanted pregnancies, echoing down the years – with great skill, though sometimes you do have to remind yourself whose grandmother is whose (and there's a less successful video game subplot connected to a haunted Burtonport house and a primal-scream therapy commune there).

The relationship between Máire and her younger sister Róisin in Seventies' Donegal is particularly volatile and toxic. Máire is the wild, bold, artistic one, Róisin is the writer, but although Máire "hardly ever wants to actually do things with me, she doesn't like me being in my own world, either". She destroys Róisin's notebooks and spits "my words back at me gleefully, making me ashamed of everything I'd ever thought to put to paper".

Máire embraces change – she needs to get away from her boyfriend Michael's suffocating love – but life at NYU in 1979 is alien and the art classes are dull, apart from those taught by an apparently sympathetic professor. In New York, she's no longer so loud and bold. Her roommate Franny, "peppy and preppy, pretty and popular", invites her home for Thanksgiving in Minnesota, and after this nightmarish visit Máire is set on a tragic course.

After Michael dies, it's her hitherto unknown aunt Róisin, still rooted in Burtonport, who offers sanctuary to the orphaned Cora, who, it transpires, is pregnant (later she becomes a celebrated pro-choice activist). Lyca, her daughter, finds herself the guardian of the family secrets, many of them contained in letters between Michael and Róisin. The strands of this impressive novel, ending in 2023, are tied up a little too neatly at the end, but Airey's storytelling is powerful enough to convince you of anything.

NEWS BRIEFING

THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

PHOTO: FACEBOOK

The Nicaraguan government seized a diocesan seminary and retreat centre. About half the 60 seminarians studying at the Diocese of Matagalpa's San Luis Gonzaga seminary were present when police confiscated the building on 20 January. The authorities also seized La Cartuja, the diocesan centre and retreat house, pictured above. Fr Erick Diaz, an exiled Nicaraguan priest, said the seminary was "the heart of the Church and the diocese". He described Matagalpa, see of the exiled Bishop Rolando Álvarez, as "the diocese that had been the most heavily attacked" by President Daniel Ortega's regime.

'Conversion therapy' dispute

Bishop José Ignacio Munilla of Orihuela-Alicante attacked the **Spanish** government for opening an investigation into seven dioceses for allegedly hosting "conversion therapy" events. Writing on social media, Munilla said "conversion therapy" did not exist, but was an "ideological construct of Marxism" to prevent the Church from offering pastoral accompaniment to those trying to live out "the virtue of chastity". Munilla's stance put him at odds with the Archdiocese of Valencia's condemnation of conversion therapies. They were outlawed in Spain in 2023.

The **Malian** government said it would end subsidies to Catholic schools which cover 80 per cent of teachers' salaries in the 2025-26 academic year. It said the 1972 agreement under which Catholic education received state funding had become a financial burden and violated the secular constitution. Christians make up just three per cent of the population. Church sources said the cut threatened the jobs of 2,000 teachers.

The **Nigerian** Diocese of Warri suspended a priest from ministry after his wedding in the United States. Social media posts showed Fr Okanatotor Oghenerukevwe marrying Dora Chichah on 29 December 2024, at the Streams of Joy Church in Dallas, Texas. The diocese said Oghenerukevwe had requested release from all canonical obligations on 30 November but had married without completing the necessary procedure.

Government representatives met church leaders in the **Democratic Republic of Congo** to organise an ecumenical service on 9 February to pray for peace. Mgr Donatien Nshole, the secretary general of the Congolese Bishops' Conference, met the Minister of Justice Constant Mutamba Tungunga on 21 January to discuss the initiative for interfaith prayer for the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) and the population of the east of the country. On 27 January, fighters from the M23 rebel group entered Goma, the capital of North Kivu province and the largest city in the region, claiming control as civilians and FARDC troops fled. "The situation in Goma is very serious," reported Bernard Balibuno, Cafod's country representative for DR Congo. "The humanitarian needs in Goma now are vast. The city has been forced into shutdown by the fighting and hundreds of thousands of people are displaced. Many are reduced to begging on the streets."

A **South African** bishop called for the government to formalise the activities of small-scale mining operations (referred to as "artisanal mining"), which attracted national attention last November when hundreds of miners failed to emerge from an abandoned gold mine in Stilfontein, in North West Province. Authorities refused to offer any assistance while the miners feared arrest after a rescue attempt, resulting in the deaths of scores of the miners before an operation launched in early January. Bishop Victor Phalana of Klerksdorp said the government had done little to protect the lives of the miners.

Gracias resignation accepted

The Pope accepted the resignation of **India's** Cardinal Oswald Gracias as Archbishop of Bombay on 25 January and elevated his coadjutor Bishop John Rodrigues to the see. Rodrigues described Gracias – who turned 80 on 24 December – as "a giant of a man, and now I have mighty big shoes to fill".

Pope Francis appointed Cardinal George Jacob Koovakad as prefect of the **Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue**, succeeding the late Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot who died in office last year. The announcement on 24 January confirmed that the Indian-born Koovakad, 51, a Syro-Malabar priest, would retain his role as coordinator of apostolic journeys.

Cardinal Claudio Gugerotti, the prefect of the Dicastery for Eastern Churches, visited **Syria** on 24-29 January, so that "the nation's Catholics may feel the affection and support of the entire Catholic Church, and in particular of the Bishop of Rome" following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, according to a Vatican statement. An unnamed local source told Aid to the Church in Need that international attention "pressures the former rebels to be more peaceful". She said Christians "do not want to define themselves as minorities", as "they might lose their representation in the new constitution and institutions".

Archbishop Anastasios, the Primate of the Orthodox Church of **Albania**, died in Greece on 25 January aged 95. Anastasios, an ethnic Greek born in Piraeus, was appointed primate by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople in 1992.

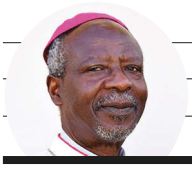
The Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone published an inquiry billed as the first independent analysis of clerical abuse in **Italy**. The Munich-based law firm Westpfahl Spilker Wastl reported nearly 60 cases since 1964 in the north-eastern diocese covering South Tyrol. A spokesman for the firm said the study was the first in an Italian diocese "to reconstruct and examine in a completely independent way the episodes of sexual abuse".

Pope Francis said the **2025 Jubilee** and the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea was a "providential" moment for Christian unity, falling in a year when Eastern and Western Churches celebrate Easter on the same date. "Let us rediscover the common roots of the faith," he said at an ecumenical vespers service in Rome on 25 January to mark the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

The **Vatican** published a document "on the relationship between artificial intelligence and human intelligence" on 28 January, discussing the place of the "wisdom of the heart" in developing "the human-centred use of this technology".

Compiled by **Patrick Hudson, Bess Twiston Davies** and **Ngala Killian Chimtom**

PHOTO: FACEBOOK



·QUOTE OF THE WEEK·

“Catholic men should be ashamed of the violence instigated against women and children. On behalf of men, I am sorry.”

Archbishop Franklyn Atese Nubuasah of Gaborone responding to police reports that most Botswana murders result from gender-based violence.

PERU / Spanish daily El Pais reports allegation dating back to 1983

Opus Dei’s first cardinal denies he abused teenager

BESS TWISTON DAVIES

OPUS DEI’S first cardinal denied allegations he abused a teenager during confession. Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne, Lima Archbishop from 1999 to 2019, said he had “never abused anyone” after the Spanish daily *El País* reported the claim that he abused a teenager in Peru in 1983.

The alleged victim, who was 16 at the time, said Cipriani would reproach him during 45-minute confessions at an Opus Dei centre, reducing him to tears. The priest would then hug him, placing his hands under the boy’s clothing. When Cipriani kissed him “near the edge of the lips” he refused to go to him for confession again.

He complained to Opus Dei in 1983, later meeting three of the group’s priests who said they would speak to Cipriani but told the complainant he was “an orphan with problems and had misinterpreted fatherly affection”.

In 2018, he wrote to Pope Francis after watching a film about the abuse crisis in the Chilean Church. He asked Juan Carlos Cruz, a Chilean abuse survivor and member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, to give Francis his letter personally.

PHOTO: ALAMY, FOTOHOLICA PRESS AGENCY

Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne

“All I want is for you to know the truth ... I only want you to remove from the Church a pastor who has done me harm,” he wrote.

“Francis acted,” Cruz told *El País*. The Pope asked a Jesuit in Peru to meet the victim and the Vatican imposed disciplinary measures limiting Cipriani’s ministry after he resigned on turning 75 in 2019. He was ordered to leave Peru and forbidden from wearing the insignia of a cardinal or making public statements.

Cipriani claimed last Saturday that Pope Francis had allowed him to resume his priestly ministry after a meeting in 2020. On Monday the Vatican said: “Although specific permissions have been granted on certain occasions ... at present, this precept remains in force.”

Opus Dei in Peru said it had no record of the 1983 complaint but added: “Today, it would be impossible for a complaint to fail to be recorded.” Fr Ángel Gómez-Hortigüela, its vicar general, said he had refused to meet the complainant in 2018 as he did not consider the matter within his remit. He apologised for not meeting him in a “personal, human and spiritual fashion”.

Flanders Catholic schools drop teacher baptismal requirement

TOM HENEGHAN

A SHORTAGE of secondary school religion teachers in the Flemish-speaking north of Belgium forced Catholic education officials to drop the requirement that candidates be baptised.

Catholic Education Flanders, the region’s largest educational authority, said 632 classes in its secondary schools have no religion teacher, requiring 60 full-time appointments to fill the vacancies with particular shortages in Antwerp, Ghent and the bilingual capital Brussels.

“This is not ideal, but necessity knows no law,” education delegate Jürgen Mettepenningen told the Brussels daily *De Standaard*.

The decision did not affect the region’s smaller state sector, but proved necessary in Catholic schools because slots for religion classes cannot legally be filled by other subjects. Mettepenningen said education laws were partly responsible. “Principals are stuck if they can’t find a teacher,” he said. “Students end up studying or have to go home.”

Previous regulations required that religious teachers be baptised, have suitable training and follow the curriculum. The authority’s decision keeps only the last requirement – an approach it will review annually.

State schools have no department to support such “emergency teachers” as the Catholic system has.

Mettepenningen hoped most teachers would be baptised or at least Christian-oriented, but schools said they had few options.

“There are many fewer students studying religion to become teachers, and that makes it more difficult to find someone for the subject,” said Ann Daelemans, personnel director at a Catholic school south of Antwerp.

Mettepennigen added that technology could not replace the teachers. “You can teach digitally for a while,” he said, “but ultimately, students still need a teacher in front of the class.”

Syro-Malabar liturgy conflict unresolved

RITA JOSEPH

HOPES FOR a resolution to the Syro-Malabar Church’s bitter liturgical feud suffered a setback when a spokesman issued a note refusing to revoke suspension orders and disciplinary proceedings against dissident priests.

The priests in the Archeparchy of Ernakulam-Angamaly, in India’s southern state of Kerala, received the message from the diocesan spokesperson Fr Joshy Puthuva on 23 January.

On 12 January the newly appointed vicar and apostolic administrator for Ernakulam-Angamaly, Archbishop Joseph Pamplany, had agreed in talks with protesting clergy to pause suspension of 10 priests until he had studied their complaints about diocesan governance and the implementation of the “uniform rite” of the Syro-Malabar liturgy.

“We had thought they were sincere in their efforts for reconciliation,” said Fr Rajan Punnackal, a protester. He told *The Tablet* that Archbishop Pamplany had signed an agreement with 21 priests on 12 January agreeing to look into their demands during a second round of talks. He said Pamplany must have been “aware” of Fr Puthuva’s note he said violated the agreement.

“It could not have been sent without his approval. It may be the Major Archbishop Raphael Thattil’s diktat. That is why we insisted that he should be there at our next meeting with the vicar,” he said. Archbishop Thattil, the Syro-Malabar primate, is the nominal head of the archeparchy. “This is the work of the criminal curia. We will not hold further talks till the current curia and canonical bodies are reconstituted,” said Fr Jose Vailikodath, the rebel faction’s spokesperson.

UNITED STATES / Bishops criticise immigration orders

Trump and Vance praise March for Life supporters

MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS and TABITHA SMITH

PRESIDENT DONALD Trump praised supporters of a pro-life movement in a video message to the annual March for Life in Washington, DC on 24 January. He touted his recent pardon of 23 pro-life protesters who had been convicted of impeding access to abortion clinics and violating the federal Freedom of Access to Clinics Act.

Vice-President J.D. Vance addressed the march in person, emphasising the administration's commitment to pro-family policies. "Let me say very simply: I want more babies in the United States of America," he said.

"And it is the task of our government to make it easier for young moms and dads to afford to have kids, to bring them into the world, and to welcome them as the blessings that we know they are here at the March for Life."

However, the week saw growing tension between church leaders and the administration, as the US bishops criticised President Trump's anti-immigration executive orders.

Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, the chair of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) committee on migration, condemned a new directive allowing immigration enforcement agents to enter worship spaces and schools in order to detain migrants.

He said the change "strikes fear into the heart of our community, cynically layering a blanket of anxiety on families when they are worshipping God, seeking healthcare, and dropping off and picking up children at school".

PHOTO: ALAMY/AP, ANGELINA KATSANIS/POLITICO

J.D. Vance greets the marchers

The USCCB president Archbishop Timothy Broglio issued a statement on 22 January objecting to several executive orders "which will harm the most vulnerable among us".

Vice-President Vance cast aspersions on the bishops' motives in a television interview broadcast on 26 January, saying that "as a practising Catholic, I was actually heartbroken by that statement".

He claimed the USCCB "needs to look in the mirror a little bit and recognise that when they receive over $100 million to help resettle illegal immigrants, are they worried about humanitarian concerns? Or are they actually worried about their bottom line?"

In a statement released the same day, the USCCB defended its "long history of serving refugees" through the US Refugee Admissions Programme.

POSTCARD FROM Canberra

Identity crisis

BY JOHN WARHURST

CATHOLIC universities, especially publicly funded ones, can be lightning rods for identity conflicts as they try to serve two interests: the public and the Catholic. To what extent are they "agencies" of the Church controlled by the bishops? What is their place in the broad Catholic community? A graduation ceremony at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) late last year dramatised the tension.

ACU is Australia's only publicly funded Catholic university. It has seven campuses in Australia and one in Rome. At its Melbourne graduation ceremony on 21 October there was a mass walkout in response to a speech by Joe de Bruyn, a senior Catholic trade union leader connected to the private Campion College, who had received an honorary doctorate. He urged graduands to stand up for orthodox Catholic doctrine and not "cave in" to public opinion, citing three examples from his professional life: his opposition to abortion, IVF, and same-sex marriage. Most of the audience walked out, leaving the room about 15 per cent full.

The university apologised to the offended graduands, and offered counselling and ticket refunds, drawing the ire of church figures. Members of the hierarchy including Archbishop Peter Comensoli of Melbourne, condemned both the walkout and the university's response, while influential Catholics in the media were apoplectic.

The Archbishop of Sydney, Anthony Fisher, who had nominated de Bruyn for his honorary doctorate, echoed some of these sentiments in furious letters to the ACU leadership which quickly became public. In December, with Comensoli's support, he wrote to the Dicastery for Culture and Education saying that Vatican action was "urgently needed" at ACU.

Statements issued in the name of Vice Chancellor Zlatko Skrbis resolutely defended ACU's role as a public university alongside its promotion of the faith. It also received some episcopal support from Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, president of the ACU Corporation, who defended it from "relentless public attacks".

Nevertheless, the encounter left ACU bruised. Fr Bill Uren SJ, former rector of the University of Melbourne's Newman College, suggested the walkout was unsurprising, given that a male speaker was lecturing on controversial topics in a format where dialogue, an essential aspect of freedom of speech, was impossible.

This isn't the first row over ACU's Catholic identity, nor will it be the last over Catholicism in the public square. It speaks to a fragmentation of the Catholic community that was obvious in the 2017 same-sex marriage plebiscite, the Plenary Council of Australia in 2018-2022, and Australian contributions to the Synod on Synodality.

In December, a council including Comensoli re-appointed Skrbis to another five-year term as Vice Chancellor, bringing a sort of closure to the episode. But tensions remain between ACU's leadership and the bishops, and within the Australian Church as a whole – while the Vatican may yet have its own questions.

John Warhurst is Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University in Canberra and was a member of the Australian Plenary Council.

HOLY LAND

Praise for West Bank Christians

THE BISHOPS of the Holy Land Coordination said pilgrims returning to the Holy Land should visit the West Bank communities whose "faith and resilience strengthen our own faith", *writes Patrick Hudson*.

In their final communiqué from their visit to the Holy Land on 18-23 January, the bishops addressed a message to the Christians of the West Bank: "We hope that pilgrims will journey not only to the holy sites of Jerusalem, Galilee and Bethlehem, but that they will also come to visit communities like Aboud, Ephraim-Taybeh and Ramallah so they too can draw inspiration from your faithfulness to the land in which Jesus was born."

The eight-member delegation led by Bishop Nicholas Hudson, an auxiliary in the Archdiocese of Westminster, reported "widespread concern at the fragility of the ceasefire" between Israel and Hamas that began on 19 January.

They described the West Bank's Christian communities as "a light in the darkness of a suffering land" amid economic instability, violence and illegal Israeli settlement. "There is a clear need for the international community to act together to facilitate realistic and radical development assistance, as part of ... achieving a lasting peace," they said.

ZIMBABWE

'You must follow the constitution'

CHRISTIAN LEADERS in Zimbabwe spoke out against calls from the ruling Zanu–PF party for constitutional changes to allow President Emmerson Mnangagwa to extend his rule, *writes Marko Phiri*. Critics have called the move unconstitutional, with the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) adding their voice to the opposition last week.

Mnangagwa succeeded President Robert Mugabe's 37-year rule in 2017 and quickly promised to uphold the constitution. When he won the August 2023 elections, he pledged he would not seek re-election in 2028. However, his supporters have pushed for extension of his rule amid reports of succession rifts within the party's leadership.

The ZHOCD warned Mnangagwa not to become "a co-conspirator in overthrowing the constitution".

VIEW FROM ROME

Paddy Agnew

COMMUNICATIONS and communicators were much on the Vatican agenda towards the end of January. Not only did we have the Pope's message for the 59th World Day of Social Communications but, of course, the Holy Year saw its first set-piece occasion, when the Vatican staged the Jubilee of the World of Communications. When he arrived in a packed Paul VI Hall to address the pilgrim journalists (around 9,000 of them, from 38 different countries), Francis said: "Look, I have a nine-page address here in my hands. But to read nine pages right now, with my stomach grumbling [for lunch], would be a torture. I will give the speech to the prefect [Paolo Ruffini], and he can communicate it to you [online]."

Aware that his audience was largely composed of religious reporters and broadcasters working for church-funded websites, news agencies, TV and radio stations and magazines, the Pope added, "I am glad that we are having this Jubilee of the Communicators. Your work is one of construction, it builds up society, it builds up the Church, it keeps everything going, just as long as you tell the truth ..." He said that 2024 had been one of the most lethal years ever for journalists, with more than 120 being killed. He also recalled those journalists who were imprisoned "because they remained faithful to their profession of journalist ... because they had wanted to see with their own eyes and then had recounted what they had seen ... I call on whosoever has the power to ensure that all those unjustly arrested be released."

Earlier in the morning, the journalists had been addressed by Philippines reporter Maria Ressa, awarded the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize for her fearless defence of freedom of expression in her homeland, and by the New York-based Irish novelist, Colum McCann, author of *Let the Great World Spin*. He told the journalists, "We live in the most and least human of times" where "spectacular leaps forward in science, medicine, art and technology" sit awkwardly in a time also marked by "an epidemic of loneliness and isolation" in which "we refuse to listen to one another. Our curtains get drawn. Our windows get closed."

As humankind struggles to deal with "wars that threaten to annihilate us ... with the effects of climate change ... the great geographic pressures of migration" and other issues, "we live in broken times". McCann believes that journalism and storytelling can play a fundamental role in the repair process. "Storytelling is a call to action. Story-listening is a form of prayer ... The act of listening and talking bolsters our very notions of peace, democracy, equality and understanding. Stories can lead to action, which can lead to change ..." And when that happens, McCann concluded, journalists find themselves on a "pilgrimage of repair".

NO STORY IN recent times has generated more storytelling than the Israeli–Palestine conflict. In an interview in early January with Fabio Fazio on his TV chat show, *Che Tempo Che Fa* ("How the Weather Is"), Francis repeated the Vatican line on the conflict. Asked if he still believed in a two- state solution, he said: "The possibility exists, indeed, I would argue that it is the only solution ... We will have to convince a lot of people ... Peace is always better than war but peace requires a lot of courage."

Fazio asked the Pope: "You have called this jubilee, the Jubilee of Hope ... Do you think hope is missing from this world?"

"A bit, a bit," responded Francis, almost reluctantly.

Asked why he had wanted to open a fifth Holy Door in the high security Rebibbia Prison (the other four in Rome are in the Basilicas of St Peter, St John Lateran, St Mary Major and St Paul Outside the Walls), Francis answered: "I carry prisoners in my heart always ... In every parish where I have served, I would wash prisoners' feet every Easter Thursday. We can all fall, one fall can lead to another and on to a crime, something really ugly. And let us remember, many of those who are in prison are less guilty than those who are outside."

EDGAR BELTRÁN, the Vatican correspondent for the online Catholic outlet "The Pillar", has noticed that the prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, told an interviewer in Spain that "worse but less publicised" abuse cases than that of former Jesuit priest Marko Rupnik have come before the dicastery. Rupnik is a high-profile religious mosaics artist who has been accused of the spiritual, psychological and sexual abuse of some 30 adult women who belonged to a religious community he helped found in his native Slovenia the late 1980s and early 1990s.

"Worse cases"? Because Rupnik's abuse involved women rather than boys? Perhaps the cardinal could have chosen his words more carefully.

Paddy Agnew reports on Italian football for WorldSoccer and on the Vatican for the Irish Independent.

NEWS BRIEFING

FROM BRITAIN AND IRELAND

UK–Ukraine reading project

War Horse author Sir Michael Morpurgo and the Waterstones children's laureate Frank Cottrell-Boyce read to children at **All Saints Catholic Primary School** in Anfield, Liverpool as part of the launch of a government initiative linking schools in the United Kingdom and Ukraine to swap stories and run joint reading projects. The aim is to strengthen the relationship between the countries and boost education standards. The Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer joined in a video call with pupils from All Saints' partner school, No 219 in Kyiv. The programme, which is being delivered by the British Council in partnership with the National Literacy Trust, will match 50 schools in the UK with 50 schools in Ukraine.

Mabel, a care home resident with no family who asked for some birthday cards for her 103rd birthday, was sent more than 120 by **St Mary's Catholic Voluntary Academy** in New Mills, Derbyshire. After a public appeal, Mabel received more than 1,700 cards from the local community.

An employment tribunal has ruled in favour of St Anne's Catholic High School for Girls in north London which fired its **Christian pastoral manager** for publishing social media posts reflecting traditional views on marriage. Gozen Soydag had sued the school for wrongful dismissal, harassment, discrimination and breaches of human rights.

A Cardiff primary has become the first school in Wales to win a **Cafod LiveSimply** award. All 220 pupils at Christ the King took part in Cafod's Big Lent Walk and other activities including supporting a parish food bank.

PHOTO: STELLA MARIS

Catholic charity Stella Maris is calling for urgent action after record levels of ship abandonment have left thousands of seafarers stranded without pay, provisions or a way home. According to data from the International Maritime Organisation and International Labour Organisation, 310 ships were reported abandoned in 2024, an increase from 142 in 2023. In Kenya, abandoned seafarers faced little food and no wages. Stella Maris CEO Tim Hill said: "These figures ... represent lives upended and families pushed into financial hardship."

Anti-terrorism 'failures'

The daughter of the murdered Catholic MP Sir David Amess, **Katie Amess**, has told *The Times* that Prevent, the Home Office's anti-terrorism scheme, failed her father, killed in October 2021, and the victims of the Southport killings.

Arundel and Brighton Diocese has launched a **free primary school resource**, available on St Mary's University website.

The Holocaust Educational Trust commemorated Monday's **Holocaust Memorial Day,** marking 80 years since the end of the Holocaust, with a live webcast from All Saints Catholic College, west London.

Together for the Common Good has organised a public lecture on 19 February, "Staying Human: Reimagining the Spirit of the Commons" with Professor Luke Bretherton, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Christ Church, Oxford.

Archbishop of Southwark John Wilson's new book, ***The Romero Rosary***, is to be launched on 12 February.

One of Ireland's best-known abbeys, **Mount Melleray** in Co. Waterford, has closed its doors due to falling vocations and the advanced age of its monks. Last November, monks in three Cistercian communities agreed to merge into "Our Lady of Silence" Abbey at Roscrea.

In a message for **World Day for Social Communications** Archbishop of Armagh Eamon Martin encouraged journalists across Ireland to consider publishing articles offering hope and positivity.

Compiled by **Ruth Gledhill**, **Bess Twiston Davies**, **Tabitha Smith**, **Ellen Teague** and **Sarah Mac Donald**.

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PHOTO: YOUTUBE

PERSON IN THE NEWS

Fr John Heneghan of St Patrick's Church, Southport, on the sentencing to 52 years in jail of murderer Axel Rudakubana: "Today is very painful. The families are ... foremost in our minds."

ENGLAND, WALES AND SCOTLAND / 'Hopeful' rise still falls short of pre-Covid tally

Sunday Mass-goer numbers increase by 50,000 in a year

BESS TWISTON DAVIES

THE NUMBER of Catholics attending Mass in England and Wales shot up by roughly 50,000 in 2023.

The latest figures from the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales reveal that, while 503,308 attended Mass in 2022, 554,913 did so in 2023.

A spokesman for the bishops' conference said: "We can't vouch for the total accuracy of this figure, and we expect it to be a slight underestimate as some parishes may not have given their figures when their diocese requested."

Stephen Bullivant, professor of theology and the sociology of religion at St Mary's University, Twickenham, said he was "quietly hopeful" about the data.

"That's because I would have suspected that anyone coming back to church post-Covid would already have returned," explained Bullivant, who is also director of the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society.

The increase still falls short of the pre-Covid numbers. In 2019, according to the bishops' conference, 701,902 people attended Sunday Mass. Bullivant estimated that "around two-thirds" of the numbers of Mass-goers pre-pandemic had returned by 2022, when 389,960 people were registered as attending Mass in England and Wales.

Bullivant told *The Tablet*: "My understanding talking to parish priests is that [during Covid] we lost a lot of families." He added: "Almost every year since the 1960s, the number of people dying or leaving has outweighed numbers of new people joining the Church. What I suspect with the extra 50,000 is the influx of new people joining is bigger for the first time than numbers leaving."

A similar trend has been found in Scotland. Data shows that 95,029 people attended Sunday Mass in Scotland in 2023, compared to 89,420 in 2022.

Like England, Mass attendance in Scotland has not returned to pre-Covid levels: 127,003 Scots attended Sunday Mass in 2019. Nevertheless, 647,600 people attended Sunday Mass in Britain in 2023, and 592,428 in 2022.

A new poll, meanwhile, shows that Generation Z – those aged 18 to 24 – are half as likely to describe themselves as atheist as 45- to 60-year-olds. Sixty-two per cent of Gen Z youth questioned by OnePoll said they were "very" or "fairly" spiritual.

Bullivant said: "We are getting to a point where it is increasingly common to have been brought up without any religion." He said young people today might "have to go back to their great-grandma" to find someone "conventionally religious" in their family. So Gen Z could encounter faith "as something new and exciting".

Aid to Church in Need conference first for Scotland

BISHOPS FROM the Holy Land and Nigeria are among the speakers scheduled to speak at a conference in Scotland on the suffering and persecution of Christians, *writes Ruth Gledhill*.

Aid to the Church in Need is organising the biggest event for the Church in Scotland this year, the Courage to be Catholic Conference, featuring speakers including a bishop from the Holy Land, a bishop from Nigeria and the head of Divine Renovation UK.

Bishop William Shomali, patriarchal vicar for Jerusalem and Palestine, will share what life is like for the suffering Christians in the Holy Land along with a message from the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem.

Bishop Wilfred Anagbe, Diocese of Makurdi, Nigeria, will give testimony on the persecution of Christians in one of the fastest-growing Catholic countries in the world. Dr Hannah Vaughan-Spruce, executive director of global mission Divine Renovation UK, will deliver a talk, "Why Catholics leave and how they might return", focusing on the need for evangelisation.

The aim is to foster collaboration among Church organisations and charities and provide a platform for laity to live their faith "more boldly", supporting one another in the Jubilee Year of Hope.

William More, manager of operations for Aid to the Church in Need Scotland, said: "We are delighted to be hosting the first ACN conference in Scotland and we believe it to be the first of its kind for the Church here.

"It's exciting to be able to bring such inspiring and varied speakers to Scotland and we believe this is a fantastic opportunity for the laity and Church to come together."

Tickets can be purchased via TryBooking.

Communities who help care for the earth 'must be key part of parish life'

COMMUNITIES OF faith who will bring about change and resolve to care for the earth are needed to help secure the future, Bishop of Kilmore Martin Hayes told 140 people who attended "Seeds of Hope: Returning Biodiversity to our Parishes", a conference in Mallow, Co. Cork last weekend, *writes Sarah Mac Donald*.

Bishop Hayes, who is Laudato Si' coordinator for the Irish bishops, acknowledged to the conference's delegates, which included five bishops, that listening to the facts about the global devastation of biodiversity can be "overwhelming".

"We must act as communities of faith and make care of Creation a key element of our activities as parishes," he said. The tenth anniversary of *Laudato Si'* offers faith communities the opportunity to celebrate the invitation it places before us, he said. "It is calling for an ecological conversion, [one] to really embrace our Christian spirituality." He noted that this was a strong theme that emerged in the recent Synod on Synodality in Rome last October.

Referring to Pope Francis' writings on the spirituality of St Francis of Assisi and its inspiration for the encyclical, he said the Pontiff underlines the need to acknowledge the harm we have caused to our environment and that acting individually is not enough. "We need a community conversion."

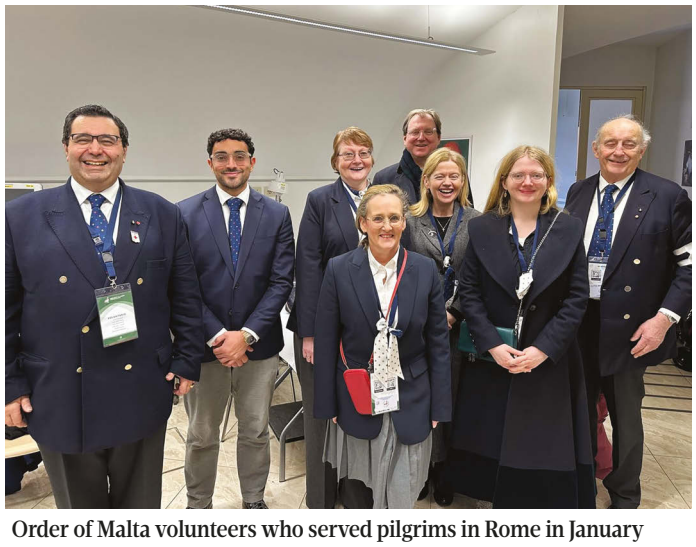
Bishop Hayes highlighted how 13 Irish dioceses and many Irish religious orders have divested from the fossil fuel industry in recent years. The bishops' initiative on returning 30 per cent of parish grounds to nature by 2030, inspired by Columban Fr Seán McDonagh, has secured the support of the Irish Heritage Council.

BRITAIN / ROME / Waiting list for volunteers keen to join teams aiding Jubilee Year pilgrims

Queue to help Order of Malta

BESS TWISTON DAVIES

PHOTO: THE ORDER OF MALTA IN BRITAIN



Order of Malta volunteers who served pilgrims in Rome in January

BRITONS ARE queuing up to volunteer for Order of Malta teams helping jubilee pilgrims in Rome.

"British volunteer places were immediately filled – there's a waiting list now," said Philippa Leslie, director of communications for the Order of Malta in Britain.

In January, the Order of Malta in Great Britain dispatched four teams of volunteers to aid pilgrims visiting St Peter's and four other Roman basilicas.

International Order of Malta teams including doctors, nurses and volunteers qualified to give first aid serve each basilica from 7.30 a.m. to 7.30 p.m.

Three more teams of British volunteers, who do not need to be members of the Order of Malta, will go to Rome in July and another three next October.

Each volunteer is vetted by the Order in Britain and Rome, "and needs to have experience of crowd situations", said Leslie.

Last week 5,000 people attended a Mass at St Paul's Outside the Walls. Major James Casha, British first aid lead on the Order of Malta team said: "Order of Malta teams were on duty there and a couple of people fell over and had to be taken to hospital."

Leslie said volunteering for the jubilee was "uplifting and inspiring". She added: "The Order of Malta has a hospitaller tradition. This is part of that."

The first teams reported the kindness they had experienced from the Carabinieri providing security for the jubilee.

"Some gave the first team tickets to the Pope's Wednesday audience," said Leslie.

Founded in Britain in 1875, the British Association of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta has two auxiliary bodies, the Order of Malta Volunteers and the Companions of Malta. As part of the Order of St John Care Trust, it helps run homes for the aged in England. Since 1950 the Order of Malta has operated a daily first aid post in St Peter's Square.

Vatican's Commission on Women and the Diaconate due to meet in Rome

MEMBERS OF the Vatican's Second Commission on Women and the Diaconate are due to meet in Rome next week to consider the submissions of synod members on this topic, writes *Sarah Mac Donald*.

The Tablet understands that commission members will meet between 3 and 7 February, although a spokesman for the Vatican failed to respond to questions about the meeting.

The topic of women deacons was one of the "hot button" issues during the first synod gathering in 2023. Many of the Synod on Synodality delegates and those consulted during the synodal process believe the diaconate should be open to women as a sacramental ministry. However, in May 2024, Pope Francis took the issue of women deacons off the synod discussion table and assigned it to a study group.

One of those due to attend next week's meeting is Deacon Dominic Cerrato, Director of the Office for the Diaconate of the Diocese of Joliet. He did not respond to a question over whether there is room within a more synodal Church to see women incorporated into the diaconate on a more graduated basis, starting in those places that need women deacons and ask for them. In the past Deacon Cerrato has argued that women deacons in the early Church were not ordained and were not equal to male deacons.

In a recent article on women and the diaconate for OSV News he said diaconal ordination is a question of doctrine.

This is a minority view among scholars, most of whom point out that there is no doctrine regarding women deacons but rather there is significant historical evidence to support the ordination of women as deacons.

Another member of the Second Commission, Dr Caroline Farey, Diocesan Mission Catechist for the Diocese of Shrewsbury, and former adjunct professor at Franciscan University, Steubenville, declined to comment to *The Tablet*, saying "the work of the Commission is for the Holy Father not for the public".

Last October Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith announced that the Second Commission, appointed in 2020 to study the female diaconate, would resume its work.

'Spread message of the Synod on Synodality'

A PRIORITY for those interested in the Synod on Synodality is "getting the message out" that the Church is "trying to move into a different way of living and operating", Bishop Brendan Leahy of Limerick has said, writes *Sarah Mac Donald*.

Speaking at *The Tablet* webinar, "How to receive the Synod's conclusion in our parishes and dioceses", Bishop Leahy said: "We really need to give a huge priority to communicating the message."

Drawing on his experience of attending the two synod gatherings in Rome on behalf of the Irish Bishops he admitted that "a minority of a minority of a minority" had ultimately engaged directly in the synod.

"But that doesn't mean that the message shouldn't go out to the whole Church," he said.

On his return from the Synod, the Bishop of Limerick wrote a letter to his diocese and put together a four-page leaflet to highlight some of the key points of the synod message. He also made video clips and wrote articles. Parish bulletins and newsletters, the bishop said, should be used and priests should be encouraged to preach about the Synod and be given resources to enable that.

Another speaker, Austen Ivereigh, commentator and biographer of Pope Francis, noted that Cardinal Mario Grech had said that bishops have the responsibility to ensure that the results of the synod process are accepted and implemented in the daily life of their local churches. "I found the comment interesting because, in fact, since the Synod concluded in October, there has been little, I would say really nothing from the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales on this." In Dr Ivereigh's opinion, implementing the Synod is about a way of being in our parishes, dioceses and deaneries, which starts with a lot of patient listening, consultation and using the "Conversation in the Spirit" method.

Sealed with a kiss

GUY CONSOLMAGNO

RESULTS OF A computer model published last month suggest an intriguing evolution for the dwarf planets Pluto and Charon. And the work itself is a model of how astronomical models are used.

Back in 1978, astronomers Jim Christy and Robert Harrington were photographing Pluto to improve its orbit when they noticed a small "lump" whose position appeared to circle around the fuzzy dot that was Pluto in their images. They correctly deduced that this was in fact a large moon orbiting close to Pluto, and they named it Charon after the ferryman of the underworld. Its orbit soon showed that Pluto was far less massive than originally assumed; indeed, Pluto turns out to be much smaller than Earth's Moon.

Further observations (eventually with the Hubble space telescope and finally with Nasa's New Horizons spacecraft) showed that Charon was almost as large as Pluto, and the two orbit face to face, one side of each body always facing the same side of the other body. But then the instruments on New Horizons measured the chemical composition of each body, and found that they are made of very different sorts of material. Pluto is rich in nitrogen ice; Charon is covered with water and organic ices.

The only comparable pair in our solar system, in terms of relative sizes, is the Earth and its Moon. But we know that both our planet and its companion are chemically very similar. Our best guess is

Things we think are important may turn out not to matter nearly as much as the things we tend to neglect

that early in the history of the solar system, something big hit the proto-Earth and the resulting splash (from both bodies) was mixed into today's Earth and Moon. That couldn't have happened to Pluto and Charon, given their chemical differences.

Would it be possible that two different bodies forming out beyond Neptune, made in different places of different materials, could encounter each other and become locked together like Pluto and Charon? Time for a model, some fancy computer calculations. And at first, the answer appeared to be, No, that wouldn't work. Two bodies that close would pull each other apart, it seemed.

But that model was based on models of the Earth and Moon, which are big enough that the strength of their mutual gravitational pulls overwhelms the strength of the rocks they're made from. However, in a recent paper, Adeene Denton and her colleagues showed that this wouldn't be the case for tiny Pluto and Charon. Instead, they calculate that the two bodies could actually remain rigid, intact, during a glancing collision where they momentarily "kissed" before slowly moving apart. With the right conditions, they could evolve into the orbits we see today. With the right conditions. More models. We love to think that our computer calculations can reproduce what actually goes on in nature, but in truth we know that we're always just approximating the truth.

The real benefit of scientific models is not so much that they give us perfect descriptions of reality, but rather that when we assemble all the different ideas of what might have happened, translated into maths and from there into computer codes, we can see which of the different aspects of the problem turn out to be crucial (as in, the strength of the ices in Pluto and Charon) and which don't matter so much. It's a good lesson for anyone trying to figure out how God relates to us. Things we think are important may turn out not to matter nearly as much as the things we tend to neglect.

Guy Consolmagno SJ is director of the Vatican Observatory.

Glimpses of Eden

JONATHAN TULLOCH

ONE OF MY favourite places for experiencing wildlife is the writing desk. I love it in spring and summer when red mason bees fly in to join me, or when I'm summoned to the window by birdsong. A cranefly dancing round the lightshade is always a great autumn entertainment. Winter too is not without its delights. If I look up now and crane my neck, I can see the molehills dotting the sheepfold. This field, which lies between our house and the churchyard, seems as peaceful as any corner of Britain and Ireland, yet underneath the

tranquil sod, a great subterranean engineering project is constantly under way.

This two-acre sheepfold may well conceal a few kilometres of mole tunnels, forming the territories of perhaps three moles. A quick count from my desk reveals that there are five extra heaps of black soil this morning. The little velveteen miners have been busy – moles are capable of excavating 30 metres of tunnel in a single night. The molehills we see are the spoil heaps from the shallower, hunting burrows: those temporary shafts that the moles dig at a depth of just a few centimetres, eating the worms they encounter. The animal's living quarters are more permanent and lie as much as a metre below the ground.

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