

The NET

Sharing fruits of faith in Derry Diocese

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**Wishing all a blessed
Christmas celebration**

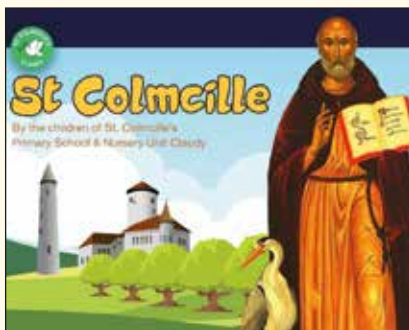
See
inside...



WYD at Home - Termonbacca



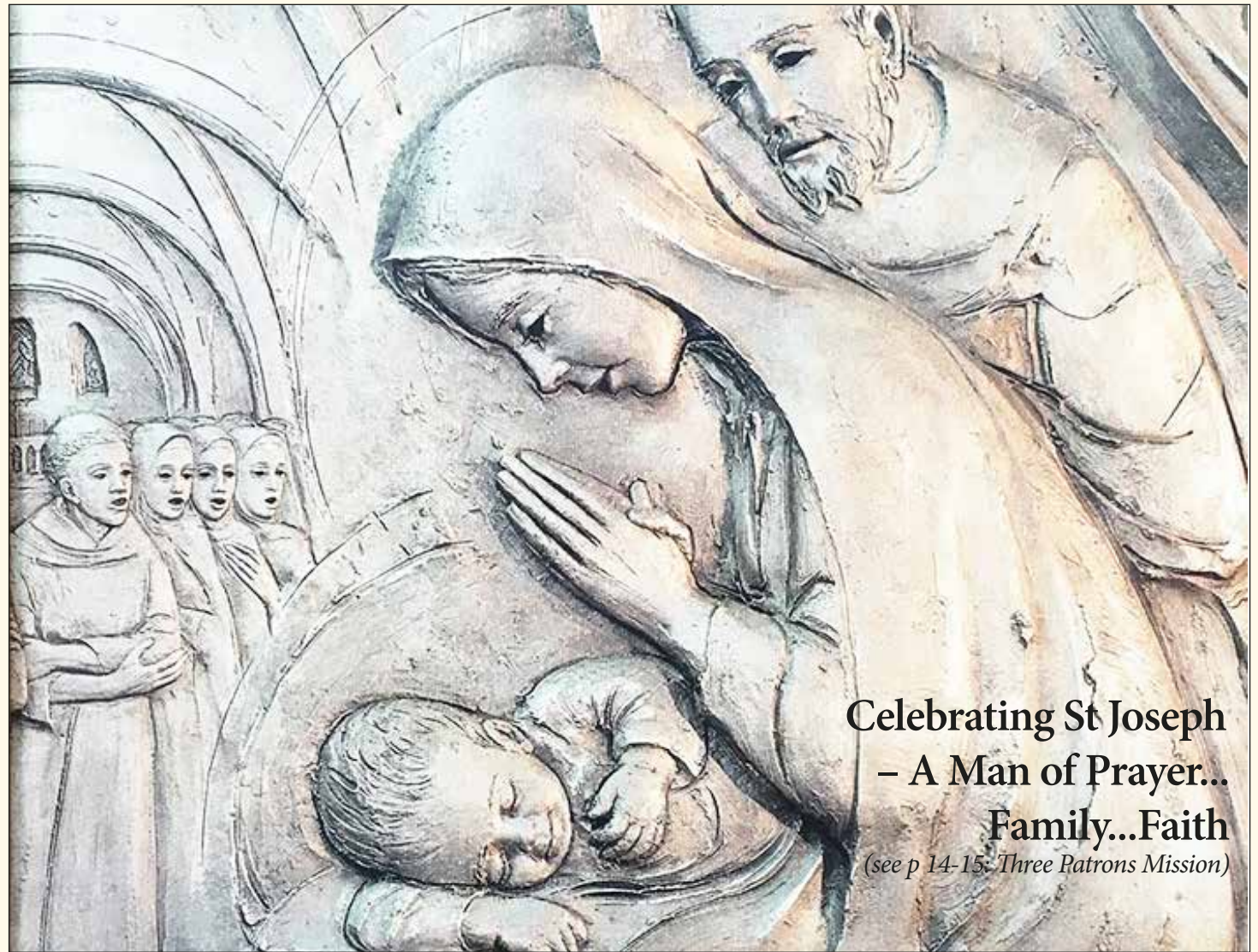
Bishop visits Hollybush PS - Culmore



Colmcille Digital Book - Claudy



St Joseph Mission - Three Patrons



'Christmas Night' - Vision of St Clare



Charity Pedal Power - Waterside



Colmcille Anniversary Celebration - Long Tower



Spirit of Christmas - Steelstown PS

**Celebrating St Joseph
– A Man of Prayer...
Family...Faith**
(see p 14-15: Three Patrons Mission)

People in focus



Lauren Campbell - Galliagh



Luke Kelly - St Eugene's JPPII



Marguerite Hamilton
- Columba Community



Siobhan Sweeney - Cappagh



The late Fr James McKee
- Glenullin

Also featuring: Young Writers section; Pope John Paul II Award update; Steelstown & Culmore promote Gifts of Love; Children in Crossfire fundraisers; Gifting Talents to Parish Family feature; Syro-Malabar Bishop on Derry visit; Divine Child Novena; Children's Catechism, Quiz and much more...

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Reflecting on the Pope's prayer intention for December – "Let us pray for catechists, summoned to announce the word of God: may they be witnesses, with courage and creativity and in the power of the Holy Spirit" – Bishop Donal writes...

I pray this diocese can develop a 'ministry-rich' way of being Church



Bishop Donal

WE talk about 'handing on the faith'. An older generation remembers faith being handed on by being caught rather than taught. We learned from family, society and school – all of whom were echoing the same message.

In a much more secular age, many families are not sure what values they hand on. And society is very fragmented. The result is that schools are expected to hand on everything from moral and civic values to relationships education and healthy eating. And then schools get blamed for failing to replace the role that society, family and parish are often not playing.

In that changed context, in May 2021, Pope Francis reinstated the lay ministry of Catechist. Unless parish communities are actively offering 'catechesis' to its members, they will not grow in faith together. Catechesis will not happen nowadays unless it is taken on as a conscious task.

A Catechist is someone who is trained and commissioned to help others develop in their

faith journey. That is not an easy task. And that is why Pope Francis prays that they can exercise that ministry as courageous, creative witnesses, led by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Prayer intention for December speaks of announcing the 'Word of God'. In Christian teaching that phrase has two meanings. There is the Word of God in the scriptures. That Word calls people to believe, to learn about their faith and respond.

But the first meaning of the 'Word of God' refers to Jesus. 'In the beginning was the Word...the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (St John's Gospel, Chapter 1). The catechist does not just offer words about Jesus. The catechist has the task of inviting people to meet Jesus,

the Word made flesh.

In 1964, the Second Vatican Council published a document on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum DV). That document states quite clearly, 'Christianity is not a religion of the book but a religion of the word of God... the incarnate and living Word' (DV10). Jesus, the Word of God was revealed before the Gospels of the New Testament were written.

Thus, all catechesis is directed, not merely at passing on Christian teaching but at what St Paul called 'the obedience of faith' (Romans 16:16). Catechesis is about formation and not just about information.

The Pope's intention also uses an interesting phrase. It says that catechists are 'summoned to announce the Word of God'. A ministry in the Church is

not merely a career choice. Those who teach in the name of the Church have a summons, a vocation, a calling to serve God and the mission of the Church. There has to be discernment on the part of the local diocese to discern who is called to this ministry.

I hope and pray that this diocese can develop a 'ministry-rich' way of being Church, where the lay ministry of Catechist can respond to the needs of a missionary church and help bring the love and mercy of God to our time and our place.

Pope establishes ministry of catechist - Vatican News Apostolic Letter issued "Motu Proprio" by the Supreme Pontiff Francis "Antiquum ministerium" (10 May 2021) | Francis (vatican.va)

Live Advent journeying in hope

ADVENT is my favourite time of the year. I love the sense of contrast, the call to be quiet amid the activity that the lead up to Christmas brings, no matter how well prepared I try to be. I love the invitation to take time and journey into the deep, powerful mystery that is Christmas.

Every year, I look for something new to read, some new insight that will lead me deeper into prayer, which will help me to be more reflective and will encourage me to reach out to others.

I usually come back to the basic teaching that Advent means 'Coming' – the coming of Jesus into human history two thousand years ago, the coming of Jesus into my heart in the present and the coming of Jesus in the world to come. Christ yesterday, today and forever.

Let's consider for a moment the beautiful words of John 1: "And the Word became flesh

and lived among us, and we have seen his glory."

Imagine God choosing to come among us. Imagine God choosing to be born in a time and place of conflict, choosing poverty and uncertainty, circumstances that were far from ideal but He chose them. Perhaps our Advent reflection will focus on what is he teaching us? What has to happen in my heart so that I may accept the invitation that this teaching gives? The invitation to make space for the God who is always calling, who is always waiting, who is always hoping that I will respond. What an awesome responsibility it is when we respond "Yes" to the invitation.

Pope Francis wrote, "The Word brings God's breath into the world. It infuses the heart with the warmth of the Lord."

Isn't that a beautiful meditation? As I read the comforting, challenging Advent scriptures, I believe my

heart will be warmed again. This warmth, this experience of the love and mercy of God which is available to each one of us will help us to be witnesses of this love to others. God's generous giving draws out a generosity in us, particularly at Christmas, and the more we receive this love that heals and frees us, the more we realise His many blessings in our lives, the more we want to give to others, the more we want to see them blessed.

Perhaps this Advent, like Mary, we will undertake a difficult journey, the journey to the hill country to visit Elizabeth. Perhaps our journey will help us to re-connect with family or friends who would appreciate our presence.

Perhaps our journey will remind us that God has a plan for our lives. Our prayer in Advent, and the reflection that brings us closer to God, will allow the Holy Spirit to reveal

what this plan is; what we are to do and where we are to serve. The Holy Spirit will help us to wait with expectation and hope.

A friend recently reminded me of one of our Christmas liturgies in Thornhill College when, in our school of 1,400 girls, we had a 5-year-old child come to light the candles on the Advent wreath. Her parents had waited 11 years for this precious gift of God. As her story was told, we entered into the joy that is so much part of Advent waiting.

We believe in the God who is "waiting to be gracious to us," as we journey in surrender, seeking to detach ourselves from the things that block our relationship with God and others.

My encouragement to myself and to you is to live Advent, staying awake and watchful, journeying in hope, open to the coming of the Christ child in our hearts this Christmas



Marguerite Hamilton, Columba Community.

The ministry of

The NET

was dedicated to Our

Lady, through the

intercession of

St Maximilian Kolbe, in

a ceremony celebrated by

Bishop Donal McKeown

on August 14, 2019.



The NET

Sharing the fruits of the faith in the Derry Diocese

Contacting us:

If you have a story that you would like to share or an event you would like covered by The Net, just drop an email to

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Commending creativity of Y7 children in St Colmcille’s Primary School & Nursery Unit, Claudy, in honouring their school’s patron saint in this special year, principal, Mr Michael O’Kane is delighted to report on...

International praise for Claudy children’s digital book on St Colmcille



THE year 2021 has been a celebration of the 1500th anniversary of the birth of St Colmcille and the children of St Colmcille’s, in Claudy, have written their own digital book about the life of the saint.

Under the direction of the Y7 staff, Mrs Moira O’Kane, Mr Darragh McCloskey and Ms

Theresa Kidd, the Y7 children decided to include their own artwork, videos and interviews in the digital book, which has given a rich collection of evidence and stories of the life of St Colmcille and his importance to the school, county and country.

The children had the opportunity to interview the local

parish priest, Fr David O’Kane, and this video interview is available in the book.

They also added their own innovative touches to the book, including their own interpretations of what 6th Century monasteries would have been like by building them in Minecraft.

A real highlight of the book is

a recording of the school hymn, ‘Dove of the Church’, sung by the children and led by Mrs Kellie McLaughlin and Mr Kelan Galligan.

Throughout the book, readers will be able to learn all about the life of St Colmcille, listen to the children’s interpretation of the stories of the Saint, and learn about

the places in Co Derry named after him.

The children in Y7 in St Colmcille can be considered international authors, as the book has been published on the Apple Books Store and can be downloaded for free on any Apple device around the world.

Readers from as far away as

California, South Africa, Australia and Rome have got in touch with the school and have congratulated the children on this superb project.

It has left a lasting digital record of the life of St Colmcille, told through the medium of text, video and music, that can be accessed around the world.

Well done children!

Helping children thrive in the midst of life’s storms...

Hollybush PS welcomes Bishop Donal for blessing

THE pupils and staff of Hollybush Primary & Nursery School, at Culmore, outside Derry, had a warm welcome for Bishop Donal when he arrived for a visit in the midst of Storm Barra, after celebrating Mass in the Long Tower for the close of the year marking the 1500th anniversary of the birth of St Columba.

The newly appointed principal, Mrs Teresa Duggan, who hails from the Parish of Aghyaran, had invited the Bishop to come along and bless the school’s Nursery Unit and ICT Suite, where he got an opportunity to view the great work

the children had been doing to celebrate the birth of Derry’s Patron Saint 1500 years ago.

The girls and boys were delighted to share their knowledge of Columba, and Bishop Donal was impressed by the digital production they had created of the Saint’s life through a schools’ project with Derry’s Nerve Centre.

Bishop Donal also enjoyed a musical reception from the School Choir, who sang a beautiful hymn calling on the Holy Spirit called ‘Gather Round’, which was particularly fitting with the Diocese embarking on the Church’s Synodal

Pathway, hoping and praying to be guided by the Holy Spirit. They also sang ‘This Little Light of Mine’ and ‘Away in a Manger’.

The occasion saw the launch of the School’s new prospectus too, with Mrs Duggan telling the Bishop that the parents and teachers in Hollybush very much work together in nurturing and teaching the children.

Aiming to help pupils develop a love of learning, a respect for all and a desire to realise their full potential, the Hollybush family works to achieve this within a Catholic centered, inclusive and

safe environment, through a combination of traditional and innovative teaching and learning methods.

Telling ‘The Net’ that it had been a pleasure to be in Hollybush PS for a time of prayer in their refurbished Nursery Unit and Computer Suite, and to spend time with the

staff, Bishop Donal remarked: “Education is so much more than the content of classes. Hollybush is creating a community where pupils of all ages feel welcome - and where all the staff work together to help children thrive.

“The faith dimension of Catholic education encourages the children

to believe that God has a dream for each of them”.



Derry youth enjoy World Youth Day at Home

THE Derry Diocese held a 'World Youth Day at Home' on the Feast of Christ The King in the Carmelite Retreat Centre at Termonbacca, which was attended by 30 young people led by Diocesan Youth Coordinator, Lizzie Rea and a team of volunteers.

Commenting on what was Derry Diocesan Youth Ministry's first face-to-face event since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Lizzie told 'The Net' that she was delighted with the response from the young people and their willingness to get involved.

"The day was one that lifted my spirits after a long two years on online ministry, but I know that without that we wouldn't have got the same level of engagement," she said, adding: "I would like to thank all the leaders who came to help and all who were involved on the day, but a special thanks to all the young people who attended".

The focus of the day was looking forward to the next World Youth Day with the Pope, which will be held in Lisbon in 2023, and some discussion around the synodal journey that the Church is embarking upon.

As well as the talks and discussion, there was a quiz and outdoor scavenger hunt, and the

day came to a close with Mass celebrated by Bishop Donal, followed by lunch.

Saying afterwards that it had been "very encouraging to be with young people and those who walk them", Bishop Donal added: "They have both an enthusiasm and a scepticism, the hunger to hope along with the fear of being disillusioned. My dream is that we can gather a group of young disciples who will walk together, learning to love the Lord and to build his Kingdom together."

"World Youth Day in Lisbon, on August 1-6, 2023, is about 600 days away. It gives us a goal for the next two years. The theme is 'Mary arose and went with haste' (Luke 1:39). It would be great if we can journey with these young people, preparing for Lisbon, taking part in the synodal pathway in Ireland and then journeying on after Lisbon with that haste, that urgency of Mary. God wants us to be involved in the church's mission, starting now!"

He continued: "The themes of our Diocesan Plan - and the theme of the Synod of Bishops for 2023 - give us a structure. We want to build community, develop participation and growth in faith - and then take up the mission of making Jesus known and loved."

"And then 'people will see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.'" (Matthew 5:16)

Celebrating Mass with the young people, Bishop Donal spoke to them about the synodal process that the Church is undertaking, referring to the encounter of Jesus and two disciples on the road to Emmaus on the day of His Resurrection.

"The first thing that Jesus did was to listen to their disappointment," he remarked, adding: "The first stage of our synodal journey is to take people seriously."

"Jesus takes us where we are. He wants to be with you on your journey, whether it is in the Church or away from the Church."

Bishop Donal continued: "Pope Francis wants to hear from people who are not going to Church, who have been hurt by the Church... how they see the Church. And he also wants to hear from people who are not part of the Catholic Church."

"Synodality," he explained, "is not about arguing our cause or corner, but about being open to listen...to listen to the Holy Spirit, to be true to ourselves and not just to what everybody else is saying, to have high principles, to have courage to speak the truth, even if it is uncomfortable, and never



allow the crowd to railroad you into anything that you are not happy with".

Bishop Donal concluded with a quote from a homily Pope Francis had given to young people gathered in Rome: "You have been entrusted with an exciting but also challenging task: to stand tall while everything around us seems to be collapsing; to be sentinels prepared to see

the light in night visions; to be builders amid the many ruins of today's world; to be capable of dreaming. This is crucial: a young person unable to dream, has sadly become old before their time! To be capable of dreaming, because this is what people who dream do: they do not remain in the darkness, but light a candle, a flame of hope that announces the coming of the dawn. Dream,

make haste, and look to the future with courage". (Pope Francis <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211121-omelia-cristore-delluniverso.html>)

"Pope Francis wants us to start this journey," he added, "and, please God, we can do that here and go to World Youth Day in Lisbon in 2023".



Prayer for the Synod

*We stand before You, Holy Spirit,
as we gather together in Your name.
With You alone to guide us,
make Yourself at home in our hearts;
Teach us the way we must go
and how we are to pursue it.
We are weak and sinful;
do not let us promote disorder.
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.
Let us find in You our unity so that we may journey
together to eternal life
and not stray from the way of truth and what is right.
All this we ask of You, who are at work in every place
and time,
in the communion of the Father and the Son, forever
and ever.
Amen.*



Explaining that word 'synod' - Lizzie

THE entire Catholic Church is called to participate in the upcoming Synod of Bishops, which is entitled: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission."

'Synod' is a Greek word (synodos) meaning a meeting or assembly. The two Greek words that make up Synod are 'syn', meaning 'together', and 'hodos', meaning 'way' or 'journey'. Pope Francis has called the entire People of God to journey together!

This Synod is not just another meeting with oral presentations and written reports. This Synod is a process of journeying together. As the Church, we will listen to each other, dialogue with each other, pray together, discern together and make decisions together for the purpose of

proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus to the world.

The synod is a time for Pope Francis and other church leaders to hear what people in the Church like, what they find helps them, but also how their experience has been of the Church and their faith. Not a media experience but your own personal experience.

Around this diocese, we will have lots of different conversations and then we put it all together to send to a national forum, where all the Diocesan responses will be combined and sent off to the Vatican.

But this is just the start; we then have a path way for a national synod, where we will all express how it feels to be part of the Church in Ireland.



Lizzie shared some history of World Youth Day with the young people...

World Youth Day – an experience of the universality of the Catholic Church



Lizzie Rea, Diocesan Youth Coordinator, with Fabienne McCormack, Dungiven.

WORLD Youth Day is a worldwide encounter with the Pope, celebrated about every three years in a different country. The most recent WYD was celebrated in Panama City, Panamá, from January 22-27, in 2019, and the next will be held in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2023.

WYD is open to all young people who want to take part in a festive encounter centred on Jesus Christ together with their peers. This event is an opportunity to personally experience the universality of the Catholic Church, and to share with the whole world the hope

of many young people who are committing their lives to Christ and His Church.

It is a unique way to deepen your faith and grow closer to Christ, through prayer and the sacraments, together with hundreds of thousands of other young people who share your interests and ambitions.

Pope John Paul II announced the institution of World Youth Day on December 20, 1985, and the first official WYD was held in 1986.

He told the 800,000 pilgrims gathered with him in Toronto, the last international WYD at

which he was present: “When, back in 1985, I wanted to start the World Youth Days, I imagined a powerful moment in which the young people of the world could meet Christ, who is eternally young, and could learn from Him how to be bearers of the Gospel to other young people. This evening, together with you, I praise God and give thanks to Him for the gift bestowed on the Church through the World Youth Days. Millions of young people have taken part, and as a result have become better and more committed Christian witnesses.”

At the end of Mass on the Solemnity of Christ the King on 22 November 2020, Pope Francis called for a re-launch of the celebration of WYD in the particular Churches. He announced that this celebration, which has been traditionally held on Palm Sunday, was to be held on the Sunday of the Solemnity of Christ the King, starting in 2021.

The institution of World Youth Day was certainly the result of great prophetic insight on the part of St John Paul II. He explained the reasons for his decision as follows: “All young people must feel that they are cared for by the Church. Therefore, may the entire Church on a worldwide level, in union with the Successor of Peter, be more and more committed to young people, to their concerns and worries and to their aspirations and hopes, so as to meet their expectations by

communicating the certainty that is Christ, the Truth that is Christ, the love that is Christ...”

Pope Benedict XVI took up the baton from his predecessor. On various occasions he stressed that these events are a providential gift for the Church. He described them as “a remedy against faith fatigue”, “a new, more youthful form of Christianity” and “new evangelisation put into practice”.

In Pope Francis’ view too, World Youth Day provides an extraordinarily powerful missionary thrust for the whole Church and, in particular, for the younger generations. Just a few months after his election, Pope Francis inaugurated his pontificate with WYD in Rio de Janeiro in July 2013, at the end of which he said that WYD “was a new stage on the pilgrimage of youth crossing the continents bearing the Cross of Christ”.

He went on to say that “we must never forget that World Youth Days are not ‘firework displays’, flashes of enthusiasm that are an end in themselves; they are the stages of a long journey, begun in 1985 at the initiative of Pope John Paul II”.

He also clarified a central point: “Let us always remember: young people do not follow the Pope, they follow Jesus Christ, bearing his Cross. And the Pope guides them and accompanies them on this journey of faith and hope”.

WYD brought me back to practising my faith – Fabienne McCormack



Fabienne McCormack, Dungiven, who shared her World Youth Day experience.

DURING a lively interview session, 25-year-old Fabienne McCormack, who lives in Dungiven, shared her experience of attending the World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland, along with a group from the Derry Diocese in 2016.

When asked what had made her sign up for the event, Fabienne recalled getting a message from her father, while she was at university in Liverpool, asking her if she would like to go to World Youth Day.

Saying that her brother, James, had also attended, she added: “I didn’t really know anyone that was going apart from my brother, but I got to know people...and my brother got a girlfriend out of it! We made great friends there.”

“I had rolled my eyes when I first heard about World Youth Day, but I really enjoyed it. We stayed in groups of three or four in host houses and visited places associated with Pope John Paul II. There were also times of catechesis and we got the opportunity to go to Confession, and there were times of entertainment.

“We got the opportunity to

speak to other young people our age from Poland and other countries, like Spain and America. It was class and really good fun”.

Recalling the Walking Pilgrimage to the Vigil Site, the day before the closing ceremony, Fabienne said: “We walked for a long distance to a site where we camped out. It wasn’t the best night’s sleep but it was really good. We had a Mass with candles and stayed up for a long time”.

She added: “I can’t remember anything bad about it. I loved it. We were with people our own age and it was also like a holiday. Before going to World Youth Day, I was a bit lost with regards to my faith. I would have been enjoying uni life, but my experience at World Youth Day brought me back to practising my faith”.



Celebrating Mass at close of year marking 1500th anniversary of birth of St Columba, who built communities in monasteries that became “powerhouses of renewal and energy”, Bishop Donal stated...

Church renewal needs communities seeking to let God lead them

ST Columba's Church, Long Tower was the setting for the celebration of Mass by Bishop Donal to mark the end of the year celebrating the 1500th anniversary of the Derry Patron Saint's birth.

While the congregation in the Church was much smaller than the norm before Covid, for Long Tower ceremonies celebrating the beloved Dove of the Church, there were plenty viewing through the webcam and the talented Long Tower Folk Group members were there to help raise the praise powerfully heavenward.

Amongst the congregation were representatives of the primary and post primary schools, from within the Derry and Raphoe Dioceses, which had submitted a Colmcille Project in the Schools' Competition to commemorate this special anniversary of the Saint's birth, with the winners announced and prizes presented after the ceremony.

The special occasion was also marked by the Vatican, with its Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin sending a message from Pope Francis to Bishop Donal, with his “good wishes to those assembled for the celebration”.

Referring to the Holy Father's message in his homily, Bishop Donal noted his mention of Columba's “missionary zeal and pastoral fervour”.

Commenting on this, Bishop

Donal said: “Columba was a passionate man, and every day he had a passion for one thing. He was not just seeking to increase his influence and power. He wanted to spend his life bringing light and hope into people's lives. That is not easy”.

Highlighting the great need for this in our time, when some will enjoy much over Christmas while others will be “weighed down by illness, financial worries and a lack of joy”, he remarked: “Plenty of adults and children are dreading Christmas because they don't have enough money to take part in expensive celebrations or they can't bear the thought of the loneliness when everybody else seems to be having fun.

“And then, there is so much uncertainty over how things are going to be in the future. When will we get rid of the Covid restrictions? How will the environment be for our young people?”

He went on to say: “Saints like St Columba were prepared to walk into the future with faith and confidence that God was with him. Columba set off across the stormy sea to a place where he could no longer see his native Ireland. He settled on a windy island, far away from populated areas. There he set up a monastery where the community had a strict daily routine of prayer, where they studied and lived off the

land. They were not sure where they were going – but they had trust that God would lead them forward.

“St Columba would tell us today to be people of courage. That is not quite the same as being an idiot and doing stupid things. But it does mean being a dreamer and daring to do great things in order to bring the good news of Jesus into people's lives. I hope and pray that we can learn from St Columba to love people and to have that missionary zeal and pastoral fervour”.

Pope Francis also expressed a hope in his message for the renewal of society “through Christ's message of healing, reconciliation and hope”. Commenting on this, Bishop Donal said: “Those who encourage anger and confrontation have nothing to offer, except more of the same in the service of some mythical glorious future. Columba would tell us that you cannot build peace on a foundation of war and hatred. But some people do not want healing and reconciliation. And they prefer to criticise those who build bridges and not walls.

“St Columba knew about struggle and death. He would want us to believe that peace and reconciliation are possible, and that people should not have to live in fear of violence in their homes or in their streets. He would tell

us that harsh words hurt and do not help”.

Referring to the great example of the main churches in the community, in having “such good relationships publicly and privately”, he added: “If we want to celebrate our shared heritage in Columba, we have to keep up that work and create hope. Being different from others should help us appreciate one another, not fear them. We can all retain our identities and be a blessing on each other, never a threat to each other”.

Bishop Donal concluded by highlighting how Columba had built communities in monasteries that became “powerhouses of renewal and energy”.

“Renewal in the church”, he stated, “always needs communities of dedicated individuals who are prepared to pray and live a shared life, seeking to let God lead them. Parishes have to be communities, not just places where people can consume occasional religious services whenever they fancy the idea. Columba would tell us to build a community of faith here in this parish and in every parish, where people of all ages can grow together in faith. He would be shocked if we haven't learned that lesson in the 1500 years since his birth!”

Photography by Stephen Latimer

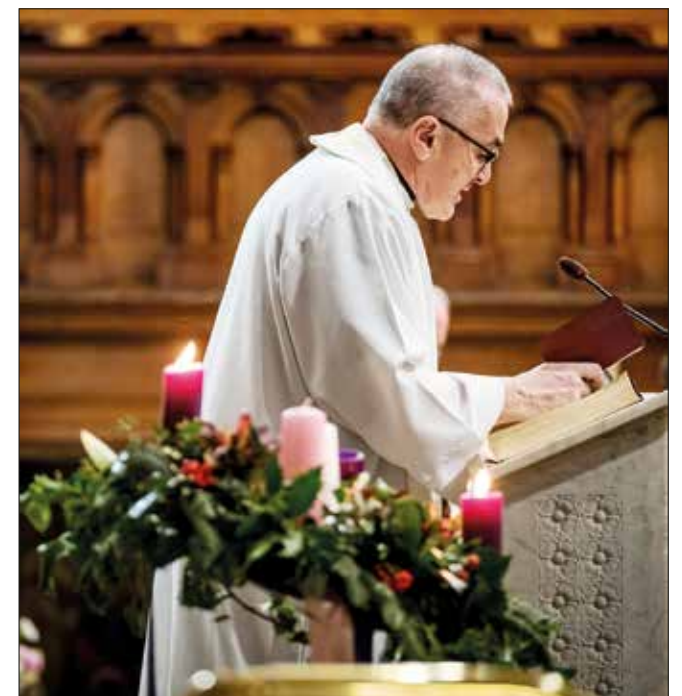


From the Vatican, 16 October 2021

*The Most Reverend Donal McKeown
Bishop of Derry*

His Holiness Pope Francis sends cordial good wishes to those assembled for the celebration of the 1500th anniversary of the birth of Saint Columba, whose legacy of missionary zeal and pastoral fervour continues to echo throughout the lands of Ireland, Scotland and beyond. As the Catholic faithful, together with our brothers and sisters of other Christian communities, mark this solemn occasion, His Holiness prays that it will lead to a deeper appreciation of the shared spiritual patrimony bequeathed by Saint Columba and inspire anew in our own day a commitment to holiness of life, the spread of the Gospel and the renewal of the fabric of society through Christ's message of healing, reconciliation and hope. With these sentiments the Holy Father commends all taking part in the anniversary celebrations to the protection and prayers of Saint Columba, and cordially imparts His Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of joy and peace in the Lord.

*Cardinal Pietro Parolin
Secretary of State*



Fr Paddy Baker, Adm Long Tower.



Schools project drew excellent links between lives of Columba and students today



THE winning entries in the Colmcille / Columba 1500th Anniversary Schools' Competition were from Long Tower PS, Derry, St Eithne's PS, Derry, and St Colmcille's PS, Claudy, for the Primary category, with submissions so amazing that the adjudicators couldn't separate them, and from Thornhill College, Culmore, for the Post Primary category.

Launched by the neighbouring dioceses of Derry and Raphoe, the competition involved participants exploring the life and legacy of the Donegal-born Saint across the curriculum for a Colmcille School Project.

In their comments, the independent panel of adjudicators praised the standard of all the projects, describing them as

engaging with a good balance of knowledge and creativity, with excellent links made between the life of St Columba and the lives of the students today.

The other entrants were Nazareth House PS, Derry, Donagh National School, Faughanvale Primary School, and Steelstown PS, Derry, for the Primary category, and Lumen Christi College, Derry, St Mary's College, Derry, Sacred Heart College, Omagh, St Joseph's Boys' School, Derry, and St Columba's College, Derry, for the Post Primary category.

Each participating school received a gift and their projects can be viewed on the Derry Diocesan Catechetical Centre website.



Having completed his Pope John Paul II Award, St Columb's College pupil, Luke Kelly reflects on his experience

Volunteering gave me a sense of purpose lost to many nowadays



Luke Kelly, St Columb's College, Derry.

MY parish involvement for the Pope John Paul II Award was with St Eugene's, where I was able to help with the weekly collections during Mass in the Cathedral. It was daunting at first, as I was constantly concerned not to miss the collection, or start off too early, but through the other volunteers' help I quickly learned the way to approach.

After a few weeks, being more confident, I started focusing less on the collection and more on those who were providing it. I noticed over the year many of the different people, the regular faces as well as those of visitors... "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another".

Bringing myself out of my fear of the congregation's prying eyes, I focused on the individuals within

it. I saw the differences among us, though importantly the faith we share. In the eyes of many, I also saw the same peace that I feel that is provided within the church, and, in others, the sadness and turmoil of their lives. I realise that I had begun to see what I feared others would see in me.

Volunteering gave me a responsibility that I believe is key for growth as well as fulfilment; a sense of purpose lost to many nowadays. This opportunity to focus upon yourself, whilst experiencing others, is growth.

I was able to volunteer to read during Catholic Schools' Week. Public speaking has never been a strong point of mine, and though shaky at the start, I gained another chance to improve.

Participating in this Award during lockdown, when a reduced number of the congregation gathered, was strange to say the least, though also somewhat comforting to see those not afraid and still willing to come. The greatest shame was those weeks in which the church shut its doors, and I do believe that is a regret held by some.

However, I moved to online activities and took part in Youth Alpha, in which I explored videos and discussed diverse topics and questions within theology and the wider world. Participating with other young people gave me insight into the views and, importantly, the differences

between our stances, be that on what role religion plays in a secularised society or whether flight or super strength would be a better super power.

Having participated within youth groups in the past, I was used to the initial awkwardness of introductions, though the online aspect posed a new challenge to overcome. I found this course thoroughly enjoyable, discussing commonly shied away from conversations.

For my social hours, I was able to participate in the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities and Communities Social Action Project. This programme aims to create cities and communities in the UK where all children, whether they are living in care, using a children's centre, or simply visiting their local library, have a meaningful say in, and truly benefit from, the local decisions, services and spaces that shape their lives.

I, alongside a few other young people, made up a Youth Advisory Board, in which we received and partook in Child Rights Training, as well as public speaking. I am very grateful and glad I took part as it gave me new skills and developed my confidence, as well as providing me with the opportunity to meet new people, with new mindsets. Alongside our Youth Board there ran an adult version as well, consisting of various backgrounds, including social workers as well as

governmental officials.

Voice

Our role was firstly to learn about the various issues surrounding children's rights on a wider scale and then focusing more locally. Holding accountable and providing the voice of youth to the council, we advised on the layout and terminology used to avoid jargon so that young people can better understand the decisions that are affecting them.

Furthermore, we got involved in analysing surveys on data of young people across the district about issues that affected them, be that mental health or lack of disability access for children, such as in parks. This informed our decisions on what to bring forward for further contemplation by the wider community.

We began the preparation and training to participate and guide workshops, which began with school children, preparing them for discussion on the day. During the main event, young people, from age range 11-18, participated in conversations with different community leaders and social representatives to decide on the direction Derry should focus on heading, in relation to young people.

Through this, I gained a plethora of skills, from group discussion, presenting, and listening carefully, to reflecting on what was being said.

Reflecting on how the teachings

of Christ were relevant to my chosen activities for the Award, this quote from Matthew 20:16 comes to mind: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." To lower oneself in search of understanding and humility, and to put someone's need above your own, I know that in doing what others did not desire to do, in volunteering my time during collection and to sometimes clean afterwards, I gained a greater understanding of humility.

Weekly, I saw others offer up their wealth to provide help to those that need it, not for moral superiority but because it is the right thing to do; striving to raise those who are weaker and feeble to a better life. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5)

The source of Western morals and that of rights stem from Christian beliefs and teaching. To protect the most vulnerable in our society is paramount. The convention of the rights of the child, heralded by UNICEF and individuals world wide, is expression of this belief, "for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these".

My actions, and those of many others in this programme, have been to raise awareness and to strive towards a better, safer world or, as I see it, to strive towards the ideal and establish the Kingdom of God upon earth.

Completing the Pope John

Paul II Award has helped me to understand and appreciate the contribution of young people to our Church. As I began the Award, I was of the understanding that faith among young people is low and dwindling. While that may be true in some cases, I met and saw those youth who are enthusiastic and engaged within the church; be it simply attending or volunteering their time to sing weekly. This Award is evidence in and of itself of the involvement. Even through the various disruptions throughout the year, many young people still attempted wholeheartedly, if not succeeded, in accomplishing their goal.

You often hear that young people are the future of the Church. That being true, they do not need to wait to get involved, having unique perspectives and a great capability to learn as well as to lead.

Whether someone does choose to strive for higher, or devote themselves to a greater extent, we do not gloss over those young people who wish to learn or to practice in quiet... "Then stirs the feeling infinite, so felt in solitude, where we are least alone."

Who knows what the future of the church will look like? May youth become beacons and saviours of the Church or simply strive into the unknown with truth and faith in hand as it is their role to do so.

Award coordinators nourished by fruits of pandemic reflection time



Tony Brennan, JPII Award National Coordinator

DIOCESAN coordinators of the Pope John Paul II Award in Ireland and England have been meeting online during this time of restrictions due to Covid-19, in an effort to continue sharing ideas about how to get the best out of the programme for the young people and their parishes, and while there is some frustration over not being able to engage as much with the Award participants during the pandemic, it has been seen as an opportune time to reflect on what is working well and what is not.

Tony Brennan, the national coordinator of the Award, has been heartened by the contributions made during their latest meeting, which was via

Zoom – a tool that he has found most useful in enabling more of the Diocesan coordinators to take part.

"We normally met once a year somewhere central, like Maynooth, but it was difficult to get everyone there, with 24 leaders involved around the country and four in England," he remarked, adding: "However, since the Covid restrictions, we not only have had more people attend the online meeting, we also discovered that using Zoom made it feasible to have two meetings in the year. It is important to meet in person too and we hope to do so in 2022 for one meeting".

Saying that the meetings gave the coordinators an opportunity to learn from each other, Tony happily noted from the discussions the amount of work being done in engaging with young people in their parishes and not necessarily in the schools.

"The schools are connecting with parishes but the work is more involved in parish," he said, "and that is what this Award was always to be, to get young people involved in their parish".

He went on to highlight

the example given by Award coordinator, for the Diocese of Kildare & Leighlin, Catriona Kelly, where a great number of the young people had been involved, during Covid, in reading, stewarding, cleaning, and greeting people as they came into Mass, not just on Sunday but during the week as well.

"She also shared that, with the restrictions, they had held a number of Award ceremonies in Carlow Cathedral to accommodate the participants and members of their families," said Tony, "and parishes then had another Award ceremony to include those participants who had not been able to make it to the Cathedral.

"So, each participant had the main ceremony and then one in their own parish, which enabled the people of the parish to become more aware of these young people and their involvement in the Pope John Paul II Award".

He also highlighted the contribution of the coordinator from the Dromore Diocese, Frances McNally, regarding the reflection by the participants on what the Award had meant

to them, and how Dromore has adapted the Reflection to be more focused on the feelings participants experience taking part in activities and on living their faith.

Feelings

Frances explained that she had put together a reflection book, in which the participants completed their Reflection over the two years, using two short questions for parish or faith activities and two for social awareness activities. During lockdown, she carried out the exercise using Zoom, and it involved encouraging the young people to recall the feelings they had experienced before, during and after the activity they had volunteered for, and what they had learnt about themselves through participating in the activity. She then asked them to reflect on what they had written to find a word, Gospel quote, hymn or something that showed God at work in their experience.

She also quoted from two of the participants' Award reflections. One wrote about how he had helped an elderly neighbour in the rural area in which he lived, who had never missed Mass, to be able

to watch it online by walking up her laneway, putting in the online address for the Mass and handing it to her, as she was self-isolating. As restrictions eased, he was able to go into the house and sit with the 80-year-old to watch the Mass together, and to have a cup of tea and a chat.

She told how another participant had shared in her reflection that she had felt a bit of a fraud doing the Award, and didn't know why she had signed up for it as she didn't come from a family that practiced faith. The girl went on to share her experience of being at the JPII Award event in Knock in 2019 and being "grabbed" by the music, as she was studying A level Music, which led to her deciding there and then that she would join her parish folk group. The girl also shared that she wanted to continue to allow her faith to grow as it was growing because of the Award.

The Award coordinator for the Archdiocese of Armagh, Janet Forbes shared some of the fruits of their time of reflection during Covid, with time spent trying to "firm up parish structures again" which has now led to a sense

of vibrancy, though still some frustration regarding the level of engagement because of the pandemic.

Janet added that they had also discovered a lack of focus on the ethos of the Award, to engage young people in parish life and give them a positive experience of what Catholic Christian life and community is about. As a result, they developed a catechetical programme that looked at such things as the Creed, Catholic social justice, Laudato Si and the faith life of Blessed Carlo Acutis, which has brought depth to the Award, with the young people now doing their hours knowing why they 'do' it rather than just doing it as a text box exercise.

Award director, Fr Paul Farren also spoke to the coordinators, outlining the importance of them: communicating God's love to the participants; accompanying the young people so that they know they are part of the community of the Body of Christ and are valued; and helping the young people discover their purpose in relation to the Award, as well as in relation to their lives and vocation.

Young Galliagh parishioner and Net Ministries leader, Lauren Campbell shares her faith story...

I give each day to Jesus in prayer



THE latest young person from the Diocese to dedicate their time and talents to the building up of the faith amongst our youth through Donegal-based Net Ministries is 20-year-old Lauren Campbell, who lives in the Galliagh area of Derry, within the Parish of The Three Patrons.

After a period of training in Rossnowlagh at the start of September, Lauren was one of two leaders appointed to the youth ministry team working with the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal in Limerick.

Delighted to have this opportunity to help other young people grow in their faith, Lauren has shared some of the life experiences that have helped her faith develop to the extent that she wanted to share her love for Jesus with others.

While she was baptised as a baby, Lauren said that she wasn't aware of going to Mass or praying until she was about six or seven years of age, when she went to live with her grandparents in Leafair after her parents separated.

A strong memory she has is of her Granda Brian "sitting in the living room saying the four Mysteries of the Rosary every day", and going to Mass in St Brigid's Church, Carnhill, every Sunday with him, her Granny Anne, and younger sister.

"I didn't love going but I didn't hate it either," said Lauren, adding: "I was definitely more excited to go home for Sunday dinner afterwards!"

Often encouraged by her grandparents at this young age to talk to God and that He would help her, she recalled starting to do this during Mass: "I didn't really know how to listen to God, but I did talk to Him. I had made my First Holy Communion but my sister hadn't, and I remember being really happy that I could receive Jesus."

"However, when we got our own house, I stopped praying and going to Mass because I didn't have granny and granda to tell me to".

Lauren went on to recall how she had been bullied by others in her P6 class at school, which left her coming home and crying when she was doing her homework, and how this was then followed by her

starting to go out with boys when she was about 11.

Describing this time in her life as "living with the world", she remarked that going out with boys had made her feel "loved and chosen".

While she had received the sacraments of Holy Communion, Confession and Confirmation during her primary school years, it wasn't until she was 14 that Lauren was brought back to really thinking more about her faith, when her three-year-old brother, Rhys was diagnosed with cancer.

"Mummy was staying up in Belfast with Rhys for his treatment, so my sister and I moved back to live with Granny Anne again. Granda had died when I was in P7," said Lauren, adding: "While I hadn't been praying, I knew that God existed and, because my granny's faith was so strong, I never doubted that Rhys would get better."

"Every night when we went to bed, granny came in to my sister and I and gave us the Padre Pio Prayer Card and we would say it together for Rhys. That was really all I prayed for. I didn't have a personal relationship with God."

"I remember Granny always saying about God hearing children's prayers and she encouraged us to pray, as God would answer our prayers".

She went on to recall her Granny and aunty taking Rhys to a healing night in Galliagh with the Franciscan Friars, saying: "The cancer was in his kidney and collar bone and after Fr Thomas prayed over him, the secondary cancer in his collarbone was gone. This confirmed for me that God existed and that He only wanted the best for His children."

"Everything went really well during Rhys' treatment and I felt that God was really hearing and answering our prayers. Then, on my 16th birthday, Rhys was told that he was cancer free and he has never looked back".

A year later, in 2019, the sixth years in Lauren's school, St Cecilia's, were given the opportunity to go to Medjugorje on a fully paid for pilgrimage by a sponsor.

"I just knew that I had to go but there were limited spaces," she recalled, adding: "My friend and I put our names down on the list, and we were both so eager to find out if we could go that we went over to ask the teacher."

"A couple of days later she told us that we had places on the pilgrimage. I was pure buzzing and couldn't wait to go. I didn't know what we would be doing, but I just knew that I had to go."

"At the last minute, my best friend pulled out from going and I was scared to go without her, but I still really wanted to go, so I did. Then, when we were on the

bus on the way to Dublin, my teacher stood up and said that we were going to pray the Rosary. I honestly didn't know how to pray it and I remember thinking, what did I get myself into, but then I decided to go into the pilgrimage with an open heart".

Healing

Reflecting on some "mind blowing" moments during this pilgrimage, Lauren said: "One of them was a friend of mine receiving a healing of her knee. We were having a worship night as a group in the house where we were staying, and one of the leaders was praying and said that he felt God wanted to heal someone with a knee problem. He asked us to close our eyes and anyone who had a knee problem was asked to raise their hand."

"I sensed him walking towards my friend and praying over her. She hadn't been able to straighten her leg as her knee would dislocate, but after she was prayed with she straightened it. I opened my eyes and her leg was straight and she had no problem with it after, she was fully healed. We started crying because we knew that God was real and had healed her".

She went on to recall another incident at the top of Cross Mountain that had had a great impact on her: "There was a woman there who had an exorcism carried out on her. We saw it happen and it really terrified me. I was scared it was going to happen to me because I didn't know what was happening, but then our teacher explained it to us."

"Through that experience, the Lord revealed to me His love for us. I could see that He loved us so much that He would set us free. This is when I first really experienced God's love properly."

"During the pilgrimage, I went to Confession for the first time in six or seven years. I was terrified to go, but I ended up having a very good Confession and I felt so good afterwards".

By the end of the pilgrimage, Lauren found that she didn't want to go home. "I felt so at home and at peace while I was there," she remarked, adding: "When I got home, I knew that I had to change. I knew that I couldn't deny that God was real anymore because He had shown me His love and that He always wanted the best for me."

"So, after my experience in Medjugorje, I began seeking more. I met a former teacher of mine from St Cecilia's for a coffee and chat, and she invited me to the Friars' Living Disciples Prayer Group in Galliagh. She had been with our group in Medjugorje. My friend and I went to the Prayer Group together on the Tuesday night and I thought it was really

great. There was worship before the teaching and I just allowed the Lord to work on me during this time and my faith grew stronger and stronger."

"I learnt a lot about my faith from the older people at the group. I was going there for about six months but my heart was still searching for something more and that is when I felt that the Lord was calling me to serve with Net Ministries".

Saying that she had first become aware of Net Ministries in August 2020, Lauren recalled noticing that people were randomly mentioning the youth ministry organisation to her as something she should maybe do.

"Even during one time in Confession", she said, "one of the friars asked me if had ever thought about doing it. I put it to the back of my mind and didn't think too much more about it. Then, in September 2020, I was standing outside Galliagh Chapel and this young girl got out of a car and asked to speak to me. She said that she had been praying and that the Lord wanted me to do Net Ministries. I had heard of this girl but didn't actually know her. I was completely shocked and just stood there saying something like 'Aye, right'."

"She gave me her 'phone number to text her so that she could help me with the discernment process, as she had done Net Ministries for two years before that. During the time I was discerning about it, people kept mentioning it to me."

"It took me two months to text that girl, as I was too scared to say 'yes' and go and do it, and tell my parents about it. I had applied to university to do teaching and ended up also applying to Net Ministries. I had felt the call so strongly to go that it was a little scary, because it was so real".

"I knew that the Lord wanted me there," continued Lauren, "so I decided to apply and was accepted in February 2021. I had already accepted my place at Net but hadn't heard back from Stranmillis at that stage, and I felt that I couldn't tell my parents about it as they wanted me to go to university."

Rejected

"Stranmillis usually comes back to students around May. I was praying to God for my application to be rejected so that I could go to Net. When the notification from college came through, my stomach sank. I opened the email and saw that I was rejected and prayed in thanksgiving to God. My daddy couldn't believe that I was rejected with three A stars. He just couldn't understand how that could happen because he wanted the best for me."

"I told him then that I was going to do Net Ministries. My parents didn't know what that was about,

but my mummy's response was, 'Lauren as long as you're happy, I'm happy', and that has given me so much peace about what I am doing".

Lauren then spent her summer fundraising for the 5,250 Euros of sponsorship needed for her Net year and, thanks to people's generosity and the help of friends to organise a raffle and quiz night, she was ready to set off in September to Rossnowlagh for training with Net Ministries.

"In the car, on the way there, I was holding back tears," she recalled, "it was all becoming so real. I knew no-one else who was going but when I got there and met the Net staff, I felt at home. It was great meeting everyone as they were all so good. I just felt filled with the Lord."

"The training started on September 1 for musicians, which included me as I play the guitar. I found it really intense but I had always wanted to learn more about worshipping the Lord through music."

"On September 9, everyone else arrived for the training. It was an amazing time. I absolutely loved it. I knew it was the best decision I had ever made. During training I learnt so much about the faith and about myself, and grew so much in my personal relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit."

For the first six weeks, all the Netters and staff lived together in Rossnowlagh and on the last week of training we received the team announcements, when we were broken up into smaller teams. There are six teams this year, though we only have four of them in operation at the minute as nine Netters are stuck in America because of Covid. We have teams in Limerick, Letterkenny, Cork, and there is a Mission Team that travels around Ireland to local areas where needed".

Recalling the emotion of the teams' announcement, Lauren said: "The Limerick team, which I am in, was the first announced and I was the first of the females to be announced as a team leader. That was crazy for me as I had never done anything like that before and I didn't know what to do, but there was training for that afterwards".

On October 24, Lauren arrived

with her team in Limerick, where they began working with the CFRs in Youth Ministry, Young Adults, and Street Ministry, and they are hoping to go into primary schools after Christmas. There are five of them in the team, including two boys and three girls aged 19-23 years old.

She commented: "We have the opportunity to teach the youth in Limerick about the faith. We do three youth groups a week in Moyross, which is a neighbourhood in Limerick like Galliagh. Our ministry is so blessed this year. The numbers that come to the groups changes every week – we could have up to 19 for the 6-12 years youth group, and about 13 on average for the 12-17 years group, sometimes it could be a lot more and sometimes a lot less. The friars have a Young Adult Prayer Group every second Wednesday for those aged 18+, and there would be about 25-40 people attending that."

"We have just had a group of 12-17 year olds from Limerick in Rossnowlagh for a Net Ministries weekend, during which we had prayer and worship, surfing, movies, games and a women's session and manly session were various issues were discussed, such as our worth, etc."

"We also do Street Ministry on the streets of Limerick, praying with the homeless people, who are mostly aged 25+. It is very good praying with them and listening to their stories. One thing I really love about Street Ministry is that the homeless people are sitting there on the street with nothing, but every single one that we have approached has had a pair of Rosary beads or a small cross around their wrist. While they have so little material things, they still have faith in God, which I think is so beautiful. It seems that people who have nothing are more grateful".

With no regrets about joining Net Ministries, Lauren said: "I am really enjoying what I am doing at the minute, and am taking each day as it comes, appreciating and feeling grateful for all that the Lord has enabled me to do. I give each day to Jesus in prayer and try to let Him work through me in everything".



WE welcome yet another young writer on to the team, Jodie Kennedy, from the Derry City Deanery, who is a pupil at St Cecilia's College in the City.

In her first article, Jodie was delighted to share her experience of a recent visit by the Home of the Mother Servant Sisters to her school, of which the late Sr Clare Crockett was a former pupil.

Having read what Pope Francis said during his celebration of the World Day of the Poor Mass, Niamh has reflected on this and how we can reach out to help others in need this Christmas.

Writing on a similar theme, Bronagh has shared the great efforts in her school, St Colm's Ballinascreen, to support the work of St Vincent de Paul and other charities particularly at this time of year.

John has written about his Christmas preparations as an Eastern Catholic, including attempting to limit his use of information technology so as not to distract from this special time with God, while Peter shared his appreciation of the gift of faith passed on to him from his parents and generations past, and how he is being enabled to grow in and live out that faith in his Parish of Iskaheen & Upper Moville.

Having volunteered as a leader at the World Youth Day at Home event that the Diocesan Youth Ministry Team led at the Carmelite Retreat Centre, Termonbacca, Hollie has written about this experience and her hope to be at the next WYD in Lisbon, in 2023, and the involvement of youth in the synodal process underway in the Diocese and throughout the universal Church.

Gemma has shared another art piece and written about how we can use the gifts that God has given us as a blessing for others, and Niamh has shared some thoughts on this too.



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



Niamh O'Kane - Co Derry Deanery. Gemma Gallagher, Derry City Deanery. John Augustine Joseph, Derry City Deanery. Zara Schlindwein, Derry City Deanery.

We can use the gifts God has given us as a blessing for others by Gemma Gallagher

CHRISTMAS is a time of giving gifts and these do not have to be physical gifts to bring joy to people.

I am thinking of the gifts and talents that God has given each of us, to be shared with others. I have the gift of kindness and have a lot of time for others, and I have the gift of being loyal as well.

God has also given me the gift to do art and to be able to Irish dance and be confident. I also do First Aid, which can show a duty of care for other people, like God wants us to, and I train at the gym

to take care of the body that God gifted me with.

I have gifts that can be used in my parish too, such as reading at Mass. I try to use all my gifts and talents to the best of my ability, as they are a blessing from God.



“Feed the world, let them know it’s Christmas time” by Bronagh Doherty

CHRISTMAS is the time of costly clothes shopping, gift-giving, and elaborate events full of festive cheer and happiness. For others, nearly 313,000 people living in relative income poverty (Department of Communities 5/August 2021), Christmas brings a season of sadness, anxiety, and fear for the future.

As shops increase prices to relish in the money to be made from the festive period, food becomes increasingly harder for families to buy. As the nights grow colder, those of us lucky enough to be inside in front of a roaring fire looking out enjoy the cosiness, but it brings cold to the bones of those who cannot afford fuel to heat their homes, for those lucky enough to have a house that is.

For the homeless, Christmas simply means more footfall and the hope of a few more coins as the hunger and cold gets fiercer, in some cases causing the death of a human. This is socially unacceptable how the rich and poor in communities live the same season in irreconcilable ways.

There are many charities in our communities who strive to help those in poverty in their district. To name a few: Salvation Army, UNICEF, Shelter NI who offer suitable housing to those on the streets to help combat the ever-growing issue of homelessness, FareShare NI helps by collecting spare and waste food from local businesses, restaurants

and shops, and redistributing it to those in poverty to fill their ravenous stomachs on these cold, long winter nights.

Another charity is that of St Vincent de Paul (SVDP), whom we work closely with in my school, St Colm's, Draperstown. SVDP work closely with the Catholic Church and Catholics across Northern Ireland do fabulous fundraising and volunteering to help our local communities.

In my school, we fill hampers in our form tutor classes and, every year since I started secondary school in 2016, we have filled more and more and we aim for this year to be no different, with a record amount of food hampers. This is such a positive thing to see.

Each pupil brings in two, three, or more if they wish, items which are non-perishable, and we put together hampers so a family in the Mid-Ulster area can have food over Christmas.

Poverty affects one in six people in Northern Ireland (Strategy- Anti Poverty McGarry Consulting 2017-2020), so St Vincent's offers help to as many of these people as they can. Charities can only do their work if they have funding and volunteers. St Colm's is only a very small part of a massive picture in helping poverty at Christmas.

Another brilliant movement is the Samaritan's Purse: Operation Shoebox campaign. This brings together the people of the Catholic faith to bring a



smile to children's faces in Third World countries across Eastern Europe, where children endure the worst hardships year-round and, in many cases, have no light at the end of tunnel, no present to look forward to on Christmas morning. Christmas morning is like every other morning, overshadowed by war, hunger and violence.

It is more common than not for schools across Ireland, primary and secondary, to fill a shoebox per family with gifts for a child. Over 186 million children in 160 countries have smiled because of you, because of your kindness and have experienced God's love since 1990 (Samaritans Purse 2021).

Campaigns like these show the solidarity and togetherness the Catholic community can show in helping those in difficulty or hardships. It is easy to get involved, shoebox information can be found at <https://www.samaritans-purse.org.uk/what-we-do/operation-christmas-child/>.

A full list of ideas can be found online but, for example, a small toy (nothing war/violence

related), colouring pencils/book, small cuddly toy/doll, small puzzles, toothbrush, soap, or flannel are also good ideas.

Get creative, you could even send your child a note or drawing! Attach £5 and check the website for a local collection date and centre.

Why not, next time you're doing your groceries, pick up a few extra non-perishables (rice and tinned fruit and veg are a good idea) and donate them to your local food bank or St Vincent de Paul to help families who will go hungry this Christmas, whilst we have more food than anyone can physically eat.

Poverty is year-long, not just Christmas time, but this is a time when it gets particularly hard for families and individuals. Let's not forget the real meaning of Christmas, the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Why not be someone else's saviour this Christmas and donate to charity. A small donation can make the biggest difference to a person's life. Let's come together to make everyone's Christmas just that little bit merrier. Together we can do it!

Sharing her experience of World Youth Day at Home, Hollie recalls the words of Pope John Paul II to young people during his visit to Ireland in 1979...

“I believe in youth”

YOUNG people in the Derry Diocese have celebrated World Youth Day at Home. During the visit of Pope Saint John Paul II to Ireland in 1979, the Holy Father famously said: “I believe in youth”. A few years later, His Holiness established World Youth Day as a joyous event celebrating Catholic youth that would take place every three years. The next World Youth Day event will take place from August 1-6, 2023 in Lisbon, Portugal.

This year, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Pope Francis invited all dioceses to host a World Youth Day event at home. On November 21, the Diocese of Derry hosted and celebrated the event in Termonbacca, where we were wonderfully and kindly welcomed through the hospitality of retreat facilitator, Aoife O'Neill, and the Carmelite Fathers.

Coinciding with WYD, Pope Francis has invited all dioceses and parishes to participate in

the synodal process, which will also conclude in 2023. Personally, the highlights of our diocesan event for me, was our synodal conversations and our Mass.

Interestingly, unlike any other programme or ‘conversations’ I have been involved with before, for example, Alpha, the Derry Youth Ministry Scholarship, Mary's Meals, the book club, etc, although successful, I noticed that trying to engage the young people with their faith via such platforms was somewhat difficult.

However, our first synodal conversation proved very interesting, popular and successful, as I could tell from the high level of participation from within my group. It was as if they were able to understand and relate instantly, which was quite unusual, as many young people tend to be shy when engaging with faith conversations, programmes, events, etc.

Finally, our WYD event at home

concluded with Mass celebrated by Bishop Donal. It was a wonderful way to finish the day.

Overall, I found it very emotional. Our Diocese had now embarked upon the Synodal Pathway, and this WYD event

was our first in-person since the beginning of the pandemic.

I hope the other young people enjoyed the day as much as I did, and I look forward to the global celebration next year in Lisbon!

Espirito Santo.



Hollie was one of the leaders during the Diocesan World Youth Day at Home event at Termonbacca.

Gratitude for gift of faith passed down the generations to me *by Peter Grant*



MY first involvement in my parish was when I was in third class and Fr John Farren asked me to become an Altar server in St Patrick's Church, Iskaheen.

Naturally, I was very nervous at the beginning but was reassured by the kindness and encouragement of Fr Farren and the parishioners attending Mass. They made me feel I was very much a part of my parish community and my contribution was very much appreciated.

As I grew older, I joined the Ministry of The Word group and read at Mass also. At this age, I was beginning to look around me and see the huge contribution other people were making to the spiritual and physical life of the Parish.

I began to really listen to what my great aunts, granny and parents told me of their upbringing in the faith and how different and much easier it was for me. My granda, Auntie Nancy and their family walked four miles to Mass in St

Patrick's Church, in Iskaheen, from Meedinmore where they lived, to Mass each Sunday, fasting from midnight the night before.

This walk at no time of the year is easy: four miles there on an empty stomach and four miles back home to probably a basic breakfast of homemade bread and tea. Can you imagine this journey in the freezing cold, dark, raining or frosty, snowy, winter mornings and you are very hungry, with probably not the warmest of clothes and shoes barely fit for purpose, arriving at a cold damp Church, as there was no central heating then.

Mass was said in Latin, with the priest facing the altar and his back to the congregation. The only time he faced them was to preach his sometimes very sharp sermons. This is faith that our grandparents and generations before them lived out so willingly, so we could have the faith we have today.

Those who lived closer to the Church may also have had the return journey in the evenings for devotions. In the summer months, this journey was done in bare feet.

In this time, pre Vatican II, there was no place for the laity in the Church, well maybe the priest's housekeeper was the limit.

The family Rosary, followed by a long list of prayers, was said in every house, every day of the year, no matter what else was happening.

This may seem a lifetime back to us now, but it is not when there are many people alive that can still relay these events. Christmas morning Mass was at 6 am and you stayed for three Masses. What time must they have had to be up at to walk to Mass then?

In my mother's time not so long ago, I better say that, in Scotland, where she was brought up, your faith dictated what job or profession you got. For example, you were always asked what school you attended to sift out the Catholic applicants, but still the people did not give up their faith, they kept strong, fighting to keep their Catholic schools and education.

Taking all this into consideration, it is very easy for me to be involved in my Parish. Doing the Pope John Paul and Papal Cross Awards has strengthened my commitment to my faith in a 'doing way' as well as a spiritual way.

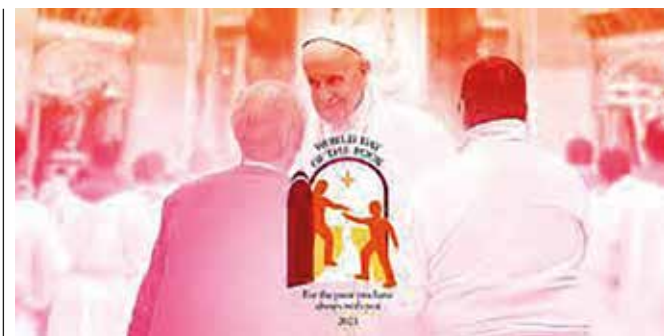
COVID brought many changes and made us think and plan to keep our faith and parishioners together in the best ways we could, in the circumstances. Social media and the internet were a

great option during lockdown, with Mass lived streamed already in St Patrick's Church in our Parish by a very forward seeing Fr Farren. He quickly extended this to the other two Churches, so that people could be present for Mass and Devotions from their homes, although unable to receive Holy Communion or go to Confession. When lockdown ended, online Masses were still an option for the housebound and vulnerable.

The youth in my Parish decided, last Christmas, to start using social media to reach out to parishioners and the wider public and help spread our faith. We started by recording the prayers distributed from the Catechetical Centre each date of the 12 Days of Christmas. This was very successful across the generations in the Parish. It gave our young people's group the inspiration and encouragement to use our IT talents to further spread our faith in a new way, to not only our own contemporaries but cross generational.

During the season of Lent we interviewed the laity, priest, bishops and the Archbishop through Zoom, giving everyone an insight into their lives, faith journeys, and how they were coping with life during the pandemic, and the reassurance that everyone was struggling at this time.

Reflecting on how the faith and Catholic traditions have been passed down to me, gives me strength and encouragement to do all that I can, by being actively involved in my parish and diocese, to preserve, promote and pass on our faith to future generations.



Pope Francis' World Day of the Poor Mass *by Niamh O'Kane*

DURING his homily in St Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis stated that the Gospel tells us of the evident signs that the Son of Man will come and help humanity interpret history where today's pain coexists with tomorrow's hope – that the pain humans face today, will cease tomorrow, and he stresses this.

Pope Francis highlighted how the poor are one of the most wounded and oppressed in history, "marked by tribulation, violence, suffering and injustice", and who are awaiting a liberation that "never seems to arrive".

The World Day of the Poor, held on November 14, called Christians to focus in a special way on the "suffering of those most vulnerable", the Pope said, since they are often forced into this life of poverty due to injustice and inequality at the hands of a society that is inconsiderate of their needs and trepidations.

The Pope pointed out that a "future of salvation" is awaiting those in poverty and others who are oppressed, and he stated that "Jesus wants to open our hearts to hope" and free us from anxiety and fear. Highlighting his point that "Tomorrow's hope flowers amid today's pain", Pope Francis is hopeful of this bright future and is encouraging everyone who will listen to also be hopeful of what awaits us.

In order to assist with the process of obtaining this, Pope Francis encourages that we must "nurture tomorrow's hope by healing today's pain". He insinuates that Christian hope

is not just a naive optimism that things will be better tomorrow, but a call to action to help make God's promise of salvation "concrete...today and every day".

Christians' healing of the past is not Christians simply wishing and desiring a better tomorrow with no oppression, but acting upon that better tomorrow and contributing when necessary.

Personally, to assist with this modern day issue, I contribute change at Mass in the collections and, whenever possible, giving when I can to those in need. Lots of people do this and yet more people need to do this also, in order to bring about this much needed change.

Pope Francis paid tribute to a late Italian bishop who was very close to the poor, Don Tonino Bello, who used to say: "We cannot be content to hope; we have to organize hope". From this, our hope must be expressed with our decisions, actions and the work for justice and solidarity, in alleviating the suffering of the poor.

The Pope explained that hope must become the reality "in our everyday lives, in our relationships, in our social and political commitments".

To conclude, from this World Day of the Poor, Pope Francis highlighted that this suffering will alleviate with the desire to change through our actions of charity and that there is hope for the future as things are already changing, "Let us bring this outlook of hope to our world".

Preparing for Christmas! *by John Augustine Joseph*



THIS time last year, I wrote my first article for 'The Net'. It was on how I, as an Eastern Catholic, prepared for Christmas by abstinence from meat and other foods during Advent. This year before I began the traditional abstinence on the first of December, I took some time to reflect on how I could properly prepare for Christmas, or to put

it better, how I could use the opportunity to become the son of God that I am called to be and not someone that I want to be.

Whilst abstaining from meat and just doing general preparation is all well and good, I realised that unless I took some effort to do something that was truly outside of my comfort zone, as abstaining from meat is not that hard for me,

I wasn't going to get the outcome that I expected from this period, and neither would I be properly prepared for Christmas.

I realised that I was quite often distracted, whether I was praying or studying; the culprits often being the simple dopamine hits of binging on YouTube videos or scrolling on Instagram. I realised that if I wanted to get closer to God, I needed to either control or get rid of these distractions.

What is the point in having access to all this information if it only distracts you from your goal of being with God? What is the point in having all these distractions at all in the first place? The time that we have is very precious and if we waste it on social media, we won't have time to pray (spend time with God), to fast (so that we can have to strength to endure the tests that we face), and to do acts of mercy (so that we can truly love

our neighbour). In other words, I wouldn't be able to properly prepare for Christmas unless I removed these distractions.

As I said last year, whilst many look forward to Santa Claus and Christmas dinner, we often forget the primary focus of Christmas, Jesus Himself. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us", that's the great gift Christmas offers to us, and yet many among us choose to neglect this wonderful mystery. That may be their choice but it is not mine.

And that's why, after some reflection, I decided that it would be good if I could reduce my use of information technology as a means of distraction. I don't intend to stop using my phone or computer, I only intend to use them to study or to do something of importance.

I got rid of the apps that I didn't need and restricted the use of the apps that I do need. Instead of

watching YouTube, I should try to read a book, or use that time to pray, etc. I can use this free time to contemplate Our Lord and His great love for us.

I must confess, it's not as easy as I thought and I've already fallen back to my usual habits. However, once I realise this, I return back to abstinence from information technology. But this was not meant to be easy in the first place. It was meant to help me have more time for God and my duties (studying, etc). I only pray that I can do this successfully.



Niamh reflects on how we can use our gifts and talents to help others in our communities this Christmas to...

Be a light of joy to others in need

AS we draw closer to Christmas, a time of celebration and reflection on what more we can do to help others in need, we can each contribute to those in need in various ways in our own parishes through utilizing our gifts and talents.

Each and every one of us can demonstrate the gift of kindness in passing it on to others, at this time of year, through charitable donations, sponsored activities, food drives and hampers, the shoe box appeal, and in reaching out to those in our community who may be feeling lonely this Christmas.

At Christmas-time we are reminded to be mindful that others may not have the same opportunities as us, and need a

light this December and Pope Francis stresses this, "Christmas reminds us that God continues to love us all, even the worst of us. To me, to you, to each of us, He says today: 'I love you and I will always love you, for you are precious in my eyes.'"

Even through the COVID-19 pandemic, we are reminded to use our talents and gifts this Christmas more than ever through providing comfort by means of giving and compassionate acts.

Pope Francis guides Catholics on this with the birth of Jesus, "...it is par excellence the feast of compassion, of tenderness. Its beauty is humble and full of human warmth."

Ways to help in your parish

could be to contribute a donation in the collection box at Mass, adding to a local food drive, and volunteering at events that focus on acknowledging and assisting those who are not as privileged as you this Advent.

In my own parish of Banagher, we celebrate Christmas in a way that pushes donations to charity in a way that encourages everyone to participate. One of my favourite traditions at this time is the Christmas Bazaar, where the community donate items that

have not been used. Everyone is encouraged to buy a ticket to try to win one of the gifts and all of the proceeds go to charities and people in need, capturing the true meaning of Christmas.

God's gift to us this Christmas is not merely a material item, but Pope Francis tells us that His gift is His only-begotten Son, "Who is all His joy."

It is important to remember to give the gifts you yourself have received through life this Christmas.



Servant Sisters re-introduce St Cecilia's pupils to Adoration and Confession

by Jodie Kennedy

ON November 16, nuns from the same convent as our own Sr Claire Crockett, the Home of the Mother Servant Sisters, took the time to come down to the Creggan Parish, in Derry, to spread the Word of God to Year 13 St Cecilia's pupils and how it personally affected their lives.

One nun told the tale of how she had been a disadvantaged American Protestant, who didn't even want to live anymore until her life took a turn for the better when God appeared in her dream.

She told us that in the dream she was placed in Heaven and told that it wasn't her time yet. Although she was disappointed and confused by why couldn't she have this paradise now, she knew by the word yet her time would come. And it soon did, as by 18 she was converted and her life was

never better.

A second nun told about how, when she was a teen, she was a very distant Catholic and would go out partying, drinking and hanging around with the wrong crowd, until God called her. He had a plan for her. So, she knew that she needed to drop all her friends who weren't good influences, and drop her boyfriend, who she was very much in love with, to be a nun.

Many students admired these two nuns for dedicating their lives to God, people and their faith.

A lot of teens right now are very distant from God, but the nuns re-introduced us to Adoration, Confession and how much God loves us all.

This retreat benefited all as everyone really bonded. God connects us all!



Derry men folk at Belfast Rosary of Reparation

AMONGST the male folk who travelled to Belfast for the latest Rosary of Reparation were a number of Derry men, who had attended a similar public time of prayer in their own hometown.

Inspired by the words of the St Louis de Montfort, that public prayer was more powerful than private prayer, and that those who pray the Rosary on their knees will receive extra graces, men of various ages have been gathering in public places on the first Saturday of the month to pray a "Rosary of reparation, repentance and conversion" for the nation.

And they have been bolstered by the knowledge that men in other countries, such as Poland, are also praying the Rosary together

publicly on the first Saturday of each month for this same intention.

One lady who travelled in support of the men described it as a very emotional experience, recalling the great respect and reverence shown by the passing public in response to the atmosphere of peace surrounding the praying men, who were encircled by people also praying the Rosary, giving a sense of a wall of protection.



Steelstown and Culmore promote Trocaire's Gifts of Love

by Patricia McCormack

OUR Eco Group in the parishes of Steelstown and Culmore was set up last year in response to the encyclical Laudato Si'. The encyclical has the subtitle "on care of our common home" and in it the

Pope Francis critiques consumerism and irresponsible development, laments environmental degradation and global warming, and calls everyone to take swift action.

We meet monthly, currently on Zoom, and explore practical ways to "live Laudato Si'" in our parishes. Our action for December is the promotion of Trocaire's Gifts of Love. This is a very practical way to cut down on waste, unwanted gifts and at the same time support those whose need is greater.

"Since the market tends to promote extreme consumerism in an effort to sell its products, people can easily get caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending" (Laudato Si' 203). This is particularly true at Christmas time. Of course, a well chosen, thoughtful gift can be a beautiful token of love and appreciation. Too often, however, the selection and purchase of Christmas presents is just another rushed chore at this busy time. Many of these will be discarded and forgotten. Better to give something that makes a difference.

Trocaire's Gifts of Love can make a real difference. For example, a water filter can help prevent deadly diseases like cholera and typhoid. The gift of solar lamps can replace kerosene lamps that emit dangerous fumes and are a huge fire hazard. There are 21 gifts to choose from, starting at £5 for a

gift of soap for families in war-torn South Sudan.

These are real, life changing, practical and ethical gifts that families in overseas communities have asked for. The gifts include chicks, goats, honey bees, trees, seeds, farming tools, all sourced in the country so that they are helping the local economy as well as the families. There are gifts to support school children, young girls, new mothers, grandparents.

People can often find a gift that chimes with someone's interests or circumstances and gives them real empathy with those who will benefit.

These Gifts can be purchased online at <https://www.trocaire.org/gifts>. You buy a gift from the range, receive a card giving details of the gift, which you then give to the person in whose honour you have bought it.

As this is not convenient for everyone, we also have them available at Thornhill and Steelstown

Churches before and after Vigil and Sunday Masses on the second and third weeks of Advent. Setting up the stall reminded us of how much we have to be thankful for.

"We need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the bible. It is the conviction that 'less is more'. A constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment" (Laudato Si' 222).

For more information, email Collette at a.j.craig@btinternet.com or contact Patricia at 07711900420.

Passers-by support for Pro-life vigil by Ethna Johnston

A VIGIL took place at the City Hall in Belfast on Saturday, October 23. The event was organised by Precious Life and involved people from all over Northern Ireland, as well as others from the South.

The crowd comprised people from all faiths and none, and everyone held a poster with the slogan: "Every child deserves a BIRTH day." This slogan underscored the removal of the right to life of the unborn child by the implementation of Section 9 of The Northern Ireland Formation Act. The protesters formed a complete ring around the City Hall.

The protest marked the second anniversary of the introduction of abortion in Northern Ireland.

During these two years, over 1,556 children have been killed - a school full.

To bring this home to people, there was a collection of children's shoes, with individual names attached, arranged in the figures 1,556. This poignant reminder really brought home the reality of what has been happening here in the last two years.

The protest made an impact with passer-bys. Some teenage boys 'took the knee' to show their support and other people stopped to talk, or simply give a comment of approval. It was obvious the rally was helping people to keep on working in whatever way we can for the repeal of abortion in Northern Ireland and the removal of Section 9.

Children in Crossfire annual Christmas Appeal...

Stopping malnutrition...saving children's lives *by Shauna O'Neill*



Getu & Derartu.

WHEN Children in Crossfire was founded in September 1996, we could not have imagined the positive impact we would go on to make in so many lives. The healthcare and education programmes we deliver to some of the most vulnerable children in the world are built on the donations we receive from people here in Ireland. We are eternally grateful for all that kindness.

For almost half of those 25 years, we have been supporting the therapeutic feeding unit at St Luke's Hospital in Wolisso, Ethiopia. The wonderful medical team there provide life-saving treatment for children suffering from severe acute malnutrition.

In the time we have worked together, more than 5,650 children, all at risk of dying, have been successfully treated at St Luke's.

Ten years ago, the mortality rate from malnutrition stood at 4.1%; today it is 2%. Our goal, with your goodwill, is to drive it down to zero.

A couple of months ago, we were delighted to erect a plaque at St Luke's Hospital in memory of the late Bishop of Derry, Dr Edward Daly. Bishop Daly was a great supporter of Children in Crossfire and it was an honour for

us to acknowledge that support and keep his memory alive.

One of the photographs accompanying this features two-year-old Derartu and her loving father, Getu, from rural Wolisso. Derartu is one of 452 children treated at St Luke's in the past year.

Recently, Getu told us about their experience when she was very sick: "Her leg was swollen and she had no appetite for food. When I took her to St Luke's, the doctors told me I would be able to stay with her. We stayed there for 21 days and received treatment and she got well. I now take care of her at home, according to the advice I received from them [the medical team]. She is now a healthy, growing child."

It was Brehane Dinku, who also features in one of the photographs, who got Derartu the medical support she needed, having seen just how poorly she was during a routine visit to her community.

Brehane is one of 240 Community Health Workers who support families throughout Wolisso daily. All of these frontline heroes were trained by Children in Crossfire - thanks to our supporters!

By donating to us, you are ensuring thousands of children like Derartu get to grow up in good health. You are empowering Brehane and her colleagues to keep driving malnutrition down. You are enabling the team at St Luke's to keep the sickest children alive and bring them back to health.

We are very mindful that living costs here are on the rise, so we know we are asking you to dig deep this Christmas. Your support would be especially vital

right now because violent conflict is escalating across Ethiopia, including where we work.

We are facing very severe challenges to ensure the children and families we support continue to receive the medical services they rely on. A donation will help stop malnutrition and save more children's lives in the face of civil unrest, so please give what you can.

As 2021 draws to a close, after a deeply challenging 18 months, we wish you and yours a peaceful, happy Christmas and New Year. Let's keep giving children the healthy, happy future they deserve.



Young people who took part in a Pier Jump fundraiser at Creggan Country Park for Children in Crossfire.

Waterside priest uses pedal power to raise thousands for charity

GETTING on his bike to cycle 100 miles for the third year in a row to raise funds for charity, Waterside parish priest, Fr Michael Canny has managed to gather £9,000 in sponsorship to benefit a local charity and a foreign one.

The keen cyclist came up with the pedal power fundraiser when the Parish Pastoral Council agreed, three years ago, to support a parish

outreach.

"Some families in the parish have had sick children and received help from the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice, so we took that as our local charity," said Fr Michael, adding: "and with the Good Shepherd Sisters living in the parish, we selected them and one of their projects as the foreign charity."

He has presented £5,000 of the proceeds raised to the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice, and £4,000 to Sr Myriam McLaughlin, of the Good Shepherd Sisters, Derry. The 63-year-old completed his 100-mile challenge this year by cycling from Derry around Limavady and Magilligan, and then on to the Coleraine area, and back.

Last year, the Clonmany native cycled 100 miles around his beloved Donegal and, in 2019, he completed the 100-mile 'Lap of the Lough Cycle' around Lough Neagh.

To date, Fr Michael has raised around £11,500 for the Good Shepherd project and about the same for the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice.



Abseil fundraiser - Kate Gormley, Craigmole, in the Claudy Parish.



Niamh O'Kane, Park, Banagher Parish, did a pier jump at Creggan Country Park for Children in Crossfire.



Fr Michael Canny presenting a £5,000 cheque to Northern Ireland Children's Hospice, from the proceeds of money raised from his 100-mile sponsored cycle in memory of baby Conor McKinney-McCallion. Included are Caidan McKinney McCallion and Sally McCallion.



Fr Michael Canny, PP, Waterside, presenting Sr Myriam McLaughlin, of the Good Shepherd Sisters, with a cheque for £4,000 as part proceeds of money raised from his 100-mile cycle. The remaining funds raised were presented to the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice.

Burt, Inch & Fahan Calendar 2022

THE annual Burt, Inch & Fahan Calendar for 2022 is now available in all the usual outlets.

The colourful showcase of some of the parish's most beautiful and iconic scenes, taken by local photographers, can be purchased in local shops and post offices around the parish or reserve your copy by contacting Kathleen & Breige Grant on 074 9368373 or 086 3931426.

The producers thank all the sponsors, local shops and those who gave photographs to make this publication possible for the 11th successive year.

Priced at only €5, this is a real bargain and helps two very worthwhile causes. Proceeds from the sale of the 2022 calendars will go to the Oncology Services in Letterkenny University Hospital and Parochial Funds.



Niamh O'Kane.

Three Patrons Mission a special time of reflection on...

St Joseph – Man of Prayer...Family...Faith

THE Three Patrons' Parish was blessed with a beautiful time of prayer as Advent got underway and the special year honouring St Joseph drew to a close, when the Discalced Carmelite Fathers led a three-day mission dedicated to the Patron of the Catholic Church, from November 29 until December 1.

Frs Michael McGoldrick and Mike Spain, of Termonbacca, were joined by Fr Liam Finnerty ocd, Dublin, and the trio were greatly impressed and heartened by the turnout of parishioners for all the ceremonies, including the early morning Masses, in all three churches in the parish, St Patrick's, Pennyburn, St Joseph's Galliagh, and St Brigid's Carnhill, and a very special ceremony for the Blessing of the Sick on the second afternoon in St Joseph's Church, followed by Confessions.

As well as the two morning Masses in each Church, the Mission included an evening ceremony, during which there was a period of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the praying of the Rosary and a talk.

Each day had a different theme, reflecting on St Joseph as a Man of Prayer, a Man of the Family, and a Man of Faith, and the Carmelite Fathers gave a talk on each. A summary of those delivered by Fr Michael McGoldrick are included in this coverage of the Mission.

Prayer

Speaking about St Joseph as a man of prayer, Fr Michael remarked that, while the Gospels say very little about St Joseph, "we get clues about the place of prayer in his life from events recorded there."

He added: "Most of what we know about St Joseph comes from description of four dreams in which an angel of God directed him to act in a particular way. The dreams are recounted in chapters one and two of St Matthew's Gospel."

Saying that there was much to be learnt from these dreams, he continued: "What is striking is that in each vision Joseph was quickly able to recognize that it was an angel of God that was visiting him. Perhaps because in three of the four dreams the angel was asking him to do something that he would not have chosen to do, he quickly realized that it was the angel of God and not the devil that was appearing to him."

"The devil can appear as an angel of light and has fooled many over the centuries. Joseph had deep faith that enabled him to recognize that his dreams were visits from an angel of God."

Highlighting that listening to God was the first quality of prayer, Fr Michael referred to what St John Paul II had said of Joseph, "he listens to the words of the Living God. He listens in

silence. And his heart ceaselessly perseveres in the readiness to accept the Truth contained in the word of the Living God".

He went on to point out that prayer as a family was very important in the Jewish tradition, saying: "We can assume that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus prayed as a family every day. Devout Jews were to pray the Shema prayer twice daily and we can assume that the Joseph would have done so...and would also have taught Jesus to say that prayer."

"When a child was born, it was consecrated to God by the parents going to the Temple in Jerusalem and offering a sacrifice in thanksgiving. It would be the equivalent of our baptism ceremony. We know that Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple to consecrate him and to offer the sacrifice and prayers of thanksgiving."

"We know from the Gospels that Jesus went to the synagogue, the Jewish equivalent of our chapels, each Sabbath to join in the community prayer. He would have learned this practice from going to the synagogue with his father. He would have seen his father at prayer there and learned from him. Faith is caught not taught".

He added: "Saying that Joseph and Mary taught Jesus the place of God in his life may sound strange, since Jesus was the Son of God. But in the Letter to the Philippians we are told that Jesus 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness'. Just as we are not born with full knowledge of God, neither was Jesus. He had to learn from his parents about God."

"Joseph taught him to pray as was the responsibility of every man at the time. He brought Jesus to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Joseph is a great role model for fathers in passing on faith to their children."

"Joseph teaches us to listen to God, to see God as our friend who only wants what is best for us and, therefore, to trust God. His life tells us that prayer is indeed frequent friendly conversations with someone that we know loves us".

Family

Talking about St Joseph as a man of the family, Fr Michael considered what lessons could be learnt from the Holy Family and, in particular, St Joseph.

He firstly referred to St Joseph learning that Mary was pregnant, saying: "We presume that she told him and that she would have told him how she became pregnant - that this was God's doing and that her child was God's Son. The gospels tell us that Joseph, being a just man, wanted to divorce Our Lady informally. His reasons were to protect her first of all because

a woman who became pregnant before marriage could be stoned to death."

"But there was deeper reason: respect for what God was doing. He could not marry Mary and claim that child as his own - for it was God's child. We can only imagine the blow it must have been for Joseph. God, in turn, honoured his goodness and sent an angel to tell him to take Mary as his wife and to name the child, Jesus".

He went on to note that Joseph and Mary's married life had many twists and turns: "When they married and Jesus was born, I am sure Joseph was looking forward to living a normal, simple and happy family life. He was a carpenter. While a carpenter did not, at that time, make much money, he knew that he would earn enough to support his family."

"That plan too was dashed, not by God but by someone who was out to destroy Jesus - Herod. Herod had learned from the Wise Men that Jesus was to be a king, and he felt threatened. He did what so many have done down the centuries - he tried to destroy the opposition. He arranged for every male child under two to be put to death. The angel of God appeared to Joseph again and he, Mary and Jesus had to set off at night for Egypt. It meant learning a new language, getting work wherever possible and getting used to a whole new way of life. Many refugees today can identify with the situation".

Commenting on the story of Joseph and Mary's anxious return to Jerusalem when Jesus went missing, as a 12-year-old, and it taking three days to find him, Fr Michael remarked: "Families here have spent days searching for missing sons and daughters, so you more than anyone know what Joseph and Mary went through. They were lucky enough to eventually find Jesus, though they did not understand the reason he gave for going missing".

Highlighting that most of the life of Jesus had been lived quietly in Nazareth, he continued: "We sometimes forget that Jesus was fully human. He would have learned how to behave as a young man from Joseph. The qualities that we see in Jesus in the Gospel are the fruit of His home life. Joseph taught Him to be gentle yet strong, independent yet cooperative, self-controlled and respectful of others, conscientious towards his family and at work, grateful, humble and aware of his dependence on God the Father, concerned about the poor and those whose rights were being abused".

Fr Michael also shared four principles for parenting that writer, Tom McGrath, a husband and father, had found in St Joseph:

Every difficult family situation is best met with compassion; expect God to speak to you, and be willing to listen; practice your religion, it will help you discover who you are and why you are here; and we are all here to do some work - just as Jesus had a specific task to carry out, so did Joseph and so do each of us.

Commenting on Joseph as a model parent, he said: "He sacrificed any dreams he may have had, any plans for the kind of family he may have wanted, in order to be the father God wanted him to be. His whole self was sacrificed to Mary and Jesus. This is the role of every parent: To pour yourselves out to bring about God's dreams and plans, and not our own. If you try to allow God His way and to give yourself over to His will, you are a very good parent".

Faith

In talking about Joseph as a man of faith, Fr Michael said that this was again very evident in Joseph immediately obeying what he was told to do by the angel of God in his dreams.

"While Joseph recognized the visit of God it cannot have been easy for him to constantly change his plans. Each time he was asked to face an unknown future," he remarked, adding: "But isn't that precisely what faith is about".

Explaining that faith "is first and foremost acknowledging God to be Lord of our lives, God who makes himself visible in Jesus", he continued: "We acknowledge that God wants only what is best for us - even though we may not always understand why. God will often lead us along paths that we are not familiar with, even paths we would prefer not to follow, but always for our good."

"Faith is also acknowledging that Jesus wants us to be His friends. It's a friendship we live out



Carnhill



Bishop Donal's Christmas message

May we be grateful for God-given blessings, big and small



Bishop Donal

THE events of the Christmas story must have left Mary and Joseph very confused. All their

plans were gone and someone else seemed to be in charge of their lives. And that sense of being confused must have continued for all of their life.

But Mary began the journey with a grateful heart when she went to visit Elizabeth. There she prayed the Magnificat, giving thanks and praise to God.

And I am sure that she was able to look back on all the strange and stressful events of her life with eyes of gratitude. Why? Because she knew that God's grace was at work, even in the most difficult of situations.

I hope that individuals, families and communities will have the chance to celebrate good things this Christmas, whatever the limitation on travel and on gatherings.

And when we look back over the last very difficult months, I hope that we can acknowledge the losses - but also be grateful for the God-given blessings, big and small.

Grateful hearts can face the future with trust, whatever it holds. For we know that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us - and still does.

continued from page 14

in our day-to-day lives. We show that we want to be friends of Jesus by the way we treat one another. We also express it when we pray – when we listen to Jesus and talk to Him. Belief in doctrines follows on from that because either Jesus has revealed these truths, or His church has spelled them out.”

He also pointed out that faith needs some silence in our lives to be open to God, noting that Pope Francis affirms that St Joseph was open to the quiet presence of God at every moment of our lives, in every person and in every situation.

“Because we are dealing with something that we cannot see or touch, it is not surprising that at times we question our faith,” said Fr Michael, adding: “There is nothing wrong with having doubts. Cardinal Basil Hume, a former archbishop of Westminster once wrote, ‘I only began to believe when I doubted’. It is when we doubt that we have to make a true act of faith. We have to depend entirely on God.

“As we grow in faith, it will often seem to get darker. We seem to have few securities. Many good people in whom this is happening think that they are losing their faith. The opposite is in fact the case. Their faith is growing stronger.

“When we see faith in that light,

it is clear that Joseph was a man of faith. He acknowledged God to be Lord of his life. He was willing to do what God wanted and to accept what God wanted. He did not always understand what God was doing but he trusted that God wanted only good for him. He was a humble man because he was always willing to lay aside his own preferences for what God asked of him. He trusted that God knew better”.

He went on to quote some words of Pope Francis that it was faith that “gave Joseph the power to find light just at the moment when everything seemed dark. Faith sustained him amid the troubles of life. Thanks to faith, Joseph was able to press forward when everything seemed to be holding him back”.

“We ask St Joseph Patron of the Church, man of faith, to help us along our journey of faith,” concluded Fr Michael.

Paying tribute to the efforts made by parishioners to attend the various ceremonies and to the Parish Pastoral Council for organising the Mission, parish priest, Fr Michael McCaughey thanked the Carmelite Fathers for their inspiring sermons and also for the great ministry they carry out at Termonbacca, which, he said, was always a place where people were made feel welcome.



Galliagh



Fr Michael McGoldrick ocd Termonbacca.



Pennyburn



Many preparing for Christmas with Novena to Divine Child

by Aoife O'Neill

THE nine-day Novena to the Divine Child in preparation for Christmas, led by the Discalced Carmelite Fathers in Termonbacca, got underway on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, and will finish on Thursday, December 16.

This Novena is inspired by the old Carmel tradition dating back to the time of St Teresa of Avila. In this tradition, the image of the Child Jesus from the crib would spend nine nights moving from cell to cell, and the nun or monk would hold a 24-hour time of prayer, keeping vigil with the

Child.

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

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

Today, the Child Jesus statue from the crib at Termonbacca journeys around the city, spending 24 hours in a different home before moving on to the next.

Each night, the Carmelites celebrate Mass with Novena Prayers at 7.30 pm. They invite people to submit prayer intentions, which are then written on a 'straw' strip and placed in the empty manger to prepare a bed for the Child Jesus.

When the Novena concludes, on Thursday, December 16, with Mass at 7.30 pm, the child Jesus will be placed in the manger at Termonbacca.

This year, the route of the Child Jesus includes from Termonbacca to Rossville Street (December 8), then on to Derryview Terrace (December

9), Sevenoaks (December 10), Papworth Ave (Saturday 11), Ballyarnett (December 12), Ardnamoyle (December 13), Caradale Park (December 14), Westway (December 15), and back to Termonbacca (December 16).

All are welcome to come along for Mass - book a place via termonbaccaderry@gmail.com or join via Termonbacca YouTube channel.

A copy of the Novena prayers can also be found at www.termonbacca.org or sent via email to those who wish to join at home.



The Divine Child arrives the first night of the Novena at the home of the Murphy family, Rossville Street



Blessed Is She Derry
Blessed Brunch
& Books

Saturday 18th December 2021
12pm- 2pm
Termonbacca Carmelite
Retreat Centre

An opportunity for women of all
ages to get together, eat, pray
and journey through spiritual
books together.

For bookings or queries please PM or
email termonbaccaderry@gmail.com

Eangach

Ár nDúchas

An Phaidir Gheal

Go mbeannaí Dia dhuit,
a Phaidir Gheal,
go mbeannaí Dia is Muire dhuit.
Cár chodail tú aréir?
Faoi chosa Mhic Dé.

Cá gcodlóidh tú anocht?
Faoi chosa na mbocht.
Cá gcodlóidh tú amárach?
Faoi chosa Naomh Pádraig.

Céard é sin romhat amach?
Tá, na haingle.
Céard é sin i do dhiaidh aniar?
Tá, na hAspail.

Céard é sin ar do ghualainn dheas?
Tá, trí bhraon d'uisce an Domhnaigh
a chuir Muire liom ag déanamh eolais
ó thigh Phádraig go dtí tigh Pharthais.

Bríd agus a brat,
Micheál agus a sciath,
dhá láimh gheala
ghléigeala Mhic Dé
ag cumhdach an tí
agus a mbaineann linn
arís go maidin.

Amen

(Ár bPaidreacha Dúchais, 509.
Buíochas le *Foilseacháin Ábhair Spioradálta*.)

Mí na hAidbhint



Coinnle

Tugtar Mí na Nollag ar an mhí seo, agus ar ndóigh tá sin iontach fóirstineach. Ach ar bhealach thioctadh Mí na hAidbhint a thabhairt uirthi, nó i rith na míosa táimid ag ullmhú don Nollaig — i séasúr na hAidbhint. Seo mar a chuireann Críostóir Ó Domhnaill (údar) agus Ciarán Ó Dúshláine (aistriúeoir) síos ar an Aidbhint ina leabhar *Muire, Máthair Dé*:

‘Is é a dhéanann na diagairí ná an tIonchollú a phlé go léannta. An gnáthdhuine, áfach, tugann sé cuairt ar an Mhainséar. Sa Mhainséar feicimid céard a fuair na haoirí ansin rompu: ‘Muire agus Iósaef, agus an naíonán ina luí sa mhainséar’ (*Lúcás 2:16*.) D’imigh na haoirí leo ansin agus iad ‘ag glóiriú agus ag moladh Dé faoinar chuala siad agus a bhfaca siad’.

I mBeithil tá plean síoraí Dé ag teacht chun críche. I ndiaidh 14 bhiliún bliain de stair an domhain

bhí buaicphointe sroiste, ach ní bheadh brí iomlán an ní a bhí tarlaithé soiléir go cionn tríocha bliain eile, ag tosú le Cnoc Chailvaire agus an Cháisc agus ag críochnú leis an Chincís.

Tá an Mainséar ina thost, ach má fhanaimid nóiméad le héisteacht, tabharfaimid faoi ndeara go bhfuil scéal á insint aige. Tugann sé cuireadh dúinn blaiseadh dá rúndiamhair. I liotúirge na hEaglaise tarraingítear ár n-aird ar an rúndiamhair seo leanas:

‘Óir, trí rúndiamhair an Bhriathair i gcolainn chuir tú solas nua do ghlóire ag lonradh ar shúile ár n-aighe: ionas go scuabfaí ar aghaidh sinn chun grá a thabhairt do na maitheasaí dofheicthe trí aithne a chur ar Dhia go sofheicthe’ (*Preafáid na Nollag 1*).

Anseo i mBeithil tá naíonán de thart ar 3 chileagram meáchan



Coinnleoir na hAidbhint

tagtha ar an saol, agus dóibh siúd a chreideann is siombail nua lonrach é de ghlóir Dé: Dia na síoraíochta i gcrot naíonáin anbhainn. Is léiriú ann féin an anbhainne seo ina bhfuil Dia le feiceáil agus é ag labhairt lenár gcroí.

Seasaimid os comhair an mhainséir inár dtost. Teipeann orainn é a thuigheáil. Ach is é a deir an Liotúirge: ‘Tá muid gafa



Solas

go hiomlán i ngrá do Dhia atá dofheicthe. Caithfimid ligint do rúndiamhair Mhuire agus an Linbh dul i bhfeidhm go hiomlán orainn; caithfimid déanamh mar a rinne Muire: ‘thaiscigh Muire ina cuimhne na nithe seo uile, ag machnamh orthu ina croí (*Lúcás 2:19*). Is áit í Beithil ar a gcaithfimid filleadh arís is arís eile.

(Buíochas le *Foilseacháin Ábhair Spioradálta*.)



Mainséar

Léiriú Inchollaithe ar Ghrá Dé

Nach iontach an rud atá á rá ag an Eaglais nuair a deirtear gur sacraimint iad an lánúin, comhartha ghrá Dé i gcolainn daonna. Ní thig leat sin a rá gan creideamh a bheith agat sa Tríonóid: Athair, Mac agus Spiorad Naomh. Is trí phearsa i muintearas le chéile iad an Tríonóid Naofa. Agus is dhá phearsa i muintearas le chéile iad an lánúin phósta. Mar sin is comhartha ghrá na Tríonóide í an lánúin phósta, comhartha mhuintearas na Tríonóide i muintearas na lánúine. Tá an méid sin ráite i bpreafáid a trí d’Aifreann an phósta nuair a deirtear:

*Ba thoil leat an duine a chruthaigh tú le barr ceana
a ardú go céim dínite chomh hard sin
go dtabharfa dúinn in aontacht an fhir agus na mná
iomhá fhíor de do ghrá féin.*

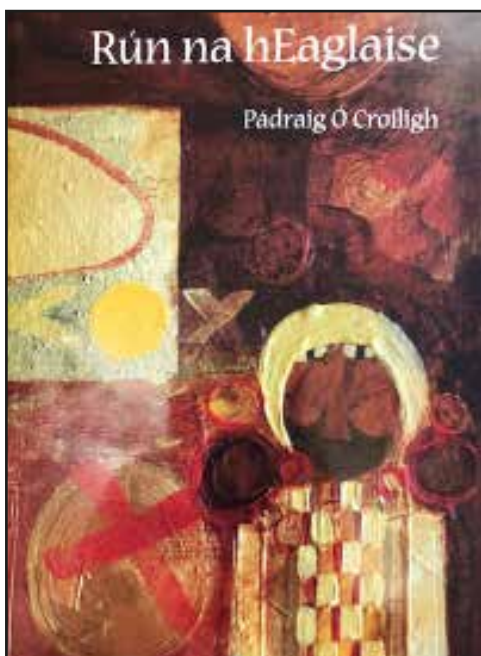
Tugann sé sin bunús dúinn as an lex orandi, nó dlí na hurná, le teagasc na hEaglaise a aithint. Is ó ghrá na Tríonóide a thig cruthú an domhain agus an chine dhaonna, agus is ó ghrá na lánúine a thig cruthú na clainne, i gcomhoibriú le Dia. Ní sa mhéid sin amháin

atá an tsacraimint le feiceáil, ach i dtaispeántas an ghrá os comhair an tsaoil agus sa léiriú go bhfuil an saol ar fad ag brath ar an ghrá, cosúil leis an lánúin. Sin rud atá speisialta i saol na lánúine. Sin an príomhrud atá le déanamh acu i saol na hEaglaise, grá a bheith acu dá chéile agus a bheith mar léiriú inchollaithe ar ghrá Dé. Glaonn sé sin gach grá eile amach as gníomhaíocht agus muintearais an chine dhaonna, gach carthanacht agus gach ministreacht ghrá eile dá bhfuil ar an domhan.

Gan grá daingean a bheith á

léiriú ag lánúineacha na hEaglaise bheadh moill agus tacht ar shruthán an ghrá ón Tríonóid isteach tríd an chine dhaonna. Mar sin ní rud deas atá á phlé againn i Sacraimint an Phósta, ach rud iontach tábhachtach do shaol na hEaglaise, agus tríd sin do shaol an domhain ar fad.

Buíochas le *Foilseacháin Ábhair Spioradálta*.





Gifting talents to parish family in thanksgiving to God...

AS we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus and reflect on the Christmas story, including the visit of the Three Wise Men who went out of their way to pay homage to this special Child, giving Him their precious gifts, a number of people across the Diocese have been reflecting on the gifts/talents that they have received from God, and how they could offer (or maybe already do offer) these for the benefit of their parish, as a thanksgiving gift to God...

God has given us unique gifts and we are told not to hide our light under a bushel *by Bernie Doody*

PEOPLE do not like to talk about their talents as it may come across as arrogant, and there's truth in that, however, God has given us all our unique gifts and we are told "not to hide our light under a bushel".

When I was asked to share how we might use our talents for the benefit of our parish, my first thought was the flower-arranging that I do for two churches in my town. I also thought that it didn't really require much talent, as the flowers are already beautiful - perhaps, just an eye for colour and giving a little of your time.

In fact, I experience the most serene peace when I am flower-arranging in church that I can only describe as "a peace that the world cannot give", and I feel privileged and so thankful to God for this little job.

I have asked God in the past,

"Is that it, God, is this all I can do for you?" as I sometimes get frustrated about the very limited role that women can play in our Church. Then I remember that the Church is not the building but the people.

I think how I can help people in our community through the family support charity that I am the administrator for, and which I also volunteer with. These families are ones that are going through a difficult time in their lives, perhaps a sick child or parent, disability, broken relationship or post natal depression.

As a volunteer, I visit the family for three to six months, until the family feel able to move on. The role of the volunteer is just "to be there", a listening ear and to spend some time with the children.

I feel this is my best gift, as I

What gifts do we bring to the Christ Child?

by Bishop Donal

SOMEONE said that education is not about finding out how smart you are - but discovering how you are smart. None of us is as smart as all of us.

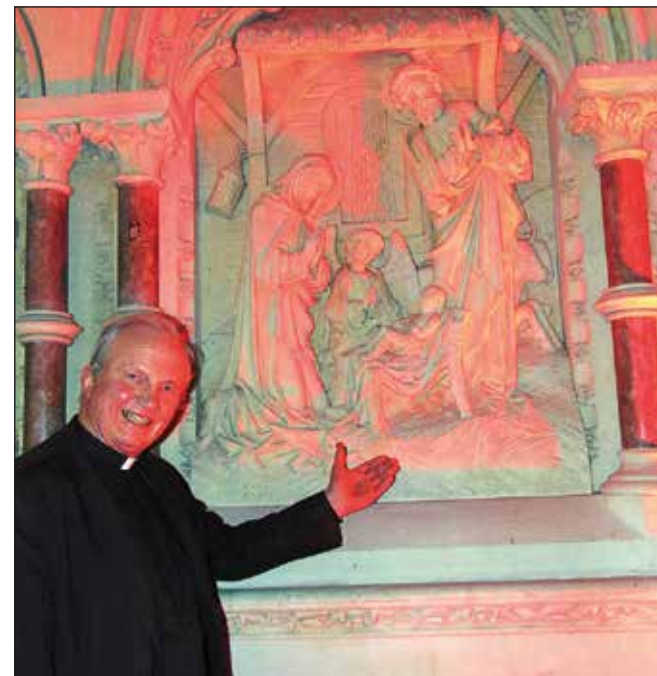
And we are all gifted in different ways.

'The Net' has asked a number of people to reflect on gifts that they or others have. What gifts do we

bring to the Christ Child?

In this winter of 2021, we might reflect on our gifts by walking together, helping others to see their talents and allowing them to affirm us in our own blessings.

That affirmation of our God-given beauty can be the best gift that anyone received!



Bishop Donal Mckeown

It's not just being aware of our talents, but what we do with them *by Search Youth Group*

AS young people, we collectively agree that sharing Jesus' message with other young people is one of the best ways that we can give thanks to God for all that He has done in our lives.

Through our faith journey in 'Search', we have learned that we are 'children of God' and are 'made in his image'. We know that God is good and is working in our lives even when we don't see it.

We want to share with others the message of God's love and we encourage others to do this, whether that be through 'Search', their own parishes, or other Christian organisations.

We feel that through getting to know Jesus we are getting to have a deeper understanding of ourselves and who we are created to be.

We understand that everyone's talents and abilities are different. In the 'parable of the talents' we are reminded that we have been given different amounts of talents to use, and that it is not really about what talents we have but what we do



Search Youth Group.

with them.

For some of the Search young people, sharing our talents looks like volunteering at Church, our schools, and in Search summer schemes or weekend retreats.

We would encourage all young people to get involved in their

parish as they are the future of the Church, and the church needs more people. We have seen how volunteering builds confidence, develops leadership skills and deepens faith, and we would want these experiences for all our young people.

During our weekly meetings, we will continue to pray for all our young people in our parishes that, during this Christmas season, they can rediscover the true meaning of Christmas; to be reminded that Jesus came so that we could live life to the full.

Through song I have been able to provide comfort...joy...and hope *by Grace Kelly*



Grace Kelly, Clonleigh Parish.

AS we journey through the season of Advent and then the wonderful story of the Nativity, I am reflecting on my role within

the Church.

I have been a member of our Church choir for over 30 years. I feel my voice allows me to express my feelings and to perform the liturgy along with the other Choir members. My voice gives me the power and confidence to unite the congregation of the Church in a meaningful way through music.

Just as the disciples were sent to spread the word of God, I have been given the same gift from God to allow me to do the same thing in a different way. Not only does my voice allow me to do this in a religious setting, but I find it easier to express myself in my day-to-day life and present myself assertively because I have no doubt or reservations about the gift I have

received from God.

My music ministry has allowed me to share in hundreds of special occasions with the Church community. Through song I have been able to provide comfort in times of distress, joy in times of celebration, and hope in times of uncertainty.

With other family members in the Choir, we have the opportunity to touch so many people's lives, alongside the fact that it brings us closer to God as a family.

I am also a member of the recently formed Liturgical working group and our mission is to encourage more people to become involved in the Church.

"When you sing you pray twice" (St Augustine).

can empathise a lot with these families from my own past experiences as a busy mum.

With this in mind, although the Church needs readers and cleaners, how we use our talents to help God's people, is paramount.



Bernie Doody, Omagh

Our gifts ultimately are given to us to love and to serve *by Kathleen Cullivan*



Kathleen Cullivan, Derry

AS we prepare to recall that first Christmas when the three Wise Men travelled with gifts for the infant Jesus, perhaps it would be useful to look at this event and the significance of it to our present time.

The biblical account of the three wise men (or Magi) can be found in Matthew 2: 1-12. During the Christmas season, the story of the Magi bringing their gifts to the Christ Child can be a helpful reminder to us of all the different gifts that God wants from us as well.

At some point after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, several Magi travelled to see him by following a unique star or light in the sky. They were a special class of priests in the Persian Empire that had been around for a long time, at least since Daniel was appointed to be their leader (Daniel 5). It is very possible that while Daniel was overseeing these Magi, he taught them the prophecies about the coming Messiah, such as in Numbers 24:17 and Micah 5:2.

Given that they were looking for signs, it is also quite possible they had been waiting for Jesus coming

for some time. They were religious professors, philosophers, and scholars who were highly educated in many fields, including religion, astronomy and even astrology. These men did not risk their lives to make this journey in order to make a political move, teach a seminar, or advise a king, they were travelling from the far east to worship He who has been born King of the Jews (Matthew 2:2).

When they found the child they rejoiced with great joy, fell on their knees before Jesus and Mary and worshipped Him. They humbled themselves before God's son and they gave their best gifts to Jesus. They cared greatly for Jesus. This was an appropriate reaction to being in the presence of the King of Kings. Then they opened their gifts to present to the child. The gifts were gold, frankincense and myrrh. These were not random gifts they had lying around. They each had their significance and have important meaning for us today. While these gifts were rare and costly, they were not unheard of in first century Palestine.

The deeper spiritual meaning behind these gifts symbolized three key aspects of Christ's identity. The gold points to Jesus' royalty, the frankincense to His divinity and the myrrh to His humanity. Their gifts told the story of how God, who came down from Heaven as our King (gold) to fulfil His priestly duties (frankincense) and eventually die for our sins (myrrh).

The main gift behind the Magi's story is their willingness to go to the ends of the earth to pursue and find the Son of God, and their love and reverence when finding Him lying in absolute poverty. A totally dependent and helpless child, but these circumstances did not cause their faith to waver. They knew with

certainty that they had found the King of Kings. They worshipped Him with great love.

When growing up, I was taught to aspire to recognising what my vocation was. Everybody had a special vocation which nobody else could fulfil. This might not be visible to us, but it was something that we needed to pursue if we were to find contentment and peace. By acknowledging and practising our vocation we would worship God. Prayer was the gateway to finding this.

I understood that I was not being pointed in the direction of a career path, which is the way we might look on it today. I was being asked to get to know and understand the gifts and talents that God has bestowed on me and how I should use them.

There was a wider definition of vocation than how we see it today. I wouldn't have seen a vocation for me within the Church, as this would have meant becoming a nun or joining the religious life. This seemed the only route available at that time. I learned from family that love of neighbour was paramount and this, somehow, should be inherent in all that I would do. This was never spoken but rather lived out.

Gratefulness

I believe my vocation found me rather than me choosing it, because I would not have thought to look in the direction I was to find myself.

There was a period of wandering before this happened. After many experiences in working in many different capacities, none of which lasted very long, I started to work in the field of addiction and there I remained. Probably one of the greatest gifts I was ever given. Here was also where I began to see my own gifts through the eyes of others. This gave me a peace and contentment and resolved a lot of restlessness. I feel a profound gratefulness to God for guiding me to the gifts He has given me and for the people He put in my way.

I sometimes feel that God's guidance is like a soft whisper, so easily missed, just like the Magi chose to follow that star with little else to inform them, other than their faith and that soft whisper of God. As I was rewarded with contentment and a better understanding of how God works with and in people, the Magi were rewarded by being one of the first to recognize and see the Saviour. They used their strongest gift, which was beyond the symbolism of the gifts they brought, and that was the love that existed in their hearts for the Lord, before ever seeing him. They teach us to seek, to take time out, to put everything aside as they did, and to believe.

This example helps us to create the space we need to experience Christmas as we approach it, with all its pressures and pulls in other directions. Love is what God most

seeks from us. Like any mother, no matter how many children she has, she will always seek the love of the child who gets a little lost.

Our gifts or talents ultimately are given to us to love and to serve. How can we use these gifts within the church? There have been new roles created in the church for laity participation. We now have readers, Eucharistic ministers and, on November 21, we had three men ordained to the diaconate in the Diocese of Tuam. In a church where lay people as well as clergy are active in leadership and other roles, the research shows that good quality lay leadership and active involvement from lay people are linked to growth. Churches are more likely to be growing where volunteers are involved in a variety of roles in church life.

My own involvement in church has only come about recently. I believe that involvement remains on the fringes as we undergo the changes necessary to allow a more meaningful participation of the laity. This will involve structural change as emphasised by Pope Francis. His desire is to see the Church informed by laity, rather than a top-down approach.

As we approach the possibility of a more open and inclusive Church developing, I have some hope that the laity may see a future where we will have more constructive participation in the future, where we can make use of the many gifts

that the laity possesses.

As more courses develop in the areas of theology, parish ministry and spiritual guidance, their very existence and validation by the Church seems to indicate that these may be areas to be developed within it.

To look at the writings of Pope Francis gives much needed inspiration. He acknowledges the numerous challenges thrown up by contemporary life. He gives voice to the inherent knowledge and wisdom which exists in every human heart. He says: "It is illogical and even impossible for us pastors to think that we have a monopoly on solutions for the numerous challenges thrown up by contemporary life".

His reflection on the role of the laity lies in the belief that we would have a much richer Church with more inclusiveness of the laity. This approach seems very close to the Bible and the beautiful examples Jesus gave us of how He chose His disciples from the most ordinary of men and placed His Church in their care. The story of Mary Magdalene, the woman at the well and the tax collector are other examples.

Like the Magi at that first Christmas, anybody who recognised Him didn't look back. My prayer is that we may all recognise Him in a deeper way this Christmas, in that soft whisper so easily missed.

May brightness of Christmas Star inspire all to share their talents *by Geraldine Conwell*



Geraldine Conwell, Dunamagagh.

their witness of faith and belief in God. Like the Magi, we, too, are led to Jesus.

What are our treasures? When it comes to the life of the parish can it be said that we open our treasures and gifts? From my earliest memory, my parents involved me and the rest of my family in the life of the parish. Duties included: cleaning the chapel; lifting the 'Silver Circle' monies in the townland; assisting in every parochial social event in the parish hall, whether it was a Christmas party for children or an event for the senior citizens or a fundraising Bazaar. We were always encouraged to actively give of our time and gifts for the benefit of the parish community.

As I journeyed through life I tried as best I could to use the gifts and talents God has given me for the benefit of my parish community. One precious gift I received from God is the gift of creativity. I have used this gift to enhance the Liturgical celebrations in our parish.

Many years ago, along with a group of women in the parish, we designed and created church hangings for important celebrations in the Church calendar. Such

celebrations included: Christmas; Easter; First Communion; Confirmation; Marriage; and Our Lady. I have erected the crib in my local church since the early 1980s and have experienced much joy in doing so!

My work as a teacher in my local school enabled me to foster gifts in the children I taught and encourage them to contribute to the life of the Church. Since my retirement, I find myself utilising my gifts of planning and organisation as a member of the Parish Pastoral Council. I use my IT skills to help with regular posts on our parish Facebook page. In addition to the Parish Pastoral Council, I am an active member of our local Community Association and contribute to the social life of our parish community. Our team was very active during the Covid-19 pandemic, reaching out to the young and elderly in our community. More recently we have spent time and energy securing funding, and developing and delivering programmes classes and workshops to assist parishioners of all ages in reconnecting with each other following lockdown.

As we commence the Synodal journey, it's an opportune time to reflect on this new place of

travelling, and allow God and the Holy Spirit to lead us in commitment and in sharing our gifts to enrich our communities.

We have many calls on our time but, through prayer and reflection, we will be guided by the grace of God and the Holy Spirit to keep alive the flame of faith in our communities. I pray that the Star that led the Magi to the manger in Bethlehem will shine over our personal mangers and deepen our commitment to mission. May the brightness of that star journey into our hearts and inspire all in our parishes, young and old, to share the talents God has graced them with as a thanksgiving gift.

Through the famous words of St Francis of Assisi, "It is in giving that we receive", we are reminded to offer our help, love and support for those in need and to look for opportunities to help people with an open heart without expecting anything in return.

To fully receive, to receive with a joy that motivates us to keep on giving, we must give from a place of selflessness — from a place of service to others, not selfishness. God who sees all the good we do, rewards us with His countless blessings.

Being in parish choir a lovely way to feel part of Mass *by Bronagh Currie*

I think everyone has been given unique gifts. There are so many different gifts and talents, like being artistic, a great planner or communicator, or the gift of writing.

I have been given a certain amount of musical ability. I enjoy singing as part of our parish choir. Being part of a church choir is a lovely way to feel part of the Mass and other services, and hopefully add something to the service itself. It is a great way of meeting and making really good friends with similar interests.

I think everyone enjoys singing Christmas Carols at this special time of year. There are so many beautiful classic Carols and I think everyone has a favourite, like 'O Holy Night' or 'Silent Night'.

And, there are some beautiful

more recently composed Christmas hymns by very talented and gifted people today, like Sarah Hart's hymn 'Saviour', Matt Maher's hymn 'Glory' (Let There Be Peace), and Liam Lawton's hymn, 'The Maiden and Her Child'.



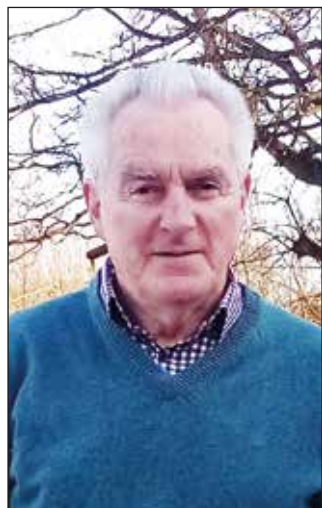
Bronagh Currie, Bellaghy

AS we approach the beautiful celebration of Christ's birth and the story of the Three Wise men bearing gifts for the Infant Jesus, we reflect on this event in scripture.

The Story of the Magi are the first people who are described as worshipping Jesus. The star directed them and after searching and travelling "by another route", they found the precious gift of God's Son. They didn't just turn up and leave, they were overjoyed and experienced a deep encounter with Jesus. They opened their treasures and offered their gifts to God. The gifts of the Magi are symbolic of

What gifts have you to offer your parish?

by Noel Bradley



Noel Bradley, Buncrana.

I have been asked to write a piece for 'The Net' on the gifts or talents I, and others, have to offer our parish. I suppose 'it is right and fitting' that I acknowledge to myself and to God first of all that I have been gifted in many ways, and these gifts of their nature deserve thanks or gratitude.

I did not give myself these gifts but have been given them and so 'it is right and fitting' that I thank God for them. In fact, as I reflect on my gifts, I can say that everything I am and have has been given to me: from my existence to the air that I breathe, to my physical, psychological and mental/spiritual faculties. This is true of all of us. But there are also specific and unique gifts that I or another have and can offer. What might they be for me?

I was fortunate, or gifted, to study Philosophy in UCC, and then Theology in a seminary and later, for many years, in Rome. It helped me to understand in some way the truths and mysteries of the Christian faith and to share that understanding with others. Later, as a missionary priest with

the African Missions (SMA), I was fortunate, or gifted again, to work as a missionary priest for 29 years, with all the experience and learning that I have gained from that. During that time, I had the good fortune to study and train in counselling and in spiritual direction, or accompaniment, plus various training and facilitation in various personal and community development workshops along the way.

I am married now over 21 years, with two young adults, and my wife, Rosanna and I have tried to continue to commit ourselves to the Church and its mission. We help with a 'Lectio Divina' group that consists in reading, reflecting and praying over the coming Sunday readings and then sharing together our thoughts and feelings. We assist with a short pre-baptism night for parents and Godparents. We also take part in a small faith-sharing group, in which we share about how we are getting on in our own faith journey. We find this supportive for ourselves and for the others.

Lectio Divina and small faith-sharing groups could be extended around the parish. It can be done on Zoom or in someone's home, when it becomes safe. This kind of Scripture reflection, prayer and sharing ones faith experience would be new to most, but it has been found helpful in nourishing and building up the faith of people. Hearing Scripture at Mass on Sunday with a homily may be of help, but I believe most people could not tell you what the Scripture readings were about after Mass if they were asked.

It does not seem sufficient to nourish and strengthen people's faith to live and work in a secular

world like ours today. The number of engaged Catholics has been dropping steadily in recent years. (Not that it is all about numbers). It would take some organisation and some short training for people to widen this within the parish.

Care

This brings us to the question of the gifts and talents of other people in the parish. The main gift that they have is that the majority of them care and have affection for the Church. "The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Rom 5:5). This is shown in the way they care for their immediate families and extended family, but also for neighbours and others.

You don't need a degree in Theology or a qualification in Scripture to get involved in Scripture reflection and prayer or faith sharing. You just need to be able to read and talk, and have a head on your shoulders and some love and care in your heart. The majority of people can ask questions, understand things, reflect, judge for themselves and decide. We do that all the time. People belong to organisations; they meet other people, go to meetings, they work on teams. They are educated. Just listen to the Joe Duffy programme on RTE radio with people phoning in to make their point.

Why can they not bring all that plus their experience of life into the ministry of the Church, and I don't mean just the ministry of reading in Church, or of giving out Holy Communion, or of the Parish Council, but also of a service/ministry like Lectio Divina and faith-sharing.

They could also be invited to join a 'Grieving' group for people who

are particularly grieving and need support, or learn to support and facilitate an environmental group in the light of climate destruction and the encyclical 'Laudato si', or a Catholic youth group, or a leadership training group, or a group that they themselves feel is needed.

Of course, it will be difficult to get lay people involved. They have been passive and leaving it all to the priests for so long, and the priests have got used to doing almost everything themselves, that it is going to be hard to change the old way of doing things.

The priests themselves need updating and training also because it is a new and ever changing pastoral situation. Now, with priests getting older and less vocations to the priesthood and the same amount of work to get done, it is not going to be easy for them to muster the energy for this new challenge of getting lay people involved.

There are all kinds of people with qualifications and training in therapy and counselling of different kinds, even perhaps in Theology. They would be a great asset for a parish. But they need to be invited and encouraged and supported all the way, until this kind of participation by lay people becomes the normal way of being Church.

This is what Pope Francis is pushing for in his speaking and working for a Synodal Church, with his key words of 'communion', 'participation' and 'mission', 'listening', 'dialogue' and 'discernment'. It is a call for a process of pastoral conversion for all of us.

Actions speak louder than words

by Lucia Hughes

I have been involved in parish work for 40 years. I am in the Legion of Mary, the church choir, the local drama club and, many years back, I ran the local youth club with others.

I enjoyed every minute of these parish organisations, and got to know so many people and, hopefully, gave people some of my time and experience.

Being an active member of your parish is a real privilege and I was lucky to have had the time and energy to help as best I could.

Actions speak louder than words.



Lucia Hughes, Dromore.

My gifts have helped me and others to overcome worries

by Martina Connolly

I feel that my gifts are happiness, love, selflessness and encouragement.

Through my life experiences, I feel that God has provided me with these specific gifts to overcome personal challenges and to help others overcome their worries and burdens.

I am dedicated to my parish in volunteering, choir, prayer groups and bringing others into their faith on a daily basis, acting as a witness for God and all the good that He has done in my life.

The Holy Spirit has worked wonders in me and my family.



Martina Connolly, Banagher.

Essential to involve more youth in parish ministries

by Robert Glackin

I have been a Minister of the Word and Eucharist as far back as I can remember. By our example in participating as readers and Eucharistic Ministers we, hopefully, can reach out and connect with those who are on the margins of Church and society.

We all have a desire to deepen our own spirituality through liturgy, prayer and the faith life of all those involved in parish life. We must offer our gifts as best we can whenever we are needed. It is essential that we encourage more young people to get involved in our parish ministries.

In our parish, we have always been blessed to have the help of the Thornhill Team, led by St Perpetua, who came along and facilitated Talks and Days of Reflection to develop our Parish Ministries and support

our priests.

We are all aware too of the challenge of the late Pope John Paul II for us all to get involved in very concrete, planned ways of bringing the good news of the Gospel to the society we live in.

"Let us go forward in hope", he said, "The new millennium is opening up before the Church like a vast ocean upon which we shall venture relying on the help of Christ".



Robert Glackin, Waterside, Derry.

If you have skills you are willing to share let your parish know

by Martin Harran



Martin Harran, Urney & Castletfin.

AS our Church moves more and more towards greater laity involvement, we will require active participation from the laity in ways that we might not have thought of in the past. My own background is in computing and IT, and I had

never really thought of that as a skill that might be useful to my parish until last year, when Covid hit us and online streaming of Mass and other liturgies became a necessity rather than an option.

When our parish first looked at doing this with one of the established commercial operations, the cost of doing so - both the initial setup and the ongoing fee - was prohibitively expensive. Between myself and a few other parishioners, however, we were able to set up our own streaming service at a negligible cost.

One of the things that struck me about this was that my own involvement was almost accidental; it came about through a question our priest asked, almost in passing, at a Parish Pastoral

Council meeting on Zoom.

I think there is a tendency that when we look at how we can play an active role in our parish, we tend to start by looking at what we see as the parish's needs and whether we can match into them. An alternative approach is for us to simply make our priest or Parish Pastoral Council aware of our skills and our willingness for the parish to avail of those skills, and let them figure out how those skills can be used.

This particularly applies to skills that we use in our working or professional life. There are all sorts of such skills that our parishes will need in the times ahead, perhaps physical skills to do with the maintenance of the church properties or other skills, such

as accountancy or managerial experience or teaching experience.

One particular challenge facing us is the increasing momentum to remove religious education out of schools and back into the family and the parish.

And you don't have to be actively using those skills, your skills and experience don't disappear when you retire and using those skills to help your parish can be personally rewarding and enjoyable.

If you have any skills or experience that you are willing to share, then don't wait for someone to come asking, as there is sometimes a reluctance for others to approach us to do things for free that other people may pay us for doing. Let your parish know that you are available and willing.

Using our talents to help our parish we thank God for these blessings *by Maebhe McMullan*

AS we prepare for the birth of Jesus, this time of Advent is a great opportunity for us to think and reflect on many different aspects of our lives. Each year as Christmas approaches, we often find ourselves looking over the past year. We remember the highs and lows, personal achievements and the challenges we overcame, but at this time of year, as we prepare for the Christmas season, we should also take more time to reflect on our faith and our relationship with God.

People often mistakenly think that you can only have a 'good' relationship with God if you go to Mass every day and pray every day, however, there are so many ways that you can deepen this relationship with God, which in turn will help strengthen your faith.

God has blessed each of us with so much in our lives. We all have unique talents and gifts that we were given by Him, just like Jesus received precious gifts from the Three Wise Men. We can each use our gifts and talents in our everyday lives to help in our parish community, and by using them we thank God for bestowing these unique blessings on us. I will reflect on a few of my talents and, hopefully, it will help you identify some of yours!

Thankfully, I was blessed with a love of music and the gift to be able to sing. Over the years, I have utilised these talents in my local parish. Since the age of 12, I have sung as part of Christ the King Youth Choir. Using this talent to make Mass more enhancing for fellow parishioners is a true blessing. As a group of young

people, we have achieved so much.

This involved me stepping out of my comfort zone many times. I remember the first time I sang a solo! I love getting up and singing as I also get so much out of it. Knowing that God and the Holy Spirit is so close and present among us in the chapel can feel really overwhelming, but it is very special knowing that me and my friends are the ones praising Him in that moment through song. As St Augustine said, "To sing is to pray twice".

Another gift of mine is I love working with and alongside others. I am a real people's person. For the past few years, I was elected the Youth Coordinator for my parish. This involved working alongside the youth and creating and organising events for them. The main one I ran was the Pope John Paul II Award. This was a huge undertaking, as I constantly questioned myself if I was capable to do this role...What if they have questions I don't know the answers to. What if no one turns up? Again, this was really out of my comfort zone and a big commitment, but knowing that there were hungry young people out there looking to get involved and participate in the award scheme, reassured me that I could only do my best and, thankfully, it has gone really well.

Over the years, we have put hundreds of young people from Cappagh Parish through this Award. I have such a strong belief in the Pope John Paul II Award. Not only is it in memory of an amazing man, but giving these young people somewhere where they can come and express and

understand their faith at their level is very important as, unfortunately, this is the age many decide to stray from their faith.

Coordinating the Pope John Paul Award in my parish was a huge challenge, but, seeing the young people turn up every week and participate, and grow in eagerness to learn in their faith, made it all worthwhile. Our young people are so precious, they are a gift in themselves, and they are the church of tomorrow, so we must protect them and let them nurture their faith.

Organise

Another gift I have, well I like to think I have, is I like to be really organised and organise things (my mother may disagree!) Cappagh is such a big parish, so we have a lot going on in our parish community. A lot of this is organised by the Parish Council. I have been a member of this Council for the past three years and during this time we have organised a vast array of events for the people of the parish, such as, Parish questionnaire, Novena to St Joseph, as well as an online video for Blessing of the Graves during last year's lockdown. We also meet regularly to discuss where we can improve services and events, and train ourselves to provide for the people of the parish better.

Through my work with the young people of the Youth Choir and Pope John Paul Award, I have also organised some of my own events. I decided to write a youth questionnaire to get feedback from the youth of the parish, and I also directed a drama re-enactment of The Stations of the Cross and The Nativity to coincide with the

launch of Christ the King's Youth Choir's two CD releases.

The youth questionnaire, thankfully, got a good response and the information collated was great to pass on to the priests of the parish. The two CD launches were probably two of the biggest achievements of my life. I have absolutely no drama experience but the production that we managed to put together on those two occasions were simply amazing and a proud memory I have treasured.

I love my role within the Parish Council as not only am I helping to make the Parish better for its parishioners, but I have met so many new people and been involved in some great projects.

Of course, all of these examples take time, and time is another very special gift. As I have no commitments, I have more time than others, so I have been able to get really involved in Cappagh Parish life. However, as precious as time is, it is up to us how we use it. If we all played a small part in giving up a bit of our time, we could make each of our parishes a better place. No one is expecting you to be out every night of the week, but could you offer up an hour a month or an hour a week? All the work I do in my parish is voluntary.

As the Christmas season approaches, there is no better time to step up and get involved in your parish. A lot of parish volunteering is done on a rota basis, so you can commit to what you like or are available to do. Do you like to sing? Why not join the choir? Or, if there isn't one, approach the priest and he could maybe help get a few musical people together. Do you like to read



Maebhe McMullan, Cappagh Parish.

and public speak? This is something that terrifies me! But, if this is a gift you have, why not volunteer to read one Sunday a month?

There are so many roles that keep our parishes ticking over... St Vincent de Paul, collectors and counters, and cleaners...and they could all do with more help. If you do not already, I ask you to make a conscious effort to try and get involved in your parish, and maybe make it a resolution for 2022.

I have honestly enjoyed all the volunteering I have done with Cappagh Parish. A lot of it would not be possible without the trust, support and spiritual guidance from its amazing priests, both past

and present. Cappagh Parish is a great parish and it is so nice to give back to its priests and people anyway I can.

I hope this has helped you identify your talents and gifts given you to by God and, hopefully, encouraged you to reach out and use your gift to not only benefit you, but your parish community and your relationship with God.

"Your talent is God's gift to you. What you do with it is your gift back to God" - Leo Bascaglia.

Thank you for taking the time to read my article. Wishing you, and your family, a very Happy and Holy Christmas and a Peaceful New Year.

Prayer most important gift we can bring to feet of Jesus and Mary...just like Magi on first Christmas *by Maire Gormley*



Maire Gormley, Buncrana Parish Director of Catechesis and Faith Mentor.

play and an important part of the Christmas story. As we hear in the Gospel of Matthew, the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were tangible, visible objects able to be physically placed at the feet of Jesus and His mother Mary as the visitors from the east "did him homage".

The most obvious gift I can think of that I have received from God and that I offer to the parish is the gift of music. I play and sing at the morning Mass in Buncrana and a number of kind parishioners have commented to me how much it means to them to have music there regularly. They have spoken on how it enhances and helps their prayer during Mass, and it is lovely to hear those comments.

I try to choose hymns that are connected to the readings or the particular feast day as much as possible, but it isn't always easy for

some of the more difficult readings we hear during the weekday liturgy! As the Parish Catechist, I feel that when I choose music that ties in with the Liturgy of the Word, then it's another way of 'teaching' something of our faith and drawing out another element of the Mass.

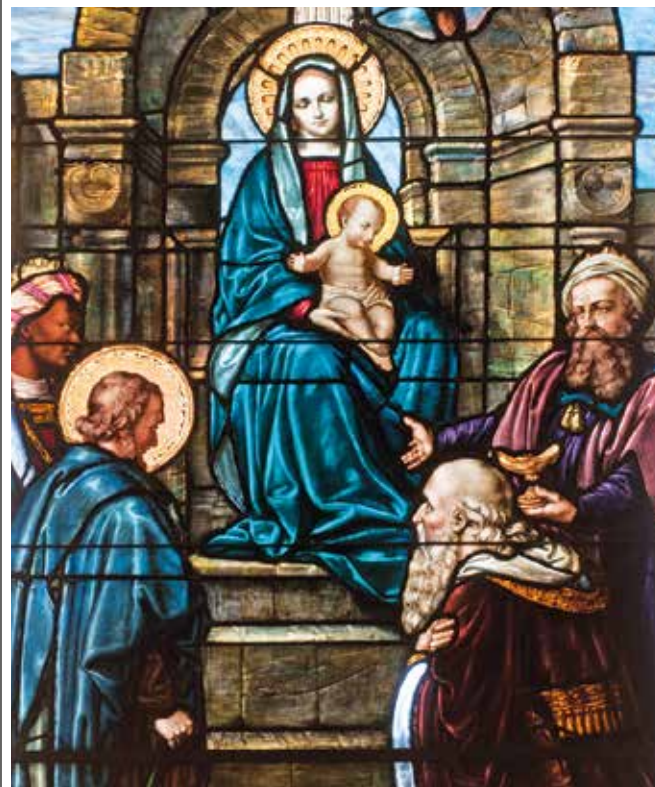
Many of our parishioners also volunteer their gifts to the parish on a regular basis; those who are Ministers of the Word, who arrange flowers, who clean, who are Eucharistic Ministers...to name but a few, all keep the parish running smoothly. Again, these are very tangible gifts offered and we can see the result of these gifts offered each time we are in a church or at a Mass.

Some gifts, however, aren't as obvious, yet are just as necessary. The gift of prayer is one that comes to mind straight away. It may not be as tangible as music or myrrh

but is often offered humbly and unassumingly. Prayer is one of the most powerful gifts that a person can offer, and I know that Buncrana is bursting with faithful and faith-filled pray-ers.

The prayers of the parishioners underpin so much of the gifts offered by others and we are so blessed as a parish to have a culture of prayer, particularly prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament. It is heartening to see this continuing among the young people too. Many of the Pope John Paul II Award students undertake Adoration as their parish task and the parish is richer for it.

Prayer can be offered by anyone, anywhere, at any time, and while it may not always be recognised as a gift or talent, it is perhaps the most important thing we can bring to the feet of Jesus and Mary, just as the Magi did at the first Christmas.



Our talents take on special significance when we offer them to God *by Oliver Barrett*



Oliver Barrett, Leckpatrick.

THE prophet Micah, over 400 years before the birth of Jesus, prophesied that the ruler of Israel would be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2). Bethlehem, בֵּית לֶחֶם in Hebrew means 'the place of bread' and has special significance in the Judeo-Christian tradition, for it is the birthplace of King David.

After a lengthy period of silence from the end of the Old Testament to the beginning of the New Testament, the angel Gabriel

announces to Mary the birth of the Messiah (Lk 1:26-36). His royal lineage is unquestionable from the beginning, as Joseph is of the house of David (Lk 1:27) and his birth takes place in Bethlehem, the City of David (Lk 2:4) as the prophet Micah foretold.

The theme of Christ's kingship is continued in the visit of the Magi. We know from the Scriptures, Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior were professional astronomers. The gifts they presented are significant, as gold signified the kingship of Christ, frankincense signified his divinity, and myrrh signified his virtue, prayer, and suffering. The nativity preceded an infanticide as, in a vain attempt to destroy the infant Jesus, King Herod killed 20 of the children of Bethlehem from two years and under. These children are known as the Holy Innocents. King Herod, who was a megalomaniac in my opinion, thankfully did not succeed.

I find the nativity scene in

Bethlehem a strange scene as it is the reversal of our earthly concept of kingship (Lk. 2:1-7). Christ is depicted as being surrounded by adoring animals rather than being surrounded by human retainers. He is in the lowliest place in the cosmos at the centre of all of creation. From the beginning, we are being taught the importance of being humble.

Each of us has individual gifts and talents and they take on special significance when we offer our gifts to God. When we work for our parish and diocese, we become like Magi presenting gifts to the infant in Bethlehem. This can sometimes mean making a long and arduous journey and dealing with feelings of desolation enroute, however our efforts are never in vain. It is a journey worth making to present our gifts and talents to the divine infant.

I do not believe that any one particular person has all the gifts and charisms we need to

be a church, but each of us have something we can give.

Earlier this year, I completed my Master's in Theology online, at the International Dominican University. Pope John Paul II inspired me to do so when he talked about the importance of being informed about the faith. I believe if we do not stand for something we will fall for anything, although I do not think you need to have a qualification in Theology to participate and offer gifts and talents for the glory of God.

I would like to be a theologian and a parish animator someday. I like to teach the Catholic faith because everyone deserves to hear the liberating truth of the Gospel message. I am a Minister of the Word in my parish and involved with the work of the Diocesan Mission Team.

Presently, I am participating in the synodal process. I think if everyone offers their gifts, we will achieve remarkable things together.



The Adoration of the Magi (Matthew 2- 9-11) by James Tissot (1886-94).

I pray every parish will become living stones of the temple of Christ *by Rhonda McColgan*



Rhonda McColgan, Parish of Iskaheen & Upper Moville.

AS Christmas is fast approaching, Christians everywhere are preparing for the celebration of the birth of our saviour, Jesus Christ. We are told in Matthew's Gospel (Mt 2:1-12) how the three wise men travelled from the East after they saw the rising of the star, to pay Him homage. As prophesied, they found Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem. We are told that they fell to their knees and offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

As I reflect upon this, I ask myself the question of what can I give the Lord as a gift to thank Him for all that He has done in my life? What I discover as I ponder this is that the Lord, in His goodness, has already given me the gift to give back. This sounds strange I know, but as a parent I can make some kind of sense out of this theory. For example, when my children were little I would buy a gift for them to give to their father at Christmas that would be from them. They

would get great excitement out of wrapping up their Daddy's gift and, on Christmas morning, they showed great delight as he made a fuss over the gift they gave to him. Obviously, my children didn't actually buy the gift themselves, but parents have a way of knowing how to love their children in all situations. Their excitement was this gift given in love.

Similarly, our Father in Heaven gives us gifts and talents in order for us to give them all back to Him with a heart full of love. We see in Matthew 25:14 that these gifts and talents are not for us to keep for ourselves. Jesus explained this in the parable of how the master rebuked the servant for not making interest on His talent that the master had given to Him. Peter also tells us, (1 Peter 4: 10-11), "Serve one another with the gifts each of you received thus becoming good managers of the varied graces of God. If you speak, deliver the word of God; if you have a special ministry, let it be seen as God's power, so that, in everything, God may be glorified in Jesus Christ. To Him, belong glory and power forever and ever".

So, what gift do I have other than first being a wife and Mother? Well, once a week, I lead a small Lectio Divina group. After the Rosary, we read, meditate, pray and contemplate Bible scripture. In this, I have discovered that I have an ability to lead such a group. It took me a long time to get started because I believed that the word 'lead' meant that I wasn't being humble. I believed that that was 'ego' and, as a result, it had held

me back. One day, I was listening to a Dominican priest and I was struck when he explained that 'humility' is the ability to recognise the truth. The truth was that God gave me this gift to organise such a group. Prior to this, I actually had false humility due to my lack of understanding.

Ministry

I also discovered that I have a gift for prayer ministry. This gift was made known by God through the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, based in Galliagh, in Derry. Once a month, they organise a healing night and have trained some of us on how to pray with others. This training also involved us learning how to receive the Holy Spirit through having a surrendered open heart, and learning how to live a life true to the Gospel. We are not perfect, but God has a habit of using those that aren't. Yes, I still do fall, but my first thought is to run back to the Lord in Confession.

This ministry was never something that I ever envisaged myself doing and I am fully aware that it is not by my own power. It is a gift straight from the Lord in order to build up the kingdom, thus giving all glory back to God.

Having seen the success of the healing nights and the Lectio Divina group, I believe that all parishes could offer something similar. We all too often look to our Church as a place to receive the sacraments. Whilst this is definitely true, they are also places where community come together. They are places within our parishes that help us to become our true calling,

which is to become saints. Our priests do so much and I used to look upon all these things as having to come directly from priests. This is not the case, and the Pope is asking us to find ways in which lay people can get involved.

At the healing nights, before Covid, two ladies would organise tea and buns in the kitchen. Amazingly, this is where a lot of healing took place. The two ladies had such a gift of hospitality that quite often this is where people opened up and the two ladies would often be seen praying and chatting with folks.

I am sure that people would love the opportunity to get involved in parish life. These two examples of ministry, if done from a place of love, deliver so much fruit. So, we don't need to wait on our already over-stretched priests to organise new ways of increasing and building the faith. We can get involved by discussing them with our priest and being ready to serve. This is our calling as baptised Christians.

Jesus tells us, in John 14:12, "Truly I say to you, the one who believes in me will do the same works as I do; and he will do even greater than these, for I am going to the Father. Everything you ask in my name, I will do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son".

My prayer, going forward, will be for every parish to become the living stones of the temple of Christ. May we truly become lighthouses of healing, fun, laughter, community and, above all, peace, love and growth.

Our parish would not be as good without the help of volunteers using their God-given talents *by Rosalie Connor*



Rosalie Connor, Bocan Parish, Co Donegal.

THERE are wonderful people in Bocan Parish who give their talents to the community, such as our beautiful choir who use their gift of music and song to enrich the Mass and make the coming together of friends and neighbours on Sundays so enjoyable.

We also have our St Vincent de Paul Committee, who work so hard for the less fortunate and use their gift of compassion to help others. Mary, our Sacristan, works tirelessly for the parish and is a great organiser, and so the place runs smoothly thanks to her excellent organisational skills.

Our priest, Fr Karl, is a great preacher but, more importantly, he is a good listener, as are the teachers and staff in our schools who are there for the children to help them. We have coaches and volunteers who help out at Cudaff & The Colts football clubs, and use their

talent and love of sport and fitness to benefit others.

The common denominator in all of these peoples gifts lies in caring for others and not just themselves. There are too many people to mention individually, but one lady in particular stands out for her selfless work for Bocan Chapel and various community groups in our area.

In all weathers, Angela Mooney goes to work in the Good As New Charity Shop, and has done for as long as I can remember. Various groups would have the rental of the shop for a run of about two months and Angela always made herself available to help them at least one day a week, and usually more if they could not get enough cover.

For Bocan Chapel, Angela was the sole worker who kept the shop running by herself six days a week. As a worker in the shop myself at odd times, for my children's fundraising events, I did not look forward to the chore of working there as it was often cold and I would worry about making conversation with customers coming and going. I have often thought how gifted Angela is in sales and as a communicator. She always made far more money than anyone else but, more importantly, she gave her time and used her gifts for helping others.

I can say our Parish would not be as good a place to live in without the help of our volunteers using their God given talents and to them all I say thank you.

Christmas gift-giving *by Sr Margaret McConalogue RSM*

LUKE'S Nativity story speaks of the "news of great joy" spoken by the angel to the shepherds out in the field, as they guarded their sheep. What was the shepherds' response? "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this event which the Lord has made known to us!" "When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds said to them." "And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as they had been told" (Lk 2:15-20).

Matthew describes the visit of the Magi and their trouble with King Herod, who "was perturbed" at the news when the Magi asked him, "Where is the infant king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose (in the East) and have come to do him homage" (Matt. 2:3-5).

Nevertheless, despite Herod's unhelpfulness, they continued on their journey and the star reappeared, halted over the place where the child was, and "filled them with delight"...and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling on their knees they did him homage. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh" (Matt. 2:9-12).

What is my response to this great

event in our lives? What are my thoughts on Christmas morning, as I gaze into the crib with the images of the newborn child, our Saviour, with Mary, his mother, and Joseph? What form of homage can I offer? Not gold, frankincense or myrrh – but, in common with the shepherds and the wise men from the East, an open heart, a sense of delight that God has come among us in human form, became one of us, to show us how to live in love with those around us and to work for the betterment of this beautiful world that He has given us.... however badly we have treated it to date!

The image of the crib is not just about a helpless infant but rather the entire life of Jesus on earth – an infant yes, but also as growing boy and a full adult who walked the roads, shared meals, taught on the hillside, "wept over Jerusalem" as he neared His end, suffered and died, and rose again to show the depth of God's love for us – and asked us to continue His mission on earth, assuring us that "I am with you always, yes, to the end of the world".

Yes, His mission continues in us today, in our world, especially in our concern for the poor and needy brothers and sisters as well as our poor impoverished planet. It is hard to square that with the terrible atrocities that are happening more

than 2,000 years after His coming among us – such as the deaths at sea of the 27 refugees, and many others, drowned in the English Channel as a result of people trafficking. What we do to each other!

Too many of us say a few passing prayers for the wider, wounded world, contribute our loose change, blame someone or other for the situation, and feel smug about our efforts as dutiful Christians! This might help us feel good in ourselves, but it does little for the eco-health of our natural home. We are called to be present to the troubles of our world in a real way. It is God's body; it is our mother, our sister, our brother, its inhabitants are God's family, our family.

Pope Francis writes urgently about the need for a conversion of our souls, a whole transformation of life-style, and ultimate dedication of our energies to saving planet Earth, and the poor who cling to it in desperation.

Responsibility

Pope Francis believes that the call to a prayerful concern for our troubled world, to a conversion of our lives to save Mother-Earth, is much more than an add-on obligation. It is a knowing in the heart, a recognising of our wider family of origin and destiny, an awakening of the divine imagination already within the human psyche. Our hearts, sacred

from birth and Baptism, fashioned lovingly in the image of God, somehow sense this astonishing revelation of our intimacy with the earth, and our responsibility for saving her life and the lives of those whose plight is increasingly desperate.

Our prayers are powerful when they grow from the way we see and understand the mystery of Creation and Incarnation – God with us. The Pope is trying to help us hold the suffering poor in a ravaged world as the greatest concern of God among us. He wants us to live and love and serve from that perspective. Like Jesus, who looked into the hearts of sinners and saw their grace, so too we are called to look at our beloved, broken and beautiful earth and see the weeping face of God.

Beyond a passing sympathy, we are urged to get utterly involved in a full commitment to do all we can to transform Christian and universal consciousness before it is too late.

"Resurrection has happened, and it is about more than a miraculous moment for the Crucified body of Jesus. It is the final stage of Creation and Incarnation for the crucified world", said the late Daniel O'Leary.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical 'Evangelii Gaudium', or 'The Good News of the Gospel', has a similar message when he says: "The kingdom of God is already present in this world, and is growing here

and there in different ways – like the small seed that grows in a great tree...the kingdom is here, it returns, it struggles to flourish anew. Resurrection is already secretly woven into the fabric of history".

Words such as these reveal to our hearts the depths of the mystery we are part of, and the responsibility we have to live sustainably to protect our planet.

All this brings us to a new way of being, a new way of seeing, a new way of praying. It reveals to us the nature of God's intimacy with all created beings, the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in all that lives. We begin to realise at the core of our being, the praise in bird-song, the adoration in each new dawn, the cry of the ocean, the lament of the earth. It is then that our prayer is in deep communion with the wounded earth and its peoples.

As the poet Joseph Mary Plunket wrote:

"I see his blood upon the rose

And in the stars the glory of his eyes;

His body gleams amid eternal snows,

His tears fall from the skies"

The physicist, Brian Swimme puts it differently: "Say this to every child – you come from the energy that gave birth to the universe. Its story is your story: its beginning is



Sr Margaret McConalogue RSM, Culmore.

your beginning".

So much to be grateful for on Christmas morning and every morning! Like the wise men from the East, we can only fall on our knees and pay homage to our Creator. We can also, of course, reflect on how we can contribute to improving the state of our world and its people – perhaps by joining an ecology group, working at parish level to promote awareness of our environment, offer our time and energy to help in our parish, check our consumerism – do we really need this – and buy only sustainable gifts this Christmas. In other words, to live simply so that others may simply live!

Then, like the little drummer boy, our finest gifts we bring, pa rum pum pum pum...To lay before our King, pa rum pump pum pum!

The twenty-first century Magi *by Rory McGilligan*



Rory McGilligan, Dungiven.

CHRISTMAS is a time for hope, in fact, the Christian message is one of hope. As I write this article, it seems that there may be another twist in this pandemic, with the discovery of a new variant named 'Omicron'.

The pandemic has brought so much uncertainty and fear into our lives and the cause for hope seems a distant fairy-tale. To get through uncertain times, it is natural for some of us to put up defensive mechanisms to protect us from the unknown. As a Christian Catholic people, we are called to be a people of hope, something which can be very difficult to do in these times.

I am of the belief that our Heavenly Father does not wish us to take unnecessary risks with our health, but he is still asking us to be a people of hope, love and charity. All of the aforementioned gifts are very much in demand as we live through such uncertainty. These gifts are also needed by our Church, which is in a state of transition, as we move to a mission church.

Let's remember the Church is 'The Body of Christ'. It now seems that we, the laity, are asked to have a bigger role within the Church.

Sometimes my six-year-old likes listening to the Nativity story just before bed-time. I suppose it is a form of prayer that is simple and easy to connect with. The story goes that we are also present in the stable at Bethlehem that first Christmas night. As we enter through the stable door, we see people ahead of us, it looks like a man, woman and child. We approach quietly and slowly, but the man Joseph can hear our footsteps rustling through the hay and turns around. He greets us with a big smile, the type you give to a friend that you haven't seen in a while. He puts his hand upon our shoulder as we all

gaze in amazement at the infant Jesus sleeping peacefully in the manger, our eyes then glance towards our beautiful Mother Mary, who looks upon the child with love and tenderness. She then looks towards us full of maternal love and compassion also. St Joseph asks us to stay and help keep watch on that first Christmas night.

Does our Lord want you to stay and help keep watch over His body, the Church, today in the twenty-first century? You might be saying to yourself, "What can I do?" or "Sure people already help out in the parish with that already".

Some of us who start thinking about talents or gifts can get uncomfortable, thinking "It's not as if I have any outstanding talents or gifts". I must confess I feel like this sometimes. However, God has given us all gifts and talents. For me, it's being reliable. At times, it doesn't feel like anything special but it enabled me to help our parish over the pandemic. I joined a team of stewards that helped people sit at Mass in safety. You will find stewards at every Mass in our parish helping out; just being reliable turning up when required. Again, that talent of just being reliable and showing

up helps our parish facilitate Mass in a safe and welcoming environment.

Recently our Parish Priest asked for more volunteers to help with stewarding duties, which helps to spread the responsibility. Thanks to more people who generously offered to help, I now can sit with my family at some Masses; something which I really appreciate.

I started reading a book by St Louis de Monfort called "True Devotion to Mary". In the introduction to the book, Saint Louis writes that Our Lady, before her Assumption and Coronation, wished that she may not be a public figure. She wished to remain a humble, quiet soul, always carrying out God's plan, which is why in the Gospels her words, although profound, are few.

I remember when Pope Benedict was elected Pope in April 2005, he said from the balcony: "The Cardinals have elected me, a simple humble labourer in the vineyard of the Lord". May we, too, be simple humble labourers in our Lord's vineyard.

Maybe this Christmas, as we approach the infant Jesus lying in the manger, may we fall to our

knees and follow the example of the Magi paying homage and bearing gifts, although not Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh but the gifts of our talents and time.

While in front of our Blessed

Saviour, we ask Him in prayer to keep us safe, to look after our families, to give us courage and open our heart to God's plan, which is full of hope and love.



Rebelling a bit in her youth following a strong Catholic upbringing, Cappagh parishioner, Siobhan Sweeney reflects on her faith journey and how she was...

Led back into life of prayer through Divine Mercy

AS a coordinator for the St Michael Apostolate of Prayer for Priests in the Derry Diocese and a member of the Diocesan Eucharistic Adoration Apostolate, Siobhan Sweeney, from Omagh, is very aware of the importance of the vocation of priesthood to the celebration and adoration of Jesus in the Eucharist.



Siobhan Sweeney, Cappagh Parish.

Coming from a strong Catholic background, which she rebelled slightly against while growing up, Siobhan reflects on her journey of faith, which began 56 years ago when she was born into the family of Sarah, now 93, and the late Hugh Sweeney.

Referring to herself as "The Novena Child", she explained that she was the ninth child in the family of 12, which consists of seven boys and five girls.

"We would have been brought up praying the Rosary," recalled Siobhan, saying: "We went down on our knees to pray together as a family. Then, as life goes, we went our own way."

"I went to England for 10 years, and Rosie was living there too. Later on, when I had moved home again, Rosie was back from

England on holiday and she had got into the Divine Mercy after our sister, Anne had given her the 'Handbook of Devotion to Divine Mercy'.

"While we were down in Donegal at our sister's cottage for a holiday, Rosie started telling me about Divine Mercy and God, and this wonderful book about Divine Mercy. She then left me the handbook, which is based on Sr Faustina's Diary, and said that I would have to read it from start to finish."

"I got to page 70 and read that Sr Faustina was told to say the Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be, and the Memorare to St Joseph daily. I remember thinking that if it was good enough for St Faustina, it was good enough for me, but I did an Our Father and three Hail Marys, a Glory Be, and Memorare to St Joseph daily."

She continued: "I did a lot of this prayer for my friend, Rachel who was ill, but through it God was also working on me. Rachel wasn't practising her faith and when she took ill with cancer I was concerned for her well-being, as she was going to die. So, it was through the Divine Mercy that I got back into a life of prayer. Rachel died on December 27 and was buried on the eve of the new millennium."

"Later that year, I went on a pilgrimage to Medjugorje for the first time. I was around 34 years old at the time. I remembered hearing a priest say, when I was living in England, to be prepared for the new millennium and this had stuck in my mind."

Arriving in Medjugorje on April 27, 2000, a week or two after Easter, Siobhan recalled: "It was a lovely time to be there, in the post era of Easter and into May, the month of Our Lady. Rosie was with me, and I remember each of us telling our friends that we were going with our sister, even though we each had our own reasons for going."

"During the pilgrimage, I was told to pray every day, attend daily Mass and join a prayer group, so when I came home I thought about how I could do what Our Lady wanted. A friend of mine told me about a prayer group in Omagh called Youth 2000, so we went to it together. She didn't go back after a couple of weeks but I continued, even though I was joining when it was time to be kicked out...I was 35."

Challenged

She added: "I was in the prayer group about a couple of years and it helped my confidence, as it challenged you to do things. Then I was asked to be a regional leader. While praying about this, I opened my Bible and the Scripture reading I got was about Jesus telling Peter to put out into the deep! So, I took that as confirmation that I was to become a regional leader, and was involved at this level for years. I would still help out at local retreats."

"As happens, people move on, go to university etc, and so the Omagh Youth 2000 Prayer Group

started getting smaller over time. We tried to get more young people involved in it but it had run its course."

"The remains of our Youth 2000 group then reformed as the St Joseph's Prayer Group, which was open to all ages. We dedicated the group to St Joseph as I love him and I have had many prayers answered through his intercession. It started in Omagh Pastoral Centre, and then we moved it to the Oratory in the Christian Brothers, where we exposed the Blessed Sacrament. Then when the Christian Brothers were getting older and they eventually left, the Prayer Group stopped."

It was around this time that Siobhan got involved with the St Michael Apostolate and then the Apostolate of Eucharistic Adoration.

Saying that she has considered a religious vocation over the years, Siobhan continued: "It wasn't something strong but it was there. I spoke to a priest at a Youth 2000 retreat about this and asked if he thought I should be a nun. He said, 'No, people wouldn't see the good works you are doing.' He was referring to the retreat work that I did. He had felt that that work would speak more than being in a religious order."

"I have gone to Lough Derg over the years and one time I met a woman there who regretted not being a nun, so the two of us went down to the Sisters of the Poor in Dublin together for a weekend. I was exhausted at the time and I remember seeing one of the nuns looking at me like she was looking into my soul, and I just thought, 'Oh get me out of here!' Ha!"

"The Sisters of the Poor were

lovely. I was involved with them through Youth 2000, however, I think God is calling me wherever I am at. I don't think He is calling me to religious life. Marriage hasn't been in the equation either and I don't think it ever will be."

Recalling having a lot of energy when she was younger, Siobhan said: "I was involved in so much; sometimes I was meeting myself! I feel that I should be doing more now, particularly in my parish, especially after hearing Fr Declan McGeehan's recent homily about the Synod."

"I have heard it said that you should only do one ministry. I am a Minister of the Word, reading when I am asked, though I am on a weekly list for a neighbouring parish. I also did pre-marriage talks for a period through a Maryvale Distance Learning Course, which was funded by a Dominican Order priest who

was a member of our Youth 2000 Omagh Group, and dedicated to the ongoing formation and teaching of the faith to the youth. One of the catechetical exercises was preparing engaged couples for marriage. For a lot of years I would have helped couples prepare for marriage, starting off with my nephew, but that stopped recently because of Covid."

"I was also a presenter in the Diocese with the Apostolate of Eucharistic Adoration before Covid, and was doing my duty with my parents. My father died five years ago and I still do a night and dinner duty with my mum."

"This has been a bit more of a quiet time lately, but I am happy to kick start again. I am into my faith and I want to continue to embrace it, so this is probably a good quiet time to think about that and where God wants me."



St Michael's Apostolate of Prayer for Priests

DEVOTED to the promotion of prayer for our priests, the Sweeney sisters from Omagh are hoping to encourage more people to spiritually adopt a priest to pray for, as part of the St Michael's Apostolate of Prayer for Priests under the Patronage of Our Lady Queen of Apostles.

Founded in Dublin by a lady called Olivia Connolly on the Queenship of Mary, August 22, 1996, the Apostolate celebrated its Silver Jubilee back in the summer with its spiritual director, Fr Thomas Clowe, of the Salesian Order.

Speaking to "The Net", Siobhan Sweeney, who lives in the Cappagh Parish, said that she had first got involved with the Apostolate about 14 years ago through her older sister, Rosie Johnson, who lives in the neighbouring Parish of Drumragh.

"Our job as coordinators for the Derry Diocese is to try and get every priest covered, and currently each one is covered for prayer through this Apostolate," she explained, adding: "At the start we had two people for a priest, but now, over the last number of years, it has been upped to four persons for a priest. Bishops originally had 10 people praying for them, but now there are about 20 praying for a bishop, because of the times we are living in."

"It is power prayer that is so much needed at the moment for our priests. If we have no priest we have no Eucharist."

"Prior to Covid," continued Siobhan, "we would have gone to events like retreats and asked people as they were leaving if they would like to adopt a priest to pray for. It is very spiritually rewarding. It strengthens the priest, who then

strengthens his congregation."

We need to keep our priests strong so we can avail of the sacraments.

"We have a list of names of people praying for priests in the Diocese, and when a priest dies we contact the person who was praying for them to let them know, and give them the option of taking on another priest to pray for. We also get new people to pray for the priests, as we wouldn't always know if someone who is on our list to pray for a priest has died, and so we would be delighted to hear from any readers of "The Net" who would be happy to do this."

Explaining what is involved, she said that when a person signs up to pray for a priest, they are given a prayer card with the priest's name on it. As well as saying the special prayer on

the card for this intention, the third Glorious Mystery of the Rosary, the Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, is also offered up for the adopted priest, followed by the Prayer to St Michael the Archangel, as a daily commitment.

"You also offer up a Mass spiritually once a week for the priest adopted, that is, you just mentally offer up the Mass, saying his name silently."

Anyone who would like to adopt a priest in prayer can contact Siobhan on 07880588041 or Rosie on 07810387825.

If anyone from another Diocese would like to adopt a priest there, please contact Olivia Connolly via the St Michael's Apostolate website www.prayerforpriests.com/index.php/about



Siobhan and Rosie.

To live a life of service with love *by Mel O'Dea*

WITH the special year dedicated by Pope Francis to St Joseph just come to a close on December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and the Season of Advent underway as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, perhaps this is a good time to consider the call of Our Father in Heaven to live a life of service with love.

What better examples have we of good and faithful servants of God than Our Lady and St Joseph, who both responded in faith, hope, trust and love when they did as they were divinely asked – Mary to be the Mother of Our Saviour, and Joseph to be the Guardian of The Holy Family.

They chose to live a life of service to God and they did so without hesitation and with great love. There was no complaining or thought of self-gain, instead they gave of themselves completely and continually.

And this is what we are all asked by God to do, to live a life of service with love. This is what Jesus taught us through His ministry on earth...as He told His disciples: "The Son of Man Himself came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

We have many examples of this in the Gospels, such as Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet, after which He said to them, "Do you

understand what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you" (John 13:12-15).

That divine desire to serve was no doubt encouraged during Jesus' childhood through the lived example of His mother, Mary and foster father, Joseph.

And so, it was very timely that Pope Francis' call for the 150th anniversary of the declaration of St Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church to be marked with a year of special focus on the humble carpenter, preceded his launch of the Synodal Pathway for the Church, on Sunday, October 10.

When he spoke in St Peter's Basilica, in Rome, at the opening of the Synodal Path, the Pope referred to the example of Jesus, saying: "He was always at the service of the person He was with, listening to what he or she had to say".

The Holy Father is now calling us, as sisters and brothers in Christ, to pray, reflect, share and listen to the thoughts that the Holy Spirit brings to our minds as we journey together, seeking the way forward that God is laying out for us as the Body of Christ;

the Church.

Receptive

It was when Joseph was at his most quiet, and so most receptive, that he heard God speak to him, which was when he was sleeping. The message in this is that God can do the same with us, and to help us be open to that happening and to recognising God speaking to us, Pope Francis is encouraging us to begin our synodal journey with a prayerful mindset.

He is urging us to spend time in prayer before, during and after times of encounter with each other, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts, and asking God to bless us on our journey of faith and discovery of His Divine Will for us and the entire body of His Church here on Earth.

Perhaps we could find a quiet place to pray, as Jesus did when He wanted to enter into deep communion with His Father. God is always with us and none more so than when we are in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament – in the Tabernacle or exposed in the Monstrance for Eucharistic Adoration or in the Tabernacle of our bodies, when we receive Him in Holy Communion.

God also speaks to us through His Word, recorded in the Scriptures, and helps us to believe in our Divine worth through His healing touch in the Sacrament of Confession; the gift



of reconciliation with Him and so with each other...as family...as community.

As we prepare to celebrate the first Christmas, when Christ Our Saviour was born and the Magi brought precious gifts for this Holy Child, may we also reflect on the gifts/talents we have received from God and how, with love, we can best use them to serve Him, and so each other, in our Church.

Like with St Joseph, we will best hear God speak to us in our quiet times. May we be open to listening and responding as Mary and Joseph did...as did the disciples and countless people down the ages...and seek to discover not only what our Church can do for us, but what we can do for Our Church – for God and each other.

This Synodal Pathway that we are setting out on is Good News for our time and has the potential to bring great joy...if we are open to being involved, to being guided by the Holy Spirit through our

prayer, and so letting God lead us along His way for His Church.

It is a journey that we are all invited to join in on; church-goers and non church-goers, Catholics and non-Catholics, no matter what is going on in our lives, no matter what our level of education or experience is, no matter how little we may feel we have to offer, or how hurt, angry

or disappointed we may be.

To each reading this, perhaps you are to be a light of welcome on this journey to others...in your family, in your circle of friends, in your community, in your workplace. It could be the best gift you will give this Christmas...a gift of hope, in your desire to live a life of service with love.



Building a lasting relationship with Jesus will lead to freedom *by Fr Paul Farren*



IN his homily for the December Matt Talbot Prayer Society Mass in St Eugene's Cathedral, Fr Paul Farren asked those gathered to pray that those suffering from addiction "can go to Jesus in their crisis and build a lasting relationship with him that will ultimately lead to their freedom".

Referring to the Gospel story of the healing of the paralysed man, Fr Paul wondered if this man, who had picked up his stretcher and walked home, began at any stage, with the passage of time, to question whether his healing had been miraculous.

"Did he think that perhaps he wasn't really paralysed and that he just needed somebody to give him the courage to attempt to stand?" he asked, adding: "It is possible that his belief in Jesus could have been eroded over time."

He continued: "There will always be attempts in our lives to

undermine our faith in God. It is the battle of our lives and everyone is engaged in it. Faith is not a box ticking exercise. We don't have it and keep it. We must live it, and unlike anything else in the world our faith lasts for eternity.

"Our faith can be eroded when we don't live it, when we don't attend Mass, when we don't pray, when we don't go to Confession. It can be very subtle, but it has devastating effects on our lives. One Sunday missed at Mass can become two and very quickly it's possible to not be attending. A year goes by and then it is several years and suddenly, life is gone and faith has been eroded.

"The big issue with not living our faith is the lack of relationship with God. When we fall out of relationship with God our lives can very quickly become chaotic, not as a result of a punishment from God, but as result of not being able to deal with the issues that life presents".

Stating that there are periods of time in life that it is impossible to live without God, Fr Paul added: "For these times, a relationship with God is essential, but a relationship is not something that you can switch on and off, it's always ongoing. If you find you are only engaging with God when you are in crisis, you will also find

that there will be more crises in your life. Things are only a crisis when you don't know how to deal with them. When we remain in continuous relationship with God we don't see as many situations as being a crisis".

He went on to point out: "The Holy Spirit guides us when we remain in relationship with God.

The Holy Spirit attempts to guide us throughout our lives but if we are not in relationship with God, we don't hear, we don't see, we don't sense the Holy Spirit in our lives. It's then that we report on 'seeing strange things' rather than recognising the miracles that happen in our lives".

He finished with the prayer:

"Lord, guide each of us in our relationship with you and give us the courage to be able to say I have experienced a miracle, I have seen a miracle. I believe in you. Matt Talbot, intercede for us".

The Matt Talbot Society prays for those suffering from any form of addiction, for those recovering from addiction, and for all those

affected by addiction. Mass is offered on the first Monday of each month in St Eugene's at 7.30 pm.

To enrol someone in the Society, contact St Eugene's by calling 028 71 262894 or 028 71 365712, or emailing steugenes@btconnect.com, or private messaging St Eugene's Cathedral.

Syro Malabar Bishop on Derry visit

THE Apostolic Visatator to the Syro-Malabar Faithful in Europe, Bishop Stephen Chirappanath, received a warm welcome to the Derry Diocese when he visited Bishop Donal in St Eugene's.

Based in Rome, Bishop Chirappanath is responsible across Europe, except Great Britain, for leading all the Catholics who belong to the Syro-Malabar Church.

The Syro-Malabar Church traces its history back to St Thomas the Apostle. While having its own Liturgy and leadership, its 5.25 million members are in full communion with the Catholic Church. Its headquarters are in the Indian state of Kerala.

Commenting on the visit, Bishop Donal said: "We discussed the ministry to the Syro-Malabar



faithful that has been carried out by Fr Dr Joseph Karukayil (Varghese) for a considerable number of years.

"Fr Joseph, currently based in Dungiven, is preparing the way for his successor, Fr Joshy Parokkaran,

who is expected to arrive before Christmas.

"While the Syro-Malabar chaplain has a specific appointment to his own Church, the Diocese of Derry has always been happy to offer accommodation and

some parish involvement to the Chaplain.

"I reassured Bishop Stephen that the members of his Church have been a great example of prayerfulness, graciousness and enthusiasm in our local parishes".

Fr Stephen Quinn ocd, Termonbacca, continues with his reflection on the question – ‘Is Sr Clare Crockett a saint?’

Sr Clare and the Open Hands of the Lord

HAVING examined in the previous article a theory of holiness based on the suffering and open hands of the Crucified One, I want now to scrutinise whether the holiness of those open and suffering hands is reflected in the life of Sr Clare Crockett.

To begin such an assessment, let us set off by turning to the moment in Sr Clare's life when she bent down to kiss the cross. It was only then that the disparity between the Lord's wounds and Clare Crockett's hands impressed itself deeply upon her consciousness. The gap was indeed glaring.

This was the moment when someone who had been 'blaggarded' into going to Spain, and who had spent her time smoking and sunbathing impervious to the spiritual significance all around her, this most unlikely of girls, who could not stay still and seemed to have words always coming out of her mouth, was hit by a divine bolt of lightning; the wounded and empty hands had given everything to her and posed to her their own challenge.

What was she to do with her own hands, so full of excitement and ambition for celebrity? The force of that question would not remain static; it would only grow and gather momentum over the rest of her life.

On one occasion, when Sr Clare was teaching one of her many classes, she suggested that her pupils just weren't 'getting her'. When she spoke like this, there was more to it than a throwaway line. She indicated that they just were not penetrating into what her life and teaching meant. They were missing the point somehow, getting caught in the superficialities, and not seeing the big picture.

In posing this challenge to her pupils in that one moment, she was speaking to a wider audience. She was speaking to the wider audience of the young people of the 21st Century, the people of her own city and country, and to the whole People of God. She was warning this wider audience not to miss out on the deeper language of her life. She was telling us that there was more to her story than simply a young woman becoming a nun, at a time when the women of her generation hardly know what a nun is. There's more to the story than simply a young woman going off on mission to far flung places, and, what is more, the story does not end in the tragedy of an earthquake. In this young vibrant life, God Himself had inscribed in His own handwriting, a message about His holiness that was written to young people; young people who live exactly as Clare

Crockett did before she met the Cross, young people who have surrendered to chronic doubt and who know nothing as definite but ego and desire.

The language of God began in Sister Clare's young life. A few years ago, her younger sister Shauna gave a testimony, in which she emphasised the point that her sister, Clare, was just an ordinary teenager. I believe that testimony to be tremendously significant. Clare lived the same life as so many of her contemporaries and this is why her witness is so important. She knows them, she has seen that life from inside, and has shared their trials of life.

Clare had lived a life full of smoking, drinking, partying, messing around and high jinks, and fascinated by the cult of celebrity. This lifestyle was all she knew up until that moment the cross made an impact. The lifestyle filled her ears, it filled her eyes, it filled her mouth, and it filled her soul. It is a lifestyle that, sadly, for some people will be all they will ever know. And it is not just this present generation that she can speak to, older ones than hers have fallen into the same cul-de-sac.

She said that she thought she was happy. It was only after the cross that she knew there was any other option. In addition to the experience of the cross, there was that infamous moment when after a hard night's drinking, which had left her bent over a toilet bowl, throwing up her guts, that she was filled with the sense that the One who had hung upon the cross was looking at her again, profoundly disturbed and distressed by what she was doing to herself.

Sitting there being sick, she had to question what sort of happiness terminates in this destination? And if she wasn't happy then how many more were there in exactly the same position; young people, middle-aged people, and older people, who did not know their own dignity, valued nothing of their own integrity, and knew not what life was about.

Strangling

She realised in that lavatory, an age-old wisdom: that we resemble the things that we love. When we love great things, then we ourselves become great, but if we love trifling things, then they will make us as trifling as themselves. At that toilet bowl, she realised how small her life had become and yet, somehow, she still thought that she was happy. This lifestyle was strangling the very happiness out of her. How many young people and even not so young people labour under the same misapprehension? How many could Sr Clare speak to?

As she woke from her mistakes, she decided because of the

cross to become a servant sister, and so leave father, mother, sisters, family, city, country, and language. It wasn't as if these things no longer mattered, or that they had lost their value, but there was something else, someone else to take their place. God would become her father, her mother, her brother, her sister, her city, her country, and her language. God would be to her everything. With such generosity, she could truly speak of herself as a spouse of the crucified Christ. Everything was crucified to her as she started to open her own hands in service.

She did not satisfy herself with becoming a religious sister. She had more gifts to give. She responded to His love, as she told herself in the film, by trying to give God everyday her 100 percent, then the next day a little more, and the following a little more again.

The cynics amongst us will scoff, but only look at her movie and the book about her life and see that this was not just empty words. Take a good look at the children in the Jacksonville school that she taught for their First Communion. See the reverence that was exuding from those children and the way that they were concentrated on the Mass, and you have got to realise that that could only have occurred by Clare giving her 100 per cent to that class.

I was a pastor for many years in a parish, and I know just how difficult it is to enthuse children about their faith and to keep them concentrated on the proper object of their First Communion. I must confess that I failed utterly at getting the children at the parochial school to concentrate on Him rather than on the money they received, or the various forms of apparel that they were about to wear. I would have given my eye teeth to have a nun who gave her 100 per cent to get children to concentrate and to know who it is that comes to them on their First Communion Day.

In the film, we also see the AIDS patient, Paco, who was dying in the hospital where Sr Clare was a chaplain. Paco had for two decades been completely cut off from the life of the Church. One can only imagine the anger and resentment that Sr Clare had to face the first time she entered his room, and then every time afterwards that she spoke to him of the things of faith. Only God knows the mortifications and pains that it cost her, in order to encourage him and delicately lead him back to the Church and to Christ in the Sacraments. But because she did it with 100 per cent, that patient received his Viaticum, that is, his bread for the journey to heaven, and died a son

of the Church.



Sr Clare in the Classroom.

of the Church.

Then there was that underachieving class that was thrust upon her when she went to teach in a school in Ecuador. The class was at the bottom of the heap and was deeply unenthused about their studies. But by sheer effort, tenacity, and by her sheer love for them, she drew out of that failing class what was best in them and, at the end of the year, all the children passed their exams. Right there, the 100 percent is again written large in hard graft and effort.

I am a friar of the Discalced Carmelite Order and we have had the privilege of having many members recognised as saints. A seemingly consistent characteristic of those saints' lives was that, towards the end of their earthly pilgrimage, they were invited to experience in their own bodies the very sufferings that the Lord went through on the cross. Some have called it the school of the Lord sufferings. St Therese of Lisieux, St Elizabeth of the Trinity, and St Teresa of the Andes all experienced this type of suffering. The suffering is a harbinger of a final transformation in holiness.

Hallmarks

We start to see hallmarks of the same process towards the end of Sr Clare's life. Watching the film, it becomes increasingly more apparent that, since arriving in Ecuador, she is losing weight, her face is pallid, and eyes strained. Even the sisters, when speaking of her, start to mention her migraines and about her having to take more rest. I found out on one occasion, from her mother that, after Sr Clare died, they found during her autopsy that she had been bleeding from her brain. This had never been diagnosed during her life. One can only imagine the pain that she was enduring the whole time.

One of the most beautiful moments of the whole Sr Clare story is that night when, marked by suffering and just having

arrived home from the treatment room, Sr Clare was greeted by the children in her school who begged her to play her guitar and sing for them. Her religious superior advised her to go on to bed and take the opportunity for some rest. It would have been expected, after a long day in the hospital that she would have beat a hasty retreat, but she refused to take the stairs to bed and found the wonderful words, "I have written a blank cheque for Him."

Again, she responds with her 100 percent and even a lot more here in the midst of sickness and pain. And so, she went into the room with all the children and sang for them. She said of the moment that even if she couldn't sing, she could shout as best as she could for her children but even more for her Lord. He alone saw her sacrifice and must have been gladdened by her complete generosity. She had arrived at empty hands.

I hope that by this stage we have all come to realise the sad ending of Sr Clare's earthly life, in the midst of a terrible earthquake, that reduced the convent and school to dust and rubble. She died surrounded by five children whom she had been teaching to play the guitar. She died with them wound around her, trying desperately to protect them from the force of the falling masonry.

Even in death, Sr Clare was significantly joined to her Crucified Lord. She had once remarked that it would be a beautiful thing to die at the same age as the Lord. And so it was, Sr Clare died at the untimely, but joined up, age of 33. A sign to us all of the intricate relationship that had been established between Clare Crockett and Jesus Christ; their lives had become so wedded.

Even the power of that horrendous earthquake could not silence Sr Clare. It could not blank out the language that God had written into her life. The power of that union goes on speaking. It is

almost as if she goes on singing to us, to young people, to the people of Derry and to the whole Church: the message of Christ's crucified love.

He tells us Himself, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if anyone serves me, the Father will honour him."

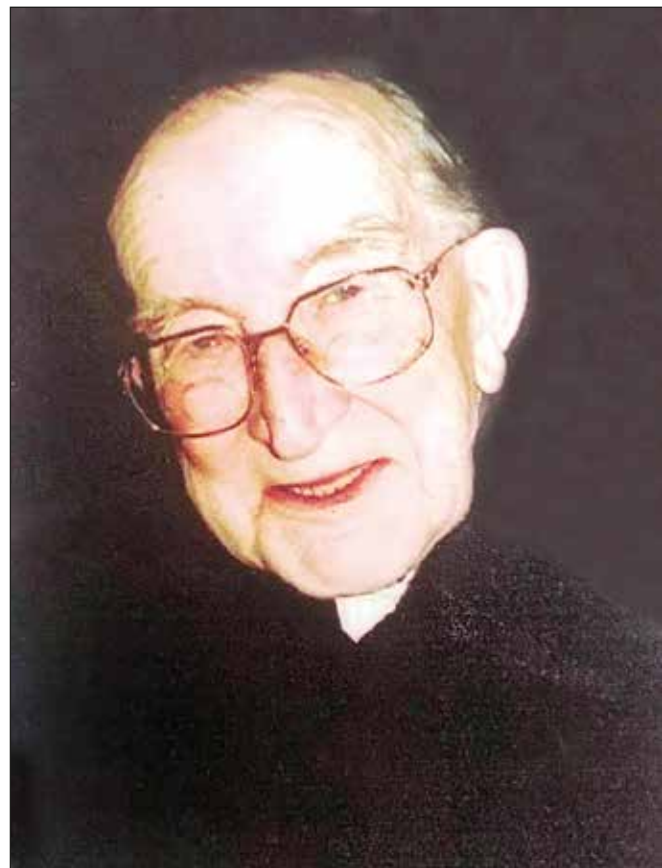
Sr Clare, as a bride of Christ, stood firmly and squarely at the foot of the cross. She did not move and, what is more important, she stood there with open hands.

I know that I might seem a little biased, but let me tell you a story from the life of St Therese of Lisieux. As Therese lay dying from tuberculosis, she heard outside her window, one of the other sisters in her community speak to another, and that sister was conjecturing about what the mother prioress would write into the obituary of Sr Therese, when she died. The sister observed the prioress would be hard put upon to find anything to write for Therese had done "nothing" in her whole life. That too talkative sister lived for nine years with a person who became blessed, a person who was canonised, a person who was declared a patroness of the missions, and then later a Doctor of the Church.

There is none so blind as those who choose not to see. There will be many who will deride and mock the idea of an "ordinary" young woman from the Brandywell being canonised, but they can simply join a long queue that stretches from Nazareth, through Lisieux, and to this very day in Derry. The open hands of Sr Clare Crockett speak louder than their carping.

Remembering Fr James McKee – a holy, kind and gentle pastor

by Fr Liam Donnelly



The late Fr James McKee

ABOUT a year ago, I heard about a married lady in her mid 30s who had been married for a number of years and was not able to conceive a baby. I was told that she had been told that she could not conceive naturally and should, therefore, consider IVF treatment.

Anyway, I sent word to her that she should go and pray at Fr James McKee's grave in Glenullin. She went and prayed at his grave and, thankfully, she is now the mother of a fine baby girl, who was conceived naturally and has been welcomed by her, her husband and their families with great joy.

Fr McKee was a priest of the Derry diocese who was noted for his holiness, his kindness and gentleness. He died January 31, 1999, in his 83rd year. His request when he died was that he should be buried among the unbaptised infants along the back hedge of St Joseph's, Glenullin.

In a more insensitive age, unbaptised children were buried

prayers. Both men were very good friends.

Fr McKee was ordained a priest of the Derry diocese in 1939. After various appointments, he came to Glenullin in 1976 as a curate; he never wanted to be a Parish Priest. The story is that when Bishop Daly offered to appoint him as a Parish Priest in 1974 he said: "Oh no, no, I'm too auld".

He had a reputation for holiness, goodness and gentleness. Many people came to him in Glenullin, from other parishes in the Diocese where he had served as a curate, asking for his prayers. I met different people who told me that they had been cured from various illnesses through his prayers.

I became Parish Priest of the Parish of Errigal (Ballerin and Glenullin) in 1994 and was fortunate to have Fr McKee as a curate. He was a great companion, relaxed, humorous and very kind.

He didn't talk to me about his prayer life and I never asked. He probably would have said, in his self-deprecating way, "It could be

better".

I always considered him to be a saint and always felt blessed to be with him. I still remember the regard and respect in which he was held by all the parishioners.

Another priest, a retired Parish Priest of Coleraine, told me of the great respect that the teenage girls and boys who attended Loreto Convent, in Coleraine, from Glenullin had for him; he was very impressed by that.

It is important that Fr McKee's name should not be forgotten. I'm sure it won't, considering the numbers who come to his grave.



O Mary conceived without sin...pray for us who have recourse to Thee

by Mary McMenamin

THE Feast of the Immaculate Conception is celebrated each year on December 8. As Our Lady said to St Bernadette when she appeared in Lourdes in 1858, "I am the Immaculate Conception".

Our Lady was immaculately conceived in St Anne's womb. God preserved Mary from the stain of original sin. Mary is God's masterpiece, His greatest prodigy. Reflecting on this great mystery, we realise that God the Father had chosen Mary even before she was born to become the mother of Jesus, God the Son. And so, Mary is the Immaculate Conception!

We might be tempted to think that life was easy for Mary, as God bestowed on Her special graces. Our Lady was human like us and not divine. Mary also had free will,

like we have, but She chose to do God's will in everything. Mary never did her own will for one single second of her existence on earth. She had given God her Fiat.

Unlike Mary, we, on the other hand, are more attached to doing our own will rather than doing God's Will. I like to imagine what this world would be like if we were more like Our Lady and we chose only to do God's will and live in His Will. What a harmonious and peaceful world we would live in. It would be the Kingdom of God on earth.

In the late 1920s, Our Lady frequently appeared to the Servant of God, Luisa Piccarella in her bed, and revealed to her the events of her life, from her Immaculate Conception to her bodily

Assumption into heaven.

The book written by Luisa, and entitled, 'The Virgin Mary in the Kingdom of the Divine Will' includes meditations from Our Lady given to Luisa, with instructions on how to live in the Divine Will.

God desires to share the knowledge of His gift of the Divine Will with His children. Living closely united with God's will is the fundamental message revealed to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, in the Lord's prayer, "Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven".

For more information on living in the Divine Will, check out the website, Divine Will Family Ireland.



Mary McMenamin.



Pope's monthly intention

The Holy Father has asked for prayer during December for:

Evangelisation:

Let us pray for catechists, summoned to announce the Word of God: may they be its witnesses, with courage and creativity and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer for Priests

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

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

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

Bless, in a special way,

Your servant

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

Remember in prayer:

Fr John McDevitt (Dec 1st)
Fr Micheal McGavigan (2nd)
Fr Kevin McElhennon (3rd)
Fr Daniel McFaul (4th)
Fr Dermot McGirr (5th)

Dr James McGrory (6th)
Fr Brian McGoldrick (7th)
Fr Neil McGoldrick (8th)
Fr George McLaughlin (9th)
Fr James McGonagle (10th)
Fr Edward McGuinness (11th)
Bishop Donal McKeown (12th)
Fr Con McLaughlin (13th)
Fr Peter McLaughlin (14th)
Fr Anthony Mailey (15th)
Fr Peter Madden (16th)
Fr Gerard Mongan (17th)
Fr Colm O'Doherty (18th)
Fr Kevin Mullan (19th)
Fr Patrick O'Hagan (20th)

Fr Seamus O'Connell (21st)
Fr Joseph O'Connor (22nd)
Fr Kieran O'Doherty (23rd)
Fr Francis O'Hagan (24th)
Fr David O'Kane and Fr Patrick O'Kane (25th)
Fr Peter O'Kane and Fr Kevin Mulhern (26th)
Fr Arthur O'Reilly (27th)
Fr Michael Porter (28th)
Fr Sean O'Donnell (29th)
Fr John Ryder and Fr Gerard Sweeney (30th)
Fr Joseph Varghese and Fr John Walsh (31st)

Sergio Muñoz...and many, many faces along the highways of my life-span *by Fr John McLaughlin ssc*



Fr John with Sergio.

"WITH renewed devotion then we must serve the poor, especially outcasts and beggars. They have been given to us as our masters and patrons." (St Vincent de Paul)

"The poor, always and everywhere, evangelize us, because they enable us to discover in new ways the true face of the Father. They have much to teach us. Besides participating in the *sensus fidei*, they know the suffering Christ through their own sufferings. It is necessary that we all let ourselves be evangelized by them...We are called to discover Christ in them, to lend them our voice in their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to understand them and to welcome the mysterious wisdom that God wants to communicate to us through them." (Message of Pope Francis for the World Day of the Poor, November 14, 2021)

I was on the Chilean Pan Americana on my way to Talca, which is about three hours drive from Santiago. And I was beginning what was a new adventure in my life. For on reaching Talca, I had to seek out the local bus that would bring me deep into the flat, agricultural land where my friends lived and worked. The local bus was one of very many leaving that depot and all were surrounded by people carrying goods and even animals.

My small country bus to Santa Maria and Douai had already loaded on to the roof sacks of flower, a mattress or two, and bags of seeds, with even a cage of little chicks. Inside, people carried other groceries and tools in their hands and on their laps. I was unsure about where to get off and how far I might have to walk. In the event, the young conductor scampered up and down helping people load and then unload, and shouted out some of the localities we were passing through. He had

me taped, as there was no other foreigner heading off on that bus that day. There was dust all along the little unpaved roads so that vision was limited. He looked after me in my anxiety and helped me dismount after many stops and deliveries on the hour and a half trip.

The house indicated to me was not very impressive: an old rundown hacienda, which the patron had left to Don Sofonor, a long time servant on his lands. With Doña Malvinas, they had reared a family of four fit, young men, Pedro, Luis and Nelson. The first was Sergio, now in Santiago and whom I had befriended in the parish of San Luis, sending me off down to meet his family. That was to be a great friendship and grace in my life.

Life was hard and simple with Sofonor and Malvinas, with their sons. Days were spent in the 'chacras', and some would get on the loaded cart and harness the horse, before setting off on a two-hour trip into Talca to market some of their produce; melons, sandias, lettuces. I was to get used to seeing them return on occasion, having failed to sell the produce and throwing the melons, etc, to the few pigs around the house. Life was hard for them all, on this rented land which was often low in yields and over-used.

I was straightaway 'Juanito', and no titles. I looked around that first evening for the toilet. Some 'confort' was placed in my hands and Don Sofonor invited me to follow him, around the edge of the old hacienda. "Por alli", he said, as he pointed me out to the fields. I was a long time deciding on my trips to Santa Maria whether it was better to 'do my business' in the early morning, rather than with the flies and the sun - or rain - in late evening!

In later years, they acquired one

of the small rural houses in an estate nearby. My walks around the area were based on avoiding the squalls of dust from the local tractors and trailers. I found a narrow lane, with a little rivulet, where I could walk and say my Office in peace and harmony with Nature.

Welcome

Sergio, their eldest son, worked at first in a factory in the city of Santiago. He lived with an aunt, Victoria, and his cousin, Patti, who was part of the music group in the parish of San Luis for the Sunday evening Mass. There Sergio found a welcome and some of the young people started to encourage him about a secondary education, helping him with his reading. Sergio was honest and joyful and used to living humbly. What did shake him a little was arriving back to the house and finding just nothing to eat. In his own home, there was always something left for the last in at night.

From the factory, he was given a contact and the chance of being assistant helper in an apartment block, where some of the upwardly mobile citizens of Santiago lived, in the 'barrio alto'. Years later, during the summer, when the 'patrones' were in their holiday homes in the South, I got a tour of the apartments and stood in awe at the beauty of some of their artifacts and paintings.

The routine that Sergio was taking on was not for the fainthearted; early rising, then across the city on his bike and under his poncho, to the Departamento. Then, going all day, it was back across the city to Independencia and his night school for the 'cuarto año y medio' course, with other like-minded young men and women. Trying to stay awake for the first hour was nearly impossible, and the compassionate and dedicated teachers knew what their pupils were coming from. After getting homework, he was home around 9.30 pm and little to eat in the house, and having a go at the material to be studied. Occasionally, he would ring me in some despair as the strain got to him.

The rural schools in the interior of Talca had no great standards of learning, so he had a lot to make up. Some of the evening Mass music group helped and encouraged him in the processes. He often, on a non-working public holiday, tried to get into the National Library, where one of the attendants took an interest in this transparently honest, young student, and expressed his admiration. On a Monday, I often met up with him for an evening meal in the Barrio Bellavista, in a popular family restaurant, the Venecia. There, we would talk football and the national

results - he had been a promising goalkeeper with Talca Rangers when very young, and, of course, politics and Pinochet, before chatting about the folks at home and how school was advancing, despite the stresses..

So, after a couple of hard years, Sergio did get to 'graduate' in the presence of his parents and those of his group who had survived. One of the unforgettable moments of my life was witnessing the emotion and the pride of his father, Sofonor, with the tears running down his cheeks; Sergio being the first of his family to make it through college. Only two or three others of that group stuck out the grind of work and study. One of them, on meeting Sergio on a bus, invited him out for a drink just to express his admiration for his resilience ('Su garrra', he would have said!).

One of the many narratives that I picked up from my friend, Sergio, surrounded the occasion of the National Plebiscite on the 'continuance' or 'no' of Pinochet. Most of the apartment owners were staunch followers of the Dictator, and expected Sergio to be in the same camp! So, there was no room for any signs of joy or triumph on his part, when the campaign for the 'No' prevailed and tempers boiled high around him!

Dignity

On one of those occasions, one of the residents, a military general, arrogantly addressed Sergio as 'mozo'. He quietly responded that all the others spoke to him as Don Sergio, which prompted anger and the threat of dismissal from the General. But the other residents refused to support him and Sergio stayed on. He told me: "I now have a little bit of education, Juanito, and I think I should be allowed my title and my dignity". That was music to my ears, then and for long afterwards!

After graduation, Sergio moved on to the Inacap technical college to study as a mechanic. We got some support for him and others through an organization called Help and Hope (Ayuda y Esperanza), to which various congregations subscribed, including the Columbans. In there, the Señora Raquel served as a guide, a mother-motivator to those submitting their notes and advances in their chosen profession. I had another young man in there (in Ayuda y Esperanza) working towards being a chef, and later on supported, through them, Lidice, who became a professor of biology and a life-long friend. Maybe there is another story there!

So, Sergio emerged as a mechanic and got employment. For a while, until the garage started to go down and the 'last



Comedores Grupo.

in were the first out'. Then he had a partnership with Luis on a small garage enterprise. Sergio was, perhaps, too trusting, as Luis fobbed off a small truck on him, which later turned out a disaster (chatarra), and he had to get it off his hands. It had been destined to ease things for his brothers in Talca, getting their produce to and from the markets more quickly and more easily. He had also bought for the mother, Sra Malvinas, washing machine, TV etc, saving little money for himself. So again, with some donations I had received from Irish friends, I could help him with the little truck and some other commodities for the house in Santa Maria, making life a little more comfortable for that hard-worked family.

One of the ladies in the Social Action Group in that parish of San Luis, where I worked with Columban Fr Pat Egan, was also called Raquel. It was a joyful little group and generous with its time and service to those down at heel in the seven chapels and their surroundings. She had work as a cook with a very well-to-do family in the upper part of town, and government ministers and impresarios were often there for dinner in the evenings. The family was generous, and had an intellectually disabled daughter whom Raquel cherished. "Do ye know", she said on one occasion, "my patron and his people don't have nearly the fun we have around here" ("no saben pasarlo bien como nosotros"). It was a phrase and a comment that came back to me again and again, as I lived my pastoral life largely in areas like that first parish.

On another occasion, in a south city parish, in an area known as 'La Caro', one of the bright group of catechists was Paulina, who made her livelihood out of a small kiosk just outside one of the colleges. She used to be quite tickled that the professors and others of the staff would turn to her and invite her inside on the occasion of a bereavement, or tragedy, touching the pupils or staff. Paulina would joyfully set about organizing the simple Liturgy of Hymns and biblical reading, prayers and intercessions,

and decorate a small altar for the occasion.

Lively

On another occasion, I recall the lively youth group around that same chapel and area, as they prepared for the November 'Month of Mary' devotions with their own mural of 'Our Lady, the Washerwoman'. In those times, the prayers would be each night and in the open air, early summer, November.

Frank O'Connor, the Irish writer and playwright, had a phrase that struck me from the Abbey production: "Only the poor know how the poor live".

In the parish of San Columbano, where I spent two terms, we had at one stage a highly organized series of services: Legal Aid, an AA grouping, Soup Kitchens, and a social worker, Tina and her team, and occasional 'field activities' for occasions like local elections (a Forum to which we invited the local candidates for the council), Labour Laws on May 1, etc. It was a touching experience to just join in with some of those groups on a Wednesday, when the Social Leader, Tina led the discussion on a story from the Bible or from other Christian sources. There was even an annual Paschal Supper that she organized, using local herbs and New Testament readings, usually in the week after Easter. There would be workshops for dressmaking, hair dressing and cooking etc, sometimes home carpentry, little vegetable gardens where Sras Amada, Angelica, Vivi, Mirella, etc, would proudly show what their labours had produced. As there was crime and drugs in the area in a big way, the stories coming from some of those mothers and sisters were often heartbreaking to listen to.

Sheila Cassidy, in one of her books, quoted the song writer, Sidney Carter: "No revolution will come to change the lot of these good people, save the revolution of being loved."

During a catechetical meeting on Placeres Hill in Valparaíso, Yvette and Sergio were discussing 'Joys in the Lord', where I happened to be present. "Could ye all just think for a moment on an occasion when you were happy and joyful?...The answers came

Visions of the Child *by Vera McFadden*

I always visited Bethlehem Abbey, in Portglenone, for guidance and healing, and I often did some Christmas shopping there. Once, I noticed a beautiful picture down low in a corner of the shop. It was a golden colour. It showed that Mary had just put Baby Jesus on the swaddling cloth, and St Joseph was looking over her shoulder. Both were adoring the only child.

In the background, there were some friars and religious sisters standing in a line and singing. One of the nuns had looked astonished. I learnt that the picture was a photograph of a masterpiece by a metal artist, and was called, 'The vision of St. Clare'.

One Christmas Eve, St Francis invited the people to a cave on the hill at Greccio and he arranged for an ox and an ass to be brought as well. He wanted the people to realise the great poverty of the stable where the king of the universe was born, and he spoke to them of the great hardship that Mary and Joseph had endured.

The people listened, prayed, and sang. It was during this time that St Claire had the vision of the birth of our Lord. That was like a heavenly stamp of approval on St Francis' efforts.

St Francis had organised the first crib and he often spoke of "the Child of Bethlehem", but there is no record of him ever having a vision of the baby Jesus. He may have been able to keep that secret. Two of his followers were not.

St Anthony was his contemporary, and he had left the Augustinian order to follow the Franciscan rule. Once, he was staying in a house near Padua and baby Jesus leapt into his arms. The proprietor and his wife saw this and they told him. He asked them to tell nobody.

Padre Pio, who died in 1968, was once walking along a corridor in the Monastery. The child Jesus jumped into his arms. A lady was walking in the opposite direction and saw it happen. When they met, he asked her, "How much did you see?" She replied, "I saw

everything", and he asked her to tell nobody.

These two cases are like the time when Jesus asked Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone about His transfiguration until He had risen. They did not understand what He meant at the time.

The picture from Bethlehem Abbey is now in a prominent position in my hall.

At midnight Mass in 1936, St Faustina saw Our Lady wrapping the only child in swaddling clothes. St Joseph was asleep. He must have wakened up when the child had been made cosy. Sr Faustina also saw Our Lady holding the child in her arms. Mary let her hold Him and even left them alone.

On my bedroom wall there is a picture of baby Jesus and St Rose of Lima. It came all the way from Lima, in Peru, with some other gifts, in appreciation of help sent by my class and myself. It arrived on my birthday!

St Rose was a Dominican sister and a friend of St Martin de Porres. They were both fundraisers; she

for the education of poor boys for the priesthood, and he for an orphanage for homeless children, where they could be protected and educated.

In the picture, the child is above her right hand. He is holding a colourful bunch of roses of many hues in His right hand and a white lily in His left hand. (Imagine my delight when a cousin gave me a similar bunch of roses on my recent 90th birthday! I was telling my friends, "Just like the one that baby Jesus gave to St Rose!")

There is a white flower growing behind St Rose's foot. It is an outdoor scene, with grass and ferns and sloping ground and sea. However, there is also a big crucifix encircled with a crown of thorns and, nearby, the open book of the Word of God. The Holy Child appeared three times to St Rose.

On 13 October, the day that the sun danced in the sky, the three children of Fatima saw Our Lady of Mount Carmel and her Child, and they also saw St Joseph holding the Child Jesus. When the children of Medjugorje first saw Mary on the hilltop, she was holding the baby Jesus, covering Him with her cloak and then lifting it to show the child to them again, covering and uncovering. This is what she had come to do – to reintroduce the world to its Saviour, to bring everyone to her Son.

There is an interesting story about a district in South America. A woman had carried her little daughter to the beach, for it was a long walk. When they got there, she let the child run about. The little girl ran into a cave. On the way home she told her mother that there had been a lady and a little boy in the cave. Her mother was startled because these were the first words she had ever heard her daughter speak, as she had been dumb since birth.

Several days later, the girl was missing and her mother went to the beach and found her playing with a little boy while his mother watched. A few years later, the



little girl died and her mother carried her body to the cave and prayed. Her child's life was restored.

When people heard about this, they visited the caves and found a colourful picture on the wall. The picture remains to this day and shows Mary and St Francis and St Dominic. Our Lady is giving a Rosary to St Dominic and a knotted cord to St Francis. When the cave wall was scientifically tested, it was found that the colours went on through it. A church was built above the site and this was later replaced by a basilica.

When I was a child, one of the trimmings after the Rosary was a prayer to Our Lady of Good Success – "Mary, my Queen and my Mother, in the name of Jesus and for the love of Jesus, take my cause in hand and obtain for me good success".

Later, I learned that there was a statue of Our lady of Good Success on the roof of St Columba's Church, Long Tower, with her child in her arm and a staff in her other hand. A friend gave me a DVD of the story.

A young Franciscan nun, who had come from Portugal, once saw Our Lady, who asked her to

teach the people to say this prayer. She also asked her to hold up her girdle for the Child to touch it. It was too short, but it miraculously grew until He was able to do so.

Of course, other saints have had visions of the Child Jesus, some private one's unknown to us. A few weeks ago, I found a card which showed a picture of Our Lady with her Child and the monstrance and chalice. Underneath was the title, 'Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, pray for us who have recourse to thee'.

The statue of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament was designed by the founder of the Order of the Blessed Sacrament. Of course, she was the mother of the Child of Bethlehem, who grew to be the man who offered Himself at The Last Supper in the Eucharist. Indeed, as the priest at Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Steelstown, said a few Christmases ago, there was great meaning in the fact that the new-born Jesus was placed in a manger, which is a trough for holding animal food. But despite the poor surroundings, Mary and Joseph could still adore Him and so can we.

Happy Christmas now and always.

Continued from p28

out one by one; moments like their first Communion, a birthday, a picnic, 'til it came to Yenny, who stood there silent. "NO!"...she could not remember any such moment, even under the gentle encouragement of Yvette, who knew where she was coming from, and fortunately did not pursue or embarrass her, as I stood petrified that she might. I later remarked to the pair of catechists how much I admired their style and patience, knowing that over the two years there would be other moments to help Yenny become the person she was.

At a much later period, having visited often the parents of Sergio in Talca and gained the confidence of their sons and then the grandchildren – twins, whom I had first seen in hospital as new born babies - I was asked to visit Don Sofonor in the hospital in Talca, where he was to die in a couple of weeks. I felt more than sad as I prayed with him and left for Santiago. Malvinas continued to send out her sons to the fields in shirts that were always washed and ironed, and sometimes relations and friends would visit her. Then she had to go on dialysis a couple of days a week, into that same hospital building.

Humble

There was alarm in the voice of Sergio when he 'phoned me, now with a fine wife and small son, from his new place of work; an Argentinean-owned sweet factory, 'Dos en Uno', where he had a stable job. The news was about his youngest brother, Nelson, always cheerful and welcoming. He was in Hospital in Talca and it was serious. I drove down to visit him and found that it was a cancer that

was affecting the throat. There were stories about that hospital and its conditions. Nelson could not be saved and, once again, I drove down to be with the family on a very sad occasion as they 'waked' him (Velorio) out there in that humble cottage.

There was a small local capilla, which had Mass only occasionally, but a group of young people came and spent the whole night around the coffin, with hymns and Rosaries and traditional prayers to The Virgin saints from their own traditions, as I tried to grab some sleep amidst the gentle murmurings coming from the living-room. The following day I was able to accompany them to the parish church of San Clemente, near where Don Sofonor had been buried and whose grave I had visited on a couple of occasions with Sra Malvinas.

There was a large grouping of the local farming community and many younger friends of Nelson, and it was important to me and the family that it should be a full Mass, rather than a Liturgy of the Word. In my homily, knowing that my accent might sound different to those simple people, I tried to use the language of the land in the Bible as I spoke to them all on their loss and in their deep sadness.

Driving back to my parish in the south of Santiago, I felt as tired as I ever could remember, and I had to leave my passenger, an in-law of Sergio, to make her own way home across the city on the Metro, which I felt she half-resented.

There have been many visits out to Sergio's new house, where his wife, Yossina and son, Andres

provide a welcome. I had assisted at Marriage and Baptism out there, in Maipu, a huge dormitory area. She has been a great partner, being of working class and industrious, with her family in the food trade. Meeting Sergio in the city some years earlier, on a Saturday, I was given the news of the death of my mother. It was complicated arranging an air trip home as the offices had closed and I had to hope that I could do the business at the airport on the Sunday morning, as was indicated to me on the emergency phone numbers. Sergio stayed by me during the night, and accompanied me on the bus to the Airport, giving me great comfort.

In visits from Ireland in recent years, I have been able to catch up with the three of them and get the news from the country and Santa Maria. Sra Malvinas died last year, bravely fighting on through dialysis and other infirmities. Through 'Whatsapp', I was able to ring directly to the house and family during their vigil; a sad occasion for all.

My own date of birth was that of the Feast of St Vincent de Paul, in July, years before it was transferred to late September! And I used the 'Padre J Vicente' part to avoid confusion with some other 'Padres Juan'. As a young boy in Moville, I think, there was a film, called 'Monsieur Vincent', about the life of the great Saint. Either then or later (maybe through a book from Cardinal Suenens), I learned of the group who visited him in his final illness and sought his counsel as to their own lives, that his word came through clear and concise, "More".



Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament.



Our Lady of Good Success.

Saints we celebrate during December *by Bishop Donal*

DECEMBER has so much else going on – the Advent themes and the preparations for Christmas. But there are great saints whose life and witness are placed before us. We can read all of their paths to holiness within the spirit of Advent – a time of journeying in hope, trusting that God will bring flowers to bloom, even when we see only deserts.

St Francis Xavier (1506-52) – December 3

He came from the Basque country of Northern Spain, where he became one of the first men to follow St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. After ordination as a priest, he laboured for 11 years as a missionary in India, Japan and China. He spent his life in the mission and died of disease and exhaustion in China.

St John Damascene (c 675-745) – December 4

As his name indicates, John was born in Damascus. He was involved in many of the intellectual issues of his day. But he retired to a monastery where he wrote significant works of theology.

St Nicholas – December 6

He was a 4th century bishop

in what is now modern Turkey. Famous for his generosity to the poor, his name became pronounced as Santa Claus in the United States. However, for a long time in Austria and some regions of Germany, St Nicholas was the main character in the Christmas celebration. But he was not Santa Claus, and he arrived earlier – on December 6.

St Ambrose (340-397) – December 7

Ambrose was born in Trier (Germany), which was then part of the Roman empire. During a dispute in Milan, where he worked in civil administration, he was picked to become the Bishop – even though he was a layman. He was baptised, ordained and installed as bishop within a week in 374! He was a strong leader – and a major influence on the conversion of St Augustine. He is still the patron of Milan.

Immaculate Conception – December 8

This feast celebrates the teaching that Mary was conceived without Original Sin as part of her preparation to be the Mother of the Lord. Though the belief was held for many centuries, it was solemnly defined only in 1854. And four years later at Lourdes,

the Lady at the Grotto introduced herself with these words – I am the Immaculate Conception. And our Diocese hopes to be back in Lourdes with its Diocesan pilgrimage from July 3-8, in 2022.

St Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin (1474-1548) – December 9

Juan Diego was born in what is modern Mexico. In December 1531, he had an apparition of Our Lady, known as Our Lady of Guadalupe. He dedicated the rest of his life to promoting the shrine and the devotion.

St Lucy – December 13.

She was martyred in Sicily at the beginning of the 4th century and devotion to her spread rapidly in the early Church. Her name comes from the word for 'light' and the word 'martyr' means witness.

St John the Cross (1542-1591) – December 14

John was a Carmelite friar in Spain. St Teresa of Avila persuaded him to join her in a major reform of the Carmelite Order, returning it to great simplicity of life and spirituality. This involved a huge amount of controversy and opposition, including imprisonment! The

Church is always in need of reform – and reformers are not always welcome.

St Peter Canisius (1521-1597) – December 21

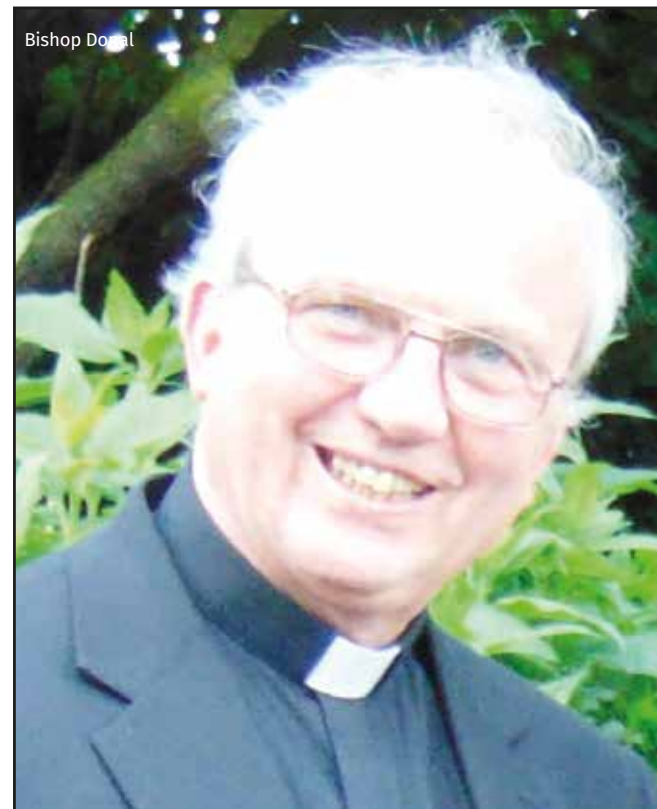
Born in modern day Holland, he was a contemporary of Francis Xavier in the young Jesuit Order. He was noted for his preaching and writing at a time when the Lutheran Reformation was developing in Germany and the Calvinist Reformation in Geneva. Difficult times inspire heroic figures.

St John the Evangelist – December 27

The opening words of St John's Gospel say that "In the beginning was the Word...and Word became flesh and dwelt among us". He is described as the disciple whom Jesus loved.

The Holy Innocents – December 28

These were the children slaughtered by Herod in his attempts to kill the new-born King of the Jews. In every time and place, children have been sacrificed to serve the interests of adults. Many parishes also use this feast to remember children who died before they came to see the light of day.



St Thomas Becket (1118-1170) – December 29

He was born in London in the early decades of the Norman reign in England. He was an important political figure – but, as Archbishop of Canterbury, he came into conflict with the king. He was murdered on December 29, 1170. The Church is strongest when it does not fear to criticise

the powerful.

St Silvester (died 335) – December 31

He was made Pope in 314 in the years immediately after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine. He served as Pope for over 20 years in difficult times.

Watch yourselves! Stay awake! *by Fr Johnny Doherty, CSsR*

AS we begin another year of the Church's journey of faith, it is important to listen to and take heed of these words of Jesus: "Watch yourselves! Stay awake!" They are part of the Gospel passage for the First Sunday in Advent and they set a theme for us for our preparations for Christmas and beyond.

These words of Jesus are not spoken to scare us. They are rather an invitation to us. Jesus' great desire is that we, both personally, as families, and as a community of faith, would have life and have it to the full. The great enemy of this desire is the way in which we can drift in our own lives and in our relationships with one another, in marriage, in family life, in the parish community, and in our relationship with God.

Advent

The four weeks of Advent are given to us to come alive to the wonderful gifts that God has given to us. In practice, this month is often a time when people are looking at all the things that they do not have. The advertisers are in full flight. The message is loud and clear that if you do not have all these latest products, you will be miserable. And we can so easily believe this!

We already have all that it takes to be happy. We have life, but we take that for granted. We have health, but we talk about our pains. We have people who love

us, but we highlight how they hurt us. We have so much to live for in the present, but we live in the past. Advent is a time for looking ahead and catching again the excitement of life which is forever new.

Christmas

So many people keep saying that Christmas is for children. It has become that, but it should not be so. Christmas is about a child who calls us to adult, mature, responses to God and to God's love for us.

Christmas is a call to stir ourselves out of any spiritual stupor that might be in us and let our minds and hearts be fired up by this most extraordinary event. A child is born for us; a saviour is given to us. God is very close to us and passionately wants to lift us into life.

Week by week in December

By far the best way we have of preparing for Christmas and beyond is by following the Sunday celebration of Mass week by week, especially as families and as a community of faith. I hope what follows here may be of help to you in this adventure.

Week 1: November 28 – December 4

Our liberation from fear

Jesus said to His disciples: "Hold your heads high, for your liberation is close at hand".

Over the past few years, with

all the revelations of scandals in the Church and society, there is a lot for us to be ashamed of and repent for. However, the resulting despair that some people have experienced is not necessary, because there continues to be so much goodness in the Church and society that we can be proud of.

This week, we begin a new year in our journey of faith with Christ. It is an opportunity to have confidence, once again, in His presence with us, and His power in us. Without in any way being unrealistic, this is a time to look towards Him to save us and to set us free.

We will find that freedom in how we are with one another in our homes and in our parish community, as we approach Christmas and beyond with love rather than with selfishness or fear.

Week 2: December 5 – 11

The joy of salvation

"(John) went through the whole Jordan district proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

Every day we are made aware of how much evil there is in our world, with stories of cruelty and vandalism at home and abroad. And yet, in spite of this awareness, there is a huge decline in our sense of sin. In some ways, this is a good development because in former times so much was thought of as

sin.

However, as we approach Christmas and beyond, it is important that we hear the call for repentance and leave anything that is harmful in the past behind us, by placing it firmly in the hands of Christ, asking for His forgiveness and healing. This makes it possible for us to make a fresh start again and again in our relationships with God and with one another in our homes and in our parish community.

Week 3: December 12 – 18

A day of festival

The people asked John: "What must we do?"

This question was in the context of John's proclaiming the Good News of the coming of Christ. As we prepare for Christmas this year what a good question that is for all of us. "What must we do?"

If you are a parent, give time to your children rather than just giving them all the costly presents that you are planning. If you are married, give your wife/husband the gift of your attention and affection. If you are young, give some of your time and energy to those in need, rather than just looking for what you can get. If you are at odds with someone, make it up. If you are in bad form, change for the sake of those close to you.

And for all of us, what we must do is put Christ at the heart of

Christmas and have a wonderful time.

Week 4: December 19– 25

Mary's Child: the Prince of Peace

Elizabeth said: "Blessed is she who believed that the promise made to her by the Lord would be fulfilled".

At the end of this week we celebrate the wonderful Feast of Christmas. Mary is by far the best person to teach us what it is about, as she was very central to the first Christmas. The first thing she teaches us is that Christmas is primarily about Christ. How obvious that should be and yet it is about so many other things for so many people today.

The second thing Mary teaches us about Christmas is that it is about God's extreme love for us as we are. Each one of us is so precious in God's eyes that Christmas would have happened if we were the only person ever to live. It is a time to let go to that love.

And the third thing is that it is about family – our love for one another in our homes and being a family together in our parish community.

Week 5: December 26 – January 1

The Holy Family

"His mother stored up all these things in her heart."

One of the lovely things about

a new, young family is the excitement of recording every movement and sound of the newly born baby. Countless photographs are taken and produced on every occasion. Reports are sent around to family members and anyone else who will listen.

This is the picture we have of Mary today, as she marvelled at her new-born son Jesus. And this is where real holiness is found. We name Jesus, Mary and Joseph the Holy Family, not because they were pious but because of the great love that filled their hearts and their home.

That is the challenge for every home and family. With the pressures of life, the wonder of each person can be lost. The call of this Feast is to get our priorities right, to put our love for God and for one another first and, in this way, make Jesus present.



Fr Johnny Doherty

Children's Catechism Club - C3

by Veronica Harley

HELLO children. C3 welcomes you to the month of December. This is a very exciting time of year as we prepare during Advent for the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. The month of December is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady which is celebrated on December 8.



Immaculate Conception

On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we celebrate and honour the holiness and innocence of Mary. Our Catholic faith teaches us that God kept Mary free from original sin. She was conceived immaculately, which means that from the moment of her conception she was free from original sin and in a state of grace, pure enough to be the Mother of Jesus (CCC 490-493). She was a fitting tabernacle to hold within her body the flesh and blood of Jesus our Saviour. When we receive Holy Communion, we also hold within us the Body and Blood of Jesus, so we should try not to sin and to be pure and holy like Mary.



The Advent Wreath

The use of the Advent wreath with the five candles has been a tradition for hundreds of years. The wreath is a symbol of the four weeks in which we prepare for the birth of Jesus, with a candle being lit each week; three purple candles and one rose candle. The green branches remind us of the new life we have in Jesus, the circle signifies the eternity of God's love for us (with no beginning or end), and the candles represent hope and light which Jesus brings into a dark world. The fifth candle is lit on Christmas Day, as a symbol

of Christ, born as the Light of the world.

Saints of the Month

St Ambrose – December 7
St Lucy – December 13
St Stephen – December 26
St John – December 27

Christmas Day

Christmas Day is celebrated every year on December 25. The word 'Christmas' comes from the combination of Christ and Mass; it is the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ (CCC 525). This was the day Jesus was brought into our world to reveal God to us. Christmas is a very special Feast, and it is one of only three Feast days of which the Catholic Church celebrates birthdays. The other two are the births of the Blessed Virgin Mary and John the Baptist. All three of these birthdays have one thing in common – John the Baptist, the Blessed Virgin Mary and Jesus were all born without Original Sin.

Christmas is a special time when we gather together to celebrate the Birth of Jesus. We exchange gifts in our homes and give thanks to God for the wonderful gift of His Son to us.



Feast of the Holy Family

The Feast of the Holy Family is celebrated on the first Sunday of Christmas. This feast day is dedicated to the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. We ponder their life together in Nazareth and pray for our own families.

The Gospels do not tell us anything about Jesus' life when He was growing up in Nazareth. The last story St Luke tells us is the 'Finding of Jesus in the Temple' (Luke 2:41-52) and so, we have the hidden years of Jesus' life (CCC 514). We know that during this time Jesus' relationship with Mary and Joseph helped Him as He grew to maturity, increased in wisdom, and found favour with God.



The Holy Family provides us with a perfect model of how to live: they loved God and one another. Families are 'schools of love', for within our families we learn how to receive and share love (CCC 2207). God's love is transmitted to us through the love of our families; through the ordinariness of family life, God is present. The family has been described as the 'domestic church' (CCC 2204) – a place of ecclesial community and a communion of persons, an image of the Triune God.

Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic churches. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph graciously hear our prayer. Amen



Our Lady of Guadalupe – December 12

"Hear me and understand well, my little son, that nothing should frighten or grieve you. Let not your heart be

disturbed. Do not fear sickness nor any other anguish. Am I not here, your Mother? Are you not under my protection? Am I not your health? Are you not happily within my fold? What else do you wish? Do not grieve nor be disturbed by anything."
— Our Lady to Juan Diego

In the winter of 1531, a poor Aztec Indian convert, Juan Diego, living outside present day Mexico City, experienced a miraculous event on his way to morning Mass. He heard strange music coming from Tepeyac Hill, and he could hear a woman's voice calling his name. When he climbed the hill, he saw a young woman, who looked like his own people in physical appearance and dress. The woman told Juan Diego that she was the Virgin Mary, and she sent him to ask the bishop of Mexico City to build a church on the hill so that their nation would be converted, and it would be a consolation to all the people.

Juan Diego obeyed the Blessed Virgin and went to give this message to the bishop. The bishop, after listening to Juan Diego, was not sure if he should believe him, even though he knew him to be a humble and faithful man. So, Juan reported the bishop's doubt to Our Lady at Tepeyac Hill, and she asked him to go back to the bishop and give him the same message. The bishop once again listened to the message and then told Juan Diego to ask Our Lady for a sign that it was She that wished the church to be built.

When Juan returned to the hill, the Blessed Virgin gave him a magnificent sign. On the hill in the middle of the winter, roses miraculously appeared and Juan gathered them in his tilma (cloak). Our Lady arranged the roses in his tilma with her own hands, and Juan went back to the bishop. When Juan opened his tilma, the flowers fell to the floor. But more astonishing than

the flowers was that the tilma had a miraculous image of Our Lady printed on it.

Immediately the bishop fell to his knees and believed Juan Diego's message. A church was built on the spot where the Blessed Virgin appeared, and eight million people were converted to Catholicism on hearing about the apparitions of Our Lady.

The tilma of Juan Diego has undergone a great deal of modern research over the years to clarify how authentic it is. The tilma is made from coarse cactus fibres that should have crumbled and fallen apart after 20 years, but it is still in perfect condition after 500 years. Chemical analysis has shown that no paint was used in the image imprinted on the tilma. Nor has it been possible to identify the colour on the imprint. Studies have also revealed that there are 46 stars on Mary's mantle. These match exactly what would have been seen in the sky in December 1531. To this day, with a sense of wonder about the 46 stars, the Mexican people like to pray the Rosary for 46 days in preparation for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, December 12.

Our Lady of Guadalupe, pray for us



Quiz Time with Lawrence

1. In the first Home Alone movie, to what city were the McCallister family travelling when Kevin was left behind?
2. Which popular food franchise provides Japan's traditional Christmas day lunch?
3. On what date does the 12 days of Christmas officially start?
4. What festive creation is accredited to confectioner Tom Smith?
5. Which singer, famous for an iconic 1988 Christmas song, was born on 25 December 1957?
6. Which US sport traditionally serves up a set of Christmas Day fixtures for live TV?
7. Which national retail company's 2014 Christmas advert featured opposing WW1 soldiers playing football during a truce?
8. In what year was the last official widespread White Christmas across the UK and Ireland?
9. Which Christmas character was only added to festivities in 1939?
10. With what song did Michael Jackson top the festive charts in 1995?
11. What is the chemical formula for snow?
12. Before Christianity, what name did the Romans give to their annual winter festival?

Quiz Answers: 1, Paris. 2, KFC. 3, 25 December. 4, Christmas Cracker. 5, Shane MacGowan. 6, Basketball. 7, Sainsbury's. 8, 2010. 9, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. 10, Earth Song. 11, H₂O. 12, Saturnalia. 13, The Elf on the Shelf. 14, Italy. 15, Denmark. 16, St Stephen. 17, Trading Places. 18, Chelsea. 19, Irving Berlin. 20, Eat a grape. 21, The Phillipines. 22, Do You Hear What I Hear. 23, Only Fools and Horses. 24, Fidel Castro. 25, O Holy Night.

13. What more recent Christmas tradition was created by American writer, Carol Aebersold?
14. In which country does Babbo Natale give out gifts to children?
15. Which country is Europe's largest exporter of Christmas trees?
16. Who is the Patron Saint of bricklayers?
17. In which festive movie did Eddie Murphy play the character Billy Ray Valentine?
18. Legendary striker Jimmy Greaves scored a Christmas Day hat-trick in 1957, in a 7-4 win over Portsmouth, but for which club?
19. Who was the composer on the musical classics 'Holiday Inn' and 'White Christmas'?
20. In Spain, it is tradition to do what at each of the 12 chimes of midnight on New Year's Eve?
21. Where is the world famous 'Giant Lantern Festival' held on the Saturday before Christmas every year?
22. 'Said the night wind to the little lamb...' is the first line of what 1960's Christmas song?
23. On Christmas night 2003, the last ever episode of which TV show pulled in over 16 million viewers?
24. Which political leader refused to recognise Christmas as a national holiday in his country between 1969 and 1998?
25. 'He knows our need; to our weakness no stranger' is a line from which Christmas carol?

Moville, Newtownstewart, Omagh, Plumbridge, Strabane, Steelstown, Sion Mills, Swatragh, Templemore - Long Tower and St Eugene's, Three Patrons, Waterside

Clonmany, Coleraine, Creggan, Culladuff, Culmore, Desertmartin, Donnyloop, Drumquin, Dunamagagh, Dungiven, Fahan, Faughanvale, Garvagh, Gortin, Greencastle,

Aghyaran, Ardmore, Ardstraw West & Castlederg, Ballinascreen, Ballymagroarty, Banagher, Bellaghy, Buncrana, Carndonagh, Claudy,

Let Your Light Shine!

Spirit of Christmas shines at Steelstown PS



The children and families of Steelstown Primary School have been very busy this month supporting a variety of local charity initiatives and groups within the local area, to positively impact the lives of many people this Christmas.



This year, Steelstown Primary School partnered with the River Radio Toy Appeal to provide toys for those in need across the North West.

P1-4 children curated gift boxes for residents of local care homes, Greenhaw Lodge and Culmore Manor, and P5-7 children donated food parcels as part of the Reverse Advent Calendar initiative for the Foyle Food Bank.

Mr O'Donnell's P7 class donated their prize from the Derry Diocesan Catechetical Centre's Colmcille Project to St Vincent de Paul, and the school also held its annual Christmas Jumper Day in aid of SVP.



Greenlough, Iskaheen, Killyclogher, Killygordon, Kilrea, Lavey, Leckpatrick, Lifford, Limavady, Maghera, Magilligan, Malin, Melmount,