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CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Mary in Gaza

Patrick H. Daly
The Redemption of
Sunday

Chris Hayden
What are You Laughing
at?

Patrick Murphy
The Image of a
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CHRISTMAS GREETINGS

**The Editor and Staff of *The Furrow* wish readers
everywhere the blessings of the feast**

The Furrow

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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Mary in Gaza: Maternal Solidarity and the Christian Call to Justice [Part Two]

Amelia Fleming

4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT:
MARY'S MESSAGE FROM BETHLEHEM TO GAZA

Part One followed Mary's journey through pregnancy, displacement and birth in Bethlehem. My second reflection turns to Gaza, where mothers face unimaginable suffering. Mary's maternal example, shaped by faith and courage, offers not only consolation but a call to solidarity and justice in the face of such pain. And so as we lit the fourth candle of Advent, I reflected on Mary's courage and the wisdom she might offer to mothers today who face hardship, particularly in places of conflict and instability such as Gaza, amid Israel's military offensive against Hamas. Though separated by centuries, Bethlehem and Gaza lie only a short distance apart, less than 80 km across the contours of the same troubled land. Both are places steeped in history. More than geography binds Bethlehem, known to Christians as the birthplace of peace, and Gaza, often a byword for suffering. They share a cultural landscape shaped by faith and survival under occupation. In both places, motherhood unfolds amid uncertainty. This convergence of past and present invites us to consider how the Nativity continues to illuminate contemporary struggles, particularly through the lens of maternal suffering. The story of Mary giving birth in Bethlehem finds unexpected resonance in the lives of women in Gaza today, women who, like Mary, carry, protect, and nurture life under the shadow of violence. The distance between them, in time and space, is not so great after all.

I am not alone in these reflections. Others, too, have drawn a line between ancient Bethlehem and modern Gaza, recognising in today's realities the truth of the Christmas story. Journalists,

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theologians, and pastoral voices have reflected on the struggle of mothers giving birth amid destruction, likening their plight to Mary's in a world that offered her no room. In their words,¹ and in the images that surface each December, we are reminded that the Nativity is not simply a story of the past but a framework for understanding the present. As we prepare once more to celebrate Christmas, often amid our own comforts and traditions, it is worth pausing to ask: whose lives mirror the Holy Family's vulnerability today? These are not distractions from the season's meaning; they are *invitations* to live it more truthfully, with compassion and attention.

Tragically, twenty-first-century women in Gaza find themselves echoing Mary's first-century experience of pregnancy and delivery with minimal resources, support, and medical care. The Church's tradition does not remain silent in the face of such suffering. Its moral teachings call for the defence of life and the condemnation of actions that violate human dignity. In this context, the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities and their inhabitants, as condemned in *Gaudium et Spes*² and the Catechism of the Catholic Church,³ stands as a grave sin that only intensifies the suffering of these vulnerable mothers. According to recent United Nations Population Fund data,⁴ approximately 155,000 women are pregnant or breastfeeding in Gaza, with around 180 women expected to give birth each day. In 2009, a UNFPA⁵ press release expressed concern over reports of premature labour and delivery triggered by the trauma and shock of ongoing bombing. Additionally, the release continued, premature and new-born infants were at heightened risk of hypothermia due to power outages, compounded by the lack of warm clothing and

1 For example, Kathy Sheridan, in an opinion piece, discussed the sanitised version of the nativity story, emphasising the harsh realities faced by Mary and Joseph. The article suggests that the traditional narrative often overlooks the struggles and hardships associated with childbirth and displacement, which are still relevant today 'The sanitised version of nativity story rings increasingly hollow', *The Irish Times*, 18 Dec 2024, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2024/12/18/the-sanitised-version-of-nativity-story-rings-increasingly-hollow/>, (Accessed 26/4/25). Bethan McKernan reported on Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa's Christmas Eve homily in Bethlehem, where he reflected on the verse, 'there was no room for them', drawing a parallel to the current situation in Gaza. He stated, 'It seems this year there is no room for the people of Gaza', highlighting the suffering of those affected by the conflict. In "'Sorrow and silence" in Bethlehem as Christmas festivities are cancelled', *The Guardian*, 25 Dec 2023, <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/25/no-room-for-the-people-of-gaza-the-persecution-mirrors-that-of-jesus-birth-says-popes-patriarch>, (Accessed 26/4/25).

2 n.80.

3 n. 2314.

4 <https://www.unfpa.org/occupied-palestinian-territory> (Accessed 25/4/25).

5 The UN agency focused on reproductive health, family planning, and population issues.

blankets among the growing displaced population.⁶ This dated press release is a sobering reminder that the situation has only worsened in the years since, with the ongoing conflict exacerbating the vulnerability of women and children. The current reality is even more dire, as the lack of resources, healthcare, and safety continues to endanger lives in unprecedented ways.⁷ Access to medications, soap, and hygiene products is severely limited, with a critical shortage of antenatal and postnatal care amid a worsening sanitation crisis. The catastrophic lack of power further jeopardises safe deliveries in only partially functioning hospitals. Stress and conflict negatively impact breastmilk production and quality. When mothers are unable to produce sufficient breastmilk, they often resort to whatever is available, such as tea or contaminated water, which can severely hinder infant growth and development.⁸

Amidst the devastation, efforts have been made to uphold basic standards of maternal care. UNFPA has deployed mobile maternity units and delivered emergency supplies to hospitals, health facilities, and displaced communities. Similar initiatives in the West Bank provide reproductive health services through safe spaces and mobile clinics.⁹ It has also provided other forms of critical support, including cash assistance, to women to help them cover their basic needs.¹⁰ While such modern interventions strive to uphold maternal dignity and safety amidst conflict, the experiences of women in the ancient world, particularly in first-century Judea, reflect a long history of vulnerability and trauma. Women, particularly expectant and new mothers of the late first-

6 UNFPA ‘Pregnant Women and Newborns are Unseen Victims of Gaza Conflict’, 14 Jan, 2009, <https://www.unfpa.org/press/pregnant-women-and-newborns-are-unseen-victims-gaza-conflict-warns-unfpa>, (Accessed 27/4/25).

7 Hynes et al. report that in 25 refugee camps across 10 countries, preventable causes of maternal mortality such as obstetric haemorrhage (33%), hypertensive disorders (27%), and sepsis (13%) were the leading contributors to maternal mortality, with indirect causes accounting for 34%. Similar patterns appeared in Gaza (2014–2015), though infections were more prevalent than haemorrhage. (Cited by Adra A, Saad M., in ‘Maternal Mortality among Refugees and in Zones of Conflict’, *Donald School Journal of Ultrasound in Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, Vol.14, Issue 1, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.5005/jp-journals-10009-1612>).

8 Katie Dangerfield, “‘The baby could die’”: What pregnant Gazans face giving birth in a conflict zone”, Global News, Posted October 19, 2023, <https://globalnews.ca/news/10029828/israel-hamas-conflict-pregnancy-birth/>, (Accessed 27/4/25).

9 <https://www.unfpa.org/occupied-palestinian-territory> (Accessed 31/10/24).

10 The cash assistance programme has provided support to over 12,000 women across the Occupied Palestinian Territory, prioritising those most vulnerable, including survivors of gender-based violence and pregnant or breastfeeding women. In partnership with the World Food Programme, the funds are distributed through both traditional and mobile payment methods, ensuring that aid reaches recipients despite significant obstacles and cash shortages. ‘Hope amid despair: A Gaza mother’s struggle to be with her baby’, 3 Dec 2024, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/hope-amid-despair-gaza-mother%E2%80%99s-struggle-be-her-baby> (Accessed 27/4/25).

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century BCE and early first-century CE, like Mary, and especially in rural areas, experienced psychological trauma, witnessing brutal forms of oppression such as crucifixion as a method of public execution. Israel at this time was politically and socially unstable. Herod the Great, the client king of the Jews, ruled Judea from 37 BCE to 4 BCE under the aegis of the Roman Empire, governing a Jewish population that, in practice, had no rights. Growing up in Nazareth, Mary would have seen Roman soldiers travelling the international route below her village on the ridgeline. Roman legions were primarily stationed in nearby strategically important Syria, and when Roman officials travelled through Judea en route to or from there, they were typically accompanied by small military contingents, a tangible display of the Empire's might, proximity, and threat of intervention if necessary.

Mary would have also experienced King Herod's Jewish army patrolling Judea to deter rebellion, maintain control, and ensure tax compliance. His army included multi-ethnic mercenaries from regions within the Roman Empire, such as Gaul, Thrace, and other non-Jewish areas, ensuring loyalty that transcended local Judean sympathies. Though at the time of Jesus' birth Herod had no Roman troops, his army mirrored Roman military discipline and organisation, and was a visible connection to, and reminder of, Rome's presence. It also demonstrated that Herod's ruthless and despotic rule was supported by Rome. These were the soldiers who would go on to carry out the slaughter of the innocents recounted in Matthew 2:16-18. Other concrete symbols of Herod's power were his imposing garrisoned palace-fortresses such as Herodium, a few kilometres from Bethlehem, and the Antonia fortress at Jerusalem's Temple Mount, creating an atmosphere of surveillance and repression.

Into this world filled with oppression and fear, shepherds and wise men came to the Holy Family, bearing the message of peace and hope. As noted by Pope Francis, the shepherds personified the poor of Israel, lowly people living with the awareness of their want. The Magi represent 'all those who have sought God down through the ages, and who set out on a journey to find Him...[the] message of the Gospels is clear: the birth of Jesus is a universal event that concerns all of humanity.'¹¹ Their arrival was a quiet yet profound reminder that even in the darkest of times, hope can break through, 'even in the darkest nights, a star continues to shine. It is the star

11 Pope Francis, General Audience, *Catechesis: The Birth of Jesus* 22 December 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20211222_udienza-generale.html (Accessed 25/4/25).

of the Lord, who comes to care for our frail humanity.¹² It is this same hope, born in Bethlehem, that I imagine Mary would share with expectant women of Gaza today. She would speak of her own experience of social oppression, political instability and personal hardship, encouraging them to cling to faith, hope and love. She would advise them to seek out a safe space and the support of other women, to prepare for difficult choices and changes of plan, and to keep sight of the future potential of their baby's life.¹³

As they cope with the waves of labour pain, she would encourage them to trust in their instincts and their body's strength, focus on their breathing - to breathe for themselves and for their child, to quiet their mind, even amid the noise of bombardment and suffering. Mary would remind them that they are part of a long tradition of mothers labouring and giving birth in challenging circumstances, bringing the miracle of new life into even the hardest of places. Mary would counsel them to pray as she had done, and to trust in God.

In reflecting on Mary's experience, I am drawn also to my own story of childbirth - in a hospital setting, through caesarean births, with skilled care and the loving support of friends and family - I am aware of the contrast. I had safety, privacy, reassurance. The women of Gaza often have none of these. Even with excellent care, childbirth left me vulnerable, dependent on others, physically limited, and emotionally raw. My experience has helped me to imagine the courage required of mothers who give birth in conflict zones, without medical certainty or familial shelter. I also recognise that my experience is not the story every woman can tell, and that safe, supported births are not guaranteed, even in peaceful societies untouched by war. In Ireland, in recent years, many women have

12 Pope Francis, *Homily for the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord*, St Peter's Basilica, 6 January 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220106_omelia-epifania.html (Accessed 25/4/25); Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 1987, n. 16.

13 Plestia Alaqaad often thinks about the children killed 'and who they could have grown up to be. Outstanding poets and bestselling authors who never had the chance to be alive. It saddens me to think of all the potential art that will now never see the light of day. The books that will never be read, paintings we will never get to behold.' In *The Eyes of Gaza A Diary of Resilience*, (Macmillan, 2025), p. 3.

come forward through powerful radio testimonies¹⁴ to share birth experiences that were marked not by gentleness but by trauma. Their stories speak of times when consent was not fully respected, when pain was minimised, and when the presence of the mother's voice and needs seemed to disappear within the system. These testimonies remind us that birth, even in a society with advanced medical resources, can still fall far short of the dignity and respect it deserves.

As we look to Gaza today, where women are giving birth amidst destruction, displacement, and overwhelming fear, these realities are thrown into even sharper relief. Whether in a modern Irish hospital or an overwhelmed field clinic in Gaza, failing to honour the dignity of women in childbirth is an injustice against human dignity, calling for solidarity and compassionate action. When I returned home with my newborns, it was to a place of warmth and relative peace, where I healed and bonded. In Gaza, many mothers wait too, not for healing, but for a ceasefire, for news of a husband or a home, for pain relief that may never come. My experience has become, in hindsight, a lens through which I have come to see more clearly the sacredness of every birth, and the scandal of how unequally mothers are treated across the world. In remembering Mary and reflecting on Gaza, I feel a maternal solidarity of prayer, empathy, and advocacy.

Pope John Paul II described the enduring presence of Mary as one that radiates through families, communities, and nations, a maternal presence rooted in belief and embodied in countless expressions of faith.¹⁵ He called the Land of Palestine the spiritual homeland of all Christians, not only because it cradled the life of the Saviour, but also because it was the home of his Mother, the first among believers. In light of this, we are invited to recognise that Mary's presence does not linger only in the past but continues

14 RTÉ Radio 1, *Liveline*, 'Birth Experiences', 2 April 2019, <https://www.rte.ie/radio/radio1/clips/21533709/>; 9 April 2019, <https://www.rte.ie/radio/radio1/liveline/2019/0409/1041645-liveline-tuesday-9-april-2019/>; 10 April 2019, <https://www.rte.ie/radio/radio1/liveline/2019/0410/1041874-liveline-wednesday-10-april-2019/>. (Accessed 26/4/25).

These deeply personal calls were often marked by raw emotion and a striking candour. The programme's open format allowed women, many for the first time, to share their stories in a national forum, breaking a silence historically reinforced by cultural norms around deference to medical authority. As noted in an *Irish Times* Health column, 'The show resulted in a more open conversation around maternal power, control and agency in maternity hospitals, with the HSE issuing an apology to the many women "where our service has failed to meet their expectations".' Tanya Sweeney, 'I encourage women to be a birthzilla, if necessary', *Irish Times*, Oct 18 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/i-encourage-women-to-be-a-birthzilla-if-necessary-1.4030085>. (Accessed 26/4/25).

15 Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 1987, n. 28.

to find expression in the lives of women today, especially those in Palestine itself.

In a 2024 testimony shared with UNFPA,¹⁶ 28-year-old Nadia described the difficulties of her pregnancy during the conflict in Gaza. Displaced multiple times, Nadia faced constant fear for her baby's safety amid the stress and physical strain of relocating. Despite her efforts to attend checkups at UNRWA¹⁷ clinics, the dangerous journey and rising transportation costs prevented her from receiving proper healthcare. The strain of displacement led to premature labour, and Nadia walked over an hour to reach the hospital while in contractions, as she could not afford a taxi. After giving birth at Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, her newborn faced breathing difficulties, exacerbated by power shortages in the region. Nadia would walk an hour and a half to visit her son in the hospital. When she could afford it, she would take a taxi or donkey-drawn cart, which now costs nearly \$10, compared to just \$1 before the war. Sleeping at the overcrowded hospital was largely impossible, as it was filled with both patients and those seeking refuge. 'I was desperate, and [the cash assistance] was a lifesaver for me,' said Nadia in her testimony. 'Now I can see my son, hold him, and be there for him. I hope I can leave Gaza when this is all over and get my son the healthcare he needs.'¹⁸ Despite the immense challenges, Nadia's determination to care for her child amidst constant upheaval becomes a reflection of the quiet hope and faith that women embody in the face of trauma. Another woman delivered her newborn son, Mohammed, safely in a field hospital in Khan Yunis late summer 2024. 'We are grateful,' she wrote in a letter to the dedicated health workers who assisted with the delivery at the field hospital. 'The sound of the rockets and bombs overshadowed my joy, but I resolved that my newborn and I will go on, come what may. We will prevail.' She included a personal wish for the staff: 'I hope that we meet again in better times'.¹⁹

While many news articles and reports convey the experiences of Palestinian mothers, there is something very different in hearing these realities spoken aloud, in a woman's own voice. Listening to

16 'Hope amid despair: A Gaza mother's struggle to be with her baby', 3 Dec 2024, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/hope-amid-despair-gaza-mother%E2%80%99s-struggle-be-her-baby> (Accessed 27/4/25).

17 The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, established in 1949 to provide assistance and protection to Palestinian refugees.

18 'Hope amid despair: A Gaza mother's struggle to be with her baby', 3 Dec 2024, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/hope-amid-despair-gaza-mother%E2%80%99s-struggle-be-her-baby> (Accessed 27/4/25).

19 UNFPA Palestine, 'Women of Gaza. A Year in Crisis', <https://www.unfpa.org/stories/women-gaza-year-crisis>, (Accessed 27/4/25).

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The Eyes of Gaza: A Diary of Resilience,²⁰ narrated by its author Plestia Alaqad, brings an immediacy that the printed word alone cannot achieve. Reflecting on her choice to speak primarily in English rather than Arabic, she explains that her native language is ‘not just [a] form of communication but [is a] piece of art. It’s lyrical, and volatile, and beautiful, and emotional.’²¹ While Arabic allows her to express pain with unfiltered emotional clarity, doing so often overwhelms her. In contrast, using English as a coping mechanism is a means of emotional distance and control. An early moment, in her Day 1 diary account (7 October 2023), captures the psychological toll of prolonged exposure to violence, particularly on mothers, who must persist in their daily caregiving roles amid unimaginable stress. She shares:

Mama tells us that she woke up to the sound of bombs and thought it was rain, so she got up to bring the laundry inside and went back to sleep. I think that’s hilarious. I immediately text my friends to tell them my mom thought it was raining, and many of them reply, ‘yeah, same here’, which both surprises me and doesn’t at the same time. How much trauma does it take to start thinking that bombs are like rain? And how much trauma does it take to consider that funny?²²

Her actual voice and testimony, inflected with the fear, strength, fatigue, and dignity of a woman living through bombardment, was both informative and formative. The act of hearing is biblically significant - it is not simply a sensory perception, but is also a call to response. It is the kind of hearing that Isaiah demanded when he cried out for justice on behalf of the widow and orphan (Isa 1:17), and that Paul described when he wrote that ‘faith comes from hearing’ (Rom 10:17). Plestia’s story is to be heard and acted upon.

In reflecting on the often hidden, unrecognised suffering of mothers, whether in the bombed maternity wards of Gaza or the quietly endured trauma of a hospital birth, I am reminded of John Henry Newman’s theology of the hidden life and personal vocation. Newman wrote, ‘God has created me to do Him some definite service... I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.’²³ His conviction that *each* life holds a sacred purpose, even when overlooked by the world, offers a theological foundation for the recognition of maternal dignity.

20 (Macmillan, 2025).

21 Plestia Alaqad, *The Eyes of Gaza A Diary of Resilience*, (Macmillan, 2025), pp. 92-93.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

23 *Meditations and Devotions of the Late Cardinal Newman*, 2nd Edition, with a Prefatory Note by VM. P. Neville, (Longmans, Green, & Co., 1893), p. 400.

It allows us to affirm that each mother, whether giving birth in a war zone, through surgery, in silence, or through adoption, bears witness to a vocation uniquely hers, known and honoured by God. Just as Mary's maternal mission was both deeply human and divinely chosen, so too are the hidden labours of contemporary mothers signs of grace in an often-unjust world.

The testimony and example of Mary is not only in Bethlehem. Her journey to Elizabeth provides another lens through which to understand maternal solidarity and divine compassion. Mary reached out to Elizabeth, who was experiencing the wonder (and challenges) of her pregnancy. Pope Francis reflects on this journey as a model of attentive, compassionate solidarity, speaking of her as a woman who 'went with haste', moved not by self-interest, but by the urgent desire to help. Even while carrying the Son of God, she set aside her own needs to be present to another woman in a time of vulnerability. 'She did not say: "But now I am with child I must take care of my health. My cousin is bound to have friends who can care for her".'²⁴ This image of Mary, quick to respond, tender in solidarity, offers a powerful witness for today. Her journey through the hill country of Judea speaks across time to the mothers of Gaza, who walk their own roads of uncertainty and danger. Just as Mary once came to Elizabeth in her time of need, so she may be understood as drawing near to women who suffer, mourn, and endure in the face of violence and devastation, such as those in Gaza. As expressed by Pope Francis, '[i]t is beautiful to think this of Our Lady, of our Mother, that she hastens, because she intends to help. She goes to help, she doesn't go to boast and tell her cousin: "listen, I'm in charge now, because I am the Mother of God!". No, she did not do that. She went to help! And Our Lady is always like this. She is our Mother who always hurries to us whenever we are in need.'²⁵

Pope Francis also reminded us that '[every] form of violence inflicted upon a woman is a blasphemy against God, who was born of a woman. Humanity's salvation came forth from the body of a woman: we can understand our degree of humanity by how we treat a woman's body.'²⁶ In the context of Gaza, this statement takes on urgency. Rooted in the principle of the dignity of the

24 Pope Francis, *Homily for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity*, Visit to the Roman Parish of Sts Elizabeth and Zachariah, 26 May 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130526_omelia-parrocchia-elisabetta-zaccaria.html (Accessed 22/4/25)

25 Ibid.

26 Pope Francis, *Homily for the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God*, 53rd World Day of Peace 1 January 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200101_omelia-madredidio-pace.html (Accessed 22/4/25)

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human person, Catholic Social Teaching calls for the protection of life from conception through to natural death, and this necessarily includes care for the mother. The women and mothers of Gaza must not be forgotten. Their pain, whether it is the physical wounds of war, the emotional toll of loss, or the neglect of healthcare in times of crisis, must be acknowledged with the respect it deserves. The body of a woman, as Pope Francis teaches, is not only a vessel of life but a reflection of our collective humanity. If we are to honour the dignity of all human beings, then we must begin by ensuring the safety, care, and well-being of those women whose lives, like Mary's, bear the weight of sacrifice. In Gaza, where women are caught between the horrors of conflict and the systemic challenges of poverty, their suffering challenges us to recognise our shared responsibility to protect them.

Mothers like Nadia echo Mary's strength and vulnerability. Their courage, resilience, and quiet hope become contemporary witnesses to the same Emmanuel she bore, God-with-us, even in suffering. As we remember Mary this Christmas, we do so not in a disconnected way, but in the light of her Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55)²⁷ and the Church's recognition of her maternal intercession²⁸, with eyes open to her presence where it is most needed, in the hearts of women who still bear and protect life under threat. In the words of Pope Francis,

[w]e need motherhood, of those who generate and regenerate life with tenderness, because only giving, care and sharing keep the human family together. Let's think of the world without mothers: it has no future. Profits and profit, on their own, do not give a future, indeed sometimes they increase inequalities and injustices. Mothers, on the other hand, make every child feel at home and give hope.²⁹

27 'The politics of peace, conscious of and deeply concerned for every situation of human vulnerability, can always draw inspiration from the Magnificat, the hymn that Mary, the Mother of Christ the Saviour and Queen of Peace, sang in the name of all mankind: "He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation. He has shown the strength of his arm; he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly; ...for he has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children for ever" (Lk 1:50-55).'

Pope Francis, *Good Politics is at the Service of Peace*, Message for the 52nd World Day of Peace, 1 January 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20181208_messaggio-52giornatamondiale-pace2019.html (Accessed 25/4/25)

28 *Lumen Gentium*, n. 62.

29 Pope Francis, *Address to the Teachers and Students of the Pontifical Theological Faculty 'Marianum'*, 24 October 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2020/october/documents/papa-francesco_20201024_marianum.html (Accessed 25/4/25).

The *suffering* of birthing women is a global concern that touches the very heart of Christian ethics. In the context of obstructed labour³⁰ when surgery is unavailable, Colleen Carpenter Cullinan draws a parallel between the women who cared for Jesus' body after the crucifixion, bringing spices, ointments, and clean cloths at the first opportunity following the Sabbath,³¹ and the treatment that should be given to the wounded bodies of women in childbirth. These women must be met with dignity, tenderness, and attention.³² This ought not be a distant hope for action. Injuries such as obstetric fistula afflict tens of thousands of women each year, often young girls bearing their first child, and frequently in conditions of poverty, displacement, or inadequate medical support. The United Nations estimates that up to 100,000 new cases develop annually, with over 2 million women currently living with this condition worldwide.³³ While such suffering is well-documented in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, one must ask where access to healthcare in Gaza has collapsed, where expectant mothers deliver in rubble-strewn streets, tents or makeshift shelters, how many women are at risk of similar injuries, untreated and unseen? These are not simply medical misfortunes; they reflect political decisions, systemic inequalities, and a failure to uphold fundamental human dignity. If Mary's motherhood has anything to teach us, it is that the vulnerable maternal body deserves not just our reverence, but also our urgent and practical compassion.

The *biblical call* to justice and compassion is a recurring theme. The notions of *mishpat* (justice or just action), *tzedakah* (righteousness or right relationship), and *agapē* (self-giving, unconditional love) require Christians to advocate for dignity in birth. Like Job, we ought to 'wear' justice and righteousness (Job 29:14) and Micah 6:8 tells us that God has shown us what is good, what He requires of us: 'to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' These demands are 'general and moral in nature, referring to good deeds, and thus doing [justice and

30 Worldwide, obstructed labour occurs in an estimated 5% of live births and accounts for 8% of maternal deaths. (*Obstetric Fistula: Guiding Principles for Clinical Management and Programme Development*, Gwyneth Lewis and Luc de Bernis, Eds, (WHO, 2006), p.3. For each maternal death, an estimated 20 to 30 women suffer childbirth-related injuries that have a lasting impact on their health and quality of life. (United Nations, 'Breaking the Cycle: Preventing Fistula Worldwide', *International Day to End Obstetric Fistula*

23 May, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/end-fistula-day>, [Accessed 26/4/25]).

31 Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1–2; Luke 24:1; and Nicodemus in John 19:39–40.

32 Cullinan, Colleen Carpenter, 'In Pain and Sorrow: Childbirth, Incarnation, and the Suffering of Women', *CrossCurrents*, Vol. 58, No. 1, 2008, pp. 95–107, p. 104.

33 Columbia University sponsored Second Meeting of the Working Group for the Prevention and Treatment of Obstetric Fistula. UNFPA, FIGO, Addis Ababa, 2002, cited in the WHO *Guiding Principles* op. cit., p. 4.

righteousness] refers to actions of social justice.³⁴ Isaiah declares that God's justice includes defending the orphan and pleading for the widow (Isaiah 1:17), a model that extends to all who are exposed to danger and abandonment. Divine justice entails the restoration of right relationships (tzedakah) through just action (mishpat) on behalf of the vulnerable. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom echoes and deepens these themes in the Beatitudes, centred on agapē in which justice is inseparable from mercy and compassion.

This is also illustrated in Matthew 25:31-46, where the Son of Man identifies himself with 'the least of these' - the hungry, the sick, the stranger, and the imprisoned - making care for them the measure of true righteousness. Therefore, justice and care for vulnerable mothers are not abstract ideals, but covenantal imperatives rooted in Scripture.

This biblical mandate to uphold justice and mercy finds resonance *beyond* Christianity, echoing in the moral frameworks of international humanitarian law, which 'must be fully respected'³⁵. The Geneva Conventions³⁶ specifically require that pregnant women and mothers of young children be treated with particular respect and afforded special protection. Yet the conditions faced by women in Gaza stand in contradiction to these commitments. Their suffering serves as a reminder that legal protections demand continual vigilance and enforcement if they are to mean anything in practice.

As observed in 2014 by Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi, the then Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations, international humanitarian law seeks to uphold a basic standard of humanity even amidst the devastation of conflict. Yet despite these legal and humanitarian protections, civilians, especially those in urban areas, continue to bear the heaviest burden of violence. This enduring reality does not diminish the importance of humanitarian

34 Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, (Magnus Press, 1995), p. 36.

35 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 504.

36 Of the forty-two provisions within the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols that address the needs of women, nineteen specifically concern mothers, whether pregnant, nursing, or caring for young children. Additional Protocol I, Article 70(1), prioritises expectant, nursing, and labouring mothers for the receipt of relief supplies, including medical aid. Geneva Convention IV, Article 50, stipulates that in situations of occupation, preferential measures concerning food, healthcare, and protection must continue for children under fifteen, expectant mothers, and mothers of young children. Furthermore, Additional Protocol I, Article 8(a), classifies maternity cases - pregnant women and those in labour - under the protected category of 'wounded and sick', safeguarding them from acts of hostility. *Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols*, www.icrc.org. (Accessed 26/4/25).

principles but calls urgent attention to the unacceptable suffering inflicted on the innocent. He went on to affirm:

Whether in international or local conflicts, the overwhelming majority of the dead, injured, disabled are civilians and damages primarily affect the civilian infrastructure and the basic resources of subsistence of entire populations. Although incomplete and limited, statistical data provide sufficient information to tell the story of inadmissible and useless suffering and demonstrate that the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law often are not respected.³⁷

We can therefore see that Mary's presence in the Gospel is *not* limited to spiritual consolation; it becomes a model of solidarity that inspires concrete moral action. Her journey to Elizabeth was not passive companionship but an act of urgent, loving response. In this light, Mary does not only stand with mothers in Gaza; she also beckons those of us who witness their suffering to act. As expressed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in an Advent sermon delivered on December 17, 1933, in London, her Magnificat is not a lullaby. It is a revolutionary hymn:

It is not the gentle, sweet, dreamy Mary that we so often see portrayed in pictures, but the passionate, powerful, proud, enthusiastic Mary, who speaks here. None of the sweet, sugary, or childish tones that we find so often in our Christmas hymns, but a hard, strong, uncompromising song of bringing down rulers from their thrones and humbling the lords of this world, of God's power and of the powerlessness of men. These are the tones of the prophetic women of the Old Testament: Deborah, Judith, Miriam, coming alive in the mouth of Mary.³⁸

If Mary could sing of a world reordered by divine justice, then those who honour her must help bring about the justice she proclaims. Her voice joins the cries of women in Gaza, calling others to listen, to respond, and to raise up the lowly with practical compassion. Mary's song, first sung in occupied Judea, still matters, sung by mothers from Bethlehem to Gaza, and in every place where life is born against the odds. Pope Paul VI also recognised in her song a

37 Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi, *Statement by the Holy See to the United Nations on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons which may be deemed to be Excessively Injurious or to have Indiscriminate Effects*, Geneva, 10 November 2014, https://press.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/2014/documents/rc-seg-st-20141110_tomasi-residuati-bellici-esplosivi_en.html, (Accessed 27/4/25).

38 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'My Soul Praises the Lord', Sermon given on the Third Sunday in Advent, December 17, 1933, <https://livingbulwark.net/wp-content/bulwark/december2014p20.htm>, (Accessed 1/5/25).

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Mary who was ‘far from being a timidly submissive woman’, and that women would recognise a woman of strength, who experienced poverty and suffering and who proclaimed that God ‘vindicates the humble and the oppressed, and removes the powerful people of this world from their privileged positions’.³⁹ As expressed by Elizabeth A. Johnson, her song ‘rings with support for women in the struggle ... against racism, classism, heterosexism, and all other demeaning injustice.’⁴⁰

Christmas, as Mary first knew it, was not wrapped in comfort but in hardship, a reality that echoes in the words of Plestia Alaqad, who records in her 2023 diary that Palestinian houses

where people had enjoyed the cosiness of the season have turned into cold tents full of scraps of their possessions. The people ... are getting killed. Christians who would be celebrating Christmas ... now find themselves trapped in the churches that should be lit up with lights and joy and song. The sounds of fireworks and celebration have turned into the sounds of airstrikes and bombs. The fathers who would be holding bags full of gifts for their children are instead holding bags full of their children’s limbs. The happiness in the air, this December, has become sadness and grief.⁴¹

Her words remind us that, for many, Christmas is not a time of feasting but of fasting from safety, joy, and even hope itself. As many celebrate the traditions that Christmas brings, ‘[what] is clear is that we do not really celebrate Christmas by giving presents, by putting up a Christmas tree, by making our home as cosy as possible or by other touching customs carried on with a mildly sceptical frame of mind.’⁴² For Karl Rahner, Christmas is not something we just commemorate once a year; it is a mystery to live with and to reflect upon, continually drawing us into a deeper understanding of the divine in our world. The celebration is less about a past event and more about how that event transforms the present reality and our ongoing relationship with God.⁴³ Mary’s *fiat* illustrates the openness to the divine that Rahner sees as essential to understanding the ongoing presence of Christ in the world.

Just as Christ’s birth is not a static event but an ever-present reality, Mary’s role is not confined to the past. We also celebrate

39 Pope Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, 1974, n. 37.

40 in *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, (Continuum, 2006), p. 271.

41 Plestia Alaqad, *The Eyes of Gaza A Diary of Resilience*, (Macmillan, 2025), p. 125.

42 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Vol. III. The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, Trans Karl –H and Boniface Kruger, (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), p. 24.

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 24 – 34.

this Jewish mother of Jesus, shaped into the Theotokos - the Mother of God - a title that has both honoured and perhaps, obscured her. We should read into the biblical gaps to remember her historical life, to appreciate her deeply human example of strength and resilience and allow those biblical silences to speak to us of her. In doing so, we recognise the strength and dignity of women facing similar struggles in our world, those who are part of a new, 'created population, the "forgotten victims of war" that the civilised world has totally [forgotten] about.'⁴⁴ Their stories, like hers, demand to be heard.⁴⁵ As Luke's Gospel reminds us, Mary is the one who 'kept all these things and pondered them in her heart' (Luke 2:19), an image of contemplative resistance and maternal courage. In this light, Mary stands with mothers in Gaza and beckons those of us who witness their suffering to act. The Christian imperative is clear: to offer not only prayerful remembrance but material, medical, and political support to those in need, and to let Mary's example inspire the compassion, haste, and practical love our faith demands. Outrage alone, at what we see, hear and read reported from Gaza and elsewhere, is not enough; our faith calls us to *transform* that outrage into action. A Marian-inspired response could include supporting organisations providing healthcare in conflict zones; advocating for conflict resolution in accordance with Catholic Social Teaching and international humanitarian law; and creating safe spaces for women both locally and globally, offering pastoral care and trauma-informed support to mothers who have suffered birth trauma, displacement, or violence.

In December 2023, Pope Francis recited a prayer for the traditional Act of Veneration of Mary Immaculate in Rome's Piazza di Spagna, which gave voice to the often-silenced grief of mothers around the world - be they from Gaza or Ukraine, in hospital wards or refugee boats - whose suffering and courage mirror that of Mary beneath the cross. I reproduce here the translation published by *L'Osservatore Romano*:⁴⁶

44 Adra A, Saad M., 'Maternal Mortality among Refugees and in Zones of Conflict', *Donald School Journal of Ultrasound in Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, Vol.14, Issue 1, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.5005/jp-journals-10009-1612>.

45 Amid ongoing bombardment and uncertainty in Gaza, journalist Plestia Alaqad documented her efforts to communicate with the outside world, determined to bear witness to the unfolding humanitarian crisis despite the psychological toll. Alaqad recounts how she gave two interviews to international news channels, aware that internet access could vanish at any moment. While initially energised by the opportunity to speak live on air, she later describes feeling largely numb and emotionally overwhelmed, but that she wants 'my voice to be heard.' Plestia Alaqad, *The Eyes of Gaza A Diary of Resilience*, (Macmillan, 2025), p. 36.

46 'For mothers who weep for their children killed by war and terrorism', *L'Osservatore Romano*, 15 December 2023, <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/2023-12/ing-050/for-mothers-who-weep-for-their-children-killed-by-war-and-terror.html>, (Accessed 29/4/25).

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Immaculate Virgin!

We come to you with hearts divided between hope and anguish.

We need you, our Mother!

But above all, we want to thank you,

because in silence, which is your style, you watch over this city
that today covers you with flowers to express their love.

In silence, day and night, you watch over us:

over families, with their joys and worries — you know them well;

over study and work places; over institutions and public offices;

over hospitals and nursing homes; over prisons; over those who

live on the streets;

over parishes and all the communities of the Church of Rome.

Thank you for your discreet and constant presence

that gives us comfort and hope.

You know we need you, Mother,

because you are the Immaculate Conception.

Your person, the fact itself that you exist,

reminds us that evil has neither the first nor the last word;

that our destiny is not death but life,

not hatred but fraternity, not conflict but harmony,

not war but peace.

Looking at you, we feel confirmed in this faith

that is tested dearly by events.

And you, Mother, turn your eyes of mercy

on all the people oppressed by injustice and poverty,

tried by war; Mother, look on the martyred Ukrainian people,

the Palestinian people and the Israeli people,

plunged in a spiral of violence.

Today, holy Mother, we bring here, under your gaze,

many mothers who, as happened to you, are filled with sorrow.

The mothers who weep for their children killed by war and
terrorism.

The mothers who watch them leave on journeys of desperate hope.

And also the mothers who try to free them from the bonds of
addiction,

and those who watch over them through long and difficult illnesses.

Today, Mary, as a woman, we need you

to entrust to you every woman who has suffered violence,

and those who are still victims of violence,

in this city, in Italy and in every part of the world.

You know them one by one; you know their faces.

We beg you to dry their tears and those of their dear ones.

And help us to embark on a path of education and purification,

recognizing and countering the violence that lurks

in our hearts and in our minds,

asking God to deliver us from it.
Show us once again, O Mother, the path of conversion,
for there is no peace without pardon,
and there is no pardon without repentance.
The world changes if hearts change;
and everyone must say: beginning with mine.
But only God can change the human heart
with his grace, the grace in which you, Mary,
were immersed from the first instant.
The grace of Jesus Christ, Our Lord,
whom you generated in your flesh,
who died and rose for us, and to whom you always direct us.
He is salvation for every person, and for the world.
Come, Lord Jesus!
May your kingdom of love, justice and peace come!
Amen.

The Redemption of Sunday

Patrick H. Daly

It is fair to say that since the third Millennium opened we are living through the twilight of the Christian Sunday. The things and customs that formed the wallpaper of all our lives are fading beyond recognition or recall. We have experienced the ebb tide of much that provided colour and variety in the Catholic countries of the EU: priests in soutanes, nuns' habits, fish on Friday, foreheads with blotches of ash on the first day of Lent, and at an alarming rate, the Lord's Day. Observance of the third commandment of the Decalogue, not least since Covid, is no longer something one assumes one's neighbours keep. Sunday is for many just like any other day. The cultural, religious and social factors which hitherto defined the uniqueness of Sunday no longer apply.

And yet, as the second quarter of the twenty-first century beckons, serious attempts are being made to redeem Sunday. And one of the principal agents of that rescue effort is the European Commission. There is every reason to believe that Ursula von der Leyen is responding positively to the gentle lobbying of the *European Sunday Alliance*. She made it clear that one of the flagship policies that she hopes will define her second presidency of the EU Commission will be restoration of the unique character of the seventh day, albeit not primarily so that the divine will be deferred to through keeping the Third Commandment.

It is frequently forgotten that the Sabbath/Sunday is a gift from God to his people. It is designed primarily as a day of rest. A loving deity extends compassion to his hard-working creatures. The God who laboured for six days in creating the universe gave himself a day of rest. The seventh day on which rest, by divine precept, is mandatory is an acknowledgement of the fact that *homo sapiens*, ever since the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, is defined by her/his work. Brendan Behan may have claimed that "work is the curse of the drinking classes" but for most of us – responding to the question "what do you do?" – we identify ourselves (and profile our social usefulness) by our job/profession/calling, all of which involve work.

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THE REDEMPTION OF SUNDAY

The Maynooth Catechism insisted that on the sabbath we refrain from “servile” work. The concept makes us uneasy today, it is more than a little *démodé*. Yet it does recognise fatigue, tedium and physical claims on both body and psyche that hard work makes. Adam, the first human, was earning his living by the sweat of his brow. God recognised that work made huge demands on his creatures. The quality of the work that lay ahead of him in addition to the overall well-being of *homo sapiens* depended on a sustained period of rest. The seventh day, the Sabbath/Sunday provided that rest in the Judeo-Christian world. The world of twenty-four hour consumption, the permanently open online shopping mall, the flexible working schedule of the many who hold down two jobs, all combine to undermine the seventh day and erode completely its uniqueness.

Concern about the sabbath may be insignificant compared with trepidation about climate deterioration, global warming and the unprecedented migratory flux across our continent, yet there is a growing sense of alarm at the erosion of our Sunday. An increasing number of EU citizens are becoming vocal in their desire to protect Sunday. And they are not all churchgoers.

One of the most long-lasting civic society organisations in Europe is the *European Sunday Alliance*. It is an ecumenical civic society organisation. Friday may be the day of religious observance and rest for Muslims, Saturday is the Jewish Sabbath, and Sunday is the Christian holy day, the day Jesus rose from the dead. But the selection of Sunday as the weekly day of rest is not a confessional option: tradition and the long history behind it make Sunday the sensible and logical choice.

The *European Sunday Alliance* campaign is focused on the right and the need for the working woman and man to rest from their labours. This right is enshrined in Article 31 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. The right to worship or to make “time for God” is a secondary consideration, but the priority this civic society action sets is very much consonant with God’s will and wish for human welfare. Worship is considered as a legitimate recreational activity which stimulates and enhances mental health, on the same level as volunteering, leisure and sport. It too is considered by the *European Sunday Alliance* as a prerequisite for a healthy work-life balance.

There is every reason to believe that Ursula Von der Leyen is listening. She too wants to protect Sunday and will derive some comfort that its support of and furtherance of the goals of *Sunday Alliance* has been a COMECE (Commission of Bishops’ Conferences of the EU) priority for many years. Having Europe’s Catholic bishops behind her is no inconsiderable boon. Her

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motivation – and it is important to remember that in addition to being a politician of unusual dexterity, Frau von der Leyen is a medical doctor – is to protect the health of the working man/woman. This humanitarian concern opens an opportunity to (re) secure the place the Christian believes God should have in any altered profile of the contemporary Sunday.

It is pertinent to any reclamation of Sunday as Christians understand it that for most of recent human history there has been the recognition that the weekly day of rest is *commonly* enjoyed. We all take our rest *together*. The *European Sunday Alliance* insist that the common day of rest be Sunday – a work-free Sunday – and that it involve *synchronised quality resting time*. There is an open admission that *homo sapiens* is a social/rational animal, and the very fact that this quality resting time is enjoyed together is conducive to the mental health essential to human happiness and to fruitful productivity. There is a strong echo of God's words to Eve and Adam. There is nothing *contrary* to biblical tradition nor to Jesus's attitude to sabbath-day observance.

The Sunday roast, the Sunday hiking/walking clubs, the matinées at the Albert Hall or the Haus am Ring, the family outings to the seaside are escape hatches from work profoundly rooted in our Western culture. There has always been the acknowledgement that the rest and recreation of the many has to be supported by the work of the few: the performers at the theatre or the opera, those who operate the amusements in the Prater, the ice-cream merchants on the pier at Knokke-Heist or Bundoran, the bus/train drivers etc. are all working on a Sunday. But sometimes they forget the quality of their service to the common, shared day of rest. Sunday work is their contribution to the well-being of the majority of their fellow-citizens.

Some may claim that the Catholic bishops – and COMECE is an active partner and articulate protagonist of the *European Sunday Alliance* – are piggybacking on a civic society initiative to pursue religious ends and protect confessional interests. Pope Paul VI in making the Saturday vigil Mass fulfil the Sunday obligation for Catholics and the end of the 60's already loosened the strictures on the implementation of the Third Commandment. Compulsory sabbath observance and the uniqueness of Sunday are seriously challenged by the way most of us are compelled to live in the global village. This applies in particular to Catholic families with young children, especially with sporting activities on Sunday morning.

The *European Sunday Alliance* emphasise that the *quantity* of commonly enjoyed free time – work-free – must have a vertical as well as a horizontal dimension: it must have *quality* and safeguards must be taken to provide that. Time must not be wasted. Survey

after survey conducted in the EU over recent decades suggest an incremental increase in the number of people suffering from loneliness. This may be the fruit of the inverse demographic pyramid. Only children, divorced couples or partners, the number of EU younger citizens living abroad and, thus, at a distance from their ageing parents all contribute to the loneliness quotient.

The quality of time on people's hands could be enhanced by visiting the solitary elderly or marginalised (those to whom Pope Francis drew our attention). The negative impact of loneliness could thus be softened. A commonly shared Sunday, free of the pressures of work and the fatigue it brings, would free up more of us to devote attention and time to others. Christian virtue and evangelical counsels prosper under the radar in a more relaxed and less pressurised environment.

This gentle drift towards the reclamation of the sabbath, of Sunday as a commonly shared day of rest, even if viewed purely in terms of social capital and an indispensable contribution to public health, can also be welcomed by the Church as to its advantage. The central preoccupation of the late Canon Harley, PP at St. Lawrence's, Kilmacud, was to get the carpark empty after the 10.00 Sunday Mass so as to make space for the cars coming to the 11.00. That is no longer a worry for the Irish PP. Fewer Sunday Masses, far fewer people, but more space and, if the *European Sunday Alliance* has its way, more *quality* time to be availed of for creative use.

The Sunday Mass can now become more of an *event*: an unhurried, well-constructed and carefully delivered homily; congregational singing, prayerful liturgy and, perhaps a hitherto neglected added value to Sunday Mass, tea & coffee in the parish hall. There is more social bonding in a smaller congregation, fewer Masses mean the same people are obliged to attend the same Mass together, and community solidarity becomes an incremental gain.

The *European Sunday Alliance*, even once we acknowledge its fundamentally humanitarian aim and the secular context in which it seeks to operate, is unwittingly promoting the classical Christian understanding of the sabbath and opening up realistic possibilities of reclaiming Sunday as a unique, commonly shared day of rest, which creates an ocean of leisure time during which Christians can opt to gather for worship.

Sunday is under threat. Many of the values it once embraced and the freedoms sabbatarian observance protected are no longer cherished by mainstream society today. Religious practice or attendance at Sunday liturgy has become an optional extra regarding which most people stay tight-lipped. But with Sunday trading, the professionalization of sports of all kinds – even horse

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racing – those who might wish to attend church on Sunday are prevented from doing so by employers who make no concession to the religious obligations of their employees: this applies to people in the service sector and in the caring professions. The use to which COMECE applies its soft power and the support it gives to the *European Sunday Alliance* is a welcome sideways-on exercise in political pressure which deserves to be welcomed and saluted. “Remember that thou keep holy the sabbath day.”

One of the declared ambitions of the EU moving forward is preservation of Europe’s cultural patrimony. Not only are cathedrals, monasteries and episcopal palaces integral to that patrimony, so too is Sunday as a unique day of rest, recreation, abstinence from work, communal worship and prayer.

Priest as leader.

“The Priest as leader” is a somewhat neuralgic topic to address in contemporary Ireland, perhaps even throughout the contemporary western world. Why? Because there has been intense scrutiny of both priests and priesthood, as well as heightened, maybe even unreal, expectations from leadership. Therefore, to consider the priest as leader means acknowledging the challenging context in which the Church finds herself at present, as well as the complex reality that leadership involves in our society.

– +Alphonsus Cullinan (Ed.), *Priesthood in Ireland Today*, Mynooth: St. Paul’s Publishing, 2025, p. 85.

What are You Laughing at?

Humour in Preaching and Speaking

Chris Hayden

Humour is a wonderful gift. It is, by turns, a coping mechanism, a social lubricant, a means of maintaining or establishing perspective, a way of deflating human pretension and pomp. Humourlessness, in contrast, is a burden. It locks us up in our immediate concerns, it robs us of flexibility when dealing with limitations in ourselves and others. Quite rightly did Chesterton remark, in his classic work, *Orthodoxy*, that angels can fly because they take themselves lightly, whereas Satan fell by the force of his own gravity. There is, of course, a place for proper gravity, and neither faith nor good sense would indicate that we be in permanent stand-up-comedian mode. But to lack humour is a real impoverishment, and if sarcasm is the poorest, lowest form of wit, then perhaps the highest is the self-deprecating kind. Indeed, someone once coined an extra beatitude: ‘Blessed are those who have learned to laugh at themselves; they shall not want for entertainment.’

Like practically any gift, humour can be abused; it can be used in a careless or cruel way. Even when carelessness or cruelty are not intended, humour can degenerate. St Francis de Sales cautioned against such degeneration: ‘Only beware of letting this seemly mirth go too far, till it becomes ridicule. Ridicule excites mirth at the expense of one’s neighbour; seemly mirth and playful fun never lose sight of a trustful, kindly courtesy, which can wound no one.’¹ Humour can also be weaponized, used in a deliberately mischievous way. The social radical, Saul Alinsky, wrote that humour ‘is essential to the successful tactician, for the most potent weapons known to mankind are satire and ridicule.’² While preachers and catechists are – hopefully – not in the business of using humour in a cruel or hurtful way, they will do well to be mindful that humour can offend or even scandalize. If we find

1 *Introduction to the Devout Life*, III, xxvii.

2 *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 75.

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ourselves wondering whether a humorous story or anecdote might be a little close to the bone for our congregation, a charitable and prudent approach might be, 'If in doubt, leave it out.' The same caution, incidentally, can be applied to our Irish national pastime of 'slagging,' in which the boundary between good humour and mean-spiritedness is easily crossed.

I have occasionally felt a touch of depression on leafing through scholarly theological treatments of humour. They tend to be consummately dull, sometimes to the point of being unintentionally hilarious. Is there humour in the Bible? In the Gospels? Truthfully, the sacred pages were not penned by a P.G. Wodehouse of late antiquity, and there is little enough material that would tick the most obvious box – which is to say, material that makes the reader laugh. There is a body of scholarly commentary on humour and irony in the Gospels, but again, I am somewhat sceptical of it. It is one thing to ponder *why* something is funny (on which, more in a moment); but it's quite another thing to adduce a plethora of academic and literary devices in order to demonstrate *that* something is funny. Not to be excessively sceptical: there are passages in the Bible that, with a little scholarly poking and prodding, can reveal an unexpected element of comedy. But humour that needs to be carefully signalled as such is hardly all that different to the third-rate comedian who signals to his audience that it's time to laugh. Taking great pains to point out the humour allegedly hiding within the deep structure of a biblical passage seems to me to be a close cousin of the (albeit deliberately funny) notion that Wagner's music is not as bad as it sounds.

From a homiletic or catechetical point of view, the most insightful comments I have come across are in an essay by Reinhold Niebuhr, entitled 'Humour and Faith.'³ Niebuhr begins with the frank acknowledgment that the Bible contains little mention of laughter (there is only one instance of divine laughter in the entire Bible, and that is the laughter of scorn – 'He who sits in the heavens laughs' [Ps 2:4]). 'Why is it,' Niebuhr asks, 'that Scriptural literature, though filled with rejoicings and songs of praise, is not particularly distinguished for the expression of laughter?' Niebuhr answers this question – he answers it excellently – by considering the relationship between humour and faith. Both humour and faith deal with incongruity. Humour deals with relatively minor incongruities, such as the loss of an affected pomp and dignity to an unnoticed banana skin, or the endless human capacity for folly. Faith deals with major incongruities, such as contingency, tragedy and death.

3 Robert McAfee Brown, ed., *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 49-60.

WHAT ARE YOU LAUGHING AT?

Humour can help us cope with life's incongruities, but it is powerless to resolve them. Such resolution is the task of faith. When humour is over-burdened, when it is asked to bear a greater weight of meaning than it is able for, it becomes dark and sardonic. One need only think of the kind of jaded, jaundiced contemporary comedian for whom there is no ultimate meaning, for whom it is laughter 'all the way down.' Niebuhr notes: 'We laugh cheerfully at the incongruities on the surface of life; but if we have no other resource but humour to deal with those which reach below the surface, our laughter becomes an expression of our sense of the meaninglessness of life.'⁴

Søren Kierkegaard's famous parable of the clown is a brilliant illustration of the hazard associated with being too ready to see the funny side of things. A fire breaks out in a theatre. The clown comes out on stage to sound the alarm. The audience, believing this to be part of his act, laugh. The more intense the clown's protestations, the louder they laugh. Soon, it is too late to escape, and they all die laughing. Niebuhr again: 'If we persist in laughter when dealing with the final problem of human existence, when we turn life into a comedy we also reduce it to meaninglessness.' These cautions are extremely helpful in the attempt to describe the possible role and limits of humour in a faith context. They do not for a moment proscribe humour, or imply that it has no place in such a context. Rather, they acknowledge that humour can help us to transcend our circumstances, while reminding us that it is unable to offer the kind of resolution that is found only in the Transcendent:

Insofar as the sense of humour is a recognition of incongruity, it is more profound than any philosophy which seeks to devour incongruity in reason. But the sense of humour remains healthy only when it deals with immediate issues and faces the obvious and surface irrationalities. It must move toward faith or sink into despair when the ultimate issues are raised. That is why there is laughter in the vestibule of the temple, the echo of laughter in the temple itself, but only faith and prayer, and no laughter, in the holy of holies.⁵

Humour, then, does its best work when it nudges us towards faith, when it enables us to persevere through life's incongruities in the anticipation of a resolution of even the most tortured of them. This consideration does not totally instrumentalize humour, pressing it into the service of an ulterior agenda and rendering it dull in the process. Humour – decent, thoughtful, light-hearted, clever, kindly

4 *The Essential Niebuhr*, 51.

5 *Ibid.*, 59-60.

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humour – works anyway. It loses nothing of its own if it points us towards the higher purpose, the incongruity-resolving power, of faith.

It may be helpful to distinguish between good humour as a trait, and the deliberate use of humour in speaking. Many of the saints have been people of joyful good humour. An obvious example is St Thomas More, who was noted for his light-heartedness and wit. Likewise, St Philip Neri, who is popularly regarded as the patron saint of laughter and joy. A less obvious example could be St John of the Cross who, while virtually synonymous with the ‘dark nights’ of soul and spirit, was a joyful, genial person whose good-humoured company was sought out by his contemporaries. No amount of wise-cracking wit can make up for a deficiency in genuine affability and good humour, and if we opt, in our homiletic or evangelistic efforts, to use humour in a deliberate, intentional way, this poses a challenge to us: Are we merely joking about, or are we genuinely striving to live, personally, the injunction of St Paul, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice’ (Phil 4:4)? We will do well to guard against falling into the stereotype of the sad clown.

WHAT ARE YOU LAUGHING AT? THE USES OF HUMOUR

Concretely, then, how might the use of humour help in preaching? For an answer, we could go right back to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, which points to three fundamental elements of a communications situation: the credibility and effectiveness of the speaker (*ethos*); the need to reach, to move, to influence the audience (*pathos*), and the topic itself (*logos*).⁶ Judicious use of humour can act at the level of *ethos*, by presenting the speaker as engaging and warm; it can act at the level of *pathos*, by ‘softening up’ the audience; and it can act at the level of *logos* by shedding light on the topic at hand. I would suggest that we be most restrained in using humour to ingratiate ourselves with our audience. There could be a certain homiletic demagoguery in trying too hard to move one’s congregation by force of wit. Conversely, trying too hard to be funny could make the preacher appear weak and needy. ‘Will it show me to be warm and approachable?’ is not the best question to bring to a funny story or anecdote we are considering using in a homily. ‘Will it entertain my congregation?’ is not much better. Well-chosen humour will, in all likelihood, do a bit of both; but if so, let that be a happy side-effect rather than something directly intended. Far better to ask: ‘Will this humorous story help to

6 See, for example, *Rhetoric*, Book I, part 2 – at <https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.1.i.html>.

clarify, to illustrate?’ ‘Will it facilitate insight?’ Homiletic humour is at its best when it is doing just that.

Let us, at last, move from unfunny theorizing to (hopefully at least slightly) funny application. A story I have found effective in wedding homilies tells of a young couple, now husband and wife, walking down the aisle at the end of the ceremony. She says to him, ‘Well? Did you hear all the priest said?’ ‘Of course, darling he replies. ‘So,’ she persists, ‘You heard what he said about the two becoming one in marriage?’ ‘Yes, my love,’ he answers, adoringly, ‘every word of it!’ ‘Well just so you know,’ she says, ‘from now on, *I’m* the one.’

This story has, as I’ve indicated, been road-tested, and it generally elicits laughter. But as I’ve also indicated, that is a happy side-effect rather than the specific purpose of the story. The purpose of the story, the light it sheds, can be elaborated on once it has been told. *Once it has been told*, mind you: there is no better way of deflating a funny story than over-introducing it, or attempting to explain it in advance.

Having told it, what might one go on to say about that story? Why is it funny and what light does it shed on the reality of marriage? In the deepest sense, it is a ‘true’ story, and it is that in at least two ways. First, the bride was quite right: from now on, for her husband, she is the one. There is no other for him from this day forth. But what she left out was that from now on, for her, her husband is the one. There is no other for her from this day forth. A second truth the story casts light on is that this is not easy. Two lives do not get indissolubly joined together without some drama. This social and psychological truth has been prosaically expressed by a family systems psychologist: ‘A man and a woman are to leave their parents and form a new unit. Two people join together and become one. But as anyone in a modern marriage knows, the question is always which one.’⁷

‘Why is this funny?’ That is a most useful question to bring to a humorous story (again, once it has been told!); it is the bridge between the laughter and the learning. If I, in my homiletic preparation, have figured out what a story teaches, or illustrates, then I can share that insight with my hearers. In this way the humour, in addition to being honest fun, becomes a vehicle for learning and insight. If funny stories are funny for a reason, it is usually because of what they unmask and debunk. If they help to unmask and debunk some of our human foibles and nonsense, then let’s use them as well as we can to that effect.

7 Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Durham NC: Alban Institute, 1993), 27.

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OF ELEPHANTS, AIRPLANES AND LOBSTERS: CATECHETICAL HUMOUR

Who would not warm to the Loving Elephant? She was walking along beside a river, her moularge heart brimming over with love for all God's creation. When she noticed an ostrich standing up from its nest and making its way down to the river, the Loving Elephant felt a frisson of alarm at the sight of an exposed ostrich egg. It might be stolen by a predator. It might heat up too much, or even crack, in the afternoon sun. What to do? The Loving Elephant – out of sheer love – trundled over and sat on the egg in order to keep it safe until the mother-ostrich's return. And that, of course, was the end of that egg.

As for the theological significance of the episode, the Loving Elephant, for all her love, lacked the virtue of prudence. She offers the homilist an admirable introduction to the topic of the Cardinal Virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, which put flesh and blood on our efforts to live a life of faith, hope and charity. We laugh (those of us who permit ourselves laughter at the thought of a crushed ostrich egg) at the elephant's well-intentioned deed, but a little homiletic nudge will help us to enter the more serious territory of the virtues. Love on its own, love without reference to value, can cease to be love. 'Hashtag-be-nice' is utterly inadequate as moral guidance. We need to ponder, prudently, how we love in practice. Which is to say that our expressions of love need to be based on prudential decisions.

Some humorous anecdotes really can hold up a mirror to our foible-ridden attempts at discipleship. Two priests are travelling together and their airplane gets into difficulty. Under the circumstances, they deem it prudent (yes, that virtue!) to make their confessions to each other. And so, two very full, frank confessions are celebrated on the stricken aircraft. Moments after the second absolution has been imparted, the captain makes an announcement: 'Ladies and gentlemen, the news from the flight deck is good. We have full control of the aircraft, and we have been cleared for a normal landing shortly.' A dense, pregnant silence descends upon the two priest-companions, and after a moment one of them says, 'Isn't it really amazing how we tend to exaggerate when we're feeling a bit stressed?'

The 'lesson' here hardly needs spelling out, yet there can be something particularly instructive about stating the obvious. Disciples find it difficult to live *sub specie aeternitatis*. We do it in fits and starts and in moments of crisis. That bashful priest reminds us that that it can take some stress to get us to focus on matters of ultimate concern. That reminder could be used as a prompt: Why wait? Why put off taking God seriously? Our faith is a gift to be

lived, not a fire service to be called on in an emergency.

Not quite as adept as the bashful priest at spotting his own sin, was the man who was driving along a busy motorway when he received a call from his wife, who wanted to let him know about a news item she had just heard. A deranged motorist was driving against the traffic, on the wrong side of the motorway her husband was on. ‘*One* deranged driver?’ – her husband yelled – ‘there are *hundreds* of them!’

Here, again, the ‘why-is-it-funny’ diagnostic tool is useful. Applied to this story, that question can help us to move from the obvious irony of the situation, to a consideration of how we reflexively and spontaneously judge ourselves to be right and others to be wrong. Our default mode is that others are at fault. Sometimes – often? – we need to exit that mode in order to see reality as it is; in order to see ourselves as we are.

Seeing others in a poorer light than is warranted may not be only a personal failing; it can also be a socially or culturally sanctioned one. Irish people are notorious – at least in our own eyes – for the exercise of that dubious charity that consists in keeping other people’s feet on the ground. Let nobody around us develop any notions above his or her station; but should that happen, we are ready and willing to disabuse them of same. An Irishman was walking along a pier, carrying a bucketful of lobsters. An Englishman pointed out to him that the water level in the bucket was a little on the low side, and that if it wasn’t topped up, there was a risk that some of the lobsters would dry out and be useless for the table. ‘Well now,’ said the Irishman, ‘what you need to realize is that these are *Irish* lobsters, and if one of them gets too close to the top, the others will pull him back down. So there’s no chance, at all, at all, of any of them drying out.’

Need we ask why this homiletic gem is funny? Well, let’s ask anyway. It reminds us – particularly those of us who are Irish – of our low tolerance for high achievement (in others, that is). In addition, the explanatory comments of the lobster-bearer highlight how easy it can be to rationalize the practice of taking people down a peg or two. The lobsters were to be kept moist by being brought low; our neighbours, colleagues and friends will *benefit* by our blunt honesty. Why should we need to mend our ways or temper our speech when we’re simply doing others a favour? It turns out that that lobsterman comes bearing not just a pail of seafood, but a fine catechesis on the third chapter of the letter of Saint James. For good measure, he invites us to a critical appraisal of what our culture regards as normal and socially acceptable.

If the previous story takes aim at our tendency to take aim at others, in order to preserve them from vanity, another humorous

anecdote takes a more direct aim at our own vanity. But I will resist the temptation to over-introduce it, lest I deflate it, as per the earlier caution. A priest who had a well-deserved reputation for preaching long and boring homilies was more gifted in the area of charity than of rhetoric, and he had kindly offered to relieve a sick colleague by helping him with Masses. After his first celebration of Mass in his colleague's church, he complained to the sacristan: 'That was a very tiny congregation. Were people not informed that I was coming?' 'I don't think they were,' answered the sacristan, 'but word must have leaked out.'

If that kind priest's vanity and lack of self-awareness leave our mouths wide open with laughter, that is so that the truth of our own vanity can be gently brought to our awareness. We might also be invited to ponder the fact that while we may excel in some areas (such as the kindness of the visiting priest), we are bound to have blind spots in others. From hidden faults acquit us, O Lord! (cf. Psalm 19:13).

An Archbishop once announced a forthcoming visit to a parish from which he had heard some complaints about the authoritarian manner of the parish priest. The archbishop made it known that he would hear confessions during his visit. On the Sunday before the visit, the parish priest announced that His Grace would be hearing confessions, and that this should be regarded as a singular tribute to the parish. Furthermore, the priest added, given that the visiting confessor was so highly qualified both by his studies and his exalted office, he would be hearing only the confessions of those with mortal sins. The parish priest would be available for others, and he strongly urged all parishioners to take advantage of the opportunity for confession during the important visit. On the evening of the Archbishop's visit, there was a long queue outside the parish priest's confessional, whereas nobody went near the Archbishop.⁸ It would be very difficult for the latter to sustain the impression that the Parish Priest was an unapproachable curmudgeon.

While the details of this story hardly fit the personal experience of many parishioners, it is funny, it is relatable, because it shows the lengths to which we can go in order to manage impressions and save face. Most of our face-saving impression management is so subtle that we can engage in it without loss of face even in our own eyes, but this story could be used as an invitation to ponder how we – mostly but not always subtly – strive and contrive to look good. A slight economy with the truth, a hint of exaggeration, a barely-detectable change of tone, a meaningful silence – these are weapons in the arsenal of impression managers. They are our weapons. We are those soldiers.

8 Cf. Jean Sullivan, *Anticipate Every Goodbye* (Dublin: Veritas, 2000), 17.

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Not all humorous stories are invented. If truth is stranger than fiction, it is often funnier as well. When ecclesiological matters were being discussed at the Second Vatican Council, the topic of collegiality was hotly debated. The majority of the Council Fathers were in favour of more concrete expressions of collegiality, but there was some resistance. Cardinal Ottaviani was one of the conservative voices. His episcopal motto was *semper idem*, ‘always the same,’ and it would be hard to find a clearer, more terse statement of a conservative leaning. Ottaviani was also an exceptionally intelligent man, and he quite rightly pointed out that the sole biblical instance of collegiality, in which the College of Apostles acted as one, was the flight from Gethsemane. This was, of course, both witty and wise. The fact that the apostles acted in unison did make their action good. Unity is not an absolute value, and when it is unity in cowardice, or unity in any unvirtuous behaviour, it is no value at all.

We might make homiletic use of Ottaviani’s quip without having to get side-tracked by the ecclesiological issue of collegiality. The Church, we could point out, is not a democracy. The Gospel is not the result of a collegial discussion. The commandments are just that: commandments; not motions for debate. Not even unanimity can determine or change fundamental truths. As Saint Paul puts it, ‘Let God be true though every man a liar’ (Rom 3:4). It is wonderful to do good things, to do the right things, in unity, but it’s not the unity that makes them good and right.

NOW I GET IT: HUMOUR AND INSIGHT

Homiletic humour – assisted, perhaps, by a modicum of commentary – can help us to discern, to see more clearly. We should never take clarity of vision or of understanding for granted. An elderly bishop, whose mind and sight were both in decline, was preaching in his cathedral when a streaker ran in from the street. Naked as the day he was born, the man ran up and down the centre aisle. The bishop interrupted his homily to address the matter. ‘Young man,’ he said, ‘in this Cathedral, we do not run; we walk.’

This cautionary talk can serve to remind us that we should not be too quick to assume either that we have seen reality clearly, or that, having seen it, our interpretation of what we have seen is correct. A certain epistemological humility is called for, ‘for now we see, but ‘in a glass, darkly’ (1Cor 13:12). It may be worth adding that epistemological humility is not radical scepticism: let’s not forget the first words of Paul’s phrase, ‘for now we see...’

Seeing is not enough if our understanding of what we’ve seen is false. But sometimes, misinterpretation and misunderstanding can be entirely benevolent. A young seminarian once told his

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rector how he had been inspired by his elderly parish priest's way of praying, especially how the priest seemed to be wrapped in a contemplative silence as he celebrated the Mass. The seminarian had observed how the venerable old man, after vesting for Mass, would sit in the church for a long time, praying devoutly. Then, once he reached the sanctuary, he would stand in complete stillness for a few moments before ascending the steps to the altar, where he would pray silently yet again. After reading the Gospel he would sit for a further period of silent prayer. During the Eucharistic Prayer, his piety was most striking: after each genuflection, he would stand in complete stillness and recollection. After Holy Communion, another lengthy period of silence followed. And again, he would spend a long moment in silence just after imparting the final blessing. Once he had left the sanctuary, he would, yet again, sit in the church, praying for a long time.

As it happened, the seminary rector knew the elderly priest in question, and communicated this to him. The old priest laughed heartily, and he explained: 'I sit before Mass to rest my knees after the walk across the yard to the church. When I've managed to get as far as the steps at the sanctuary, I take a short break to ready myself for climbing them. Once I've made it to the altar, I've to pause to get my breath before I can say a thing. After the Gospel, I sit for a while to get motivated for all that standing through the rest of the Mass. I still manage – just about – to genuflect during the Eucharistic Prayer, but once I'm upright again I have to wait and let the knees settle before I continue. It's no surprise that after I've given out Holy Communion I need another break before I finish up. And I find that once I've given the final blessing and dismissal, I really need to pause for a bit before negotiating those blessed steps down off the sanctuary. By the time I'm back down in the body of the church, I need to sit for another while.'

The seminarian saw holiness. The elderly priest saw only his own infirmity. What might God's perspective be, as he worked through an old man's growing frailty? What might God's perspective be on our frailty, our sense of being burdened? In faith and trust, can we acknowledge that God does some of his best work in our infirmities and in those of others?

SEEING THE FUNNY SIDE: OBSERVATIONAL HUMOUR

Some very 'preachable' humour can be found not in stories or anecdotes, but through simple observation. Some years ago, a little niece of mine was visiting from her home in England. She was losing her baby teeth at the time, and the Tooth Fairy had been quite generous. Her current wobbly tooth would be the first one she lost while in Ireland, and she asked her father – my brother – what the

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Tooth Fairy's rate was in Ireland. She seemed pleased enough to hear that it was five euro per tooth, but after a moment's pause, she said, 'Hang on; what's the Euro-Sterling exchange rate?'

I'm not entirely sure if this was a case of being as shrewd as a serpent and as innocent as a dove (Mt 10:16), though it certainly includes both innocence and shrewdness. Was the Tooth Fairy knowingly being kept on life-support, for personal gain? Or was a child's computational intelligence outpacing her insight? It's ironic that our Lord's words can themselves be received with dove-like simplicity or with serpentine shrewdness. Let each one be his or her own judge, but if we're honest, the chances are that we will be able to identify moments when, in the living out of our faith, the serpent outsmarted the dove.

There is a kind of wry, self-directed, observational humour that, even if it never finds its way into a homily, can help us to keep our balance. I recall a conversation I once had with a parishioner. The man came into the sacristy one evening after Mass, and said: 'I see you have a leak, Father.' I felt a spontaneous surge of irritation, which I repressed, in one of those moments – and which of us hasn't experienced them! – when it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the presence of forbearance and the absence of moral courage. What I really wanted to say was, 'Leak? I have a leak? Should I call a urologist?' The leak, of course, was not in me but in the roof, and the solicitous parishioner had a plumber rather than a urologist in mind. I could also have said, if I hadn't been hamstrung by forbearance (or was it lack of moral courage?): 'The leak is not *mine*; it is *ours*; yes, *we* have a leak; the *parish* has a leak. That is the nature of parish plumbing issues – especially since the Second Vatican Council.'

There is, of course, a time for teaching ecclesiology and a time to refrain from teaching ecclesiology. That good man had no agenda other than to let me know that he had spotted a leak. That his ecclesiology was, well, leaky, should not have occasioned such an inner hissy-fit in his priest. But it did, and by the grace of God, on that occasion at least, I was able to deal with my stuff by poking fun at myself. If, in due course, something of the episode leaks into a homily, well and good; but even if that never happens, it's good to reflect on the value of injecting some humour into one's inner monologue.

CONCLUSION: KEEPING OUR BALANCE ON BLONDIN'S TIGHTROPE

Self-deprecation is one of the most effective means of deflating the ego and maintaining – or re-establishing – balance. One of my favourite 'prayers' is a self-deprecating commentary on original sin: 'Dear Lord, so far today I have been doing ok. I have not

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been nasty, greedy, grumpy, selfish or rude. I have not whined or complained. I have not eaten any chocolate, or charged anything on my credit card. But Lord, I will be getting out of bed in a moment, and I'm really going to need your help then.' I think this prayer is homiletic or catechetical humour at its very best: it conveys an important truth (that we are in constant need of God's help and mercy); and it does so in an entirely gentle and winning way.

A final story casts a sympathetic light on our difficulty with trust. Faith as assent to truths is all well and good, but living out that faith in a life of radical trust in God's providential care is another matter entirely. Charles Blondin, the nineteenth century tightrope walker, famously crossed the Niagra Falls on a rope suspended high above the river. He didn't merely walk across; he performed an array of acrobatic stunts on the rope. At one point, he asked the admiring crowd what they thought of his performance. They were wildly enthusiastic, and unanimous in the view that he was the greatest high wire artist of all time. Blondin then asked if they thought he could wheel a barrow across the falls, with a man sitting in it. The ecstatic crowd roared, 'Of course you can. You can do anything on that rope. You're the greatest!' 'Well then,' said Blondin, 'can I have a volunteer to sit in the wheelbarrow?' The crowd fell totally silent.

Faith gets into the wheelbarrow. It's not just a matter of 'Lord, Lord, we think you're wonderful' (cf. Mt 7:21); faith is willing to act, to risk, to be vulnerable. But there is a big difference – and, for most of us, a long journey – between our cheering God on, and allowing God to lead us on. The task of discipleship is about learning to put more and more of our weight in the barrow, and allowing Providence to carry us out over the abyss. To affirm this is hardly to indulge in poetic licence: we must all, sooner or later, face the abyss of death, and then, there will be nothing to carry us other than Providence. Blessed are those who have practised getting in the barrow before that last sortie.

It is good to collect and file humorous stories, illustrations and anecdotes. And it is good to bring questions to bear: 'Why is this funny? What light does it shed on the human condition? How might it be used in preaching and teaching the truths of our faith?' *Gaudium et Spes* tells us that it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of the human person becomes clear.⁹ The *gaudium* of some well-placed humour can bring us greater clarity, and it can open hearts to the *spes*, the hope that is ours as believers.

9 *Gaudium et Spes*, 22; quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 359.

The Image of a Compromised God?

Rethinking Creation Between an Atheist, a Pope and a Dominican

Patrick Murphy

INTRODUCTION

On an August Sunday morning, I slipped quietly into a Dublin city-centre church, curious to experience its liturgy for the first time. Yet scarcely five minutes into the Mass, the visiting celebrant remarked almost casually that here, in this place of “faith and reason,” there was no need to believe in “the silliness of a literal creation.” Here was a priest who freely affirmed the resurrection, the virgin birth, and the very existence of God, yet dismissed the possibility that the same God could create directly.

Weeks later, I found myself at Trinity College Dublin for the biennial congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology. The opening lecture asked whether we had forgotten God the Creator. Listening, I wondered if part of the reason we have forgotten is embarrassment or a lack of awe before an almost-powerful Creator. The modern theological imagination sometimes portrays God as strangely impotent – needing to piggyback on an unguided mechanism called evolution, a process driven by death and the loveless survival of the fittest.

The third story is more personal. Two weeks later, as a hospital chaplain, I sat with a patient who began reminiscing about a conversation his granddaughter had. She had asked, “Who made the world?” and was told she could hear either the scientific answer, or the God answer. The “scientific” version traced life’s emergence through billions – not millions – of years of evolutionary processes. The child thought a moment, then replied, “Hmm... tell me the God story.” We spoke for some time about the issue – I could see that he was conflicted and had thought much about the subject.

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These three encounters – at Mass, at a theology conference, and at a hospital bedside – exposed for me how deeply theistic evolution has shaped the imagination of our time, often leaving Christians with a compromised God. The embarrassment of affirming direct creation, the hesitation of theologians to speak clearly, and the uncertainty felt by ordinary believers all point to a crisis both pastoral and intellectual.

And the world is watching. In 1996, Pope John Paul II addressed the Pontifical Academy of Sciences.¹ He carefully acknowledged that evolutionary theory had become “more than a hypothesis” in scientific circles but also reminded his audience that science alone could not account for everything. In particular, he insisted that while the human body may have its origin in pre-existing living matter, the spiritual soul is created directly by God. At some undefined moment in humanity’s emergence, God breathed into His creature the spiritual dimension that makes us truly human. Richard Dawkins pounced on this as a gift.² He mocked the very idea of God “intervening” in an evolutionary chain to inject a soul into an animal. “When? A million years ago? Two million?”³ For Dawkins, the concept of a sudden injection was absurd.

WHAT IS THEISTIC EVOLUTION?

Theistic evolution is commonly defined as the belief that God is the Creator, but that He created through the mechanisms of mutation, natural selection, and survival of the fittest. In this view, God works invisibly behind blind evolutionary processes, guiding them toward His purposes. At some undefined moment, God is said to have imparted a soul to an evolved hominid, thereby producing the first true human being. The appeal of this position is easy to grasp. It appears to make peace between faith and science, allowing Christians to affirm modern biology while also maintaining belief in God. It avoids direct conflict with the scientific establishment, providing a way for believers to appear intellectually respectable. And it resonates with a pastoral instinct: the desire to reassure young people that science and religion are not at war.

Yet beneath this conciliatory surface lie serious problems. Theistic evolution is not demanded by science, and it undermines

1 John Paul II, “Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences.” *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, Vol 72, No. 4 (Dec. 1997), pp. 381-383, (The University of Chicago Press), 383.

2 Famous atheist, British evolutionary biologist, and author of *The God Delusion* (2006).

3 Richard Dawkins, “The Pope’s Message on Evolution and Four Commentaries III. Obscurantism to the Rescue.” *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, Vol 72, No. 4 (Dec. 1997), pp. 397-399, (The University of Chicago Press).

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theology. It presents an image of a God who is compromised and diminished: a God who cannot or will not create directly but must depend on blind processes of death and struggle. It offers peace at the price of coherence, and reassurance at the *price of truth*.

SCIENTIFIC CONSIDERATIONS: MICRO AND MACROEVOLUTION

A central confusion in public discourse arises from failing to distinguish between microevolution and macroevolution.

Microevolution: refers to small-scale changes within species: variations in beak size among finches, changes in colour, or adaptations to particular environments. These are observable, repeatable, and fit comfortably within empirical science. Christians can fully accept microevolution as variation within created kinds.

Macroevolution: by contrast, refers to the large-scale claim that entirely new species – and indeed humanity itself – arose from single-celled organisms through unguided processes of mutation and natural selection over billions of years. This is a grander claim, and one for which the evidence is weaker – and highly contested. While microevolution is demonstrable science, macroevolution is better described as speculative natural *history*.

Neo-Darwinian theory (modern evolutionary theory) proposes that random genetic mutations, filtered by natural selection, accumulate gradually into major differences. The key ingredient is time: given billions – not millions – of years, even improbable outcomes are said to become possible. The following table shows the main pillars of the modern *macroevolutionary* hypothesis.

Proof	Critique
<p><i>Fossil Transitional Forms</i>:</p> <p>Show a progression of life forms, e.g. <i>Archaeopteryx</i> (reptile → bird), <i>Australopithecus afarensis</i> “Lucy” (ape → human).</p>	<p>The fossil record is grossly incomplete with <i>many</i> gaps. Cambrian Explosion shows sudden complexity. Some fossils (e.g., <i>Archaeopteryx</i>) are widely disputed as “links.”</p>
<p><i>Comparative Anatomy</i>:</p> <p>Vertebrate forelimbs (bat wing, human arm, whale flipper) all share the same pattern.</p>	<p>Similarities may reflect a <i>common designer</i>.</p>

Proof	Critique
<p><i>Genetics:</i></p> <p>Humans & chimps share 99% of DNA. The genetic code is universal to all life.</p>	<p>High similarity does not prove ancestry – just shared biology. Could reflect <i>shared design</i> rather than descent.</p>
<p><i>Observed Speciation & Evolution:</i></p> <p>New species documented: Fruit flies diverging on apple vs. hawthorn; cichlid fish in African lakes.</p>	<p>These are examples of <i>micro-evolution</i> (adaptation, new species within kinds). Critics argue no observed transitions across major body plans (e.g., reptile → bird, fish → mammal).</p>

Beyond these basic hypothetical claims, several fundamental problems remain unresolved.

First, the origin of life itself is unexplained. There is no widely accepted scientific theory that accounts for how life emerged spontaneously from non-living matter.

Second, the rise of complex biological systems – such as the eye, the brain, or the immune system – resists reduction to gradual mutations since their parts are interdependent and irreducibly complex.

Third, human faculties such as consciousness, vision, imagination, language, and morality remain unaccounted for. No Darwinian mechanism convincingly explains their origin.

Despite these gaps, macroevolution is often presented to the public as an unquestionable fact. But strictly speaking, it is not a scientific theory in the experimental sense. Science deals with observable, repeatable events, whereas the origins of life belong to *unobserved history*. Christians, therefore, need not feel compelled to accept theistic evolution on scientific grounds because the evidence does not demand it. Indeed, the distinction between microevolution and macroevolution frees us to accept the former while questioning the latter. This alone undercuts the supposed necessity of theistic evolution.

CATHOLIC VOICES

The louder scientists insist on the overwhelming evidence for macroevolution, the harder it becomes to maintain a Christian view of the origins of life and the universe. Cardinal Schönborn openly challenged the claim that evolution is settled science. *In*

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Chance or Purpose? (2007) he argued that Darwinian mechanisms cannot account for the full complexity of life, and that Catholic faith must insist on design and purpose in creation.⁴ He warned of the pressure to conform: “Many people today are very sensitive and act as if hurt – even aggressive – whenever anyone doubts the theory of evolution.” The debate has proven, however, that there is still a good deal of room for questions, and that we do need to leave that place for questions.⁵ He also pointed to the opposite danger – dismissing belief in creation as fanaticism. “The fact that someone believes God has created them still does not justify running down such a belief in that way.”⁶

In *Catholicism and Evolution* (2015), Michael Chaberek outlines a spectrum of views on origins.⁷ Chaberek’s taxonomy helps clarify the landscape and is especially valuable for showing how theistic evolution undermines key Catholic doctrines. If human beings arose purely from natural processes, then the origin of death and suffering, the special creation of the first man and woman, and the historical grounding of salvation all become uncertain. He stresses that Catholic theology requires real first parents directly created by God, not merely evolved hominids endowed with a soul at some arbitrary point. By failing to insist on this, theistic evolution risks *collapsing the coherence* of the Catholic faith itself. For Chaberek, the true alternative is not blind Darwinism dressed in theological language, but rather a robust affirmation of divine creation. He situates this within a long Dominican tradition of defending the intelligibility of faith.

MAGISTERIAL VOICES

What, then, has the Magisterium said? In recent decades, the Church has not produced any binding teaching on evolution. In response to what appears to be overwhelming scientific evidence for evolution, the Catholic Church has understandably sought to integrate this naturalistic account with its enduring conviction that God reigns over all creation and that humanity is uniquely endowed with a spiritual soul.

While no magisterial teaching has clarified precisely how this theistic evolutionary process unfolds, statements from John Paul II and Benedict XVI suggest that the human soul was infused at an undefined stage in evolutionary history – a position that has not

4 Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, *Chance or Purpose? Creation, Evolution and a Rational Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 115,120.

5 Ibid., 38.

6 Ibid., 26.

7 Michael Chaberek O.P., *Catholicism and Evolution: A History from Darwin to Pope Francis* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015).

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escaped criticism and even ridicule. John Paul II's 1996 address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences acknowledged the broad acceptance of evolutionary theory but stopped short of endorsing it as fact. As Chaberek notes, "Some were disappointed that the Pope didn't mention the rising criticism of evolution, especially since new data has called earlier evidence into question."⁸ *Richard Dawkins welcomed* this as a significant concession, but he also ridiculed the idea of God "injecting" a soul into evolving hominids, sarcastically questioning at what stage this might have occurred. Dawkins writes:

"In plain language, there came a moment in the evolution of hominids when God intervened and *injected* a human soul into a previously animal lineage. *When?* A million years ago? Two million years ago? Between *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens*? Between "archaic" *Homo sapiens* and *H. sapiens sapiens*?... The difference is, inescapably, a scientific difference. *Religions make existence claims, and this means scientific claims.* The same is true of many of the major doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. The Virgin Birth, the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Resurrection of Jesus, the survival of our own souls after death: these are all *claims of a clearly scientific nature.* Either Jesus had a corporeal father, or he didn't. This is not a question of values or morals..."⁹

Benedict XVI, while more sceptical later in life compared to earlier, likewise never issued a definitive magisterial statement. Yet he repeatedly highlighted the unresolved questions within evolutionary theory, noting that many significant issues remain scientifically unanswered.¹⁰

While faith readily accepts the "scientific hypothesis of evolution" according to its own methods, he strongly critiques the tendency for "evolution" to be *exalted* above and beyond its scientific content and made into an intellectual model that claims to explain the whole of reality and thus has become a sort of 'first philosophy.' He notes that the theory of evolution "*cannot be proved experimentally*" to a great extent due to the vast time spans involved, meaning there are "considerable gaps in its

8 Ibid., 258, paraphrasing Ratzinger in Benedict XVI, *Creation and Evolution: A Conference with Pope Benedict XVI in Castel Gandolfo* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 237.

9 Dawkins, "The Pope's Message on Evolution and Four Commentaries III. Obscurantism to the Rescue."

10 Benedict XVI, *Creation and Evolution: A Conference with Pope Benedict XVI in Castel Gandolfo* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008).

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experimental verifiability and falsifiability.” He also highlights that the “*summing up of minute steps does not suffice.*”¹¹

Thus, within the Church, diversity of views remains, and no definitive magisterial teaching compels Catholics to accept theistic evolution. Chaberek notes that it has not arrived at a unified position indicating that the debate over evolution remains unresolved.¹²

THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONCERNS

Christianity proclaims a *God of miracles*. It affirms that He became incarnate in the womb of a virgin, that He raised His Son from the dead, that He turned water into wine, and that He will renew creation at the end of time. Yet many Christians hesitate, even recoil, from affirming that this same God could create directly.

Theistic evolution portrays Him as dependent on mechanisms of violence and chance rather than as the sovereign Creator. It implies that God could not, or would not, create directly, but must instead rely on death to bring forth life. At root, theistic evolution presents a distorted image of God; a God who creates through death, suffering, *painful mutations* – a process of endless struggle, waste, and death that appears to contradict the goodness and love of God revealed in Scripture.

Belief in evolution raises major theological problems because it makes death, pain, mutation, and suffering part of God’s original *creative process* rather than consequences of human sin. Scripture teaches that God created the world “very good” (Genesis 1:31), and that death entered only after Adam’s disobedience (Romans 5:12; 6:23). If death existed for millions of years before the Fall, then *Paul’s teaching that sin brought death* – and Christ’s death and resurrection conquered it – loses an element of coherence. Evolution also relies on mutations and natural selection, which are destructive processes *producing disease and deformity*, not the “good” means of creation by a loving God.

From a philosophical standpoint, theistic evolution is unnecessary. *Occam’s razor* advises against multiplying complexities beyond necessity.¹³ Among competing explanations, the simplest sufficient one is best. Direct creation is simpler, more coherent,

11 Ibid., 108, quoted by the editors and authors of the proceedings.

12 Chaberek, 258, paraphrasing Ratzinger in *Creation and Evolution*, 260.

13 Occam’s razor (the principle is attributed to the 14th-century philosopher William of Ockham) is a principle that suggests when faced with multiple explanations for a phenomenon, the simplest explanation – the one with the fewest assumptions or entities – is generally preferable. While not a guarantee of truth, it is a useful tool for choosing between competing theories and making the most rational choice by avoiding superfluous complexity.

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and fully compatible with revelation. Theistic evolution, by contrast, introduces needless complexity: it asks us to believe both in unguided Darwinian processes and in God's hidden guidance, an incoherent hybrid that satisfies neither side.

CULTURAL AND PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

The stakes of this debate are not only intellectual but pastoral. The way we speak of creation profoundly shapes how younger generations imagine God. For many young Catholics, theistic evolution has contributed to a crisis of faith. Raised in a culture where evolution is presented as *unquestionable fact*, they hear Church leaders accommodating rather than challenging this narrative. The result is often confusion: if God is real, why does He need evolution? If miracles are possible, why is creation excluded?

Such questions can corrode confidence in God as Creator. They leave young people with an image of an almost-able God. The pastoral consequences are clear. Catechesis becomes muddled (*a confirmation class where teens ask, "Why does the Church believe in miracles but not creation?" or a college student losing trust in the Church because its message sounds contradictory*), apologetics loses force, youth drift away from the Church. The image of a God using billions of years of "survival of the fittest" to create can undermine both the intellectual credibility and the pastoral vitality of the Church.

Theistic evolution may promise peace with science, but in practice it often results in confusion within the Church and can draw contempt from without. If the Church is to protect the faith of young Christians and bear credible witness in a sceptical world, it must recover confidence in God as the sovereign Creator, who acts directly and purposefully, not through blind mechanisms of chance and death.

CONCLUSION

The distinction between microevolution and macroevolution allows Christians to affirm the former while questioning the latter, undermining the claim that theistic evolution is necessary. Science cannot pronounce with certainty on the unobserved past, and evolutionary theory continues to face significant gaps and contradictions. As Benedict XVI observed, key questions remain unresolved, making it unwise to *bind theology* to such a fragile and contested scientific framework. Direct creation by God remains both credible and tenable, belonging to the same order of miraculous acts that stand at the heart of the Christian faith – the Incarnation, the Virgin Birth, and the Resurrection.

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What is at stake is not only intellectual clarity, but the image of God handed on to future generations. When creation is explained as dependent on processes of death and mutation, God appears diminished, His goodness obscured, and His nearness doubted. To safeguard both theological coherence and pastoral vitality, Christians must recover confidence in the Creator who acts directly, purposefully, and lovingly. In doing so, the Church can proclaim with renewed conviction that true faith and *true science*, rightly understood, do not contradict but converge, for both flow from the one Source of all truth.

When we watch dolphins leap, see the sky blaze at sunset, or notice a child's marvel at a flower, our hearts are stirred by beauty. To know these are *not accidents* but gifts of a loving Creator lifts our awe to another level. *The child's question*, "Who made the world?" is answered not with compromise, but with joy.

That amazement deepens when we remember that the same God who paints the heavens and shapes waterfalls also raised the dead, turned water into wine, and took flesh in Mary's womb. He intentionally and *carefully designed* the human body – its heart, brain, and DNA. He gave us the capacity for vision, imagination, and music. To contemplate such a God is to be astonished – and to answer His call.

Prayerfulness

Philip McParland

In his first letter to the Thessalonians (5:17), St Paul invites us to pray constantly. Some people wonder what Paul actually means by this request. We know that it is just not possible or practical to be praying all of the time. My own interpretation of Paul's invitation can be described as prayerfulness. Perhaps Paul is asking us to be prayerful. To be prayerful is not primarily about saying prayers or thinking holy thoughts. It has more to do with our disposition or our outlook on life or our life stance. Let me offer some thoughts on what prayerfulness might mean in practice.

WE ARE NOT ALONE

To be prayerful is to believe that we are not alone. Yes indeed, we are not alone. God is present in our lives. In fact, God is actively present in our lives. The Divine Presence is sustaining us, supporting us, guiding us, protecting us. There is no time when God is not with us. God, the One who is, the eternal now, is always with us. Whether we feel this or not, whether we are aware of this or not, it is true. Believing it makes a huge difference to our lives. Here is how the South American theologian, Leonardo Boff, expresses this reality:

“To say ‘I believe in God’ means that there is Someone who surrounds me, embraces me everywhere, and loves me, Someone who knows me better than I do myself, deep down in my heart, where not even my beloved can reach, Someone who knows the secret of all mysteries and where all roads lead.

I am not alone in this open universe with all my questions for which no one offers me a satisfactory answer. That Someone is with me, and exists for me, and I exist for that Someone and in that Someone's presence.

Believing in God means saying: there exists an ultimate tenderness, an ultimate bosom, an infinite womb, in which I

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can take refuge and finally have peace in the serenity of love. If that is so, believing in God is worthwhile; it makes us more ourselves and empowers our humanity.”¹

These are beautiful words indeed from an inspirational writer. We are not alone in this open universe with all our questions for which no one offers us a satisfactory answer. There exists an ultimate tenderness, an ultimate bosom, an infinite womb, in which we can take refuge and finally have peace in the serenity of love.

LOVED UNCONDITIONALLY

Speaking of the serenity of love brings me to the *second* thing I would like to say about prayerfulness. To be prayerful is to accept that we are loved unconditionally. The God who is actively present in our lives, loves us freely and without conditions. Beginning in childhood we all have picked up messages about God. These messages have formed the way we see God. It is a fact that many people carry false and negative images of God. Jesus is the one who reveals the true God. We need to look to him to learn about God. And Jesus is clear that God is unconditional and inclusive love. God does not do conditional love. The little word ‘if’ is not in God’s vocabulary. Our experience of human love may be full of conditions. We mustn’t let this affect the way we see God. We mustn’t project unto God our experience of the authority figures in our lives. What’s more, neither should we project unto God how we feel about ourselves. God sees us differently than the way we see ourselves. When God looks at us God sees a son or daughter that is precious and cherished. In the words of William Paul Young, God is relentless affection. God’s love has no limits. It is abundant. The thing we long for, the thing we desire the most, God offers us freely and without reserve. To be prayerful is to receive God’s love. It is to accept God’s love. It is to let God do what God does best: Love us as we are.

ALL SHALL BE WELL

Thirdly, to be prayerful is to have confidence that all shall be well. In the fourteenth century during a time of terrible suffering caused by wars and a plague called ‘The Black Death,’ the English mystic Julian of Norwich heard Jesus say these words to her, “Julian, all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Yes, all shall be well. All shall be well because God is

1 Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, (trans. Phillip Berryman), Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000, xv–xvi.

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involved in our world and God is all powerful. Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead. This is the cornerstone of our faith. In practice, this means that good is greater than evil, love is stronger than hatred, life is more powerful than death. Despite signs to the contrary and there are many, because of the resurrection of Jesus the forces of darkness will be defeated. The good will win out. There is no need to fear. We have every reason to be hopeful. Our future is safe. The future of the world is guaranteed. All shall indeed be well. To quote the Brazilian writer, Fernando Sabino, "In the end, everything will be alright. If it's not alright, it's not the end."

SILENCE

Fourthly, to be prayerful is to create time for silence. To know God, to know God personally, to experience the Divine Presence within ourselves and in our lives, we need to make time for silence. "The language of God is silence," said Meister Eckhart the fourteenth century mystic. God speaks most powerfully in silence, through silence. Silence allows us to listen, to listen in particular to what is happening in our hearts. And in our hearts along with our feelings and desires there is a gentle voice longing to be heard. This voice sometimes referred to as the still small voice is the voice of God. It is the voice of God whispering to us words of affirmation and approval. God's words of affirmation and approval are words we need to hear. They are important for our self-worth and our self-confidence.

I appreciate we may have a difficulty with silence. I know it is not easy to create time for silence in a busy and noisy world. Everything around us may be pulling us away from it. I appreciate too that we may have a resistance to silence. We may be frightened of meeting ourselves in the silence. But our very sanity may depend on our willingness to create a discipline of silence in our lives. The truth is silence is one of the most precious things in life. It is a homecoming to our deepest belonging, to our true identity. Without it, our lives may become superficial, lacking depth. Without silence we may not discover who we really are, a beloved child of God. More and more people today are realising this. It is why they are building time for silent meditation into their daily routine.

PLAY

Fifthly, to be prayerful is to make time for play. Yes, play! I believe that play is not just important for our physical health, it

is also important for our emotional and spiritual health. In fact, for me, play is a prayerful activity. You see, play is essentially a non-productive activity. It is something that allows us to be and to rejoice in the act of being. It helps us accept that our value does not come from what we do, from our usefulness and achievements, but from who we are. In other words, play helps us accept that we are loved unconditionally. What's more, play helps us accept that someone else is in control of our lives, that someone else is ultimately responsible for what is happening in the world. Play is an acknowledgement that there is a higher power involved in our lives, a power that is taking care of things. If play helps us to both accept that we are loved unconditionally and acknowledge that there is a higher power guiding us, it is surely a prayerful activity.

SURRENDER AND TRUST

Finally, to be prayerful is to trust in the power of surrender. It is a fact that we human beings have a tendency to become attached to anything that offers us satisfaction and security. We cling to possessions, to property, to institutions, to our roles, to our power, to our status and of course to people. We do this mainly because of our insecurities and it is understandable. But is it good for us? The truth is clinging doesn't make us free. In fact, it holds us back, often trapping us in fear. What makes us free is surrender, letting go, finding our treasure in a love and a power that is greater than ourselves.

In reality of course, we have a huge resistance to surrender. Letting go certainly does not come easy to us. It goes against the grain. We will do anything to avoid it. It feels too much like weakness and a loss of independence and control. What's more, the possibility of handing our lives over to someone we cannot see is risky and frightening. Yet there is much evidence to suggest that if we can find the humility and courage to surrender to God, we will not be disappointed. I have met a number of people who told me that surrender was the thing that turned their lives around. Their stories were all similar. They were at rock bottom, feeling totally helpless to change themselves and their situation. In their powerlessness, they called out to God for help. At that moment they experienced a reassuring and compassionate presence that left them in no doubt that they were not alone and that they were being cared for. Their surrender allowed God to move into their lives and to take control.

As I mentioned earlier, we do have Someone to surrender to, to hand ourselves over to, Someone who is bigger than us, greater than us, more powerful than us, Someone who is on our side and

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who knows and wants what is best for us. We should not be afraid to trust God. It may take time for us to become convinced of this and as a consequence it may take time for us to learn the art of surrender, but it does work. Two things are sure. One, whether or not we choose to surrender, life will make us do it anyway. And two, when we do let go we will nearly always gain more than we lose. Both these truths were certainly discovered by the man in the following parable.

“There was once a Cretan peasant. He was a man who deeply loved his life and his work. He enjoyed tilling the soil, feeling the warm sun on his naked back as he worked in the fields, and feeling the soil under his feet. He loved the planting, the harvesting, the very smell of nature. He loved especially his wife and his children and his friends, and enjoyed being with them, eating together, drinking wine, talking, making love, and simply being united in a shared life. And he loved Crete, his tiny country. The earth, the sky, the sea, it was his! This was his home.

One day he sensed that death was near. What frightened him, however, was not fear of the beyond for he had lived a good life. No. What he feared was leaving Crete, leaving his wife, his children, his friends, his home and his land. Thus, as he prepared to die, he grasped in his hand a few grams of soil from his beloved Crete and told his loved ones to bury him with it.

He died, awoke, and found himself at heaven’s gate, the soil still in his hand, and heaven’s gate firmly barred against him. Eventually St Peter emerged through the heavy gates and addressed him: ‘You’ve lived a good life and we have a place for you inside, but you cannot enter unless you drop that handful of soil. You cannot enter as you are now.’ The man, however, was reluctant to drop the soil and protested: ‘Why? Why must I let go of this soil? Indeed, I will not! What’s inside those gates, I don’t know. But this soil, I know – it’s my life, my wife, my work, my family, it’s all that I know and love, it’s Crete! I will not let it go!’

Silent, seemingly defeated, Peter left him and closed the large gates behind him. There seemed little point in arguing with the peasant. Several minutes later, the gates opened a second time and now through them emerged a very young child. She did not try to reason with the man, nor did she try to coax him into letting go of the soil in his hand. She simply took his hand and as she did it opened and the soil of Crete spilled to the ground. She then led him through the gates of heaven. A shock awaited

the man as he entered heaven there, before him, lay all of Crete.”

It is obvious that being prayerful opens up a whole new dimension to our lives. This dimension is a spacious world. It is a world full of connections and endless possibilities. Let’s not be afraid to enter this world and to live in it. It will satisfy the deeper longings in our hearts. “You have made us for yourself O Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in you” [St Augustine].

Priest in a Synodal Church.

The most important and distinctive responsibility of the priest in a synodal Church, however, as co-worker of the bishop, is to bring unity and harmony to the exercise of the ministries and charisms in the daily life of the community and then, on Sundays, to preside over the Celebration of the Eucharist, which is both the source of this unity and harmony and the most solemn expression of it. It is here, “in the presence of different ministries and in the presidency of the Bishop or Priest, that the Christian community is made visible, whereby a differentiated co-responsibility of all for mission is fulfilled”.

- +Alphonsus Cullinan (Ed.), *Priesthood in Ireland Today*, Maynooth: St. Paul’s Publishing, 2025, p. 110.

Homilies for January (A)

Peter O' Kane

Second Sunday of Christmas

January 4

Eccles 24:1-2, 8-12. Ps 147. Eph 1: 3-6, 15-18. Jn 1: 1-18.

By this stage most of the Christmas decorations have been consigned to storage for another year. The world has moved on from the dazzle of fairy lights and sparkle of tinsel, with the vestiges of wrapping paper and empty present boxes well faded. Yet in the liturgy of the Church, we are invited to hold the reins back from the rush into the new calendar year by continuing to meditate on the mystery of the Incarnation as we wait with patience of the celebration of the Epiphany of the Lord in two days' time when we mark the arrival of the Magi with their gifts marking the future: gold to recognise Christ as the King, incense pointing us towards He who is God and myrrh for us to know Him as the Suffering Servant. And yet, there is still the demand for us to reflect on how God speaks to us in His Word in these Christmas days as the opening words of the Gospel reading stir the memory of the same opening words at the Eucharist during the Day on Christmas: "In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God."

The reading from the Book of Wisdom prepares the listener for the arrival of the Messiah. As the inspired writer reflects on the nature of wisdom, a truth is revealed: all things given by the creator have one purpose: to prepare for the One who will pitch his tent among God's people. This is the literal meaning of the Gospel: the Word was made flesh and pitched His tent among us. It is when we recognise the implications of this moment that in turn we see God's glory at work in our lives. As we hear in the letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians: since we have been chosen in Christ, we are called to give praise as daughters and sons of God by the way that we embrace the gift of life.

The question demanded of us as we hear God's Word today is where do we recognise the presence of the One who has pitched

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His tent among us? As we move from the celebration of Christmas into the continued short brightness of winter weeks, we return to the liturgical season of Ordinary Time. Yet by the mystery of the Incarnation, there ought to be nothing ordinary about our move towards Spring as we get a glimpse of the longer light and the fairer day. As we live within our family homes, as we go about our daily tasks at work, as we engage in conversations and relaxation and recreation, as we embrace our joys and smiles, as we face our sufferings and tears, where do we encounter the One who has pitched His tent among us? For it is in this way that we might hear Saint Paul's profound desire: "may God enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you may see the hope His call holds for us, what rich glories he has promised the saints will inherit." We pray that the Lord will give us an open heart to recognise His glory in new ways so that the normal ordinary gives an echo of the eternal extraordinary which is yet to come.

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

January 11

Is 42: 1-4, 6-7. Ps 28. Acts 10: 34-38. Mt 3: 13-17.

At the beginning of the 1900s, Howard Thurman, an African-American poet wrote: "When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, then the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among others, to make music in the heart."

Today marks the beginning of a new liturgical season where we have certainly left behind the Christmas carols and the nativity play costumes, the Magi have certainly returned home and the shepherds are focused on the lambing season ahead. The Church's liturgy also marks a beginning as we listen to the Gospel account of the Baptism of Jesus, the one who comes to do what remains: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace – and in the joy of the resurrection cause music to be sung in the heart. The Gospel writer makes a demand of the listener: to recognise in Jesus the one foretold by the Prophet Isaiah, the chosen one of the Lord in whom God delights. As Matthew recounts his version of this moment of creation, all is made new not in the one who is baptised, but through Him who brings new life to the world. As John the Baptist protests and Jesus insists, knowing of the bigger picture, John gives in and Jesus participates in a ritual undertaken by countless others.

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It is in this familiar ritual to John and others that the identity of Jesus is confirmed: as the Son of God, in whom the fulness of favour lives, who will do great work in the name of the Creator, unveiling the promises of old to God's people and beyond, to the ends of the earth. As Blessed Columba Marmion speaks: Christ's mission will be "both redemption and of sanctification. It is to redeem souls, and, this done, to infuse life into them. That is the whole work of the Saviour." As the liturgy rolls onward over the coming weeks, this work will be recounted afresh in the Gospel stories of preaching and teaching, miracle-working and healing, suffering and death, and most profoundly the drama of resurrection. In all these moments, the Lord will call others to follow Him, just like those first ones who gathered at his birth: to journey and search, to pray and hope, to believe and love, in the joys and sorrows, the crosses and blessings.

Today's feast is an encouragement for us that baptism is not a once-off moment where we rightly celebrate with joy the gift of new life. Rather it is a call to move forward living as God's gifts in our time as we find our identity in God. Today is a good day for it celebrates something wonderful: our life in God. The feast invites us to discover our common vocation rooted in baptism: as the old maxim goes, to seek the salvation of souls. Whatever the humdrum or drama of daily living, whatever the smiles or tears that accompany our steps, whatever the small successes or fate-filled failures, we are reminded that we are God's own, God's daughters and sons on whom His favour rests and in whom His life is stirred. This is the Christian message – it is a word of life. It is about how every human life is a reflection of the very life of God. In the dignity of our Baptism, may we respond with open hearts and minds, so that we may love one another and gift each other with life.

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time

January 18

Is 49:3, 5-6. Ps 39. 1Cor 1: 1-3. Jn 1: 29-34.

How many of us are enthralled by the future? How often do we think "if only we knew, then life would be different!" Whether the temptation to search the horoscopes for glimpses of glory or to have the palm read by the fortune-teller promising success, the ancient tradition of reading of the tea-leaves lodged at the bottom of the cup or trying to predict the numbers of the draw, all unveils a deeper yearning to be a winner in the eyes of others. The deeper yearning of the human heart was well described by a saint of old:

Saint Augustine, reflecting on his journey of faith, exclaimed: “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you”.

In pondering the Word of God in these January days, the Scriptures unveil to us the promise rooted in the human heart: “I will make you the light of the nations so that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.” As all focus has been on the baptizing action of John the Baptist where the yearnings of the heart have been partly satisfied, the baptizer now turns attention away from himself towards the One who will give all that will bring eternal fulfilment: “Look there is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.” Grounding himself in the ancient promises, locating himself in the action, John points out that the figure to whom he points is the fulfilment of all, the One on whom the Spirit rests, the One who will share the Holy Spirit with others. What happened in the Jordan was only one event in the amplifying story of salvation. This experience animates John to acclaim, not because of stargazing or seer-seeking, but because of his encounter, that “I have seen and I am the witness that He is the Chosen One of God.”

The call of the Gospel is that in our daily living we will have a fuller vision of what John has proclaimed: that we will see Christ at work and we will give witness that He is God’s Chosen One. In celebrating the Eucharist, we engage all that we are and have, by full active and conscious participation in our liturgy so that we give glory to God and seek to grow in holiness. Christ is shared as the Word is proclaimed, Christ is shared as we draw near to receive the Eucharist, Christ is shared as we are sent out in His name: for in the liturgy we see Christ at work and we are missioned to give witness to others that we have encountered God’s Chosen One who brings life and sustains us in our daily living. We are aware that many people struggle to see Christ at work, especially in the midst of difficulties and challenges, wounds and struggles, grief and death. Yet the commission given to us by John the Baptist today is that we are called to be of conviction to our sisters and brothers – that even in the midst of these stories of sorrow – Christ is alive and He is our eternal hope, the One who takes away the sins of the world and invites us into communion with Him and one another as we are all called to take our place as His saints.

**Third Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Sunday of the Word of God)**

January 25

Is 8:23-9:3. Ps 26. 1 Cor 1:10-13, 17. Mt 4: 12-23.

It is said of Saint Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican saint, that when he sought refuge in the chapel with his theological musings, the

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Lord spoke to the friar from a crucifix saying “You have written well of me, Thomas! What do you desire?” To this question, the humble friar replied, “Nothing except you Lord”. This desire is at the heart of the Christian as they search and seek, grow in faith and relationship with the Word who is in our midst. This is the focus of today’s liturgy as we celebrate the Sunday of the Word of God.

In the book of psalms, we hear a living description of the Word of God: a lamp for our feet and light for our path. This light begins to beam out as we listen to the early pages of the Gospel of Saint Matthew when, in the face of darkness, Jesus proclaims a moment of brightness. We hear that John the Baptist has been arrested by Herod, an act carried out in fear and anxiety. Yet instead of casting out, the action causes a return as Matthew describes Jesus’ homecoming to Galilee. Leaving the familiar territory of Nazareth, with the unknown activity of the hidden years remaining, Jesus now prepares to build new relationships.

All that had begun on the banks of the Jordan will in time find its fulfilment in Jerusalem. Yet there is a journey still to begin, a road to be embraced, a call to be uttered and an invitation to be offered. So Jesus stands in the place familiar to his ancestors of old, as words familiar fall on ears, once proclaimed by the Prophet Isaiah: “Land of Zebulun! Land of Naphtali! Way of the sea on the far side of Jordan, Galilee of the nations!” The promised Messiah will bring light not only to the faithful places of Jerusalem and Judah, but also to homes made up of Gentiles and foreigners, places like Zebulun and Naphtali, even to the ends of the earth. But Jesus is direct: light can only emerge from the darkness when repentance is proclaimed and embraced.

We live in a world that is surrounded by darkness – not only the short light of winter days, but the dullness brought by tiredness and exhaustion, the darkness of war and terrorism, the dimness caused by death and murder, as voices fall silent and courage seems to fail. A world offering algorithms of promising perfection yet imposing crucifying expectations, where mercy is unknown and reconciliation a distant but seemingly failing hope. All rather desperate!

Yet for those of us who bear the name of Christ, we are called to be beacons of light. At the ceremony of Baptism, each of us were entrusted with the “Light of Christ” as it was symbolically gifted to us by a lighted candle. In his institution of this Sunday as the *Sunday of the Word of God*, Pope Francis reminded us that “God’s word constantly reminds us of the merciful love of the Father who calls his children to live in love”. This is the God who loves us and has made us in His image and likeness. And He calls us to follow Him – all by our baptism, in the midst of the brightness and

dullness of every day life. For we are all called! The invitation of Christ, the challenge of the world and the initiative on our own part is the lively response to the needs of our sisters and brothers today so that the brightness of the eternal tomorrow will be glimpsed.

Priest as a Servant.

Clarification of the priest's identity as a servant is an essential antidote to the clericalism that "was frequently associated with hurt and abuse of power by participants in the process". A relational, co-responsible and servant model of priesthood "helps to overcome clericalism understood as the use of power to one's own advantage and the distortion of the authority of the Church that is that is at the service of the People of God" Putting it more positively, the example of priests whose lives are subordinated to the needs and spiritual welfare of the people they serve is a wonderful witness offered to the narcissism and self-focus of our society. Priests are servants of Jesus Christ who are ordained to "take care of the Church as a devoted father takes care of his household" (Cf. 1 Tim. 3:5-7). Priestly renewal begins with an awareness that "each of us has received a special grace, so, like good stewards responsible for all these different graces of God, put yourselves at the service of others" (1 Pet 4:10).

– +Alphonsus Cullinan (Ed.), *Priesthood in Ireland Today*, Maynooth: St. Paul's Publishing, 2025, p. 149.

New Books

Conversations in the Spirit. Juan A. Guerrero SJ & Oscar Martín López SJ. Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2025. ISBN 9781788127288.

Baptised And Sent (*Preparatory Document for the Pre-Synodal Assembly of the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland*) contains among its Appendices *Conversation in the Spirit: A Resource and Facilitating A Conversation in the Spirit: The Basic Steps*. (A 1-page graphic accompanies these two presentations.) Subtitled *A Guide to the Synodal Method*, the publication of *Conversations in the Spirit* (one notes the plural) is therefore timely. Translated from Spanish it opens (like *Baptised And Sent* which includes a version as *Gaeilge*) with the prayer *Adsumus, Sancte Spiritus*, with a footnote detailing its widespread historical use. A *Prologue* by Pope Francis proclaims ‘how beautiful that from the spiritual conversation of the two authors has been born a book on conversation in the Spirit’. Commending ‘how much good it would do us to have a greater measure of conversation in civic and church life’, he continues ‘the synodal way that the church has undertaken is a path of deep listening...one that allows the spirit to move and change us, allowing us to choose and act on our choices’. Recalling that ‘the synod’s *Final Document* speaks of the need for formation in conversation in the Spirit’, he believes that this book ‘provides valuable materials for that purpose’. One could not hope for a higher recommendation.

The *Introduction* identifies that it is ‘the instrument of conversation in the Spirit that prevents polarisation and creates harmony’ which ‘has proved itself hugely helpful for opening up channels of communication and discernment within the Church’. The authors intend to indicate ‘a methodology that enables all to participate in the service of the Church’s communion and mission’ (an incisive one sentence summary of the three ‘legs’ of the synodal journey currently being undertaken. The authors state that ‘in presenting spiritual conversation, we will enter into the subject through seven “moments”, and these structure the subsequent seven chapters. A series of five *Appendices* provide ‘Templates for Conversation in the Spirit’, ranging from ‘Guidelines for Group Conversation’ through ‘Methods for Discernment’ to a scriptural set of texts to aid the process in action. The addition of ‘Key Sources’ at the end is an invitation to delve deeper into the methodology, meaning and mission of synodality in the phases to date, its present state and projection into the future. Hopefully this book will prove most helpful to those already engaged in the synodal journey and all those who are both wanted and welcomed to join this pilgrimage of the whole People of God.

Wilton, Cork

Kevin O’Gorman SMA

What're we like? Remembering Fr. Tom Hamill. Chokmah Group, 2025. ISBN 9781739966270.

As the colour-filled pages fall open, a familiar phrase often used by my own bishop appears—one that sets the tone and unveils the hues of the reflections that follow: “*A good question is better than an answer.*”

This book opens its pages to short articles crafted and shaped by over thirty contributors whose lives were touched profoundly and purpose for reflection: Fr Tom Hamill, priest of the Archdiocese of Armagh. Just as Tom broke open the Word of God to many people, now in turn they break open a word about him, that unveils the truth of God’s Word at work in Tom’s life, because “through the real goodness of people others can be lifted up; redemption is possible.” (2) This collection is more than stories: it is living memory where the familiar friend listens once again and the new friend discovers the beauty of a life well-lived, as poems, prayers and rituals are recalled, photographs animate and reflections detailing the impact of Tom on the lives of others – students and friends, family and colleagues – in the spirit of collaboration which echoes the way lived by Tom in his ministry and teaching, but only recently has received a formal word in the life of the Church: synodality.

With gratitude to Mairead Heaney, Muireann Maguire and Claire O’Malley, the Chokmah Committee, life is impressed upon these pages, which so readily receive ink and, more importantly, leave a mark upon the hearts of those who read these reflections.

With an introduction to Tom’s life from his early days spent with his grandmother, through the years of education elicited and inspired by the Christian Brothers and the Vincentians at Saint Patrick’s College Armagh, with seminary formation in Maynooth followed by post-ordination studies in Rome, it is clear that he embodied the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, especially with a focus given to the formation of adults in Sacred Scripture, whether at Mount Oliver or in the Armagh Diocesan Biblical Initiative, among his many varied pastoral experiences, as enthralled and eager students “were fascinated by his lectures and poems and stories, whether in the lecture hall or on his hill-walking expeditions at the weekends.” (11)

Yet all of this wasn’t merely intellectual study or creative writing: it was rooted in the Eucharist, the appreciation of God’s creation and the sharing of God’s love with others. The strands of a man – sojourner and pilgrim, priest and teacher – are gently woven through the recollections of words and photographs, poetry and prose, originally penned by Tom or recalled by friends: a reminder that our lives are threads in a greater tapestry, woven by the gentle hand of God. Each encounter, each shared prayer, each act of kindness unveils the pattern of grace that binds us to each other as sisters and brothers, as we find our place in the divine design. Tom’s life has shown that the love of God, the golden thread, “*binds everything together in harmony*” (Colossians 3:14), where shared “fragments of memory and reflection are the precious jewels of a presence which framed and focussed [my] life.” (120)

An important part of this book is found in the extracts from an

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interview with Tom in *The Argus* of 1991. Speaking of a variety of topics, from his experiences in pastoral ministry to the Church, from change to the need for adult education, almost thirty-five years many of these hopes and aspirations, challenges and concerns remain. In this spirit, Tom would have happily embraced being a pilgrim of hope in this Jubilee Year, for as he commented: “we have planted the seeds here and we can only hope that they will grow in parishes, homes and schools throughout the country.” (150) It is in this hope, with an invitation to memory, an awakening of the new and a stirring of the Spirit, this book evokes the hope lived by Tom: “O you who move in eyes and ears and mouth: we thank you for being with us and pray that our work will bear fruit.” (290)

St Patrick's College, Maynooth

PETER O' KANE

Preparing for the New Lectionary. Neil Xavier O'Donoghue, Editor. Maynooth: St Pauls Publishing, 2025. ISBN: 978-1-911178-71-2.

In the *Preface* the editor expresses that ‘the Irish Church is embarking on a project to publish a new Lectionary for Mass’. This project is a collaboration between the episcopal Conferences of Australia, Ireland and New Zealand ‘based on the *Revised New Jerusalem Bible*’ (2018) which ‘is best understood as the “grandchild” of the original *Jerusalem Bible* that is currently in use in our parishes’. The importance of the preparatory process is indicated in the desire that ‘this cooperation will make the publication easier and also allow for a sharing of resources and expertise between the three countries’. An informative itinerary through the recent history of scripture in the Catholic Church leads to the intention of this work, to present the *General Introduction to the Lectionary* (1981) which ‘now includes a lot of theological richness that it can encourage and inform a more fruitful proclamation of the Word in the liturgical assembly’. The conjunction of information, exhortation and proclamation here point to the prominent place of the Bible in the liturgy and life of the church.

The text of the *General Introduction* is accompanied by a number of essays. Neil Xavier O'Donoghue gives the rationale for the *Revised New Jerusalem Bible* as the basic text for the *New Lectionary*, referring to the consultative process which was conducted to help the bishops in their ‘special responsibility to regulate the liturgy and its translation in their region’. Pauline Byrne’s ‘*The Old Testament Readings in the Lectionary*’ is a valuable reminder of their role, reaching the timely conclusion: ‘The Old Testament readings are an important constituent of the abundant feast laid out for us in the Liturgy...see[ing] them not as an obstacle to be scrambled over or skirted round, but as a path to deeper engagement with the Paschal Mystery of Christ at the heart of our liturgical celebrations’. In his thorough treatment of ‘*Sunday of the Word of God*’, Thomas R. Whelan writes wisely: ‘When an assembly deepens its appreciation of the word (in its own lived spirituality as well as its liturgical expression) and makes it truly the centre of how it worships, then it is enriched when associated with other celebrations such as Christian Unity’.

The addition of Pope Francis' *Apostolic Letters 'Instituting the Sunday of the Word of God'* (2019) and '*On the Sixteen Hundredth Anniversary of the Death of Saint Jerome*' (2020) augment 'this initial offering to facilitate the beginnings of preparation of the People of God for our new edition of the Lectionary'. Dedicated to '*Readers by whose ministry the Word is proclaimed/Preachers who break open and share God's Word/Baptised who seek to embody the Word*', this volume of both texts and commentary serves as a rich resource for all referred to here. As material for instruction and explanation, reflection and meditation, proclamation and acclamation of the Word of God, this collaborative work is a substantial volume which will reward study and sharing in the local and universal synodal journey of the church(es). The quality of this 'initial offering' augurs well for the project, which will hopefully invite contributions from liturgists and scripture scholars in the other countries involved.

Wilton, Cork

KEVIN O'GORMAN, SMA

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