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# FURROW

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A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

*Jonathan W. Chappell*  
'Go therefore and make  
disciples of all nations'

+ *John McAreavey*  
Christians in the Middle East

*Philip McParland*  
The Mystical Stage of  
Religion

*Kathleen Coyle*  
Certain Marian Images may  
keep Women within the  
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# The Furrow

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A pastoral monthly founded 1950.

The motif on the cover of *The Furrow* is from Jeremiah 4:3, which reads in the Vulgate:

Novate vobis novale  
Et nolite serere super spinas.  
Yours to drive a new furrow,  
Nor sow any longer among the briers.

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# ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations’: recent Catholic teaching on non-Christian religions

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Jonathan W. Chappell

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), the impact of the Catholic Church’s teaching on non-Christian religions has been dramatic. John Henry Newman is renowned for having spoken of the ‘development of doctrine’. However, what has taken place within the Church over the last few decades constitutes nothing less than a decisive paradigm shift in the way that Catholicism regards its evangelising mission and, in particular, how it interprets Christ’s great evangelizing commission: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...’ (Matthew 28:19).

## LEGACY OF EXCLUSIVISM

The post-conciliar Church has travelled a considerable distance since the time of Pope Boniface VIII, who famously (or, perhaps, infamously) declared that: ‘*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*’ (‘outside the Church there is no salvation’). Indeed, in *Unam sanctam* (1302), Boniface was emphatic that ‘in the time of the flood there was one ark of Noah ... having one ruler and one governor, namely Noah, outside of which we read that everything existing on the earth was destroyed’.<sup>1</sup> In other words, only those who resided within the bosom of Holy Mother Church were assured of a place in paradise. This uncompromising position was axiomatic within the Church from at least the end of the third century. It gained ascendancy in the medieval period and remained dominant until the Second Vatican Council. As a form of exclusivism, it taught that ‘legitimate’ Christianity denied truth to any other religion. Consequently, the truth-claims of other belief systems were regarded as false – or, at the very least, fundamentally flawed. A characteristic feature of this exclusivism was its heavy reliance on

1 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, Penguin 2009, pp. 558–559.

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the New Testament. For example, texts such as John 14.6: ‘Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”’, were employed to support the contention that the primary mission of the Church was to convert the ‘non-believer’ (or the ‘heathen’) by bringing them to true and authentic faith in Christ. In addition to the teaching of Boniface VIII, such exclusivism was affirmed in the *Decree for the Jacobites* promulgated by the Council of Florence (1442). This pronouncement held that ‘neither pagans nor Jews nor heretics nor schismatic, can become partakers of eternal life’.<sup>2</sup>

There are certainly advantages to this ‘all or nothing’ approach to faith. For example, by taking seriously the Church’s exclusive access to divine truth, it both makes members of the Church more confident in the righteousness of their cause and also, as a result of this, makes evangelization, through vigorous proselytization, more effective. Indeed, the Catholic Church, historically, has not had a monopoly on exclusivism: it has also been strongly espoused by Protestant theologians, among them Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965).<sup>3</sup> And few would dispute that it looms large in many contemporary forms of Islam

## GROWING AWARENESS OF THE RICH DIVERSITY OF CULTURES

However, the Catholic Church does not exist in some extra-historical vacuum, any more than any other institution. By the mid-twentieth century, an increasing awareness of the rich diversity of cultures and belief-systems made a dogged adherence to exclusivism more difficult to justify both intellectually and morally. Moreover, there was a growing appreciation that all religions serve a crucial *existential* need: they offer answers to fundamental human questions relating to meaning and purpose. Many were also beginning to reach the *theological* conclusion that all human beings are made in the ‘image and likeness of God’, form a single community, and have one origin and destiny in God. Thus, when Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convoke a Council in 1959, the time was ripe for a reconfiguration of the Church’s approach to the modern world in general, and of its relationship to other non-Christian religions in particular.<sup>4</sup>

What, then, was the impact of Vatican II on the Church’s

2 Gavin D’Costa, *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims*, Oxford University Press 2014, p. 64.

3 See Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, Edinburgh House Press, 1938. Such exclusivism can also be discerned in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998), a Bishop of the Church of South India. See his *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, SPCK Publishing, 2014.

4 Gerald O’Collins, *The Second Vatican Council and Other Religions*, Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 147–148.

## ‘GO THEREFORE AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS’

evangelizing mission to non-Christian religions? The shift in approach can best be discerned in the conciliar documents. *Lumen Gentium* (LG), for instance, was decisive. While it contained no explicit reference to dialogue, it laid the foundation for future engagement with non-Christian religions by expanding the notion of Church as *people of God* to include (to varying degrees) adherents of other faiths: ‘Finally, those who have not yet accepted the gospel [non-Christians] are related to the people of God [the church] in various ways ...’ (LG 16). Though non-Christians may not be said to be *members of the church per se*, they are related or *ordered (ordinatur)* to the church in varying degrees (LG 13). This teaching is echoed by other conciliar documents, such as *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), which avers that the ‘fruits of the spirit’ are not reserved to Christians but apply ‘to all people of good will in whose hearts grace is secretly at work’ (GS 22).

### TRUTH AND GOODNESS IN NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

A further crucial development involved the acknowledgement of the presence of truth and goodness among non-Christian religions. Such religions are not simply dangerously misguided and subversive social constructions which can be dismissed as fundamentally erroneous; on the contrary, the truth and goodness that they contain should be respected, because, while such elements properly belong to the Church, they can nonetheless serve as a preparation for the Gospel. This means that, although God’s special revelation was first delivered to Israel, and ultimately found its fulfilment in Christ, ‘the plan for salvation also embraces those who acknowledge the Creator, and among these the Moslems are the first; they profess to hold the faith of Abraham and along with us they worship the one merciful God who will judge humanity on the last day’ (LG 16).

It is significant, however, that, while *Lumen Gentium* contained an impressive degree of openness to non-Christian religions, and maintained that God is present and active in non-Christian religions, it re-affirmed the duty of the Church to preach the Gospel to all peoples and invite them to conversion.

### NOSTRA AETATE: THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE

The apogee of the conciliar statements concerning the Church’s relations with non-Christian religions, and how it should approach the thorny issue of its evangelising mission, is undoubtedly to be found in one of the last of documents to be issued: *Nostra Aetate* (NA) (1965). This short document, consisting of only five sections,

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further develops the ideas of *Lumen Gentium*. In particular, it explicitly calls upon the Church to enter into constructive dialogue with non-Christian traditions. Such a dialogical approach is encouraged because: 'From ancient until modern times there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that unseen force which is present in the course of things and in events in human life, and sometimes even an acknowledgement of a supreme deity or even a Father' (NA 2).

In addition to the other two monotheistic traditions, Judaism and Islam, which are seen as especially close to Christianity, stemming as they do from the one Abrahamic source, *Nostra Aetate* devotes attention to Hinduism and Buddhism. While these faiths might at first sight appear radically different from the Judeo-Christian tradition, *Nostra Aetate* insists that 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions' – or, indeed, in any religions which sincerely seek after truth (NA 2). For, while such non-Christian faiths are 'often at variance' with what the Catholic Church 'holds and expounds', they 'frequently reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone' (NA 2).

Nevertheless, *Nostra Aetate* immediately goes on to say that, notwithstanding the 'ray of truth' which these non-Christian religions contain, the Church is obliged to preach 'Christ who is the "way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14, 6) in whom people find the fullness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself' (NA 2). And it is precisely the tension between these two sentiments – on the one hand, an openness to truth and goodness in non-Christian religions; on the other, an insistence that the Catholic Church nonetheless possesses the fullness of truth and, moreover, has a duty to preach that truth to non-believers – which has characterised much of the theological debate which has taken place within the Church since Vatican II.

## POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD

How, then, in the light of Vatican II, is it possible to navigate one's way between these seemingly antithetical positions? One possible response is a return to the exclusivism of the pre-Vatican II era. However, there are obvious shortcomings to exclusivism: it is wholly unreceptive to historical-critical exegesis; it fails to take seriously empirical facts about other religions; and it promotes an imperialist (not to say bellicose) stance towards any tradition which does not affirm its own absolutist prejudices. There are, mercifully, very few theologians who currently advocate this position, except, perhaps, those who might identify with schismatic movements such as the Society of Pius X. The majority of contemporary Catholic

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theologians advance either pluralist or inclusivist positions. We shall consider each approach in turn.

### PLURALISM

Although their number is not large, some Catholic theologians are drawn to pluralism. Associated with scholars such as John Hick, Paul Knitter and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, pluralists hold that there should be ‘a move away from insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity toward recognition of the independent validity of other ways’.<sup>5</sup> Inspired by Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘language games’, pluralism maintains that no belief system can gain access to objective truth or reality, assuming that there is such a thing.<sup>6</sup> All religious beliefs and practices are cultural, linguistic and historical constructs, which reflect the ‘forms of life’ of those who adhere to them. For pluralists, then, all religions are equally true internally, but at the same time equally false, because they do not ultimately correspond to an extra-paradigmatic (or mind-independent) reality. While it is possible to commend pluralism for its openness and tolerance, the obvious danger of this position is that it relativizes religious truth-claims to such an extent as to render them devoid of any content, coherence or meaning.

### INCLUSIVISM

A much more common, and persuasive, position amongst Catholic theologians is that of inclusivism. This has been characterised as a kind of *via media* between the Scylla of exclusivism and the Charybdis of pluralism, in that it endeavours to promote dialogue, understanding and inter-faith cooperation, while at the same time preserving what is distinctive about Catholicism. While species of inclusivism (or ‘universalism’) have existed since the beginning of Christian history (it was defended by Church Fathers – for example, Gregory of Nyssa), it has come into its own since Vatican II. One leading proponent of inclusivism was the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, well known for his concept of the ‘Anonymous Christian’. For Rahner, ‘Christianity does not simply confront the members of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian’.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Rahner further developed

5 John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, Orbis Books 1988, p. viii.

6 See John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism*, SCM Press, 1995, pp. 24-30.

7 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, Darton, Longman and Todd 1974, p. 131.

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the ‘inclusiveness’ of *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate* by affirming that, while it is indeed Christ alone who saves, adherents of non-Christian religions are already, in some mysterious sense, incipient possessors of the truth.

Some theologians, among them Jacques Dupuis SJ, have taken this line of thought further, and have spoken of the need for an ‘inclusivist pluralism’.<sup>8</sup> This claims that non-Christian religions are not just *de facto* but also *de jure* paths to salvation. Such a position, which some see as being dangerously close to pluralism, maintains that human beings gain salvation not *in spite* of their religion but *within* their religions.<sup>9</sup>

### DOMINUS IESUS: A RESPONSE TO ‘NEW DEVELOPMENTS’

Notwithstanding the success of the October 1986 interreligious celebration of faith in Assisi, presided over by Pope John Paul II, the Church’s Magisterium has, perhaps understandably, expressed some concern – not to say alarm – over what it has perceived to be the subjectivizing and relativizing tendencies of theologians such as Dupuis, and has sought to re-affirm the central soteriological role of Christ. In 2000, for instance, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued *Dominus Iesus*, in response to ‘new developments’ arising in the fields of ecumenical and interreligious engagements. The document took great pains to re-emphasise the uniqueness and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, and stressed that other religions are not autonomous and self-sufficient paths to salvation.<sup>10</sup>

### POPE FRANCIS ON THE DIVERSITY OF RELIGIONS

On 4 February 2019, on his Apostolic Visit to Abu Dhabi, Pope Francis caused some consternation when he and Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, jointly signed a Document on Human Fraternity which declared that ‘the pluralism and the diversity of religions ... are willed by God’.<sup>11</sup> Given the Church’s traditional insistence on the uniqueness of God’s revelation in Christ, concerns were raised by Raymond Cardinal Burke,

8 Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, Darton, Longman and Todd 2002. See also Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Orbis Books 2002.

9 Gerald O’Collins, *Second Vatican Council and Other Religions*, pp. 181–196.

10 See also Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, Ignatius Press 2003.

11 See Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to the United Arab Emirates, a document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, February 4, 2019, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html).

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Bishop Athanasius Schneider, and other conservative Catholic theologians<sup>12</sup> that Francis appeared to be in danger of lapsing into relativism by suggesting that God *positively* wills the existence of all religions. In a General Audience held on 3 April 2019, however, Francis sought to clarify his teaching on the diversity of religions by distinguishing between the ‘positive’ will of God and the ‘permissive’ will (*voluntas permissiva*) of God. While God does not positively will the existence of all religions, the Pope stated, God nonetheless ‘permits’ them to exist.<sup>13</sup>

## CONCLUSION

We are left with the question of how the modern Church should understand its evangelising mission. The answer surely lies in that form of inclusivism that, as *Nostra Aetate* teaches, holds that, while Catholics are called to the fullness of divine life in the Church, and have a duty to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, they must also maintain a dialogue with other faiths in a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, though Catholics must hold fast to the truth of Christ, they must also be open to the possibility that God’s grace and divine life are active in other religions. In short, the Church must be in constant dialogue with others, but in a manner which does not foreclose conversion.

12 <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/cardinal-burke-bishop-schneider-criticism-of-errors-is-fidelity-to-the-pope>

13 See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2019/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190403\\_udienza-generale.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190403_udienza-generale.html)

14 For an excellent discussion of the way in which a ‘deep listening’, inspired by the *Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, can facilitate dialogue with other faiths, see Michael Barnes SJ, *Ignatian Spirituality and Interreligious Dialogue: Reading Love’s Mystery*, Messenger Publications 2021.

# Christians in the Middle East

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+ John McAreavey

In 1997 the Scots writer, William Dalrymple, wrote *From the Holy Mountain: a journey in the shadow of Byzantium*, an account of a journey he made on foot in the Middle East in the mid-1990's. Setting out from Mount Athos in Greece, he travelled through Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and Egypt, searching for remnants of Byzantium. Dalrymple refers to 'a degree of prejudice and intolerance in Israel reminiscent of other Middle Eastern countries – notably Turkey – where a religiously homogeneous majority is able to lord it over a relatively powerless minority community'.<sup>1</sup>

*The Vanishing: the twilight of Christianity in the Middle East*<sup>2</sup> is written a generation later. Given the history of the Middle East over the period, it is no surprise that the author, Janine di Giovanni is a war correspondent who has reported on wars and civil unrest for over thirty years. She has experienced at first hand the impact of wars and revolutions on Christian communities in Iraq, Gaza, Syria and Egypt. *The Vanishing* documents her experiences in these countries over thirty years, particularly their impact on the lives of Christians and their communities. Though self-effacing about her own Christian faith, it informs her account in a powerful way. It provides some balance in an account that is shocking and depressing:

This is a book about dying communities, but it is also about faith. I wrote it so that the people I documented would never disappear. They are here on these pages, and therefore they live forever. But I also wrote it as a way of acknowledging that their faith, in many ways, is more powerful than any of the armies I have seen trying to destroy them (p. 220).

1 The situation in Israel has not changed. Writing in the *Sunday Times* on 12 December 2021, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem warn of a concerted attempt by fringe, radical groups to drive Christians away from the Holy Land - which takes place against the 'historic tragedy' of the Christian population's century-long decline (<https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/archbishops-warn-concerted-effort-drive-christians-holy-land>).

2 Janine di Giovanni, *The vanishing: the twilight of Christianity in the Middle East*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

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+ John McAreavey is Bishop Emeritus of Dromore

## CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

### IRAQ

The Christian community in Iraq traces its origin to St Thomas the Apostle; the Eastern Aramaic speakers there are one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Before the war, there were 1.4 million Christians in Iraq; now there are between 250,000 and 300,000. One man says, 'Even with ISIS gone, there's another big threat; there is no work for us. Our enemy is emigration' (p. 45). Christians in Iraq put their faith in Saddam Hussain: 'they gave their support in return for protection' (p. 46).

### GAZA

Di Giovanni has made many visits to Gaza, which is 'surrounded by the humiliation of checkpoints, inspections and barricades' (p. 72), adding, 'Gazans receive four hours of electricity per day, fresh water supplies are limited; only 5% of the water is drinkable' (p.76). She cites Fr Mario da Silva, the Brazilian priest who had served there: 'It's too difficult to live here. Difficult for people without income. Difficult to live without freedom. Christians cannot visit their families in Jerusalem. They can't work in Tel Aviv. There is no future' (p.89). Community leaders are in two minds: they do not want their people to leave and they realise that for many it is the only hope of a decent life. One person described Gaza as 'a cemetery of talent' (p. 100). Two women said to the author, 'More than money ... what people need here is prayer' (p. 114).

### SYRIA

The impact of war on Syria has been immense: It 'was ripped apart at the seams, half its people dead or displaced. It was one of the worst humanitarian crises in history, certainly the worst I had witnessed in thirty years of fieldwork' (p. 117). Syrian Christians quickly became targets of violence, as ISIS and other violent groups began their campaign against religious minorities in late 2012. As a result, 'virtually all Christians in the northeast left, taking with them a rich cultural tradition that dates to the earliest days of the faith' (p.110). Part of that tradition are villages, like Maaloula where the people still spoke Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

### EGYPT

The situation of Christians in Egypt is invidious. The NGO *Open Doors* reported that 128 Christians were killed there in 2017

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because of their faith (p. 167). They are often – politically – caught in crossfire: the bombing of churches and displays of Christian persecution are a way of showing the government’s powerlessness in the face of the extremists (p.168). Like so many Christians in the Middle East, many Egyptian Christians feel that their future lies elsewhere (p. 177). One Christian said, ‘the underlying sense of inferiority is our greatest persecution ... Moslems really don’t want us to have a voice’ (pp. 179-80).

In the final pages Di Giovanni writes movingly:

My life’s work has been to tell stories for those who did not have the ability to tell them themselves for fear of persecution, subjugation, and sometimes even death. Most of them cannot be listed here due to that fear ... (p. 224)

## A RESPONSE

Di Giovanni speaks of the violence ‘that has a way of arriving like a fierce sandstorm, devouring everything in its path’ and overturning the way of life, the culture and faith of communities that traced their origins back to the origins of Christianity. It is important that we offer Christian communities in the Middle East the support of our solidarity, expressed in prayer, awareness and practical help. As noted above, Christians in the Middle East have expressed a need for our prayers. The current issue of *Intercom* (December 2021-January 2022) offers a prayer for the feast of the Epiphany:

We pray for those suffering for their faith, remembering the Christian communities in the Holy Land, the Middle East. May God give them courage, help them to persevere and keep them safe from harm (p. 46).

Another expression of solidarity is to be informed about events in the Middle East, especially as they affect Christian communities. Since 1998 a group of Church representatives of Bishops’ Conferences in Europe, the US and Canada travel to the Holy Land in January. I quote from its website:

Mandated by the Holy See, the Holy Land Co-ordination meets every January in the lands of Christ’s birth, ministry, Passion and Resurrection. It aims to act in solidarity with the Christian communities there and shares in the pastoral life of the local Church as it experiences extreme political and social-economic pressure.<sup>3</sup>

3 <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/home/our-work/holy-land/holy-land-co-ordination/holy-land-co-ordination/>

## CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In 2016 I had the privilege of participating in this pilgrimage, which included a visit to Gaza and other locations on the West Bank.

### DEFEATING MINORITY EXCLUSION AND UNLOCKING POTENTIAL: CHRISTIANITY IN THE HOLY LAND

This report, issued by Christian leaders in the Holy Land in December 2021, is an initiative of the International Community of the Holy Sepulchre to provide practical assistance to Christians living in Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

Among the report's suggestions are the creation of "high tech start up hubs" to encourage and coordinate international investment amongst Christians living in the Holy Land.

Speaking remotely to parliamentarians, campaigners and media figures, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, extended his personal blessing to the initiative. In this, he was joined by several other Church leaders, including Fr Francesco Patton, Custos of the Holy Land, and Hosam Naoum, Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem.

Speaking in person at the event, Coptic Orthodox Archbishop Anba Angaelos emphasised the importance of defending religious freedom for adherents of all faiths and none, alongside economic and social support for vulnerable communities.

Professor Francis Davis and Dr Georgios Tsourous, the report's co-authors, stated that the "combination of rootedness, entrepreneurial agency, human solidarity, and vulnerable minority status" make the Christian community in the Holy Land "an intensively creative" one.

Christian tourism in the region provides over \$3 billion to the economy of Israel alone, with Christians comprising 53 per cent of incoming tourism flights to the middle eastern nation. The future of Christians in Israel, Jordan and Palestine, was, however, "more vulnerable than it needs to be" in the words of Professor Davis, in part because their contribution had been "massively underestimated".<sup>4</sup>

### GOOD FRIDAY COLLECTION

At a local level, the collection for the Holy Land taken up on Good Friday provides a way for every parish to support the mission of the Church in the Middle East. The website states:

4 <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/14682/economic-contribution-of-christians-to-holy-land-under-threat>

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This special collection originated from the Popes' wishes to maintain a strong bond between the Holy Places of the Holy Land and all Christians of the world. It is the main source of sustenance for life around the Holy Places, and is also the tool through which the Custody of the Holy Land is able to sustain and carry forward the important mission to which it is called: to preserve the holy places, the stones of memory, and to favour the Christian presence, the living stones of the Holy Land, through many activities of solidarity such as the maintenance of pastoral, educational, welfare, health and social structures. The territories which benefit from the Collection are Jerusalem, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Turkey, Iran and Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

With *The Vanishing*, Janine di Giovanni has left us in her debt. She witnesses to the suffering of Christians and their communities in the Middle East; those who read it cannot fail to be moved by it.

5 <https://ffhl.org/good-friday-collection-for-the-holy-land/>

**As an individual you need community.** Very quickly after his conversion, Ignatius Loyola set a out building a group of like-minded individuals. Not only were they setting up a new kind of religious community (mission focused), but they were in dialogue with the church and tradition. Left to their own devices, it is all too easy for people to get off track, to get caught up in the ego (selfishness), and to rationalise and justify all sorts of things. People need support in terms of other spiritual guides and a supportive Christian community to help them stay focused. Being part of a tradition means that there are checks and balances. There is a sense of accumulated wisdom and learning from the past, especially when it comes to what have proven to be dead ends.

– BRENDAN MCMANUS, SJ, *Channelling the Inner Fire*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications), 2022, p. 36.

# The Mystical Stage of Religion: Towards a Description

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Philip McParland

By now most of us are familiar with the prophecy made by the eminent theologian, Karl Rahner: “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.” It was a wise prediction to make over forty years ago, one that continues to be a stimulus for reflection, discussion and indeed inspiration. The truth is all Christians are called to be mystics. A mystic is an adult Christian or, to put it another way, a mystic is a mature Christian. According to the religious writer and theologian, Friedrich von Hugel (1852-1925), there are *three* stages to our religious development, the institutional, the critical and mystical and we are meant to move into the mystical stage in adult life. This is our vocation; it is our calling.

In this article I would like to offer a description of what it means to be in the *mystical* stage of religion. I am aware that this is no small undertaking. Mysticism is universal to all faiths and it has many interpretations and explanations. I am no expert on the topic, but this doesn’t matter. I believe there is nothing to fear about the mystical. Becoming a mystic is more attainable than we might think. Here I wish to present a contemporary description which may help to bring mysticism down to earth. Whether or not you agree with my description, I do hope you will at least find my language accessible.

Even in the mystical stage of religion we are not the finished article, we remain in process; we are still growing and we are still struggling. This is reflected in the way I present my material. So what is happening in the mystical stage of religion? I suggest the following *six* things:

## 1. WE ARE CLAIMING OUR BELOVEDNESS

Our belovedness is our original blessing, our core truth, our deepest identity, the face we had before we were born as the Buddhists

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would say. Our belovedness is who we are in the eyes of God. It is the image of God within us, our true self. We were born with our belovedness and we will die with our belovedness. Nothing can taint, contaminate or destroy our belovedness. It is eternal.

Because of our belovedness we are not our gender, our nationality, our ethnicity, our skin colour, our social class. These are all temporary costumes more associated with our false self. To claim our belovedness is to know where our value really comes from. It is to know who we are. It is to have answered the question: Who do I really belong to? To claim our belovedness is to know that nothing else matters. And when we know that nothing else matters we can begin to stop protecting all the things in our lives that make us feel significant and secure. To claim our belovedness is to know that our significance and security are to be found in *God*.

It is because of our belovedness that we are loved and loveable as we are. Indeed, it is because of our belovedness that we can say with complete conviction, “We are unconditional love.” Ultimately then, to claim our belovedness is to accept in our hearts that we are loved unconditionally. This acceptance, of course, does not come easy to any of us. We seem to be programmed to fall back into conditional love; conditional love is our default position. This is why in order to claim our belovedness we need to be exposing ourselves on a regular basis to the unconditional love of God. It is why in the mystical stage of religion we need to be cultivating silence and spending time each day in some form of contemplative practice. Contemplative practice is forms of prayer that allow us to be, to listen, to receive and to accept the gift that has already been given to us. It is prayer methods that help us relax into the reality of being loved. If we are finding ways to relax into the reality of being loved then we are claiming our belovedness and becoming a mystic.

### 2. WE ARE TAMING THE POWER OF OUR FALSE SELF

As well as a true self we also have a *false* self. Our false self is an acquired self, an idealised self. It is a self that is built around the expectations of others. Our false self was created by the childhood wound of conditional love. Because of this wound we look for love in things outside us, specifically in what we have, in what we do and in what other people think of us. Our false self finds its identity in *three* worth requirements: We need to *own* something, *do* something or *be* something to feel worthy of love.

Our false self powerfully and subtly says to us: “You are what you have, you are what you do and you are what other people think of you.” This drives us to build our lives around what I like to call the A triangle: accumulation, achievement and approval. These three A’s are our false self’s programme for happiness. Early in life we buy into this programme supported, indeed seduced, by the culture around us. But the truth is, the three A’s cannot make us happy because they are all *external* sources of value. Our worth cannot be defined by external things. Accumulation, achievement and the approval of other people cannot fill the hole we have inside. Only unconditional love can. Sooner or later we have to realise and accept that we are not what we have, we are not what we do and we are not what other people think of us.

To tame the power of our false self is to let go of the control that accumulation, achievement and our need for human approval has over us. Needless to say this is a difficult and painful process. The false self was imbedded in us in childhood and it will not surrender easily. It will fight to remain centre stage. One of the major purposes of the mid-life crisis is to break the power of the false self. For many of us it takes not just one but a number of crises to tame the false self. Our false self is also weakened by our experiences of failing and falling. And once again contemplative practice is needed. Through our fidelity to contemplative practice, one identity is gradually being replaced by another. We move from external sources of value to an *internal* one, from defining ourselves by the three A’s to defining ourselves by our belovedness, from seeking love outside ourselves to finding it within ourselves. To use the language of St Paul, the old man is gradually being replaced by the new man. This is what is happening in the mystical stage of religion.

### 3. WE ARE EMBRACING OUR WOUNDS

We are all *wounded*. We are born into a wounded world and a wounded family. We also collect our own personal wounds as we grow up. Our wounds affect the way we experience ourselves, other people, the world in which we live and God. Our wounds have huge control over us; indeed they have the power to destroy us. So what can we do with them? I would like to suggest that we need to learn to *embrace* them. Embracing our wounds is a process; it is a process that involves *three* things: naming, claiming, taming.

It is said that if we can *name* our enemies we are half way toward defeating them. We need to begin by naming our wounds. To name our wounds we must first acknowledge and accept that

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we are wounded. This may not be easy. We do not like to admit that we are weak and vulnerable. The fact is we can't go on forever protecting ourselves behind a coat of armour. We have to allow our defences to come down. In naming our wounds it is helpful if we can be clear and precise. Finding this clarity may take time and patience, but it is worth the effort and the wait. There is a degree of freedom in being able to name our wounds in a way that we can truly own them.

Once we name our wounds we then need to *claim* them. They are my wounds. Yes, I probably did not cause my wounds, but they are mine and I have to take ownership of them. Taking responsibility for our wounds inevitably involves forgiveness. Sooner or later we have to forgive the people who wounded us. If we don't, we are likely to remain stuck. In this it is helpful to understand that the people who wounded us were wounded themselves and perhaps wounded deeply. No one is perfect. Everyone is weak. Failing and falling are part of the human condition. Forgiving the people who wounded us may not be easy, but it is necessary.

To fully embrace our wounds we then need to *tame* them. Here I am using the word tame very deliberately. It is my view that our wounds will not be healed fully in this life. We will not get rid of our wounds this side of death. For some reason God prefers to leave us carry our wounds. To embrace our wounds is to learn to live with them, and to live with them we need to tame them. Taming our wounds involves *two* things. The *first* has to do with feelings. We need to let ourselves experience the feelings associated with our wounds. This of course is painful, often very painful. Who wants to feel anger or sadness or shame or guilt or grief or anxiety or fear? These are some of the feelings that our wounds may awaken in us. To tame our wounds, we have to allow these feelings to surface. If we do, they will lose some of their power over us. If we don't, they will continue to control us unconsciously. It is true: "There is no gain without pain."

The *second* thing we need to do to tame our wounds is surrender. We need to surrender them to God. To hand our wounds over to God is to allow ourselves experience God in a new and personal way. It is to discover with St Paul that God's power working in us can do infinitely more than we can imagine. Richard Rohr believes that if we can allow our wounds to become sacred wounds then our story becomes a sacred story. To surrender our wounds to God is to allow them to become sacred wounds. God may not take away our wounds, but God will certainly help us find a way of living with them. God may leave our wounds to 'make' us stay dependent on him and to remind us that he is the only one who can satisfy

## THE MYSTICAL STAGE OF RELIGION

the deeper longings in our hearts. Those in the mystical stage of religion know this.

### 4. WE ARE ACCEPTING THAT ALL IS GIFT

There is an objective reality to our human and spiritual lives. It is this: All is *gift*. Creation is gift. Salvation is gift. Our sanctification is gift. God's presence in the world is gift. God's relationship with us is gift. God's unconditional love for us is gift. Light, life and love are gifts. Faith, hope and charity are gifts. The spiritual life is God's work in us. Our transformation into the likeness of Jesus is the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The flow of everything is from God to us. Our fundamental stance before God is one of receptivity. The mystic is very aware of this.

To accept that all is gift is to come to God with empty hands. St Therese of Lisieux once said that she wanted to appear before God in death emptyhanded. In her early twenties she had come to realise that all is grace. This was great spiritual maturity for someone so young, proof that holiness is not determined by age. In the mystical stage of religion we are accepting that the spiritual life is not about requirements. We will not need our 'lists' of good deeds in the presence of God. The Father's love is gift, not achievement. For this reason we can identify with the experience of the prodigal son who returned to his father with empty hands to find his father waiting for him with open hands. In the mystical stage of religion, we have moved on from a requirements/rewards experience of faith. Requirements/rewards only keep us in the bondage of conditional love. The experience of God as unconditional love fills us with peace and gratitude. Yes gratitude. Perhaps the sign that we are accepting that all is gift is gratitude. We are grateful, we are saying thanks. We know it is truly right to give God thanks and praise.

### 5. WE ARE GROWING IN CONTEMPLATIVE AWARENESS

*Contemplative awareness* is our capacity to recognise the presence of God in all that is real. It is about seeing all things with the eyes of faith. God's presence is not just confined to the 'religious bits,' to what happens in church, to times of prayer, to the celebration of the sacraments. God's presence is revealed in our encounters with other people, in our relationships, in the inner stirring of our hearts, in art and music and nature, in our times of leisure, in our pain and struggles, in the many events of our daily lives. All these things and more are sources of God's revelation. They are, to quote the poet Patrick Kavanagh, "the window that looks inward to God."

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In the mystical stage of religion we are looking through the window of reality to find the reality of God. We are becoming more alert to the action of God, the movement of God, the work of God in all places and in all people. We are even expecting to find God in unexpected ways. Because of this, in the mystical stage of religion, we are integrating faith and life. Now faith and life are no longer separated like the parallel lines on a railway track that never meet. Instead, they are becoming one. To be able to say with St Teresa of Avila that God is everywhere is to have integrated faith and life. It is to know with St Paul that in him we live and move and have our being (see Acts 17:28).

### 6. WE ARE BECOMING MORE COMPASSIONATE

Jesus said, “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.” Many scripture scholars believe this simple statement is a summary of the Gospel. *Compassion* is the nature of God and God wants it to be our nature too. The fruit of prayer is compassion. Indeed, the test of prayer is compassion. Prayer and compassion are like twin sisters. They are inseparable. Compassion is certainly a sign and fruit of spiritual growth and development.

So what is compassion? It is a way of becoming involved in the lives of other people. This involvement isn't necessarily about doing things for others or fixing other people's problems. Our attempts at fixing other people's problems can sometimes be an exercise of power or a way of controlling those who need help. Compassion is being *present* to people. It is walking along side people. It is being there for others without pulling back in fear. In its purest form compassion is feeling with others, especially those who are struggling and suffering. Ultimately, it is about my capacity to enter into the life of another at the level of emotion where my heart knows the heart of the other. This is the literal meaning of the word compassion: with passion.

Compassion is also non-dualistic thinking. Non-dualistic thinking is inclusive and egalitarian. It doesn't create distinctions between people on the basis of class, religion, nationality, wealth, sexual orientation. It recognises that we are all equal, brothers and sisters to one another and children of the one God. Non-dualistic thinking sees the other as a gift rather than a threat. It accepts that no institution, religion or country has a monopoly on holiness, on goodness, on the truth. In answer to the question: Who is my neighbour? It replies: Everyone! Non-dualistic thinking acknowledges that there are many paths to God and that “We are all just walking each other home,” to quote Ram Dass.

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In the mystical stage of religion we are learning what compassion is really about and why it is so important. We are also realising that what helps us develop compassionate hearts is our experience of God's compassion. We know that God finds our weakness and vulnerability irresistible, that God is with us in our pain. Furthermore, because we know that God is compassionate with us, we are able to be compassionate with ourselves. There is one thing that can be said with confidence about the mystical stage of religion. It is filled with compassion; God's compassion for us, our compassion for ourselves, our compassion for others. It shouldn't surprise us, therefore, to know that all the great mystics throughout history were very compassionate people. They were simply channels of the life of God whose nature is compassion.

### CONCLUSION

I believe the six things I have identified in this article need to be happening at some level in the mystical of religion. I say happening because as I mentioned at the beginning we are always *in process*. It is clear that the mystical stage of religion is awakened and sustained by the experience of God as unconditional love. It changes the way we see God, ourselves, other people and the earth. And it allows us to 'taste' communion with the divine, a communion for which we long and for which we are made.

**Dreaming Big.** The young Pat Whitney delighted in reading *Buffalo Bill* at secondary school. This popular western adventure series by William F Cody (1864-1917), known as *penny dreadfuls*, was considered a respectable sort of delinquency. Though possessing it was forbidden, Pat was willing to take his chances but was nearly always caught. Author, visionary and founder of a missionary society, Pat Whitney, always had the courage to take a risk.

– GARY HOWLEY, *Revisiting the Vision of Fr Patrick J. Whitney*, (Dublin: Columba Books), 2021, p. 3.

# Certain Marian Images may keep Women within the shadow of the Apple of Eve

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Kathleen Coyle

## PART I

The recent callous murder of Ashling Murphy, going for a run along the canal in Tullamore, in broad daylight, has led to an outcry against the pandemic of global violence against women. This outcry led to candle light vigils for Ashling in towns and cities throughout Ireland, England and Scotland, and to numerous discussions on femicide on television and the daily papers. This reflection is one small response to the emerging consciousness of the appreciation of the lives of women. It wishes to ask if certain traditional images of Mary of Nazareth have legitimated women's oppression. This short reflection hopes to offer a corrective to a few of these traditional images – many of them constructs of the patriarchal mind – which commends submission as the most commendable virtue for women. Christian women are asking what forces are at work in the deep ambivalence of Christianity towards them? There is a certain urgency to this search, for this new worldwide awakening of an appreciation of the feminine is calling us to retrieve the historical Mary of the gospels as she treasured, preserved and pondered, “all these things in her heart.” (Lk 2:51).

### MARY, A MANY-SIDED SYMBOL

Down through the centuries Mary has been a pervasive presence and a many-sided symbol and her cult has nourished the religious imagination of Christians with what George Tavard so aptly calls the thousand faces of the Virgin Mary.<sup>1</sup> She has remained a woman of mysterious power in the Christian tradition when women

1 George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), a Michael Glazier book.

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themselves had little power. Like other religious symbols, the Marian symbols have accumulated layer upon layer of meaning that have gripped people's allegiance over a long period of time. However, while there is strong evidence that Mary is still a religious symbol of enduring power in the Christian tradition, she remains an ambiguous one, especially for women, for the passive virtues of submission, humility and docility have been projected on to her. Rosemary Haughton is critical of some contemporary images of Mary: She says her image has been modified to meet the current requirement "tilted head, wilting body, resigned expression; and women and most especially religious women, were required to identify with this model. Many did so, internalizing to such an extent that no other way of being devout could be imagined."<sup>2</sup> These images have led to some bizarre expressions in popular preaching and devotions. The British historian and mythographer, Marina Warner, in her book *Alone of All her Sex*<sup>3</sup> holds that such an understanding of Mary – as timid and taking directions from others – helped to define the shape of the feminine ideal for centuries. Warner adds that these traditional images of Mary have often legitimated rather than challenged women's subordination and have functioned to keep them oppressed. Elizabeth Johnson adds, "traditional demands for conformity to the patriarchal order and for obedience to male religious authority figures ... make women shudder before this text and reject it as dangerous to physical and psychological health as well as to a liberating spirituality."<sup>4</sup> Samuel Rayan, the Indian Jesuit has remarked that the Mary of traditional theology is a sort of "dehydrated Mary, who has to be liberated to be truly human."<sup>5</sup> Three random examples of Marian images - the Eve-Mary parallelism, Mary's '*fiat*' at the annunciation, and the Marian apparitions of the 19th and 20th centuries – will bear this out.

*The Eve-Mary Parallelism:* Ben Sira, writing in the second century BCE states bluntly that sin and death came into the world through a woman. He says, "From a woman was the beginning of sin, and because of her we all died. (Sir 25:24). On the contrary, in the Genesis account, woman is given the name, Eve, which means mother of the living. By contrast, Ben Sira makes her the mother of death. Anna Primavesi remarks "The connection made by Ben Sira

2 Rosemary Haughton, Unpublished paper, p. 15.

3 See Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: University Press, 1976), pp. 68-78.

4 Elizabeth Johnson, *Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 94. See also Kathleen Coyle, *Mary, So Full of God, Yet So Much Ours*, (Manila: Logos Publications, 2010), pp.60-70.

5 Samuel Rayan, "In Defense of Balasuriya," *The Tablet*, 1 November 1997, p. 1394.

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between sin, death and woman has been so accepted into Christian consciousness that it has been assumed that as God did not want her to eat (sin), neither did God want her to die. It was her own fault and she did both.<sup>6</sup> Added to this confusion, literal interpretations of the Genesis 3 narrative and the “fall” that treated the myth as history and confused it with an Augustinian interpretation of original sin has done enormous harm to generations of Christians. As we begin to expose the bias against women in these canonical interpretations, and the inferiorization of women presumed in the exegesis, we will see Eve in a new light. As Eve, and by extension, all other women are given their rightful place, it is hoped that the Eve-Mary parallelism will lose its significance, so that women will no longer have to live within the shadow of the apple of Eve.

*Mary’s ‘fiat’ at the Incarnation:* The story of the angel’s annunciation to Mary is often interpreted as if she was suddenly surprised by the angel’s visit and her response has unfortunately been understood as a childish unreflective reaction to the message of the angel, a passive submission to the will of God. Mary, submissive and subordinate is a domestic model of female obedience; her *fiat* has traditionally been interpreted in terms of subordination and self-sacrifice and her response has been unfortunately held as a model of holiness especially for women. The Second Vatican Council, in reference to the Annunciation expresses this bias, “In subordination to Him, and along with Him, by the grace of Almighty God, she served the mystery of redemption.” LG (56).

*The Marian Apparitions of the 19th and 20th Centuries:* In these apparitions Mary appears pleading, threatening, or weeping and her messages and secrets are related to the contemporary troubled world situation. Her repeated requests to Bernadette at Lourdes and her fear-laden denunciation of Communism at Fatima in 1917, called for rosary crusades as a counterbalance to the threats of nuclear war. Her apocalyptic warnings speak of chastisement for the sins of the world because an angry God’s justice demands immediate chastisement. However, people can be reconciled to God by prayer and fasting. “Communist Russia was Mary’s enemy, and so all those who combated Communism were her friends. I recall vividly reading pious pamphlets associated with support for right wing politics in the Iberian Peninsula, a celestial endorsement of the regimes of Salazar and Franco.”<sup>7</sup> Sarah Jane Boss has remarked that “the medieval representation of the Virgin

6 Anna Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 226.

7 Eamon Duffy, “May Thoughts on Mary,” *Priests and People*, May 1991, 193.

as a physical mother and bearer of God, has been gradually supplanted in Catholic devotion by images of her in the 19th and 20th century apparitions, as a prayerful young woman whose body has no ostensible association with maternal functions, Yet, she has remained, and ensures us that she will always remain very approachable.<sup>8</sup>

PART II

RETRIEVING THE MARY OF THE GOSPELS AS THE SPLENDID ICON OF THE LIVING GOD.

A study of the Christian scriptures and the long Christian tradition which emphasize that Mary's distinctiveness lies in her faithful partnership with the Holy Spirit that led her to become the mother of God's divine Son with whom she forms a bodily, psychological and social relationship. She needs to be retrieved as "the splendid icon of the living God," the icon of Trinitarian love that sensitizes us to the immensity of divine mystery and therefore carries a transforming power that brings about a sacred change in people's lives.

But first, let us turn to first century Palestine, then the gospel of Luke, and the long Christian theological tradition. We will situate Mary in her village world of first century Nazareth, and then allow Luke to form a definite portrait of her, as he allows her to speak for herself.

MARY: A SYMBOL OF ENDURING POWER IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

Mary of Nazareth was not a rabbi; she left no record of prayers or writings yet her theological voice has given the Church its most sung hymn of praise, the *Magnificat*. History has no record of her except through the documents of the first Christian community and these are annoyingly brief. Paul doesn't mention her name. The contrast between the little biblical evidence about her and the persistent interest in her over two thousand years is striking. From the scanty biblical evidence has grown a complex and sometimes exaggerated history of Marian devotion which has become central to the spirituality and art of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. She is honored in paintings and poetry, cathedrals and churches, stained glass windows and statues. She has inspired some of the loftiest architecture, and cathedrals like Chartres de Paris and Notre Dame de Reims have been built in her honor. The persistent interest

8 Boss, Sarah Jane, *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Grace in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 40.

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in her after two thousand years is not easily explained away. It is thought-provoking to inquire why, since the Middle Ages Catholic pilgrimages have mainly focused on Marian shrines. Recent statistics show that the numbers who visit the Marian shrine in Velankanni in South India outnumber those of Lourdes in France.

### NAZARETH: A SMALL AND INSIGNIFICANT GALILEAN VILLAGE

First-century Galilee was part of the vast Roman Empire which grew by conquest. The world in which the stories of Mary evolved was a Jewish one, governed by Roman rule. It was a rural region whose peasant villages are usually described as spatially and psychologically “closed” and “narrow.”<sup>9</sup> Socially, villages were bound together by ties of kinship and patronage. Homes were neither internally nor externally spacious. “Rooms were small, ceilings were low, and outside passage ways between dwellings were rarely more than a yard wide. Life was communal; privacy like individuality was minimal.”<sup>10</sup> Scholars estimate that during the time of Jesus, Nazareth had a population of about 300 to 500.<sup>11</sup> The Hebrew Scriptures do not mention it; neither does Josephus who names 45 villages in Galilee.<sup>12</sup> There were no paved streets, no public buildings, no public inscriptions, no marble or mosaics or frescoes and there were no luxury items of any kind.<sup>13</sup> Village life in this hamlet – an agricultural hamlet of about twenty houses and one hundred and fifty residents – proved to be very simple. “It was a small Jewish village, without any political significance, preoccupied with agriculture, and no doubt, taxation.”<sup>14</sup> It was a technically peasant agrarian society and like the rest of Palestine was under the explicit governance of Roman prosecutors.

Nazareth was about three to four miles from the Roman city of Sepphoris but situated off the main road. Mary was the wife of a *tekton*, a Greek word that designates a carpenter, a stonemason, a joiner or a combination of all these skills. Being primarily an agricultural village, Nazareth, a small farming village in fertile, lower Palestine probably could not provide enough business for a *tekton* but fortunately for their family, Joseph and Jesus would have worked on construction projects in Sepphoris – the three

9 Anne Hennessy, “Marian Mysteries in the Public Ministry of Jesus,” *Review for Religious*, November-December (50) 1991, p. 915.

10 Ibid.

11 Johnson, *Truly Our Sister, A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2005), p.141. I am indebted to Johnson for many of the insights about first century Galilee.

12 Johnson, “Galilee as Matrix for Marian Studies,” *Theological Studies*, 70 (2009), p. 332.

13 Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, p. 143.

14 Ibid., p. 144. See also Coyle, pp. 57-60.

or four miles to the city was a short walk for the people of that time. During the Roman occupation Galileans were triply taxed. It was especially severe to have to pay “the traditional tithe for the Temple in Jerusalem, a tribute to the Roman emperor, and a third tax to the local Jewish client-king through whom Rome ruled by proxy.”<sup>15</sup> In Galilee, under Julius Caesar, as much as a quarter of a year’s harvest could be levied as taxes to Rome. Add to that the amount skimmed-off by local chieftains like Herod the Great and by agents hired to do the collecting. The reign of his son, Herod Antipas (20 BCE – 39ACE) was the political context of Mary and Joseph’s adult lives.

#### MARY OF NAZARETH, A JEWISH GALILEAN

History has no record of Mary or “Miriam” as she would have been known in Galilee. She lived in Nazareth and would have had no social standing because of her youth, her poor family background, and her female gender. Like other women of her time she lived as a Jew in a restricted environment using the family courtyard or the village square only when men were not present or when the women were properly chaperoned. It was in this small village where Mary, a Jewish Galilean, spent most of her years and as a Jewish mother, together with Joseph her husband, brought up her son Jesus as a Jew. From the style and content of Jesus’ adult preaching, and personal religious behaviour saturated with Jewish belief, we can reasonably suppose that his parents ran an observant household. It was in this environment that they nurtured, protected, cared for and educated him.

It is not difficult to imagine Mary busy processing food, sewing, and gardening for members of her household. Samples of her housekeeping are reflected in Jesus’ parables about placing yeast in three measures of flour (Lk 13:20-21), patching an old garment with a piece of new cloth (Lk 5:36), or pouring new wine into old wineskins (Lk 5:37-39). Her situation was typical of countless women “who experience powerlessness, low social status and lack of formal education that result in poverty.”<sup>16</sup> However, like other Israelite women, she would have exercised control over critical aspects of household life. The home of Joseph and Mary would have been punctuated by the rhythm of daily prayer, the weekly Sabbath observance, and the seasonal festival pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem as ordained by the Torah. As a first-century member of an oppressed peasant society, Mary entrusts her life at a pivotal moment in salvation history to her transcendent and gracious God.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, “Galilee as Matrix for Marian Studies,” p. 335.

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A JEWISH GIRL IS CALLED AND COMMISSIONED AS PROPHET  
(LK 1:26-38)

It was while living in the remote impoverished village of Nazareth under the colluding domination systems of the Roman Empire and the Jewish Temple<sup>17</sup> that Mary, a young girl of about twelve or thirteen years old, contemplated the sacred and penetrated the mystery of her divine calling.

The story pattern of her call and her commissioning to be a prophet is modelled on that of Moses. All five elements of the story present in the call and commissioning of Moses are also present in the call and commissioning of Mary: the angel appears to Moses in the burning bush; he hides his face in fear; God signals God's intent to deliver an enslaved people; Moses objects; finally God's assurance is given, "I will be with you." Then Moses begins his life's mission as prophet and liberator of enslaved people for which his free assent is necessary.<sup>18</sup>

Luke's story, phrased in post-resurrectional language, offers us a definite portrait of Mary and allows her to speak for herself. In her call and commissioning the angel greets her, "Hail favoured one, the Lord is with you" – a formula used to greet a person chosen by God for a special purpose in salvation history; like Moses she reacts with fear and receives the classic encouragement not to be afraid; the messenger announces that she will conceive a child who will be Son of the Most High. She objects: "How can this be?" and is given the assurance that the Holy Spirit will be with her. Like Moses, this Jewish girl is commissioned to carry forward God's plan for redemption, and for this her free assent is essential. As Moses' encounter with the divine transpires in the solitude of the desert at the burning bush,<sup>19</sup> so the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary and overshadows her in a theophany by which she "encounters the mystery of the living God, the gracious God of her life,"<sup>20</sup> and prepares for the coming of the Messiah. Her commissioning for a prophetic task is in a long line with that of God-sent deliverers at significant moments in Israel's history. The announcement of her Son's birth also follows the pattern of the significant children who are called for a special mission – Ishmael to Hagar, Isaac to Sarah, Samson to Hannah, John the Baptist to Elizabeth, and now Jesus to Mary.

17 Sandra Schneiders, "Call, Response and Task of Prophetic Action, *National Catholic Reporter*, Jan 6, 2010.

18 Johnson, "Mary of Nazareth, Friend of God and Prophet," *America*, June 17-24.

19 Johnson, *Dangerous Memories*, p. 88

20 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

## THE ANNUNCIATION: A MESSAGE OF EMPOWERMENT

In Luke's Annunciation story we see Mary in her simplicity and inexperience being addressed by God "who greets her, blesses her ... and makes her a mysterious promise: Jesus the Messiah will dwell in her woman's body."<sup>21</sup> Luke introduces this powerful Annunciation narrative with the word "behold" – a word that introduces a very significant message, "behold you will conceive"; "behold your kinswoman"; "behold I am the handmaid"; "behold all generations." And that significant message is that the Messiah that has been awaited for centuries is coming into our world when the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary. The words "come upon" in Greek refer to a physical movement conveying the notion of onrushing, overpowering vitality and energy, suggesting that the divine presence is creating something new. The Spirit "came upon" David after Samuel's anointing; Isaiah foretold that the Spirit will "come upon" us from on high (Is 32:15); the Spirit "came upon" the community in Acts 1:8. Unfortunately Christian imagination has interpreted this Lukan text in a literally sexual way.<sup>22</sup> J. A. Fitzmyer, the well-known scripture scholar courageously writes, "When Luke's account is read in and for itself – without the overtones of the Matthean annunciation to Joseph – every detail of it could be understood of a child born to Mary in the usual, human way." The role of the Holy Spirit would consist then in the special sanctification of Jesus, making him 'holy' and 'Son of God.'<sup>23</sup> Luke wishes his community to appreciate that the Spirit that "came upon" Mary, also comes upon his community, creatively empowering each of them to offer the compassion of God to the powerless in their community. That same Spirit comes upon us, creatively empowering us to offer the compassion of God to our communities.

"[T]he power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk 1:35b). The overshadowing signifies powerful, divine protection and refers to the indwelling, saving presence of God, a presence that protects, directs and liberates, just as the cooling shadow of a tree or a wall protected the people of Palestine from the heat of the noonday sun. When Moses pitched his tent the cloud overshadowed it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Ex 40:35).

21 Camina Navia, *Mary of Nazareth Revisited*, "The Many Faces of Mary," *Concilium*, Diego Irarrazaval, Susan Ross and Miriam Therese Walker (London: SCM Press, 2008/4), 25.

22 See changes to the Apostles' Creed in the New Roman Missal; the old version: "He [Jesus Christ] was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary," has been changed to a more literal, direct and earthy, "who [Jesus Christ] was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. . ."

23 J.A. Fitzmyer, "The Virginal Conception of Jesus in the New Testament," *Theological Studies* 34, 1973, 566-7.

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When Jesus was transfigured on the mountain, the cloud overshadowed him. The overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, offering her a message from divinity, was one such moment for Mary. The same life-giving Spirit is now creating a new moment in her life and in our world. The same Spirit “comes upon” us and “overshadows” us today. Like Mary, certain times and places in our lives are saturated with holiness. We cherish the experience of such graced moments when we sink into contemplative silence or when we creatively offer the compassion of God to the lonely and the wounded of our world.

### MARY IS COMMISSIONED FOR A MOMENTOUS TASK

The Annunciation story is one of empowerment. A young woman is offered a mission: “The Lord is with you ... Do not be afraid ... you have found favour with God . . . you will conceive and bear a son ... the Son of the Most High ... and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:28-33). Although centuries of patriarchal interpretation have emphasized Mary’s submissive obedience, the Lukan narrative does not talk about a passively perfect young woman overwhelmed by divine duty, but about a self-possessed poor maiden who finds favour with God and is willing to cooperate with a wild plan of salvation. By contrast, Luke presents her as an autonomous person, courageous and creative. She is not paralyzed by timidity; she discerns the voice of God in her life, commissioning her for a momentous task and freely committing herself to her calling. In collaborating decisively, her choice not only changes the whole of her life but that of humanity as well. Every free response to a divine invitation is a faith response, that is, a faith manifesting itself in obedience (Rom 1:5).

When Mary is greeted by the angel and invited to participate in God’s saving purpose she responds to the news of Jesus’ conception with the words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be done with me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). What was unique in Mary was her hearing the word of God, pondering over it and responding to it by her life. What Mary does at that moment is consistent with her lifelong courageous faith and strength of commitment. Luke ends his reflection with a seemingly insignificant statement, “And the angel left her” (v. 38). Mary, a young Jewish woman is on her own now; she assumes responsibility for carrying out God’s mission by contemplating the sacred in her life and together with Joseph bringing up her son, nourishing his Jewish faith, and living her life in compassionate service. Commitment to God’s mission will demand the ultimate sacrifice; she will witness the execution of her son by crucifixion at the hands of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

Luke in his gospel presents her as contemplative and committed, collaborating decisively with God's call for her, and her choice not only changed the whole of her life, but that of humanity as well. Mysteries invite and demand repeated contemplation and the mysteries in Mary's life, as offered to us by Luke, invite us to contemplate the mystical experiences that nourished her throughout her impoverished and restricted life in Nazareth. In the words of Eamon Duffy, "In her conceiving and childbearing heaven and earth were wedded beyond any possibility of divorce; a stupendous miracle has occurred which raised human nature to heaven itself."<sup>24</sup> She is the splendid icon of the living God who sensitizes us to the immensity of divine mystery.<sup>25</sup> The foundation of Luke's portrayal of her as mother and disciple is laid in his gospel's infancy narrative. Her journey to the divine within was both an invitation (Lk 1:26) and a process (Lk 2:19), always inviting her to see her son and his mission and the daily social and political events that impinged upon her life with more compassionate, humane eyes. Her life was life as it was seen through the Father's eyes. Killian McDonnell catches a glimpse of this image in his delightful poem:

In the Kitchen: In the Sixth Month the Angel Gabriel ...<sup>26</sup>

*Bellini has it wrong  
I was not kneeling  
On my satin cushion  
Head slightly bent.  
Painters always  
skew the scene,  
as though my life  
were wrapped in silks,  
In temple smells.*

*Actually I had just  
come back from the well.  
Placing the pitcher on the table  
I bumped against the edge,  
spilling water on the floor.*

*As I bent to wipe  
it up, there was a light*

24 Duffy, "True and False Madonnas," *Spirituality*, September-October 2001, vol 7, no 8, 315.

25 Tony Kelly, "From Myth to Reality," Talk given at Marist Conference of Marian Theology, Hunter's Hill, Sydney, Australia, 1995.

26 Reprinted with permission from "Swift, Lord, You Are Not" by Kilian McDonnell, OSB. Copyright 2003 by Order of Saint Benedict. Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota.

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*against the kitchen wall,  
as though someone had opened  
the door to the sun.*

*Rag in hand,  
hair across my face,  
I turned to see  
who was entering,  
unannounced, unasked.*

*All I saw was light  
white against the timbers.  
I heard a voice I've never  
heard greeted me,  
said I was elected, would  
bear a son who'd reign  
forever. The spirit would  
overshadow me.  
I stood afraid.*

*Someone closed the door  
And I dropped the rag.*

“PONDERING THEM IN HER HEART” (LK 2:19)

The phrase “pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19; 51) is reminiscent of texts from Israel’s history where persons ponder over the significance of revelatory events (Gen 37:11; Dn 7:28). It also points to the integration of revelatory experience that engenders insight and commitment to a life of faithful discipleship – “the sort of pondering that allows for previously unimaginable interpretations of the events and world around us.”<sup>27</sup> Since she was in a bodily, psychological and social relationship with the Messiah, she is too complex a figure to limit her presence to that of disciple. As mother of the divine and human Christ she represents the presence of the divine among us in an exceptional way as centuries of Christian art and liturgical celebration have tried to express. Luke repeatedly invites us too to tiptoe into the sacred God-spaces in our own lives – lives of reflective pondering. Pope Benedict XVI in invoking Mary in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (On Christian Love) prays: “You abandoned yourself completely to God’s call and thus became a wellspring of the goodness which flows forth from him.”<sup>28</sup> He then prays that we too may become “fountains

27 M. Ko, *Magnificat, El Canto de Maria de Nasaret*, pp. 23-25.

28 Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est., On Christian Love* (December, 2005)

of living water in the midst of a thirsting world.”<sup>29</sup> – a world that is thirsting to end the pandemic of global violence and is inviting us to breathe new life and new energy into our relationships, so that we may live in compassionate communities and experience the peaceful presence of the divine permeating our lives as we live in God’s ecstasy.<sup>30</sup>

29 Ibid.

30 Beatrice Bruteau, *God’s Ecstasy: The Creation of a Self-Creating World*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 39.

**Joy.** Speaking of the signs of holiness in today’s world, Francis outlines some of the features of Christian joy. He commences with the affirmation that ‘far from being timid, morose, acerbic or melancholy, or putting on a dreary face, the saints are joyful and full of good humour’. After presenting a biblical account of joy, culminating with quotations from John’s Gospel, the Pope affirms that while ‘hard times may come’ the experience of ‘supernatural joy’ cannot be overcome because it brings ‘deep security, serene hope and a spiritual fulfilment that the world cannot understand or appreciate’. In the terms of the Fourth Gospel itself this is a joy that the world can neither give nor take away.

– KEVIN O’GORMAN, SMA, *Divine Diamond: Facets of the Fourth Gospel*. 2021, (Dublin: Messenger Publications), p. 46.

# ‘Jesus and Mary’

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Gerald O’Collins

‘If it were England, and later in the day,  
she might have met him, faded shirt,  
scuffed leggings and all, partly shadowed  
by long allees at, say, Chiswick—  
everything turned to vista, seeking out  
the Statue of Cain and Abel, the Domed  
Building, the Rustic Arch, the Doric Column  
Topped by Venus, the Bagnio,  
the Obelisk, and the Deer House, and the rest.

As it was, the heart gone out of her with grief,  
she picked her way through scrubby bushes,  
expecting nothing but the nothing left  
when love’s pegged up for the sun to eat.  
It was peculiar, then, to round a rock  
and find some idler, hands pinked  
by spiky work, but the rest of him at ease,  
liking the morning, nestling a crocus,  
his wide mouth practiced about her name.’

Peter Steele, SJ (1939–2012), ‘Gardener’  
(used with permission).

Without ever naming them, the ‘*Gardener*’ takes up the story of Mary Magdalene meeting the risen Jesus (John 20:11–18). The poem contrasts the place and time that the evangelist provides (‘As it was’ in ‘the morning’) with an alternate scenario (‘If it were England and later in the day’).

The poem elaborates this *alternative* vision of Christ the Gardener wearing a ‘faded shirt, scuffed leggings’ and ‘partly shadowed’ by the hedges of ‘long allees’. The garden that Lord

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Gerald O’Collins, SJ, [Professor Emeritus Gregorian University, Rome] thanks Tom Casey, SJ, and Brendan Duddy, SJ, for help with this article; his recent books include *The Beauty of Jesus Christ* (Oxford University Press).

Burlington laid out in the eighteenth century for Chiswick House creates a specific, possible setting for the crucified and risen Jesus to appear in the afternoon.

Steele lingers over what he saw on a visit to that garden: the Cain and Abel Bird-Cage, the Rustic Arch, the Obelisk in the Orange Tree Garden, the ornamental Deer House. ‘and the rest’.

By evoking the formal beauty of a classic, eighteenth-century garden, Steele draws forth a feeling of serenity. This is abruptly shattered by what happened to Mary Magdalen at the crucifixion: ‘the heart gone out of her with grief’.

Rather than walk down stately allees that lead to Jesus’ tomb, Mary ‘picks her way through scrubby bushes’.

Naming Christ as ‘love’ itself, the poem speaks of his execution as being ‘pegged up for the sun to eat’. Now, in Steele’s paradoxical words, Mary expects ‘nothing but the nothing left’ when such a crucifixion takes place.

In a studied and striking understatement, the poem calls it ‘peculiar’ to ‘round a rock’ and meet the crucified and risen Christ. Yet, apparently, she takes him at first to be ‘some idler’.

The marks on his hands nailed to a cross remain: ‘hands pinked with spiky work’ of the Roman nails. But ‘the rest of him’ is ‘at ease, liking the morning’ and ‘nestling a crocus’, a beautiful sign of a new spring and fresh life.

At the start, the poem puts Mary Magdalene in first place: ‘she might have met him’. It is after all her search for the body of Jesus that initiates the whole story. But what begins as a search for a corpse ends with finding her living Lord. He is like a gardener fondling the first crocus that incarnates the coming of spring.

That scene might lead us to borrow words from Shakespeare and speak of ‘journey’s end in lovers’ meeting’.

Steele catches the power of the moment in John’s Easter story when Jesus addresses her: ‘Mary’. That name comes spontaneously to him. He has so often repeated it: ‘his wide mouth practiced about her name’.

But no one says her name more beautifully and powerfully. Readers know what comes next, when she runs to bring the astonishingly good news to the other disciples.

The power of this poem depends in part on the contemporary language used to tell a familiar story: the terrible grief of Mary Magdalene as ‘the heart gone out of’ her, crucifixion as ‘spiky work’ or being ‘pegged up’, and the rest.

‘*Gardener*’ left me with various questions. Why set Chiswick House and its gardens as a background to Jesus appearing to Mary? The imagination of readers comes very much into play. In post-World War II years, I often took a road to Heathrow airport

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that passed near to Lord Burlington's home and stately garden. Such a road and airport could easily bring to mind the whole, busy world on which the resurrection of the crucified Jesus has its unique impact. But any desire to name just one meaning here would remain misguided.

As friends of Peter Steele will know, reading his work triggers many associations and resonances. He was nothing if not a poet in dialogue. Take the references to allees being 'partly shadowed' 'later in the day' (lines one and three) but followed by the 'witty' comment about the risen Jesus 'liking the morning' (penultimate line). Should we think of Steele taking up lines 28 ('Your shadow at morning striding behind you') and 29 ('Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you') of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but reversing the order of morning and evening and pointing first to evening in the eighteenth-century Chiswick gardens and then to morning in a first-century Jerusalem garden?

Steele remarks of Mary Magdalene 'it was peculiar, then, to round a rock and find' the risen Jesus, not—what readers of Eliot will recall—'fear in a handful of dust' (*The Waste Land*, line 30). Paradoxically called 'some idler', Jesus reaches out to nature in the form of a beautiful crocus and to Mary through uttering so wonderfully her name.

Even clearer is another echo of T. S. Eliot. Saying of 'the Gardener' that 'the rest of him was at ease' should remind us of the third last line of 'The Journey of The Magi' and their being 'no longer at ease here'. A famous African novel by Chinua Achebe took its title from this line: *No Longer at Ease* (1960). The journey of Christ through life and death had left him 'at ease', apart from the permanent signs of the crucifixion.

# Families at the Centre

## *The experience of Baptism Team Members*

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Cora O'Farrell

When a child is welcomed into the Christian community through the sacrament of Baptism, it offers a unique moment of encounter between the church community and young families. Preparation for baptism of their child, the celebration of the sacrament itself and post-baptismal activities offer opportunities to draw young families closer into the heart of the community. This enriches both the lives of the families and the lives of the parish community - 'the church is good for the family and the family is good for the church.'<sup>1</sup> It is important that the experience of young parents/caregivers of all levels of commitment, (from those who are faithfully committed to those who may be distanced from the traditional practices of church and the parish community itself) is a positive one, where they are valued and supported in the religious upbringing of their children. However, with the notable absence of young families from parish celebrations and activities, and with ample evidence of a disconnect between young people and the church, *how* can parish communities affirm and support families choosing baptism for their children, in a sustainable way?

In June, 2021, a small-scale research project on baptism focusing on the Archdiocese of Dublin was initiated by St Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth and the Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education, DCU. The project sought to explore how the agency of families who present their children for baptism in the Catholic Church in Ireland might be further encouraged. The project was born out of the recognition that many new parents may not consider themselves closely connected to the Church; for most, their first encounter with parish occurs through the sacrament of Baptism. If they experience a welcoming community which can

1 Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia: The Joy of Love. Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family*, 2016, #87.

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connect with them in a meaningful way and help them to feel more empowered in their role of nurturing the spirituality of their child, perhaps they may want to continue with that connection with church, beyond just the ‘event’ of the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism. Answering the call of *Amoris Laetitia* which exhorts the Church to cooperate with parents through suitable pastoral initiatives, the project’s ultimate goal is to use the principles and methods of *Godly Play* to support parents/caregivers to nurture their child’s spirituality leading up to, and beyond, the celebration of Baptism.<sup>2</sup>

The findings of the Baptism Project in relation to the experience of baptism team members in their ministry, will be presented in this, the *first* in a series of three articles entitled *Families at the Centre*. The *second* article will focus on family spirituality and the *third* article will set out the *Godly Play* principles which will inform a new initiative.

The Baptism Project set out, in the first instance, to hear the voices of *baptism team members* concerning their current practices, their experience of their role and their perceptions of the parents they encounter. This was achieved by means of an anonymous survey which was circulated digitally. Questions on the survey related to the type of preparation provided for parents prior to baptism; a focus on the ceremony itself; and any follow-up with parents. Respondents to the survey were invited to partake further in the project by agreeing to attend focus group interviews where the responses to the survey would be explored further and to check if there were resonances among interviewees with the wider group of survey respondents. Three such focus group interviews took place in June 2021 and consisted predominantly of baptism team members from the Archdiocese of Dublin. The use of open-ended ‘wondering questions’ during the interviews ensured that even at this early stage, *Godly Play* principles were informing the conduct of the Baptism Project.<sup>3</sup> The intention of this phase of the research was not to produce data which could be scientifically validated, but rather to get a flavour of baptism team members’ experiences and perceptions, which would assist the project team in planning for a suitable initiative to support and resource parents. A second survey,

2 Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995 and Jerome Berryman, *Stories of God at Home: A Godly Play Approach*. New York: Church Publishing, 2018. This approach will be explained in more detail in the third article in this series.

3 A ‘wondering question’ often begins with the words ‘I wonder ...’ and invites people to bring their experience and reflect on their own response to the topic or story being wondered about. As they were shown the findings of the surveys, participants were asked what they liked best about particular responses, what they felt was most important, what they would like to leave out, what surprised them, and whether what they were hearing fit with their own experience.

for parents of recently baptised children, was also circulated at this time, however with the cessation of baptisms due to Covid restrictions, the number of parents responding to this survey was curtailed. Nonetheless, the responses received were representative of parents with varying degrees of affiliation to their parish (from none to committed) and varying degrees of faith commitment. Their responses were used as a springboard for conversations during the focus group interviews with baptism team members.

*Accompanying* parents during the preparation stage for baptism in Catholic parishes in the Archdiocese of Dublin, traditionally involves the requirement of parents to attend some form of preparation for the sacrament (e.g. a preparatory meeting/s) which is usually facilitated by a baptism team. This practice was recounted by all baptism team member respondents and is evidence of the success of the Archdiocese in terms of direction and training courses at which such an approach is advocated (indeed these courses were frequently mentioned by respondents). There may be a Welcoming Mass prior to Baptism, although just a small minority of respondents reported this practice. In addition, there may be a follow-up with the families following the baptism ceremony and where this occurs, it generally involves a Mass to which families of children baptised during that year, are invited. However, once again this was a practice reported by a small minority of respondents.

The approach to supporting parents in the lead up to the celebration of baptism was similar amongst survey respondents. Most parishes had just one meeting during the week leading up to the baptism with such meetings lasting an hour. During that time parents are introduced to one another and to the baptism team; an overview of the sacrament of baptism including its symbols and ritual is provided; and finally any organisational matters pertaining to the ceremony (e.g. seating arrangements, readers etc.) are outlined. With Covid-related restrictions to gathering people together, face to face preparation meetings couldn't take place during the narrow window of opportunity for baptism ceremonies during the summer of 2021. Some parishes went ahead with baptisms without any preparation meeting, much to the chagrin of some of the baptism team member respondents. However, in other parishes, the meetings were moved online to platforms such as Zoom and this experience was greeted very favourably by respondents and interviewees who used them. In some instances they even indicated that they may continue to pursue some Zoom meetings 'when things return to normal,' thereby drawing on the advantages of connecting with young families in their own homes which appears to be more convenient for families and allows other members of the family (such as siblings) to say hello too.

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The perception of baptism team members concerning their role in the process of preparation for baptism, yielded a range of responses from those who took the survey. These included *perfunctory* roles (such as providing information to parents, checking paperwork, assisting the priest and other secretarial duties), *facilitative* roles (such as running the preparation meeting, answering questions and assisting families on the day of baptism) and *mentoring* roles (the perception that they were welcoming parents to the parish, representing the parish community and accompanying parents on a spiritual journey of reflection as they prepared for the sacrament on behalf of their children).

These survey responses were unpacked during the focus group interviews and there was broad agreement with the identified roles. The lack of adequate opportunity to engage further with parents in terms of accompaniment was lamented within current practices. Some interviewees reacted negatively to the perception of the role as assistant to the priest. Amongst respondents, it was common practice for the celebrant to have *limited* involvement with the work of the baptism team and many were only involved in the baptismal ceremony itself, and not the preparation phase:

*I think the baptism team really has the most important role. I know the celebrant is administering the sacrament, but the baptism team are the ones who are really engaging with the family -with the parents, and it's how you come across to them which is how they feel welcomed and how they feel understood.*

Deacons came in for special mention, with members affirming deacons' role in the celebration of baptism. Having 'one foot in family life and one foot in the presbytery' was viewed as an advantage.

When asked if they felt privileged to be part of the baptism team, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt privileged to be in their role. However almost one third of respondents stated that they had mixed feelings in response to this question. This was borne out in the focus group interviews where some interviewees were very passionate about their involvement (*we put our heart and soul into it, we absolutely love it!*) and others appeared somewhat jaded having been doing the role for many years. The two responses below capture the latter sentiment:

*Truly I shouldn't be still at it. It's very hard to get new members. I'm only hanging in because nobody else is coming*

More than 60% of respondents had been members of their baptism

team for greater than five years and 38% of those had been on their team for more than ten years. The age profile of baptism team members was a cause for concern, with many respondents alluding to the fact that there was nobody under the age of 50 in their teams, and that those members in their fifties were considered young. The comments of a young parent (Noelle) quoted in the report of the Sacramental Implementation Group of the Archdiocese of Dublin highlights the kind of impact this might have on young families' future involvement post-baptism:

*I know our church and I don't really go down that often ... when I do go down, everyone is lovely. But I just never meet anyone that's my age or that has young kids like me ... there is a huge church community, but it feels like it's their own community, that I'm not in it. I have my faith, I love going down and everyone's lovely when I go down, but I'm not in their community ... you feel like I'm part of this community but I'm not really in it. I'd really like to be more included, even though I said I feel like I'm part of it, I'm not in it.<sup>4</sup>*

#### OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Respondents repeatedly recognised the great *opportunity* which baptism presents for connecting with parents. The fact that parents approach the parish for celebration of the sacrament was viewed as very positive. Unlike the other family sacraments, with their affiliation to school contexts and possible peer pressure where almost all children in the classes are celebrating First Communion, Reconciliation or Confirmation, the request to have children baptised is done on an individual family basis. Whilst some interviewees questioned the motivation behind parents' request to have their children baptised, the majority felt that most parents were coming authentically because they wanted to be there and they wanted their child to be initiated into the Christian community. Despite the divergence in opinion regarding the bona fides of parents, every person in the focus groups felt that this opportunity for connecting with parents was not sufficiently harnessed. The limitation of their engagement with young families was a source of frustration for them. In the words of one baptism team member, *'I want more!'*. Speaking passionately about their ministry, focus group participants expressed a widespread craving for more opportunities to introduce the parents into a deeper understanding of their faith and sadness concerning the fact that most young

4 Archdiocese of Dublin, *Sacraments Implementation Group: Final Report*. 2021, unpublished, p. 57.

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families do not come to Mass or engage with parish subsequent to the baptism (*They're very engaged at the meeting and also on the day of the baptism, and then they're gone!*). In one focus group, this sadness was identified as grief.

Baptism team members seem to be aware of the family circumstances and cultural context within which they operate, but seem stuck as to know what to do next. The dichotomy between their faith experiences and those of young parents is a factor. The following quotation captures this dissonance well:

*The greatest challenge for me is to try to understand what form faith may take in parents who are not only of a very different generation to me, and whose faith formation seems to bear little relation to my own. Like a majority of people involved in church activities in Ireland, I am in the older age group and had a childhood foundation in faith that was in the air we breathed. ... Often the language we automatically use is not familiar, and the challenge is to find ways to express the good news about baptism in more familiar language. Also, to be able to hear the reality behind the language used by the parents to recognise the faith that brought them to baptise their child.*

Nonetheless, as faith filled people, baptism team members trust that the Spirit is present in their work.

One of the questions, in the survey for parents of newly baptised children, asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a set of statements concerning their willingness and perceived capacity to engage in the spiritual nurture of their children. The findings from this particular question (illustrated in the table below) were presented to baptism team members during the focus group interviews.

|   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Mixed Feelings | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| It's important to me that I continue to help support my children's spiritual life | 0%                | 6%       | 8%             | 43%   | 43%            |
| I look forward to wondering about God with my child as they grow up               | 3%                | 8%       | 23%            | 40%   | 26%            |

FAMILIES AT THE CENTRE

| <i>Continued</i>  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Mixed Feelings | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| I look forward to sharing my own religious memories with my child   | 3%                | 3%       | 17%            | 51%   | 26%            |
| I look forward to praying with my child   | 0%                | 14%      | 17%            | 40%   | 29%            |
| I feel confident answering questions which my child may have about God  | 3%                | 20%      | 23%            | 23%   | 31%            |
| I feel confident answering questions which my child might have about Jesus  | 3%                | 13%      | 26%            | 29%   | 29%            |
| I feel confident answering questions which my child might have about death, suffering or other hard facts of life | 0%                | 17%      | 34%            | 20%   | 29%            |

Most baptism team members expressed surprise at the levels of *positivity* captured in the parents' responses above. When this was explored further in the focus groups, it became clear that some interviewees underestimated the capacity and agency of parents, and/or viewed parents as possessing a negative attitude towards religion. This appears to have emerged from an assumption that the non-involvement of parents in parishes subsequent to their child's baptism was evidence of their opposition or non-interest. Others testified to the interest and good intentions of most parents and recognised the genuine spirituality of parents, albeit existing in a different guise to their own.

*There is a deep spirituality in people even though they're not expressing it the way we'd like them to, in a sense of us church people ... We have a huge learning to do from a church point of view... they'll see God differently maybe from my image of God, but let them find their image of God*

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However, the process of engaging meaningfully with parents in a dialogical manner appears to pose a challenge.

*If you've got these parents who've been away from God for so long, how do you reintroduce them? And what language do you use? Do you talk at them for a while, teach them to do this or that, or do you listen? And how do you get them to talk?*

## CONCLUSION

The surveys and focus group interviews with baptism team members provided testimony that the current model of engaging with parents around the time of baptism of their children is sufficient for preparation for the ceremony itself, but falls short of building sustainable relationships with parents beyond that moment. This deficiency is a source of frustration for members of baptism teams who are passionate about their ministry. The observation of the Dublin Diocese Task Force, that the model of Church as we have known it, is not the model that will best serve us in the future,<sup>5</sup> pertains to the celebration of family sacraments no less than any other dimension of Church. The Sacraments Implementation Group of the Archdiocese of Dublin has identified the way forward as recognising, affirming and supporting parents in their 'central role as the primary agents in their children's faith life.'<sup>6</sup> It calls for a renewed emphasis on the importance of the *family* as a locus for celebrating and passing on the Christian faith. This requires a shift in positionality *from* the parish as purveyor of information to families in need of conversion, *to* a recognition of love in the home as the most important foundation for faith.<sup>7</sup> This shift requires parishes to take seriously the role of the home and the agency of parents in the spiritual lives of their children.

If this shift in focus for parishes and baptism teams is to be implemented, some key questions need to be addressed. These include: What resources might be useful in this endeavour? What process could be effective? What supports will be needed to assist baptism teams? It is in the context of these questions that the Baptism Project sought to discern if *Godly Play* principles and/or practices can offer something to the conversation. Before addressing this in the third article of this series on Families at the Centre, the next article will explore the spirituality of family.

5 Archdiocese of Dublin, *Task Force Report*, 2021 p.1.

6 Archdiocese of Dublin, *Sacraments Implementation Group: Final Report*. 2021, unpublished, p. 3.

7 Irish Episcopal Conference, *Nurturing Our Children's Faith*, 2006.

# Homilies for April [C]

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Eugene Duffy

## **Fifth Sunday of Lent**

*April 3*

Is 43:16-21. Ps 125. Phil 3:8-14. Jn 8 : 1-11

If you were to watch just one episode of *Fair City* or *EastEnders* you would probably find yourself absorbed by it and enjoy it. However, if you were a regular viewer of the soap, then you would see far more in the episode than if you had only watched it once. The Sunday gospels can be a bit like that as well. We get a glimpse of something that Jesus was doing or saying but not always the full context of the action. That is very true of today's gospel, although some of commentaries on this gospel, tell us that there are old manuscripts of the gospel of John that don't include this story. The fact is that it is there now and it is a very memorable episode in the life of Jesus.

The context is that Jesus had gone up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. He had been teaching in the Temple and many of the Jews thought that he might be the Messiah, but the Pharisees and the Scribes were outraged that an itinerant preacher from a backward place like Galilee would be enthralled the crowds and winning their allegiance. So angry were they that they sent the police to arrest Jesus, but one of their number said, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing". Then, it seems that they all went home and took time out, while Jesus went out to the Mount of Olives to be alone and to pray. Renewed and strengthened by his prayer he returned to the Temple to teach again and it would seem was relaxed and composed to meet with those who so violently opposed him.

Now instead of bringing his past offences against him, the Scribes and Pharisees, the guardians of all things religious, decided on a more subtle way to entrap him. They address him as 'Teacher', which was, ironically, to give him the status of a rabbi or teacher of the Law. They brought in this unfortunate woman who had been found in the act of adultery – no mention of the man involved! They pose what appears like an impossible dilemma

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for Jesus: the law of Moses says that such a woman should be stoned to death. If he disagrees with this judgement, then he is showing a disregard for the law of Moses, which was sacred as far as they were concerned. He would also be breaking the Roman law, which allowed only Romans to impose the death penalty. On the other hand, if he agreed with the Pharisees and the Scribes and consented to the stoning of the woman, he would lose credibility with the people who regarded him as the friend of sinners and the embodiment of mercy. In either case, he was destined to lose.

No doubt fingers were pointed, hands were raised and fists were clinched as the accusers made their case. While the woman may have stood condemned, it was Jesus who was really on trial in this situation. But Jesus bent down and silently wrote in the sand with his finger. It is as if he allows the mob to shout and protest for all they want, so that the hollowness and hypocrisy of their accusations can ring loudly in their own ears. Jesus is not being phased by their raucousness nor does he respond with anger or indignation. Eventually, he looks up and challenges them: Let him who is without sin cast the first stone. Their bluff is called and they disperse, beginning with the elders among them.

Jesus is left alone with the woman. Now there is a genuine encounter between her and Jesus. St Augustine said of this encounter, “misery met mercy”. Imagine the relief that the woman experienced in this exchange. Jesus didn’t condemn her wrongdoing, neither did he condone her action. It’s a delicate balance.

Despite having their authority and having the law on their side, Jesus speaks and acts with far greater authority and impact than the Scribes and Pharisees. His authority was recognized because of his integrity. There was a consistency between his words and his actions. He was moved by compassion in his dealings with people. He desired their well-being and freedom, that they have life and have it to the full. Others imposed their authority by appealing to their status or their honour. They imposed their will by threats of punishment and instilling fear. Jesus on the other hand shows the human face of a merciful God. St Paul describes the quality of that God best of all. We could paraphrase his words by saying that when Jesus shows the merciful face of God: he is always patient and kind; he is never jealous; he is never boastful or conceited; he is never rude or selfish; he does not take offence and is not resentful. He takes no pleasure in other people’s sins but delights in the truth; he is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes. Showing that merciful face of God and persevering to do so, we will soon discover, costs Jesus his life. At the same time, however, it was this perseverance which led to his

resurrection so that we can still now experience his merciful love and be its agents for others.

### Passion Sunday

*April 10*

Is 50: 4-7. Ps 21:8-9, 17-20, 23-24. Phil 2: 6-11. Lk 22: 14- 23:56.

There are probably two features of this Sunday that most people think of: the distribution of the palm and a very long gospel reading, for which people stood. That standing gesture, which was somewhat penitential, was meant to link the congregation with the very suffering of Jesus in his passion. Certainly, the suffering of Jesus and the torturous ordeal he had to endure is the dominant theme in the gospel. The full extent of the human suffering of Jesus is put before us in the gospel we have just heard proclaimed.

While there are many aspects of this gospel that we could focus upon for our reflection, I want to draw attention to *three* details of passion, which St Luke includes in his narrative. The *first* is the incident where one of the followers of Jesus cut off the right ear of one of the high priest's servants. Obviously, a disciple of Jesus wanted to protect Jesus and was prepared to use his sword to do so. Jesus tells the disciple simply to 'leave off'. Then Jesus heals the man's ear. All of this is consistent with the whole life of Jesus as it has unfolded through the gospel. Jesus is one who brings compassion and healing. There is a consistency in his words and actions to the end – 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'. Nothing, even the violence in which he is caught up, will distract or deter him from carrying out his mission of healing and reconciliation to the very end. Jesus acts to restore the man's bodily integrity; he doesn't waste time scolding the disciples for their lack of discipline in following his teaching. His example and a very brief word in such a tense situation are sufficient. As one early Christian writer said: 'one whose word is a sword, has no need of a sword'.

The *second* detail, I wish to focus on is the encounter Jesus has with the women of Jerusalem, who are distressed at the sight of him having to carry his cross to the place of execution. They are horrified at the condemnation of this innocent man and, as is so often the case, it is women who are the chief mourners at the time of death. Jesus recognizes their grieving, but doesn't become self-indulgent; he doesn't mourn his own fate. Rather he turns his attention to the fate of these women and all of the people of Israel – because the phrase 'daughters of Jerusalem' was a kind of code for the whole of Israel. He is concerned about his own people, not himself, and he is asking them to face their own situation and to

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assume responsibility for themselves. Although the people have ignored God's overtures to them up to now, he is implicitly asking them not to sustain their resistance to God's love for them. Once again, we see Luke painting his portrait of Jesus as one who is selfless, compassionate and attentive to the distress of those around him and not to his own suffering.

The *third* detail, which is peculiar to Luke, is the words of Jesus from the cross – 'Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing'. Once again, Jesus is prepared to forgive his enemies and to pray for them. He is gracious to the end, even to his executioners. He excuses their guilt on the grounds of ignorance, a lack of awareness of what they are actually doing. He reveals the generosity of God, who here is offering forgiveness even before it has been sought, ever before a word of repentance is expressed. Later, when St Luke is recalling the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, he tells us that as he was being stoned by his executioners he said, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'. St Luke is telling us that the true disciple of Jesus is one who, like him, has to be generous in showing mercy.

All three details reveal, even in his agony, the compassion and graciousness of Jesus. Dante described St Luke as 'the scribe of the gentleness of Jesus'. In the midst of his passion, we can see how this is indeed the case.

### **Easter Sunday**

*April 17*

Acts 10:34, 37-43. Ps 117:1-2, 16-17, 22-23.

Col 3:1-4 or 1 Cor 5:6-8. Jn 20: 1-9

Anyone who has been through a bereavement knows the pain of loss, they know the kind of void that is left in one's life when someone close to them has been taken from them. The more sudden or unexpected the loss, the greater the pain. Those who have participated in the liturgies of the past few days will have connected with the sense of loss and pain that must have gripped the first disciples of Jesus following the violent circumstances in which his life was taken. As part of the grieving process not only do we rehearse the events of the life of the person who has died, we try to hold on to our memories of them and very often we have mementos, something that belonged to them which helps to retain some sense of contact with the departed.

The gospel today, captures the sadness that had overtaken the disciples of Jesus, as it tells us that it was still dark when Mary Magdalene went to visit the tomb of Jesus. She has the impression that a further insult has been visited on Jesus by taking his body

from the tomb and disposing of it elsewhere. She tells Peter and John who then go to investigate. John looked in and saw some cloths in the tomb, the burial cloths discarded, but he did not go in. Then Peter went into the tomb itself and he obviously looked more carefully at the evidence. He noticed that the cloth which had covered Jesus' head was carefully folded, unlike the other cloths that were there. It is a detail that an attentive Jew might have understood when St John was writing his gospel. In fact, we get the impression that Peter himself didn't quite recognize the significance of what he saw, it was John who saw and believed. It seems like an odd detail, yet St John is providing it as a clue as to what was happening.

An attentive Jew would have remembered that when Moses had his meetings with God, seeing God's glory, he removed the veil that covered his face but when he came back to meet the people after his direct encounter with God he put the veil back on. Now, St John is saying, Jesus has gone into the presence of God's glory and will not be returning and therefore there will be no need to cover himself with the face veil. In fact, he will not even need the covering of his flesh anymore. Jesus now exists in a new way, no longer in the flesh but in the glory of God. So, the folded face veil or head covering works as sign for the one who can see its significance.

Jesus continues to be present to his disciples but now in a new way. In the first reading we heard Peter tell his audience how many of his disciples had encountered the risen Jesus, particularly in the context of meals and being commissioned to share the news of his resurrection with the whole world, and so that people can have their sins forgiven. When we read the stories of Jesus's appearances to his disciples it is interesting to note the places or circumstances where they meet him are very similar to those where they encountered him during his public life. They meet him when gathered together, in a context of fellowship; where there is healing and reconciliation; where they reflect on his message in the light of their own faith; when they share meals together and when they go out on mission. These are the places, too, where we can encounter the risen Jesus. When we reach out to others with respect and generosity, when we are prepared to forgive those who have hurt us, when we reflect on the scriptures or make our own prayers to God, when we receive Christ in the Eucharist and when we are prepared to share our faith openly with others. The risen Jesus is intimately present and accessible to us once we, like St John, take time to notice the signs being given to us. The first signs of his presence are to be found wherever there is truth and holiness, justice, love and peace.

**Second Sunday of Easter**

*April 24*

Acts 5:12-16. Ps 117:2-4, 22-27. Apoc 1:9-13, 17-19.

Jn 20: 19-31

One can imagine what it must have been like for the disciples of Jesus after his violent death on Good Friday. The one in whom they had placed their trust had been shamefully condemned and executed because of the claims he was making, claiming to make known God's plan for the people and putting it into action. He had been claiming to speak and act in God's name. His disciples had begun to trust in him and to pin their hopes on him. Obviously, if they were being identified as his closest collaborators, then they could rightly have expected to share the same fate as he had suffered. It is no wonder then that they were locked in a room with the doors secured.

Can we imagine what their conversations were like in that terrifying situation? Inevitably, they must have been wondering if they had misinterpreted what Jesus was saying and doing. Perhaps they might have wondered if they were naïve in having placed such confidence in him. Maybe they were raking through their own scriptures to see if there were in fact good grounds for them having followed him in the first place, and if they could find such evidence then they may not look quite so foolish before the Jewish authorities.

In the midst of that fear and confusion, that desperate searching for evidence to justify their initial faith in Jesus, the now risen Jesus 'came and stood among them'. He extended a greeting of peace and reconciliation. By way of identifying himself, he showed them the wounds of his passion. They seemed to recognize him immediately and then he restated his words of greeting. It was more than a conventional greeting. It was a message of reassurance and comfort. It is as if his words totally transform the situation and restore some sense of stability and confidence, so much so that he can now mandate them for mission.

Just as Jesus was sent by the Father to reveal the Father's plan for his people, now Jesus is sending out his disciples to carry on that very same mission. Not only is he commissioning them for a significant undertaking, he is also gifting them with the power of the Holy Spirit. He does so by breathing on them. An attentive Jewish reader of John's gospel would remember that God breathed life into Adam at the creation and 'he became a living being'. There is now the implication that there is here a new creation, a new dispensation. Things have changed, changed utterly. There is now a new relationship between God and God's people. A great reconciliation has been effected.

These disciples in the locked room are being commissioned and sent out to share this good news with the whole world. This is the beginning of the mission imparted to the whole Church. We are the heirs of that mission. We are sharers in this new creation that has been brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are living in a privileged situation because we now know that God is on our side, God is at peace with us and deeply loves us. There is no need for fear, no need to fear God nor to fear any adversary. This is the message that the disciple must now proclaim. They can go out into the world with great confidence that God has triumphed over sin and evil. Their task is to contribute to that ongoing task of eradicating sin and evil, but in a way that is gentle, yet confident. They are to be agents themselves of healing and reconciliation, always aware that they have the gift of the Spirit to empower them. We are the latter day disciples of Jesus and we share the same call to extend the healing, reconciling love of God to all whom we encounter.

**A Living Tradition.** Change is a necessary part of life. Without change, there cannot be transformation. And sometimes change involves death – death to the old patterns of thought and behaviour. And this is central to our Christian faith. It is what enlivens the Church – it is the movement of the Spirit, which is the active living tradition of the Church. This dynamic movement of the Spirit cannot be locked into a single formulation to describe the living tradition. The clue is in the name – it is a living tradition and can only be kept alive through “translation and interpretation so that its powerful vision can inspire each generation and every culture”.

- ANGELA HANLEY, *What happened to Fr. Seán Fagan*. (Dublin Columba Press), p.185.

# News and Views

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## **Catholics and Abortion Law.** Tom Healy, Dublin writes;

In an article entitled ‘Catholics and Abortion Law’, in your January issue of *The Furrow*, the Reverend Michael McGuckian SJ has done a service in so far as he discusses a topic that many of us are reluctant to speak about in public. It seems to me that Ireland has now moved to a position where voicing opposition to the normative ‘pro-choice’ orthodoxy is a matter to be exercised in private by consenting adults (if at all)! While I do not share much of the analysis and the main conclusion in the article by Rev McGuckian, I believe that debate in this area is urgently needed. I cannot comment on the question of excommunication policy for Catholics publicly supporting abortion (or permitting abortion as Rev McGuckian wrote). However, I think that it is accurate to say that no Irish politician has been publicly cautioned or sanctioned on this matter in recent years. Indeed, it would seem almost impossible to do so given that an overwhelming majority of Oireachtas members have consistently voted for the liberal abortion measures currently in place. Moreover, it would appear that a very sizeable number, if not an outright majority, of church-going members of the public voted to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment knowing that the Government would proceed to do what they said they would do following the referendum in 2018.

Where does all of this leave us now?

I suggest that a respectful and evidence informed debate is needed in the coming months especially in the context of a three-year review of the legislation and the very likely prospect of growing pressure to liberalise the current law even further. This is not to even mention the matter of ‘assisted dying’ which is the subject of consideration by the Oireachtas following a decisive vote by Oireachtas members last year in favour of legislation.

I suggest that it is time for ethicists, doctors, theologians, women and men better qualified than me to consider these matters in future issues of *The Furrow*. As with any important moral issue such as the right to life from womb to tomb everything is connected to everything: the right to life is also about the right to social and economic justice - a matter which is widely spoken about in church circles these days.

# Featured Review

## *The Church's Best Kept Secret\**

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Stefan Gillow Reynolds

Despite living in Ireland (such are the wonders of our digital age), at the start of the new year 2022, I happened to listen to a message from the Bishops Conference of Brazil! The message summed up the teaching now given by the Catholic Church that is so well documented in Anna Rowlands' masterly study. "It is time to rebuild Brazil," said Archbishop Walmor Oliveira, President of the Bishop's Conference, "it is time to rebuild society in justice and peace. Selfish attitudes, unlimited consumption, disregard for the common home and indifference towards the poorest have caused many diseases. The aim of 2022, in fact for all followers of Christ, is to consolidate social friendship and fraternity through gestures of solidarity and the protection of rights and justice."

The social and even political and environmental implication of the Gospel has become increasingly the message of the Church today, much to the annoyance of traditionalist wings that would prefer the focus to be on dogmatic orthodoxy and a limited set of moral issues. Yet, concern for the state of the world as a whole, has been part of Christian thought from the early centuries.

There are civic virtues as well as theological ones, St Augustine said and although the society in which we live in this world is different from the heavenly city to which we are summoned, we must learn to behave properly in one before we can possibly earn a place in the other. "Render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar," Jesus said, "and to God what belongs to God" (*Mk* 12:17).

In fact, increasingly in the last century, even this tacit sense of dualism between our life in this world and the spiritual life, is being challenged by the Church. "How can we love God if we do not love our neighbour?" (cf. 1 *Jn* 4:20). And we must love our neighbour in the concrete situations of need in which, in this world, they find

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\* *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*. Anna Rowlands, Bloomsbury, 2021.

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themselves. St James' letter (maybe the first great social encyclical of the Church) reminds us not to favour the rich: "God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world". Moreover, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, if one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" (2:16). Religious people, as Jesus' parable of *the Good Samaritan* shows, can sometimes be more concerned with their religious 'purity' than getting involved in the painful situations of the world, but this is a fallacy. Accordingly, the trend of recent Catholic Social teaching holds that in being concerned for the welfare of others, Christians should be concerned with the economic and political aspects of life.

Sometimes when we think of the Church we imagine a somewhat self-serving institution concerned to promote right belief and morals (orthodoxy and ortho-ethos), but not necessarily a prophetic challenge to the unjust structures in the world, which disenfranchise and cause suffering to the poor especially. The concern for ortho-oikonomia and ortho-politeia has perhaps been the best kept secret in the Church, but now it is seeing the light of day and is becoming *the* message of the Church for our time.

Anna Rowlands is Professor of Catholic Studies at Durham University in England. Her recent book, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, is a thorough study of Catholic Social Teaching. She starts with a dialogue with the Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt who survived the Holocaust to write extensively on the making of a more just and equitable social order. Arendt respected the Church's involvement in this area but argued it would always be hindered by the transcendent perspective it takes on the human person. Life in this world is never the final telos of human being and, therefore, Christianity, she argues, always renders life in this world as a somewhat secondary concern. The most important thing is to save one's soul for the next. However, and Professor Rowlands points out, the Catholic Church has made a paradigm shift in the last hundred years which has built up momentum so that, since Hannah Arendt's death in 1975, a genuine concern for *this* world has come to the forefront as a real priority in official Church teaching.

According to Rowlands, the Church retains a transcendent perspective on the human person, not in the sense that human meaning is centred on the next world but in the sense that it transcends any economic or political world-view or agenda. The transcendent value of the human person means that the state, political life and economic structures should exist for human flourishing and not visa-versa. This, Rowlands explains, is why

a 'Social' teaching is primary to a political or economic teaching. The latter are means, and can vary according to time and need, the former is built in to what it is to be human. The teaching of Pope Francis on the Environment applies this not only to the human but to the created world as a whole. The social now comes to include the ecosystem in which we 'live and move and have our being'. Natural 'goods' are not to be exploited for political or capital purposes but need to be used sustainably for the benefit of local populations and future generations.

*Towards a Politics of Communion* looks at the emergence of the modern Catholic tradition of social teaching from the encyclical of Pope Leo XII in 1891 *Rerum Novarum* which responded to the dehumanizing of the Industrial Revolution up to Pope Francis' recent encyclical *Fratelli tutti* which points out our common humanity in the face of narrow national, economic and religious interests. This tradition draws on Scriptural, Patristic and Medieval reflection on how we are by nature social beings and are called to create just forms of interaction. Therefore, political and economic life needs to be orientated toward the common good rather than selfish or ideological ends. Politics should not only serve to check evil but should allow participation at all levels in creating a more just and humane world.

In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis outlines what he sees as the key social principles developed by the Church over the centuries. He lists seven of these: dignity of the person, the common good, preferential option for the poor, universal destination of goods, solidarity, subsidiarity and care for our common home. Professor Rowlands explicates these, giving an account of their roots and their recent development. She does not shy away from the critiques that can be validly made against this teaching or its internal consistency. She points out, for example, that John Paul II put much more emphasis on individual responsibility whereas other Popes like John XXIII and Francis are willing to speak more of social or structural sin of which the individual is a victim. Rowlands also points out some of the problems that arise when the Church adopts the language of human rights, as proponents of practices which the Church opposes, e.g. abortion, assisted suicide, also use 'rights' language.

Rowlands thus situates Catholic Social Teaching as an evolving tradition – evolving because it is constantly in dialogue with concrete situations and needs. Concern for human dignity in the Industrial Revolution gave rise to the defence of the value of labour over capital, and the claim that industry exists for the sake of the worker not for the sake of net profit. Reflection on the right to livelihood and participation in social and economic life led in turn

to the consistent defence of migrant workers and, even more, of political and economic refugees. Everyone has a right to a 'living wage.' The seven 'principles' of CTS are gradually explicated through the Papal encyclicals, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and other addresses.

The title of Rowlands' book, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, reflects what she sees is a key concern of Catholic Social Teaching, namely, that the Church does not exist for itself but for others, that (in the language of the Second Vatican Council) it is a sacrament of unity for the world. CTS reaches out toward civic organizations, quite independent from the Church and the secular practice of politics, trying to show that when it comes to the welfare of humanity and the planet, there is a common interest.

Rowlands' book focuses particularly on the official teachings of the Church magisterium but does not explore how CTS has been lived out in Parishes and Dioceses and only touches on how Lay Catholic movements have been pioneers in this area. It would be interesting, as the synodal process now underway, to see the profile of CTS in this internal Ecclesial discernment. How much the seven 'principles' of CTS - dignity of the person, the common good, preferential option for the poor, universal destination of goods, solidarity, subsidiarity and care for our common home - are now being taken on by the Church at large? As can be seen in the New Year address given by the Bishops in Brazil, some Bishop's Conferences are now prioritising it.

The synodal process now underway is a good example of one of the principles of CTS being put into action. It may also explain why engaging participation and feedback from all 'levels' of the Church feels strange to many. *Subsidiarity* may be the least understood of the 'principles' of CST. It has its roots in the tradition of professional guilds and charitable and civic fraternities in medieval society. Political and economic decision making and management should be *participatory* and not just relegated by government and multi-national corporations. The state or market interests should not presume to dictate what could be much better managed at a local level. Trade unions are a modern face of subsidiarity.

Subsidiarity, in Catholic Social Teaching, points not so much to the lobbying of political and economic interests within the corridors of power as to a legitimate independence from that power. Self-regulation and delegated responsibility should mean that social groups are devolved from centralized bureaucracy and control. Such devolution in turn frees up government and international organizations to deal with issues that need a broader and more concerted policy. In other words, we don't need a nanny state that gets involved in everything. Decision making can be devolved. The

body politic is something in which everyone can play their part, not only through voting but through local organizations. A good society (like the human body) has many ‘parts’ which function in their own ways and yet never independently. Subsidiarity is the principle which tries to maintain the integrity and connection between different forms of social governance.

To conclude, Anna Rowlands has given us a thorough and compelling study of CTS. She is an academic and the book enters into various dialogues with contemporary social and political science that may be well beyond the reading range of many who, like myself, have no specialist training in this area – the Index goes to ten pages. So, this book may not be the lightest or easiest introduction to the topic, but she writes clearly and has the academic advantage of being able to set arguments within a particular historical context, and to show where the Church might learn something from secular reflection on the same subject. In the end this is an area where the sacred and the secular meet. Catholic Social Teaching is *theological* because of the Incarnation – because God has entered into and experiences fully the human condition. So, in the end, it points us back to reflecting on the Gospel as the paradigm for Christian engagement with the world. Not just the human world, as Pope Francis reminds us, for that same Word of God that becomes flesh in Jesus is the Word through which all creation came to be. Love of our common home is love of Christ.

**Freedom.** The word freedom is frequently misunderstood in today’s culture. It is typically interpreted as ‘freedom from’ restrictions or limitations on individual choices (e.g. lying on a beach without a care in the world). However, often this can simply be a disguised selfishness with associated negative consequences as wealth, possessions and lack of commitments are prioritised. This results in an impoverished experience of ‘freedom’ that isn’t true freedom. The Ignatian concept of freedom as ‘freedom for’ is much more useful. This is a sense of service and responsibility to others that helps people to sacrifice individual freedom for a greater end: the care of others, the construction of an inclusive society and reaching out to the vulnerable.

– BRENDAN MCMANUS, SJ, *Channelling the Inner Fire*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications), 2022, p. 28.

# New Books

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**Hearers of the Word.** Kieran J. O'Mahony OSA, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2021. ISBN 9781788124706.

The latest book in this series offers an overview of *Praying & Exploring the Readings for Lent & Holy Week Year C*. The opening text of the late Brendan Kennelly's poem *Begin* with its conclusion 'something that will not acknowledge conclusion insists that we forever begin' sets the scene for seeing the scriptural readings of Lent and Holy Week in supplying this something, indeed Someone, as the source of such hope. In the *Introduction* the author adverts to Lent as 'the springtime of faith', affirming that the 'Lent lectionary is perhaps the most considered and the richest [which] is right, surely, because the season guides us as pilgrims to the great festival of Easter'. The dovetailing of the Sunday readings around the theme of journey is a point well made particularly in the course of the church's synodal pathway. '*A prayer before reading Scripture*' asks, 'as hearers of the Word, God to 'help us begin again and again'.

Six chapters are dedicated to the Sundays of Lent in Year C, including Palm Sunday. Two chapters cover Holy Thursday and Good Friday in Years ABC with a final chapter for the Easter Vigil Year C. These follow a detailed format for the readings, including *Thought for the day* and *Pointers for Prayer*, a brief commentary and a concluding *Themes across the readings*. From each detailed analysis of the readings and synthesis at the end there is plenty of material for preachers to ponder on in preparation of homilies and retreat givers in preparation of talks. The first line of *Thought for the day* on the Easter Vigil takes readers back to the theme of the opening, 'Easter is a time of beginnings in the most radical sense'. This ties up with the declaration, in the *Introduction*, 'of the need, indeed the insistent demand to begin again in our time is felt more urgently as we face global warming, the loss of species, the exploitation of the earth's resources and an existential crisis'. The book is rounded off with a pronouncement on *Faith and the Environmental Crisis* which, drawing on scriptural and contemporary voices, reminds readers, 'Our calling in Christ is that "we forever begin"'. That's who we are, the beginners'. A helpful *Index of Biblical References* completes and complements this fine production. A very valuable resource for use in liturgical and *lectio* settings, this book displays a vitality which is effective in and for evangelisation.

**To Prepare His Ways.** Patrick Harrington SMA. (Cork: SMA Publications, 2021). Pp. 416.

Entering St. Patrick's building in Maynooth and turning right towards the Chapel one finds a series of portraits of 19th century prelates who left college and country and became bishops in faraway mission fields. Among these are the two Fennellys who both served as Vicar Apostolic of Madras, John from 1841 to 1866 and Stephen from 1865 to 1880. This recollection of the 'Maynooth Mission to India' sets the subject of this book in relief. This is the story of Melchior de Marion Brésillac. The opening chapter offers an account of his growing up in early nineteenth century France, entry into the seminary and formation there, followed by his ordination as a priest for the diocese of Carcassonne in 1838 and his first years of priestly ministry. Having discerned the desire to be a missionary, he requested and received permission to become a member of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (M.E.P.) which resulted in his being sent to Southern India in 1842. The major part of this book is an account of his travels and travails there, as both a priest and bishop of Coimbatore until 1853. Drawing extensively from his correspondence and contemporary sources, these thirteen chapters detail the joys and difficulties of mid-nineteenth century missionary life with its debates and divisions around culture, caste and the creation of a local clergy. The narrative of these years in India is vivid, veritable and very valuable with the view of hindsight. The next five chapters describe in detail his return to Europe after his resignation as a bishop, his relations with *Propaganda Fide* (Evangelisation of Peoples) in Rome and his resolve to found a missionary society for Africa. The final chapter concentrates on the journey in 1859 of de Brésillac and his companions culminating in their deaths in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The pathos of the final line – 'Thus ended the first mission of the Society of African Missions to Africa' – is both prepossessing and prophetic.

With his experience as a missionary in Australia and Liberia, Superior General of the SMA and Bishop of Lodwar (Kenya), the author is eminently equipped to interpret the itinerary of '*this great servant of mission*' who '*gave everything – even his very life*' (from *Prayer for the Canonisation of the Venerable Melchior de Marion Brésillac*). The *Postscript* presents '*A Sketch of the Legacy*' of de Brésillac', covering eight causes and contexts: *The Role of Conscience* and *The Dignity of Persons, Inculturation and Local Clergy*, *The Goan Schism* and "*Malabar Rites*" controversy, *The Paris Foreign Missions* and *Legacy to Africa*. The last includes the development of the Society founded by de Brésillac which at time of publication numbers 1,223, including members from many countries in Africa and India. These reflections bring out the ethical and anthropological, missiological and ecclesiological implications of de Brésillac's imaginative and inclusive vision of evangelisation which went on to bear fruit in both the local ministry and global mission of the church,

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up to and beyond the Second Vatican Council. More than a historical account of the personalities, places and period in question, this book heralds what Pope Saint John Paul II proclaimed ‘the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate’ in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (*Mission of the Redeemer*). Aptly illustrated throughout with maps and photographs, this book sets forth the spirituality of de Brésillac which, springing from his love of scripture, shows him faithfully imitating the example of Christ the Good Shepherd. This is a very readable account of a remarkable life which comes with the highest recommendation.

*St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth*

Kevin O’Gorman SMA

**Hope and the Nearness of God: The 2022 Lent Book.** Teresa White. London: Bloomsbury, 2021. ISBN 978-1-4729-8419-7

What has impressed me most about Sr Teresa White’s book is the sheer array of authors and sources she has incorporated. Augustine, Rahner, Paschal, Vaclav Havel, Newman, St Francis of Assisi, Victor Hugo, Bonhoeffer, Aquinas, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Jürgen Moltmann, Julian of Norwich, Pope Francis... these are just some of the better-known voices woven into these reflections on hope.

Poets, too, are part of the Lenten lineout: Ann Lewin, Denise Levertov, Rilke, Wallace Stevens, Emily Dickinson – and above all, Péguy, the great poet of hope. There is something subtly powerful about the inclusion of so many outstanding thinkers and artists. It lets us know that in the human heart and mind, hope is not a fleeting phenomenon, or some kind of spiritual blip. On the contrary, hope has exercised and motivated many of the greatest minds and spirits of history. To hope is to take one’s place in a long line of ‘incorrigible hoppers’ – to use a delightful term of White’s.

In the book’s seven chapters, hope is linked to providence, goodness, courage, symbols, discernment, and – in the final chapter – the Holy Spirit. The penultimate chapter, ‘Bridges of Hope,’ examines ways of fostering hope, of building bridges that ‘encourage us to cross the chasm of our fears.’

White’s reflections are not facile or saccharine. They are for those who, with Julian of Norwich, say ‘All shall be well,’ but who say it ‘sometimes through gritted teeth,’ to use a phrase from a poem by Ann Lewin, whom White quotes to great effect.

Although it is a ‘Lent Book,’ the reflections are not systematized around the season, but instead flow quite freely. However, each chapter ends with some topics for reflection, discussion and activities, and this gives the book a practical, concrete feel, as a guide for the season of Lent.

*St Patrick’s College, Maynooth*

CHRIS HAYDEN

**Strangers and Nomads: Catholic Martyrs of England and Wales.** Dudley Plunkett. Leominster: Gracewing, 2021. Pp.ix+118. Price £9.99 pbk. ISBN: 978-0-85244-980-6.

Dudley Plunkett's book, *Strangers and Nomads*, offers a marvellous overview of the Catholic Martyrs of England and Wales who shed their blood for the faith during the period of the Reformation. I could not agree more with the author that Catholics, especially from the British Isles, are too frequently unaware of the great courage and holiness demonstrated by so many men and women in the face of such cruel persecution and inhumane torture on account of their fidelity to the Catholic faith. Indeed, I have been deeply impressed by the lives of the forty-three Catholic martyrs presented in this book and the fortitude they displayed in spite of the pressures placed on them to renounce their loyalty to the Pope, their reverence for the Mass and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The way in which Plunkett presents the great witness given by these martyrs by providing some brief biographical details and a summary of their lives, contemporary testimonies, accounts of their final words before being put to death, and concluding with a Collect prayer taken from the edition of the Roman Missal for England and Wales or from the Jesuit Missal and Lectionary for the celebration of their memorials or feast-days, helps the reader to reflect on the lives of these saints with an attitude of reverence and contemplation. It also serves to remind us of the deep roots of Catholicism in England and Wales. Reading this book certainly encourages devotion to these holy men and women and fosters zeal for the faith. I believe that this is of great importance for the Catholics of today, as it has been in every century. Indeed, as quoted in the foreword of the book, 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians.'

In the face of severe suffering and death, the martyrs displayed extraordinary serenity and steadfastness. This is as much of a sign in our own time, as it was in theirs. Over the past few years, we ourselves have witnessed the fear that has overcome so many in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. I firmly believe that the witness given by the martyrs can be of great help to us all as we consider in whom we place our hope and our trust when confronted with our own mortality. After all, we too are strangers and nomads walking in faith towards our heavenly homeland. We would do well to turn to them for support when overwhelmed by fear and distress along the way.

*Newry, Co. Down*

CALLUM D. YOUNG

**Beyond Belief. How Pentecostal Christianity Is Taking Over The World.** Elle Hardy. London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2021. p.319. \$29.99 ISBN 9781787385535

Born in humble circumstances in the United States at the beginning of the last century, Pentecostals now comprise one quarter of the world's two

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billion Christians, up from just 6% in 1980. It is predicted that by 2050, one billion people will be part of the movement.

The clichè about Pentecostalism is that it is about health, wealth, and the second coming of Christ, which explains its fixation on Israel, part of its inheritance from evangelicalism. From another of its ancestors, the Holiness movement early last century in the US, it holds that after forgiveness, we may be sanctified, but Pentecostalism adds a further step: we may then be filled with the Holy Spirit, as though Pentecost were endlessly repeated. We shall then be blessed by God, which involves success in spirit, body and wealth.

Pentecostals prize personal experience over universal truth, although they insist on biblical literalness, and an absolutist adherence to doctrine. One of the few criticisms of Hardy's engrossing book is that she doesn't make it clear what these doctrines are.

Some of the greatest success of Pentecostalism comes in countries which had a shamanistic culture previously – shamans channelled advice about healing from the next world. Shamanism was part of the religion of East Asia. In Seoul, a great Pentecostal city, there are seventeen churches with more than 2000 members attending each week.

In Southern Africa, healing and divining were part of the local culture, which again dovetailed into Pentecostalism. More than half of Zimbabwe's population belong to Pentecostal churches, along with 40% of South Africans and over a third of Kenyans. The Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Ghana, and Zambia all have a population that is over a quarter Pentecostal.

Lagos, population twenty million, is probably the most religious city on earth. In Lagos, there are Pentecostal Churches and Pentecostal Mosques. Some people attend a Pentecostal Church on Sunday morning and a Pentecostal Mosque on Sunday afternoon. "It's no big deal," one of them said to the author, "Christians celebrate one prophet, Muslims another."

Brazil has been a spectacular Pentecostal success. In 2020, over 30% of Brazilians were evangelicals, the vast majority being Pentecostal. It is predicted that they will outnumber Catholics by 2032. Brazil is surprisingly under-developed. Only 8% of the population is considered literate to a high degree, about half of the country doesn't have basic sanitation, and many people do not have access to education or health care. The most famous Pentecostal in Brazil is Edir Mercedo, who founded the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. He owns a television station and is a billionaire. For Pentecostals, wealth is a sign of the strength of your faith.

Pentecostalism performed differently in different countries. One disturbing performance occurred in Guatemala in 1982-83. There, the man who became president had been an army officer, General Rios Montt, who had been trained in the US when they were worried about left wing insurgencies. Mott, an ardent Pentecostal, had the view that the local Maya culture was demonic, and carried out sixty nine massacres in his first year of government, when he appeared every week on television to

deliver his Sunday sermons. More than that, he attempted a final solution against the Maya, attacking 4,000 villages and wiping 626 of them off the map. Fortunately, the persecutions abated when he left office.

There is no top-down control of world or national Pentecostalism, and churches are jealous of their autonomy. Nevertheless, schemes for political control have been sketched out. Thus Lance Walnau and Bill Johnson in their book *Invading Babylon: The Seven Mountain Mandate* offer a scenario for achieving political power through the seven mandates: control of education, religion, family, business, government, arts and entertainment, and media. The seven mandates seem to have become part of Pentecostal culture.

Why has Pentecostalism been such an outstanding success? First of all, the church service itself is made attractive by the singing, and in Africa, by dancing as well. But the main reason seems to lie in a comment made to the author in Brazil: “The difference between Pentecostalism and Catholicism is that Pentecostalism says that you can be happy in this life.” It is not surprising that poor people from medically deprived environments respond enthusiastically to the message that they can be spiritually fulfilled, healthy, and financially secure. If that is the secret of Pentecostal success, what will happen if the promise is not delivered? And will they still need it when these goods have been obtained? It will be interesting to see how the movement fares over time.

*Canberra, Australia*

REG NAULTY.

**The Grace of “Nothingness”: Navigating the Spiritual Life with Blessed Columba Marmion.** Fr. Cassian Koenemann, OSB. NY: Angelico Press, 2021. ISBN 978 1 62138 809 8

It was the persistence of Cardinal Raymond Burke that prompted Fr Cassian Koenemann to read Blessed Columba Marmion, where he found a vein of spiritual wisdom. The title *The Grace of Nothingness* picks up a theme that, while not of first rank, does emerge, especially in Marmion’s published letters of spiritual direction. Blessed Columba’s message of divine adoption is perennial, even if other aspects need updating in the light of Vatican II (for example, his ecclesiology).

While words like ‘nothingness’, ‘self-emptying’ or even ‘self-annihilation’ are potentially destructive if mishandled, they can be liberating. My paraphrase of the book’s message would be: without God we are nothing, but with God in Christ we flourish and are transformed. It is a message of hope for us in our weakness, and a reminder to surrender to God. Trying too hard to ‘be somebody’ can get in the way. Interesting connections are made with a variety of sources, including St Paul, St John Cassian, St Augustine, St Benedict, St Catherine of Siena, St John of the Cross, St Thérèse of Lisieux, St Teresa of Calcutta, and the twelve-step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous.

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Many inspiring passages from across the writings of Blessed Columba are included. Of particular importance in this corpus, and worthy of special emphasis, is his broad vision of God's plan for us, and his insight into our potential for divinisation in Christ, from which everything else flows. The book emphasises the theology of grace, which Blessed Columba articulated in the language prevalent in his day. It could be enlightening to deepen the dialogue with the somewhat different language of grace found in the 'nouvelle theologie' and 'return to the sources', with the concomitant return to biblical, liturgical and patristic sources, so much part of the theology of Vatican II.

*Glenstal Abbey*

COLUMBA MCCANN

**Saint Faustina.** Time and again, St Faustina, especially through her experience of suffering and sickness, kept her gaze fixed on the crucified Lord. She had her own fair share of sufferings. Simply because the Lord chose her for such an important and vital task of delivering the message of Divine Mercy through her *Diary*, does not mean that she was kept from pain and suffering. Like all the saints before and after her, she experienced her own share of challenges. However, her determination to keep her gaze fixed on him and her trust in his strength alone kept her from despair and hopelessness. She shares this with us in her *Diary* so that we too can draw strength from her struggles with the cares of this life.

– ÉAMONN P. BOURKE, *Mercy in All Things*. (Dublin: Veritas), p.58.

# Ó CHÓFRA CHUALLAUGHT CHOLM CILLE

in eagar ag/edited by Tracey Ní Mhaonaigh

Eagrán ceiliúrtha de *Irisleabhar Mhá Nuad* atá anseo in ómós do Naomh Colm Cille – pátrún Chuallacht Cholm Cille – a rugadh 1500 bliain ó shin. Tá ábhar (cuid de as Gaeilge, cuid eile as Béarla) a scríobhadh faoi Cholm Cille, agus/nó in ómós dó, agus a cuireadh i gcló thar na blianta san *Irisleabhar* bailithe le chéile anseo. Chomh maith leis na píosaí seo, faightear dánta comórtha le Tadhg Ó Dúshláine agus iad curtha ar fáil go dátheangach aige.

This is a special commemorative edition of *Irisleabhar Mhá Nuad* to mark the 1500th anniversary of the birth of Colm Cille, the patron of *Cuallacht Cholm Cille*. It includes essays and poems (some in Irish and some in English) published over the years in the *Irisleabhar* which were written about, or in honour of, Colm Cille. The collection also includes poems written by Tadhg Ó Dúshláine to mark the occasion.

Cuir glaoch ar Roinn na Nua-Ghaeilge, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad (01 708 3666) nó ríomhphost chuig [nua.ghaeilge@mu.ie](mailto:nua.ghaeilge@mu.ie) más spéis leat an leabhar a cheannach (€20 + €3 p&p ach €17 + €3 má luann tú go bhfaca tú an fógra in *The Furrow*)

Phone or email the Department of Modern Irish if you would like to purchase this work (€20 + €3 p&p but €17 + €3 if you mention that you saw the notice in *The Furrow*)

Ó CHÓFRA  
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In eagar ag Tracey Ní Mhaonaigh

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