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Editor's Corner by Kathy Bishop



Kathy Bishop - editor-in-chief of The Faith Companion.

We welcome two new members of our editorial team; Martin Ryan and Roderick Campbell Guion. I'd like to thank them for taking up the challenge! I'd also like to thank Bernie Daly for offering admin/promotional support and for Hermarie for producing our Crosswords and occasional poem/article. There are many who deserve thanks and who make this publication special. I would like to thank Kim Black who sent in this edition's cover picture which we also use for our gift card. An amazing image! We now have a Catholic Gifts E-shop where you can buy gifts online including a gift subscription.

Often links arise without planning and this edition what shines through is the hope readers can gain to encourage and strengthen during this time of pandemic. In this edition's theology section, there are articles on the Incarnation, the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Immaculate Conception of Mary to get us thinking as we approach Christmas and the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on 8th December. Our Scripture section explores Jesus's victory over death and sin using Scripture on the widow of Nain in Luke. I explore how we can use a reflective journal in our Advent prayer time and Sue O'Donnell shares her poem of Watch and Wait which sums up our prayer life during Advent.

Our devotions section looks at St Francis' inception of the Nativity Scene and I share how we, as a family, bless our Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. Also, Hermarie reflects on the real meaning of Christmas separating secular values from the Christian ones. Our saint this edition is St John Vianney, the Curé D'Ars, who showed true dedication to God's Kingdom. Paul Cassidy gives a superb explanation of Our Living Faith which is truly inspiring and Sue O'Donnell's poem Draw Near gives us hope during these dark times.

We share some inspirational stories showing God's presence in everyday life. Fr Thomas Kent shares his journey to the priesthood to help inspire others and we look at John Roger's journey to the Catholic faith which led him to set up Catholic Street Evangelization. Finally, John Savage Director of the Bible Network explores the invaluable work they do in the world.

We hope and pray that this edition blesses you as you prepare for Christmas and beyond. We'd like to thank our faithful readers for their support during these trying times and we hope you will avail yourselves of our gift shop at **www.thefaithcompanion.co.uk** or call **01403 754808**.

With every blessing,

Kathy Bishop

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And the Word was Made Flesh: A Thomistic Look at the Incarnation by Sr. Mary Magdalene Eitenmiller, O.P.

Sister Mary Magdalene Eitenmiller OP is a Dominican sister with the English Congregation of St. Catherine of Siena, (Stone, U.K.). She received an MA in Theology from Ave Maria University in Florida and an S.T.L. (Licentiate in Sacred Theology) in Thomistic Studies from the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., before entering the Dominican sisters. She is now continuing as a doctoral candidate with the Dominican House of Studies.

Part 1

St. John begins his Gospel with the mysterious sentence, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1).¹ After telling us that all things were made through this Word, and that this Word was Light and Life, he proclaims in verse 14 the *good news* that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us," and "we have seen his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father." It is from the fullness of *his* grace that we have received "grace upon grace" (Jn 1:16).

So we might ask ourselves these questions: 1) *Who* is this Word of God who became flesh; 2) *why* did he become flesh; 3) *how can we rightly understand* the fact that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us; and 4) how does the fact that the Word became flesh *really affect us*, anyway? Although every mystery of faith is by definition something revealed to us by God precisely because we *cannot* attain to it by human reason alone, yet at the same time, because God has revealed at least some aspects of this mystery, we are called to reason about it, with the help of God, in order to grasp it more profoundly, insofar as that is possible to us. This is what St. Anselm calls *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking

understanding), in which we begin with what we *already* hold to be true by *faith*, and we seek to understand it more deeply by using our human reason as healed and elevated by grace.

...because God has revealed at least some aspects of this mystery, we are called to reason about it, with the help of God

So, in this first of a four-part series, I would like to begin with our first question: *Who* is this Word made flesh who dwelt among us? Of course, this verse refers to Jesus Christ, the pre-existent Son, or Word, of the Father. He is a divine Person, who has two natures. Firstly, he has an eternally divine nature, which is identical with his personhood, since in God, being and essence are the same. So just as the Father is the divine essence, the Son and the Spirit are also the same divine essence. Secondly, he has also assumed, or taken on in time, a human nature like ours in all things but sin. This second point is the mystery of the Incarnation.

¹ Biblical quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, 2nd Catholic Edition (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006).

So then, these are the *two central mysteries of our faith*, which are *deeply* connected. The first is the mystery of the Trinity, which is the ontological basis (that is, the foundation in reality, in real being) of the mystery of the Incarnation. In fact, without the Trinity, there would be *no* Incarnation, no one to become incarnate. Yet the mystery of the Incarnation is the way we come to know about the Trinity, or in technical terms, it is the epistemological basis of the Christian faith, since it is Christ himself who reveals to us the inner nature of God. As St Thomas Aquinas says, we can naturally know from the effects of God *that he exists*, but *what he is* in himself, or his inner nature, is *not* subject to merely natural knowledge.²

St Thomas Aquinas

There are some things we can come to know about God by a natural process of reason, such as that God is good, all-powerful, wise, and so on, but even these things only speak generically of the divine essence, and what is more, only analogically, that is, by way of analogy.³ In other words, we can know that God is good, in a way, however, that always fails to grasp that his goodness is far beyond the goodness of any creature, and far beyond what the mind can comprehend. Nevertheless, this natural knowledge *does* tell us something positive about God. But the fact that the one God is *tri-une*, that he is a Trinity of Persons, is known to us only by the revelation which has come through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and cannot be



² See Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* I, q. 3, prologue. (Hereafter, the abbreviation for the *Summa theologiae* is ST.)

³ An analogy, for Aquinas, refers to the fact that something is both like and unlike another. Because God is creator of all, creation has a certain resemblance or likeness to him, although creatures are also very unlike God, since they are finite, and God is infinite. For example, God is good, and creatures are good, but God is good in a way that far exceeds any creaturely goodness that we know. Yet, it is still true to say that God is good, even though we cannot really fathom His goodness. I will also explain the analogy of the Word below, which again, tells us something true about God, while we are still acutely aware that this is a mystery that remains far beyond us.



known by natural reason alone.

*...without the Trinity, there would be **no** Incarnation...*

Although I do not have space here to go deeply into Trinitarian theology, it may be helpful to understand a little more what this analogy of the Word is about, since, as we have seen, it is a proper analogy revealed to us in Scripture (specifically, in the Gospel of John), as a way of helping our limited human capacity reason about these two central mysteries of our faith: the Trinity and the Incarnation. So, what is this analogy of the Word? Aquinas follows St. Augustine in this, who tries to express this Scriptural revelation by way of what is known as the psychological analogy (that is an analogy based on the human soul, which, however, is more properly called the analogy of word and love, as we shall see.)

Just as the human mind or soul knows itself by way of intellect (such that I can form an intellectual, interior concept

of myself), so the human mind also loves itself and others through its will, which involves a kind of movement, or impulse, toward what is loved. In an analogous way, we can think of God the Father eternally knowing himself, forming an interior Word, which in God would include his entire being, power, goodness, all that God is, since God is simple and is not divided in his thoughts. So this Word, eternally generated by the Father, is the Son of God, a distinct Person of the Trinity, equal to and one in being with the Father, one divine essence, yet distinct from the Father only by the fact of a real relation to the Father⁴ from whom the Son eternally proceeds. And similarly, the Father and Son, in loving one another, eternally spirate (or breathe forth, *spiratio*) God the Holy Spirit, who is also one in being and divine essence, equal to the Father and the Son.

⁴ John 1:1 says that “the Word was with God,” literally “toward God” in the Greek (*pros ton theon*), indicating a relation of the Word, who also “was God,” to God the Father.

So, this eternal, *interior* Word spoken by the Father entered into time by assuming our human nature, in a way analogous to the manner in which our interior human word, or concept, becomes an external spoken word, when clothed with human sound or voice. That is to say, God the Father sent his Son in what is called the *visible mission of the Incarnation*. (It is called his *visible* mission, because he continues even now to be sent in his *invisible* mission, together with the Holy Spirit into each soul in the state of grace.)

Now, this assumption of our human nature is technically termed the *hypostatic union*, which is a uniting of two natures, human and divine, to the one person (hypostasis) of Jesus Christ—that is, his divine nature, *identical* with his divine person, and a human nature, which he *assumes* to his divine person.

However, lest someone might erroneously think that this *hypostatic union* should require any change in God himself, Aquinas adds, “The mystery of the Incarnation was *not* completed through God being changed in any way from the state in which he had been from eternity, but through his having united himself to the creature in a new way, or rather through having united it [the creature, i.e., a human nature] to himself.”⁵ So the change here is in the creature, not in God. It is a new relation in the creature.

The mystery of the Incarnation was not completed through God being changed in any way from the state in which he had been from eternity...

Now, there are three modes of divine presence in the world. The first mode of divine presence is the fact that God

is present in all things as the Creator of all, sustaining everything in existence. The second mode is that of God’s presence in a soul in a special way by the grace and gifts of the divine missions to the soul, and finally, this third mode is the hypostatic union. As I have said, in the hypostatic union, Christ’s human nature (which is a creature) began to be, since it was created by God, and at the very moment of its creation, was united to God the Son, but *without* in any way changing God himself, who is eternally immutable, unchangeable. That is, since God is the Creator of all, it was not difficult for him to create a human nature for himself, and “bridge the gap” as it were, by uniting this human nature to his divine person. Again, this does not in any way detract from God’s own transcendence and infinitude, since he loses nothing of this in assuming even the frail body of an infant, for God is pure spirit, and is not contracted or depleted by the hypostatic union, that uniting of a human nature to his divine Person.

This, then, is the answer to the first question: *who* is this Word of God who became flesh? In the next part of our series, we will look into our second question: *why* did God become incarnate to be published in the next edition of The Faith Companion?

5 ST III, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1, transl. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947).



Confession in today's Church – Sagging Sacrament?

by Martin Ryan



Martin Ryan was a Redemptorist for fourteen years, ordained in 1983 and left to get married in 1989. Now sixty-two, he has never lost his faith nor ever stopped his Catholic practice. He was born in London and has a first-class honours degree in theology. Now living in Scotland, Martin is an IT professional. He also expresses his faith through poetry published to his own website: <https://www.poemsforpilgrims.com/>

One of the features of Catholic life today, certainly in the Western industrialised world, is that while many Catholics still faithfully attend Sunday Mass, very few, very few indeed, go regularly to individual confession. This has led some commentators to speak of a “sagging sacrament”. This is perhaps all the stranger since, in the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council produced a renewed theology of this Sacrament and established three distinct rites for its celebration. And we must remember

that a Church Council is one of the most authoritative voices with which the Church can pronounce on matters of faith, and by which the Holy Spirit can instruct us at any given time. Why then has the Council's authoritative teaching on this great Sacrament seemingly been ignored and, in some ways, even blocked? The reasons are, of course, complex, and central among them is that change is never blithely welcomed, even change for the better.



To try and understand not only why the Sacrament is perceived as 'sagging', but also to perhaps see a way forward, it can be useful to learn from history, and to then examine what underlies the renewed teachings springing from Vatican II.

...while many Catholics still faithfully attend Sunday Mass, very few, very few indeed, go regularly to individual confession...

As Catholics we are perhaps sometimes guilty of thinking that the forms and practices of our faith are unchanging, that somehow, they are pretty much exactly as Jesus and the early Church members understood them and celebrated them. And while there are 'eternal truths', it is right and proper that in every age we seek to discern the best forms of expressing our faith, and in this regard the seven sacraments are no exception. In other words, we make a terrible mistake if we think that even a great sacrament cannot evolve throughout the Church's long history, and that God's Spirit cannot delight in blowing where He wills in every age. For God's Spirit can even speak to us through a secular world!

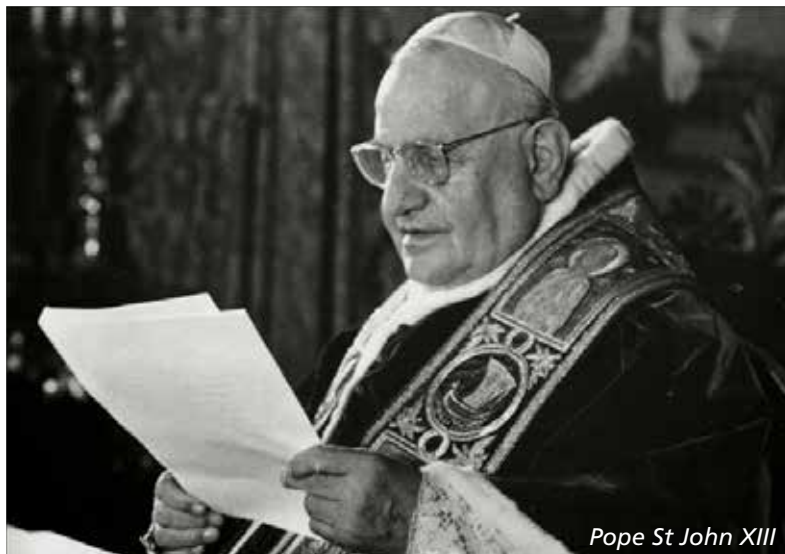
A study of the history of how the Church has understood sin and forgiveness reveals a gradual evolution into the celebration of the Sacrament as we know it today and suggests strongly that this evolution has not reached a point of completion. And frankly, this is exactly as God intends it to be. While the evolution has been gradual over many centuries, it has not always been smooth. Indeed, the key moments of growth have often sprung from crisis points.

In the early centuries of the Church,

baptism was clearly seen as both the initiation into the Christian community but also the definitive forgiveness for past sins, and this forgiveness aspect of baptism holds true even now. But a problem arose for the early Church when frequent periods of persecution caused some baptised Christians to renounce their faith due to the very understandable fear of torture and death. If these poor souls survived and the persecution lessened, they often sought re-entry to the Christian community, but they could not be re-baptised, and so how were they to be forgiven and reconciled to God and to those who had remained faithful? The eventual solution was to establish a mechanism of penance that often required a lifelong penitential process, but at least they had some hope of salvation and re-admittance into the faith community.

Many centuries later, when the Christian world was recovering from the 'Dark Ages' when barbarian hordes had destroyed the stability created by the Roman Empire, monks and nuns from Ireland and Scotland, who had been relatively remote from the massive disruptions in mainland Europe, had evolved a practice of frequent and private confession and absolution, arising from a strong tradition of spiritual direction. This practice challenged the harsh post baptismal process of forgiveness and seemed, to many, to better reflect the reality of human frailty and sin. Happily, the pastoral reality won over the long-established hard-line approach, and frequent private celebration of the Sacrament was accepted in Church life and thus provided the means for ongoing reconciliation.

Fast forward to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, and the Catholic



Pope St John XIII

Church's reaction, called the Counter-Reformation. One of the key priorities for the Protestant reformers was to lessen the power of the priest, and we have to admit that there were many abuses of clerical power that gave credence and legitimacy to this demand. One key tenet of most of the Reformers was to deny the necessity of having to confess one's sins to a priest and only receiving God's forgiveness through his ministry. For the Reformers, anyone could go directly to God for forgiveness, so who needed a priest's intervention? The Catholic response was simply to emphatically restate the necessity of confessing to a priest, and the private individual celebration we are familiar with was thereby firmly enshrined in Catholic life and practice.

It took the inspiration of... Pope Saint John XXIII... to 'throw open the windows' and allow God's Spirit to blow out the cobwebs... by convoking the Second Vatican Council

One of the tragedies of this turbulent time in the Church's history is that the Church reacted to Protestantism by becoming the 'fortress' church, and for the next four hundred years so many aspects of Catholic life and devotion were ossified, and there was no room for any development, flexibility or dissent. It took the inspiration of "good Pope John", Pope Saint John XXIII as he is now, to 'throw open the windows' and allow God's Spirit to blow out the cobwebs of those centuries by convoking the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s.

Pope St John XIII

At the heart of the Council's aspiration and therefore its teaching, was the restoration of the primacy of God's salvific action in Jesus. Where before the emphasis was on man's sin and the very real danger of eternal damnation, the focus rightly shifted to the outpouring of redemptive grace – the Easter alleluia. Even more than this, man's relationship with God was not so much me-God, but us-God. In other words, we go to God as a

community, and our relationships are key. This communitarian emphasis permeated the renewal of all the sacraments: we are baptised into the community, understood as the Body of Christ, and this union culminates in the Eucharist. Even the long established private and individual 'auricular' confession of sin was not immune from this community-centric theology. Indeed, sin could not be properly understood as just private and personal: all sin broke the relationship with God and others, and its remedy was 'reconciliation'.

Another key concern of the Council was to ensure and renew the *expressiveness* of the sacraments, so that they better effected what they signified. This meant that the sacraments should be more easily understood (without the need for any commentary) and would better communicate the efficacious grace of God. Allowance was therefore made for local variations and a degree of flexibility in their celebration.

Confession therefore not only got a new name – the Sacrament of Reconciliation – but three separate rites were promulgated in the revised Roman Rite of 1973:

Rite 1 - individual auricular confession, the traditional penitent-priest encounter with personal confession of sin and absolution – this is still seen as the normative rite;

Rite 2 - communal penitential service with personal confession and absolution;

Rite 3 - communal penitential service with a general form of confession and a single general absolution for all participants.

It will be fairly obvious from the above brief summary that the communitarian emphasis has been developed, especially in Rites 2 and 3. Let us say a little more about these two 'new' rites.



Rite 2: this rite embraces both the social and personal aspects of sin and forgiveness, and is often well attended when provided, and is especially appropriate in the penitential seasons of Lent and Advent. The communal penitential service often gives the individual's confession a greater depth through proper preparation, that the traditional Rite 1 often sadly lacks.

Rite 3: commonly called 'General Absolution', is essentially an *emergency* form of the Sacrament, and should only be performed on occasions of 'grave need', such as imminent danger of death or dire lack of confessors. The rubric also states that any general absolution should be followed as soon as practicable by the individual confession of grave sin (assuming the penitent is aware of such) and personal absolution, and certainly within a calendar year.

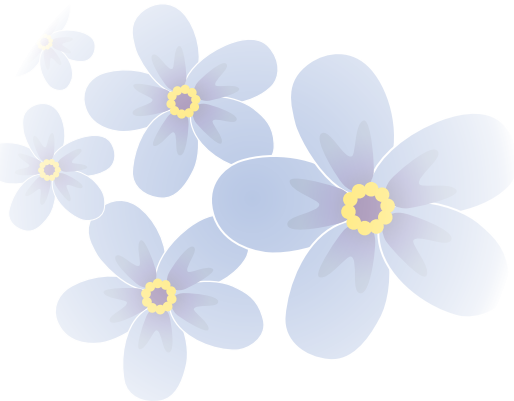
*...we go to God as a
community, and our
relationships are key...*

Each rite has a logical form and purpose, but it would be disingenuous to claim that all three rites are understood and there is no dubiety in their celebration. General Absolution in particular has been controversial, with some arguing that a more liberal use of it would dramatically demonstrate the Church as a compassionate Mother. There is a deal of evidence that when it has been celebrated in a normal parish setting it is very well attended. The official hesitancy to allow its wider celebration may be in large part a concern that it will result in hardly anyone going to private one-on-one confession. The irony is that, as we began by saying, this appears to be the case anyway. Indeed, there is evidence that

a measured use of Rite 3 might actually renew the practice of Rite 1, precisely by positing the Church as compassionate and reaching out to sinners!

Let me conclude with perhaps a radical thought: the Church's renewed self-understanding is that we are a sacred community in Christ, as expressed by Vatican II, though it has to be said that this theology has struggled to permeate many areas of Catholic life and practice. In this time of global pandemic, with constraints such as lockdown and social distancing, we are perhaps even more aware of just how much we are social beings, and how we are dependent on numerous forms of community, both religious and secular. Is it the case that, in our modern world, the fall-off in the practice of private individual confession actually reflects a grass roots rejection by ordinary Catholics of a too individualistic ceremony?

Perhaps instead of focusing entirely on getting the faithful back to private confession, more weight should be given to well prepared and meaningful celebrations of Rite 2? And this in the context of our parishes working towards being that community where outsiders say: "Those Christians, how they love one another!"



The Immaculate Conception of Mary by Kathy Bishop



Kathy Bishop is founder and editor-in-chief of The Faith Companion. She has a BA(Hons) in RE, an MA in Pastoral Theology specializing in Christian Spirituality and has trained for 2 years as a spiritual director at the London Centre for Spiritual Direction.

The Immaculate Conception of Mary is an often a misunderstood dogma of the Catholic Church. Many Catholics refer to the Immaculate Conception as the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb shortly following the Annunciation whereby the Angel Gabrielle informed Mary, she had been chosen to aid the Holy Spirit to bring about the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. This is completely wrong and is, in actuality, the virginal conception of Jesus, celebrated in the Church on 25th March. As 8th December is the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, I thought we should take the opportunity to clarify and examine this very important teaching of the Church.

Firstly, a "dogma" as defined by Cardinal Avery Dulles (1982:153) is "a divinely revealed truth, claimed as such by the infallible teaching authority of the Church, and hence binding on all the faithful without exception, now and forever." So, we can see this is a very important teaching that we need to understand correctly. Essentially, this teaching tells us that from the moment of her conception Mary, Mother of God, Our Mother was preserved from the effects of original sin and was gifted with abundant grace. This is so much more than her being born without original sin.

In order to understand Our Mother's Immaculate conception, we must first



go back to basics. When God created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the first two humans were made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-7) and Our Heavenly Father created a beautiful garden for them where they were able to live in close intimate union with God, enjoying His company. Now, as we know, God's nature is pure Love and spotless. Many theologians teach that nothing sinful can dwell in the presence of God's full glory. This is the whole reason the Church teaches that we go to Purgatory following our death to have our souls purged of any contaminating sin in order to eventually meet God face-to-face. So, Adam and Eve were spotless and pure since they were made in God's image and as such were able to commune with God in blissful harmony in the Garden of Eden.

Essentially, this teaching tells us that from the moment of her conception Mary, Mother of God, Our Mother was preserved from the effects of original sin...

Our Heavenly Father gave them life, gave them all they needed to live safely and in harmony as would any good earthly father.

"The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden there were the tree of Life and the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" (Genesis 2:8-9).

"And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or when you eat from it you will surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17).

As we know, the serpent tricked Eve and they both ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The first humans had fallen from the grace God had gifted them resulting in death and suffering entering into the world. He cast them out as He could no longer be in intimate communion with them due to this first original sin. This "stain" on humankind – Original Sin – is passed down from generation to generation. This predisposition of the urge to commit evil, that is, the predisposition to fall short of who God intended us to be, became known as the Fall. It became an indelible part of human nature. There was nothing that humankind could do to change things in their own power. The rest of the Biblical texts is the story of how God the Father, didn't turn His back on His fallen children, but choosing through Mary, born of the People of Israel, instead redeemed humankind through coming down to earth Himself as the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus. By the Incarnation of God in Mary's womb Father God redeemed and saved His children and through His saving action on the Cross Jesus completed this economy of salvation and saved God's children. So, the pathway is now open to all humankind to once again be able to commune and live in total peace and harmony with God face-to-face – the Good News of the Gospel – if we follow Jesus!

Immaculate Conception of Mary (was) a Feast originally called the Conception of Mary (which) arose in the Eastern Church in the seventh century

Franciscan Media on their article on this subject tracks the story of the development of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.



A Feast originally called the Conception of Mary, arose in the Eastern Church in the seventh century, coming across to the West in the eighth century. In the eleventh Century it gained the name we know now, the Immaculate Conception and in the eighteenth century it became the solemnity we now recognize today. So, we can see here and in Perwani's (2009) article the development of Mary's Immaculate Conception was a gradual one thought to be the result of the faithful accepting Mary's holiness. After the Council of Ephesus (431) Mary was solemnly declared Mary, Mother of God where most present believed that one who had been so close to God could not have experienced sinful acts. It wasn't clearly defined that Mary was spared a disposition toward evil inherent in original sin, until the twelfth century when there was much debate in England surrounding this subject and the universal redemption offered through Jesus. The Franciscan John Duns Scotus argued Christ's

redemptive grace was applied to Mary to prevent sin from reaching her soul and that this special intervention resulted in a more perfect redemption in her case. This special privilege was a result of God's special grace to Mary and not any merit on her part (Perwani 2009). A final point to make is that although preserved from original sin Mary was completely human in every other way.

The development of the teaching of the Immaculate Conception, then came about because of the recognition of the holiness of Mary. Since God is pure and spotless, then when God stooped down to become physical in the Incarnation, it was appropriate that God put in place special measures for His, spotless, pure presence to take flesh on earth. After Mary's acquiescence in Luke 1:38 "And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." we know the Holy Spirit overshadowed her making her His spouse

where she conceived Jesus in her womb. This could never have happened if Mary had had a sinful nature. If you remember God cannot be in intimate communion with anyone or anything that is stained with sin – remember the Holy Spirit too is God – He cannot be touched by evil and sin. Jesus, as the Second Person of the Trinity – that is God, Mary had to be conceived sinless from the first moment of her existence in her mother Anna's womb. She could not be like every other woman, so she became the second Eve, the Immaculate Conception by a special grace of God. Preparing the way for his economy of salvation.

The view of John Duns Scotus was accepted especially by Pope Sixtus IV, late fifteenth century and by the Councils of Basel (1439) and Trent (1546). However, it wasn't until as late as December 8th, 1854 that Pope Pius IX, with the support of the majority of Catholic Bishops across the world, solemnly declared in his Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was revealed by God. The Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception was born which is a holy day of obligation for all Catholics, that is, all must attend Mass on that day (Perwani 2009). Let me finish with the words from this most Blessed Pope Pius IX:

"From the beginning, and before time began, the eternal Father chose and prepared for his only-begotten Son a Mother in whom the Son of God would become incarnate and from whom... would be born into this world. Above all creatures did God so love her that truly in her was the Father well pleased with singular delight. Therefore, above all the angels and all the saints so wondrously did God endow her

with the abundance of all heavenly gifts poured from the treasury of his divinity, that this mother, ever absolutely free of all stain and sin, all fair and perfect, would possess that fulness of holy innocence and sanctity that which, under God, one cannot even imagine, and which, outside of God, no mind can comprehend fully."

Pope Pius IX (1854) (first para)

We pray:

Oh, Mary Most Holy, Mother of God, let us on December 8th honour you and remember your special place in the salvation history of humankind. Let us keep our eyes towards you as our one true and perfect example and keep close to you always as we traverse this earthly pilgrimage home to Our Lord and God and turn to you in time of need as Our Heavenly Mother. Amen

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The Lasting Reunion by Martin Ryan



Luke 7: 11 – 16

Soon afterward he went to a city called Na'in, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the city, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a large crowd from the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." And he came and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up, and began to speak. And he gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!"

If you were to ask me which person in the Bible, of all the myriad characters therein, is the most tragic – I think a good candidate would be the poor woman in this Gospel reading from St Luke, the woman we know as the widow of Nain. She is quite possibly the Bible's clearest picture of utter desolation.

To appreciate her tragic situation, we need to reflect on the prevailing culture at the time of Our Lord. Jewish society at that time was extremely patriarchal and male dominated. A key aspect of this mentality was that the man's family name should pass down from one generation to the next, and not just continue, but flourish, prosper and multiply. The best guarantee of this flourishing was seen in a man having sons, many healthy sons. Indeed, there was no clearer sign of God's blessing on a man but that he was the father of many sons, for then his line would surely prosper, and – crucially for the Jews – fulfil the solemn promise God made to Abraham and his descendants.

She is quite possibly the Bible's clearest picture of utter desolation.

In this short Gospel passage, we get a very succinct but hugely expressive picture of this poor woman's wretched plight. She had just lost her son – tragedy enough in itself. But he was her *only* son. And worse – she was already a widow! Her husband being dead, there was no earthly way his family name would continue. It was as if God Himself had abandoned her. This awful situation is further emphasised by the fact that 'a large crowd from the city was with her'. Her neighbours well understood the depth of her sorrow, and they did their best to support her by their presence and sympathy. But clearly, they could do nothing to heal her wound. And to compound her sorrows, without a male presence in the family her future would now likely be one of destitution.

Yet into her tragedy walked Jesus, the Son of God...

Notice another telling aspect of this short scripture narrative which again serves to emphasise her despair: in so many of Jesus' miracles He calls for an act of faith from the recipients of His grace *before* the miracle takes place. But not in this situation. As a Jewish man He felt her pain, and her shame, and... "He had compassion on her." Overwhelmed with compassion, He immediately and without hesitation gave her the one thing, the only thing that would heal her wound – her dead son back to life again! And the astonished onlookers declared: "God has visited his people!" What a glorious occasion that must have been for mother and son, and indeed for all the witnesses! Mother and son reunited! Sadness turned to joy. Alleluia!

And yet...

If we reflect on what this brief Gospel passage doesn't say – surely at some point later on, either the mother or the son would have had to die, one before the other? Perhaps the son did go on to raise a family and his father's name continued – but even so, mother and son would again know the pain, the separation and the finality of death. The reunion that Jesus gave them was truly wonderful but ... it was temporary.

...without a male presence in the family her future would now likely be one of destitution.

I think in this wonderful text we can resonate with the reality of human death, but even more importantly we can begin to grasp something of the enormity of Jesus' victory over death, and the firm hope that our Christian faith accords each and every one of us.

If you have suffered the death of a loved one, you know the awful pain and void that that loss inflicts. Prayers and sympathy can be welcome but nothing, nothing can heal this wound – because each person is *unique and irreplaceable*, and our love for them doesn't die. They are gone from us, and we know they are never coming back, and we try to console ourselves and continue living as best we can. Time may lessen the rawness of the pain but in truth time cannot heal us. And we know, do we not, that Jesus will not do for us what He did for that poor woman so long ago. Perhaps we should ask why not? Surely, we would clutch at even a temporary reunion.

What then does it mean to declare, as we Christians do, that Jesus has defeated sin and death? Death is still part of life,

and we didn't need a global pandemic to convince us of that.

As a Jewish man He felt her pain, and her shame ...

The good news of the Gospel is that, yes, there is a reunion that will fully heal the wound caused by the death of a loved one, and this reunion is no temporary affair. The reunion God wants for each and every one of us – is a lasting reunion, where there will be no more tears, no more separations, no more goodbyes. And it is not that our loved ones will come back to us in this life, but rather we, at our death, will go forwards to meet them in God's glorious kingdom.

Let's consider for a moment three key characteristics of that blessed reunion.

1. By God's grace in Jesus it will be a **lasting and final reunion**, in His eternal kingdom of love. There will never again be any separations – distance will be no object because we will live and move and have our being in the sight of God. *Death will be no more.*

2. By God's grace in Jesus it will be a **perfect reunion**. Here and now, our love is flawed. Our sin and frailty mean that all too often we hurt the very ones we love. In the final reunion we will be redeemed. This is hard for us to imagine, but all our relationships will be sin-free, with no misunderstandings, no communication lapses, no selfishness or pride to warp our love. *Sin will be no more.*

3. By God's grace it will be a **fully human reunion**. We are not disembodied spirits. We are flesh and blood, and the abundant life in God's kingdom will see us being able

to physically hug each other in the purity of redeemed love. We will be returned to that natural state of Eden which God intended for His children from the beginning. All manner of infirmity will be healed and especially those who today are disabled in mind or body will run and leap and dance! *Human frailty will be no more.*

By God's grace in Jesus we will see God face to face. There are no words to express the enormity of this grace and the bliss that this entails. Truly Jesus has defeated the grip of sin and death by His passion, death and resurrection. They may still be with us, but their days are numbered, and we can say with St Paul: "nothing, not even death ... can ever separate us from the love of God made visible in Jesus." Romans 8: 38 – 39.

Thus, the paradox of our faith: we who are alive now, are living in the shadows – our loved ones who have died and gone before us are fully alive, living in the eternal daylight of God's presence.

If the good widow of Nain could speak to us right now, she would surely say to us that, marvellous as her reunion on that amazing day so long ago was, it cannot compare to the reunion she and her son later experienced in the eternal kingdom of His love.

"With such thoughts as these you should comfort one another."
1 Thessalonians 4: 18

Footnote: many years ago, I wrote a poem based on this Gospel passage:

It is printed overleaf and I hope it expresses through the widow's words much of what I have tried to share in this article!

*Was this a son of God who came to me today?
I'm just a simple peasant – who am I to say?
The priests and nobles may laugh me to scorn,
But to tell the truth – I feel reborn!*

*My dear husband died just six months gone,
And then my precious, darling, only son.
I screamed at heaven to spare him so,
But die he did – no greater, crueller blow.*

*Was this a son of God who gave me back my son?
Nothing that a mortal has surely ever done?
The priests and nobles, at my door, contest,
They probe and vex why I should be so blest?*

*A byword for desolation,
All around me proffered consolation.
Empathy, sympathy, all very well,
But bereft and alone, I lived in hell.*

*Was this a son of God who touched the grave bound cart,
With true medicine for my sundered heart?
The priests and nobles crowding round my place;
Shouting, ranting, their fingers in my face.*

*Don't get me wrong, my neighbours really cared;
Weeping with me, while grateful they were spared.
But have no doubt, I speak from bitter fact,
There is no balm to heal death's vile impact.*

*Was this a son of God who graced our village street?
Who enfleshed good news – I kiss his sacred feet!
The priests and nobles: "Blasphemy! Disgrace!";
While scrabbling for evidence to frame their case.*

*I'm immune to their taunts, held high with joy,
I have been given back my sweet little boy!
A day will come when we are parted once more,
But now I can see a future blessed shore.*

*Was this a son of God, whose time was all too brief,
Whose words and manner vanquished all my grief?
The priests and nobles have no conviction;
They creep away murmuring 'crucifixion'.*

*May I make bold to echo Jesus' word?
To see death as the end is plain absurd.
This life is wonderful, crucial and key,
But we are graced for immortality.*

*It WAS a son of God who passed by here today!
Bringing life and joy in place of grim dismay.
Nothing can fill the void that death has blighted,
Save that dead and living be reunited!*

<http://www.poemsforpilgrims.com/welcome-to-poems-for-pilgrims/contents/the-widow-of-nain/>

Prayer During Advent by Kathy Bishop



It is common in the Catholic psyche today to see Advent as preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas, however, it was only at the end of the sixth century that this season was associated with Christmas in this way. Originally, the main focus was the Second Coming of Christ as promised in Mathew 24:27,

"For as the lightening comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man."

So, there was a shift from Advent being a time of preparation for the Coming of Christ at the End of Time, seeing it as a completion of his First Coming, to purely focusing on Christ coming to us at Christmas. However, in this season we also remember His coming to us through the Holy Spirit in the present and in the sacraments. All our Advent liturgies include symbols that represent all three of these aspects of Christ's Coming.¹

However, I would like to add remembering a Fourth Coming: the yearning of the people of Israel waiting for their Messiah, which we know to be Christ. The Nativity was the culmination of this yearning. In the broad sweep of salvation history these "Comings" are all linked and tell the story of God stooping down to gather His beloved, fallen children back into His fold. He never for one minute abandoned them, even though they forsook him.

...there was a shift from Advent being a time of preparation for the Coming of Christ at the End of Time... to purely focusing on Christ coming to us at Christmas.

Essentially, Advent is a time of intense spiritual preparation. It has been called

¹ Fairchild 2019

a “little Lent,”² because it traditionally included a penitential element with a period of increased prayer, fasting, and good works – still evident today; the Church emphasising the Sacrament of Reconciliation prior to Christmas Day. So, setting aside a special time to pray during Advent should be one of the pillars on which to rest your Advent preparation for Christ’s coming at Christmas, coming to us through the Holy Spirit and the Sacraments and finally coming at the End of Time at Christ’s promised Second Coming. However, as mentioned, I recommend remembering as a backdrop also the People of Israel waiting and yearning for the coming of the Messiah to save them as told in the Old Testament. Here I will look at each of these Comings introducing an aid to reflection – using a prayer journal.

Using a prayer journal can aid reflection as the action of writing has been found to trigger access to the subconscious. God often communicates, I have found, through the subconscious, so by using this tool to access what lies beneath, we can clear the way to hear God’s voice. The action of writing can enable you to go deeper, in, around and under the surface and what surfaces are nuggets of spiritual gold you know are from God. Links can be made; new understandings and images appear as if from no-where – God’s message to you is made known.

This won’t happen for all as it is God who decides what to reveal and to whom and when. It is entirely in His gift; however, many find using a prayer journal extremely helpful. Below I suggest Scripture passages that can be used to reflect on all four Comings of Jesus, but equally you can use readings during Advent liturgies.

Remembering the People of God Yearning for the coming of the Messiah

In the Old Testament, we see the story of God’s chosen people, the Israelites; chosen as God Himself formed them as a People when He freed them from slavery out of Egypt and with whom He made His first covenants with humankind en route to redeeming them to be His own again. Our Father, God tried to guide them into being obedient children, but they fell short again and again, falling into exile and slavery in Babylon and eventually being conquered by the Romans in Jesus’ time. Throughout their history God sent them messages



2 Scott Richert 2019

through the Prophets when they strayed and eventually the message of a Messiah and saviour abounded, this expectation passing from generation to generation. This Messiah (God's anointed One) was, of course, Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, God Incarnate, who became flesh in the womb of Mary, a virginal and spotless young woman from the House of David – the root of Jesse. I suggest reflecting on texts that predict Christ Coming as Messiah as a backdrop to your Advent preparations in order to fully grasp the momentous occasion of the birth of the Christ. You can find a list of these predictions at: <https://decisionmagazine.com/the-promise-of-the-messiah/> (Kaiser 2006)

Reflection: *Advent, I feel, could be a time to reflect and marvel at God's plan to reunite with His children. In prayerful reflection read through some of the suggested passages in the link above; notice what emerges, anything that sparks interest, any images or feelings. Write them in your prayer journal. I always do this as a letter to God as if I am speaking directly to Him. It makes my encounter more personal, more intimate, but everyone will find their own way of reflecting using a prayer journal. Ask yourself in what ways do I need saving, how have I fallen short as a child of God?*

The Nativity – Christ's First Coming

When we think of Christmas, we immediately think of the Nativity scene. The story of Mary and Joseph arriving at Bethlehem, Mary on a donkey as she was laden with child, finding no room at the inn forcing them to take shelter in a

stable where Christ was born and placed in a manger – not the image of the King/Messiah that was expected!

Reflection: *Ask God to open your eyes and heart and prayerfully read through the story of the Nativity of Our Lord in Luke 2:1-19. Journey through the story spiritually as if you were watching on the hillside. Note anything new, enlightening or inspiring and offer it to God in your prayer journal. Ask yourself in what ways do you see the Christ-Child as your Messiah? Indeed, in what ways do you need saving? See this scene as a continuation of the Story of the long-awaited Messiah.*

Christ Coming to us in the Holy Spirit

When Christ ascended to Heaven after His resurrection following His Passion, He did not leave us alone - Matthew 28: 20 "... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Although physically not with us, He remains with us through the Holy Spirit, who, in a special way we encounter through the Sacraments of the Church.

Scripture passages which talk of the coming of the Holy Spirit are:

Acts 1:8 Jesus says, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

John 14: 26 Jesus says, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you."

Reflection: *Prayerfully read through these passages and ask yourself*

how have I encountered the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, in my life? Have I experienced Jesus's presence at any particular time? Note any experiences or encounters you may have had during Mass, receiving the Sacraments, or in prayer or in other unexpected ways. How has the Holy Spirit come to you?

Using a prayer journal can aid reflection as the action of writing has been found to trigger access to the subconscious.

Christ Coming at the End of Time

In our profession of faith we proclaim at Mass we say that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead and in the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes 680-682 states:

"Christ the Lord already reigns through the Church, but all the things of this world are not yet subject to him." (CCC 1994:680)

"On Judgement Day at the end of the world, Christ will come in glory to achieve the definitive triumph of good over evil, which, like the wheat and the tares, have grown up together in the course of history." (CCC 1994: 681)

"When he comes at the end of time to judge the living and the dead, the glorious Christ will reveal the secret disposition of hearts and will render to each man according to his works, and according to his acceptance or refusal of grace." (CCC 1994:682)

Reflection: *The parable of the Bridesmaids shows us that we are to be ever ready for the coming of the Bridegroom (Christ, at His second coming). Read through Matthew 25:1-13 and ask yourself if Christ were to come now or if the end of time were to happen tomorrow, would you be ready? What would Christ see as the disposition of your heart? Have you refused or accepted God's grace in your life?*

When we reflect upon Christ's Comings in this way, we are looking at the bigger picture, a continuous story of Father God shepherding His children back to Him after the Fall in the Garden of Eden. The story is a continuous one spread across millennia, so these Comings are linked. As we pray during Advent looking forward to the Nativity, we know the Cross casts its shadow over the whole scene. Whilst we rejoice in this tiny infant, born to save us, the Cross is His ultimate end, Christ defeating death and evil, showing God's ultimate love for us. No person could show more love for another than to lay down their lives for others. Would you be prepared to do this for Him?

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Watch and Wait by Sue O'Donnell



Sue O'Donnell lives in Shrewsbury, Shropshire with husband Hugh and is the author of the great devotional "Listen Carefully to Me" and has penned many faith-based poems which can be found at www.a-zchristianpoetry.co.uk

"The Lord is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth."
Psalm 145 v 18

Watch, wait and wonder.	Heaven and earth combine
Wait, wonder and watch.	In God's own child.
Wonder, watch and wait.	Wild, wild imagining?
Ponder God's plan.	No it is true!
Christ will appear,	True for me,
Soon He'll be here.	True for you.
No fanfare of trumpets,	Love incarnate,
Although a heavenly choir	God's plan for men.
Will surely sing.	Began in Bethlehem
What will He bring?	In due season,
Watch, wait and wonder.	About to arrive.
Wait, wonder and watch.	Await, anticipate,
Wonder, watch and wait.	Get ready to celebrate.
Ponder God's love.	Count the days.
The light of Christ	Amaze, give praise,
Arriving one night	The Christ child
For to shine evermore.	Comes in love.

"Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, love divine."
A well-known hymn. Author not known.

*"Lord God, keep me steadfast in faith, make me joyful in hope and untiring in love.
Now and always." * Amen.*

* Joyce Huggett's adaptation of a blessing for the first Sunday in advent, found in
"The Sunday Missal."

The First Nativity by Wendy Mason



Wendy Mason was born in Queniborough, Leicestershire was a hospital administrator, lecturer and finally a capital manager for schools in Cornwall. She took early retirement in 2011 and studied creative writing. Her first novel, *St Francis - An Instrument of Peace*, was published after eight years of research. She lives in Falmouth with her husband, Harold and near their daughter Rachael and her family. She continues to write, with *Not Exactly Chaucer* published earlier this year.

Many, if not most of you, will be aware that St. Francis is credited with the creation of the first Nativity celebration. But have you ever wondered about how this came about?

I first became aware of his involvement as a young child. I was probably about six at the time when I was taken on my first visit to meet my grandfather. He had been a widow for many years and had moved away, so we had never met before. However, he had recently re-married and returned to live in Leicester. He had been introduced to his second wife, Doris,

while she was studying to become a nun with the Franciscan Order of St Clare, but she changed her mind when she met my grandfather, and they fell in love.

St. Francis is credited with the creation of the first Nativity celebration

Our visit was shortly before Christmas and in anticipation of our visit my grandfather had put up his tree and decorations, including a wonderful nativity scene. I was fascinated with the plaster-of-Paris characters and even more fascinated by the story Doris shared with me of that





first celebration of the Nativity, attributed to St Francis. As I was leaving, Doris gave me a copy of *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* and these stories of St Francis aroused my interest in this popular saint.

Many years later, I visited Assisi and fell in love with the pretty and tranquil town – a spiritual place. It was that visit that inspired me to research the life of St Francis and to write my first novel, *St Francis – An Instrument of Peace*.

The idea of celebrating the Nativity came to Francis at a difficult time in his life. He had returned from the Holy Land to find that his brothers were torn apart by conflict over the rule on poverty, his health and eyesight were failing, and he felt compelled to stand down as the Minister General of the Order he had created. Despite his pain and suffering, he retained his joy of life and still travelled widely to preach. Two days before Christmas, Francis and Leo arrived in the village of Greccio. This is my interpretation of the story of the first Nativity celebration:

We were welcomed and made comfortable by a good friend of ours, Giovanni di Greccio, a knight committed to living his life as a brother of the Tertiary Order. During supper that evening, I was suddenly struck by an idea.

‘Brothers let us do something different this year – something that will make everyone as joyous as ourselves. Let us create the atmosphere of that first Christmas when Our Lord Jesus Christ was born.’

‘It sounds good, but how do we do that?’ asked Brother Leo.

‘Let us ask all the village folk, and especially the children, to bring their pets to the Christmas Eve midnight Mass. We must also find someone who will bring an ox, a donkey, and a sheep. We will help everyone to experience what it was like on the day the baby Jesus was born in Bethlehem.’

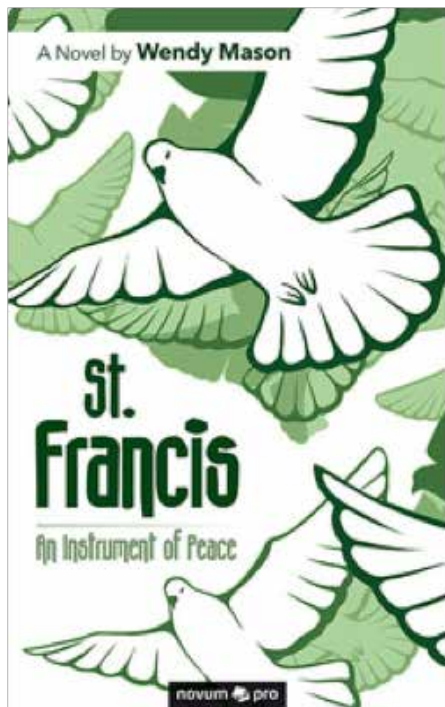
“Let us create the atmosphere of that first Christmas when Our Lord Jesus Christ was born.”

Giovanni offered to loan us animals and a cave on his land. He fashioned a crib and filled it with sweet-smelling straw. Invitations were issued and on the night of Christmas Eve, the population of the village and surrounding countryside, carrying rush torches and singing hymns, flocked to the cave. The children danced alongside their parents, leading dogs and carrying cats; birds in cages and even a lizard. I looked around the cave at the ox, the sheep, and the donkey. They nibbled at the straw, their breath gently billowing on the cold air. A brave mother wrapped her new-born baby in a shawl and laid him in the crib. A lump came to my throat, and tears prickled my eyes. I

could scarcely breathe as I realised that this was exactly how it must have been on that first Christmas morning.

The service was an absolute delight. The children laughed, danced and clapped their hands with glee. The donkey managed to deposit dung over Leo's feet, much to everyone's amusement. I led Leo outside and washed his feet while Giovanni swept up the droppings, and the festivities resumed. The villagers of Greccio were still celebrating as we left early on Christmas morning. (Extract from *St Francis – An Instrument of Peace*).

"I could scarcely breathe as I realised that this was exactly how it must have been on that first Christmas morning."



Almost eight hundred years later, we are still enjoying the joy of the Nativity that Francis created in the village of Greccio. The Nativity crib that I inherited from my grandfather will take centre stage in my Christmas decorations.

I hope you will all be able to enjoy your Christmas celebrations this year, although things may have to be a bit different. Skype, Vroom and Facetime meetings with friends and family, not quite as good as a few physical hugs, but better than nothing. Our arrangements will also take a lot more planning than usual, not quite as spontaneous as the example Francis gave us. I'm already buying presents online, so they can be wrapped, isolated and safely opened on Christmas Day. We are also planning to get together with my daughter, son-in-law and two grandsons by using their conservatory and adjoining room so that we can remain socially distanced with plenty of airflows. We may also celebrate Christmas over two days so that both grandparents have a special day with the children.

I hope you are all able to enjoy a Covid safe Christmas.

St Francis – An Instrument of Peace, is available from Novum Publishers or online at Amazon.

https://www.amazon.co.uk/St-Francis-Instrument-Wendy-Mason/dp/3990643762/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=wendy+mason&qid=15997



The Heart of Christmas: a reflection by **Hermarie**



We are fast approaching Christmas – that season of goodwill which breaks down barriers between races, ages and even faiths because of its joyous and magical effect. But most of all, it has a heart of peace which is hidden under layers of extravagance, selfish frivolity, and indulgence.

Christmas gifts have joined the band wagon of competitive extravagance with many vying for the most expensive or up-to-date gift in the store. Have we observed how children surrounded by gifts react? While the adults watched them wide-eyed and expectant, they rip off the wrapping, spend all of two minutes looking at the gift and divert their attention back to the wrapping paper!!!! Or if they do get around to using their toys, they lose interest in them very soon. There's a message in there

somewhere which is being conveyed to us by children, which is that you don't need impressive price tags and brand names to enjoy yourself.

... you don't need impressive price tags and brand names to enjoy yourself.

But most important of all – do the children know what Christmas is all about? That it is more than the tree, new clothes, rich food and expensive gifts and toys? It is sad to find so many of our children with only a vague knowledge of the Christmas Story. From the Annunciation, through the tedious journey to Bethlehem – the desperate search for suitable accommodation for the Mother-to-be, who was weary and heavy with child and, finally, finding a resting place in a lowly stable which accommodated the most

blessed and highest birth in the world, of God made Man. The message from the Angels to the Shepherds, the long journey of the Magi who set out from their wealthy palaces, in search of the God King who they found in such poor surroundings but went down on their knees and worshipped. The significance of the Crib, and its origin, from St. Francis of Assisi; the numerous customs and traditions of this wonderful festival which have come down the ages from all corners of the world – some of them which remain unchanged even today, like feeding the poor, sharing goodwill with those around us, especially the sick, the old and the lonely; preparing little offerings to be placed in the crib – making the crib itself in the home. Are the children of today familiar with any of this, or is it something they, and even their parents, do not consider important in order to celebrate the day? Then what became of that tradition of visiting relatives during the season? Over the years it has dwindled so that the young people of today don't know their family structure or where they fit in outside their immediate

family. There's too much rushing around trying to accomplish ... exactly what? We don't really know, but if we pause for a moment and think about it, for the most part it is 'much ado about nothing'! And all these opinions and decisions to take the word 'Christmas' out of the season and not have any pictures of the Nativity on display in public places – well, it depends exactly what we are celebrating; if it is a season for self indulgence and extravagance alone, they certainly have no meaning; but as Christians, is that what we are celebrating? Let's hope not.

It is sad to find so many of our children with only a vague knowledge of the Christmas Story.

So let's take time to peel off these layers of extravagance and indulgence, separate the dross from the gold and reach the heart of Christmas by being more aware of its true meaning – and we will surprise ourselves at what we will find – Joy and Peace which no money can ever buy.

Blessing of the Christmas Tree by Kathy Bishop

Some, in the secular world, put up their Christmas trees in November following retail companies trying to entice Christmas trade early into their shops. However, as Catholics, the custom is to put up the Christmas tree just before Christmas, even Christmas Eve, and to keep it up until the solemnity of the feast of the Epiphany. Putting up the Christmas tree and blessing it, traditionally, on Christmas Eve, is linked to the evening meal before the Christmas Eve vigil Mass

and it is here a blessing can be said with all the family gathered around the tree.

Origins of the Christmas tree are rooted in medieval mystery plays which depicted the tree of paradise, the Christmas light or candle symbolizing Christ as the Light of the world. The lights on the Christmas tree are illuminated after the prayer of the blessing which can be said by a parent or other member of the family – a great family moment to mark the start of the Christmas celebrations.



Origins of the Christmas tree are rooted in medieval mystery plays which depicted the tree of paradise.

After the family evening meal, the family gathers around the Christmas tree where a gathering song/hymn may be sung.

Leader: Makes the sign of the Cross and all say "Amen"

The following is suggested:

Leader: "Let us glorify Christ our light, who brings salvation and peace into our midst, now and forever."

All: "Amen"

Leader prepares those present for the blessing in these or similar words:

Leader: "My brothers and sisters, amidst signs and wonders Christ Jesus was born in Bethlehem of

Judea: His birth brings joy to our hearts and enlightenment to our minds. With this tree, decorated and adorned, may we welcome Christ among us, may its lights guide us to the perfect Light.

One of those present or the leader can then read a text of Scripture, e.g., Titus 3:4 (lines 4-7) or Ezekiel 17:22 (lines 22-24)

Reader: "The Word of the Lord"

All: "Thanks be to God."

Leader: "Let us ask God to send his blessing upon us and upon this sign of our faith in the Lord."

All: "Lord, give light to our hearts."

Leader: That this tree of lights may remind us of the tree of glory on which Christ accomplished our salvation, let us pray to the Lord."

All: "Lord, give light to our hearts."

Leader: “That the joy of Christmas may always be in our homes, let us pray to the Lord.”

All: “Lord, give light to our hearts.”

Leader: That the peace of Christ dwell in our hearts and in the world, let us pray to the Lord.”

All: “Lord, give light to our hearts.”

Intercessions are then said after which the leader invites all to say the Lord’s Prayer.

Leader: “Lord, Our God, we praise you for the light of creation:

The sun, the moon and the stars at night.

We praise you for the light of Israel:

The Law, the Prophets and the wisdom of the Scriptures.

We praise you for Jesus Christ, your Son:

For he is Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Prince of Peace.

Who fills us with the wonder of your love.

Lord God,

Let your blessing come upon us as we illumine this tree.

May the light and cheer it gives

Be a sign of the joy that fills our hearts.

May all who delight in this tree

Come to the knowledge and joy of salvation.

We ask this through Christ, our Lord.

All: Amen

The lights of the tree are then illuminated.

I find among the glitz and glamour of Christmas... this blessing helps us to refocus on Christ our Light.

The blessing concludes with a verse from “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

All: “O Come, though dayspring come and cheer,

our spirits by thine advent here;

disperse the gloomy clouds of night

and death’s dark shadow put to flight.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel

Shall come to thee, O Israel.

I say this or a similar blessing of our Christmas tree every Christmas Eve after our evening meal and prior to going to Midnight Mass. It is a truly blessed family moment. If you don’t already bless your Christmas tree in this way, I urge you to gather your family around your tree this Christmas Eve and try this little devotion. I find among the glitz and glamour of Christmas (and there is a lot of glitz and glamour in our house thanks to a certain daughter!) this blessing helps us to refocus on Christ our Light.

May Christ’s light shine on your homes this year and may you have a very blessed Christmas.

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This article is based on Page 528 of this USCCB publication:

USCCB (2007:528) “Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers: Revised Edition” found at:

<https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/sacramentals-blessings/objects/blessing-of-a-christmas-tree>

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St John Vianney: Story of a Saint 1786-1859

by Michael Doyle

Michael Doyle: Michael was educated at Oxford University and lives in Walsall. He has been a regular contributor and friend to The Faith Companion.

Holy Mother Church has always produced wonderful saints to aid and lead us on our individual journey of Faith. One particular Saint is St John Vianney, who was brought up in Revolutionary France (1789) where the Church was persecuted and vilified, was a great shining beacon of light at a time of adversity.

While working on the family farm, John Mary was convinced that he was called to be a priest.

While working on the family farm, John Mary was convinced that he was called to be a priest. With the rise of Napoleon



John Mary Vianney was born at Dardilly, near Lyons in 1786. When he was three the French Revolution 1789 began and two years later Dardilly found itself lumbered with a "constitutional priest". This meant that John and his parents had to help in secret at the Mass of any fugitive loyal priest, who came into the area. During the time of the "terror" 1793-94, he was learning to be a herd boy, shepherding the cattle and sheep of the Vianney's farm. He made his First Communion in secret when he was thirteen after Mass.

and the Concordat legalising the Church under papal obedience, the position of the Church improved somewhat. This meant the freedom of the Church was restored and Mass and the Sacraments could be celebrated.

The local bishop in the area of Dardilly started, via the priests, classes for pre-seminary training and Fr. Balley did so in the local parish, and so John Mary was enrolled. He had great difficulty in learning to read and write as he was not used to using his brain in an academic way. His education was basic,

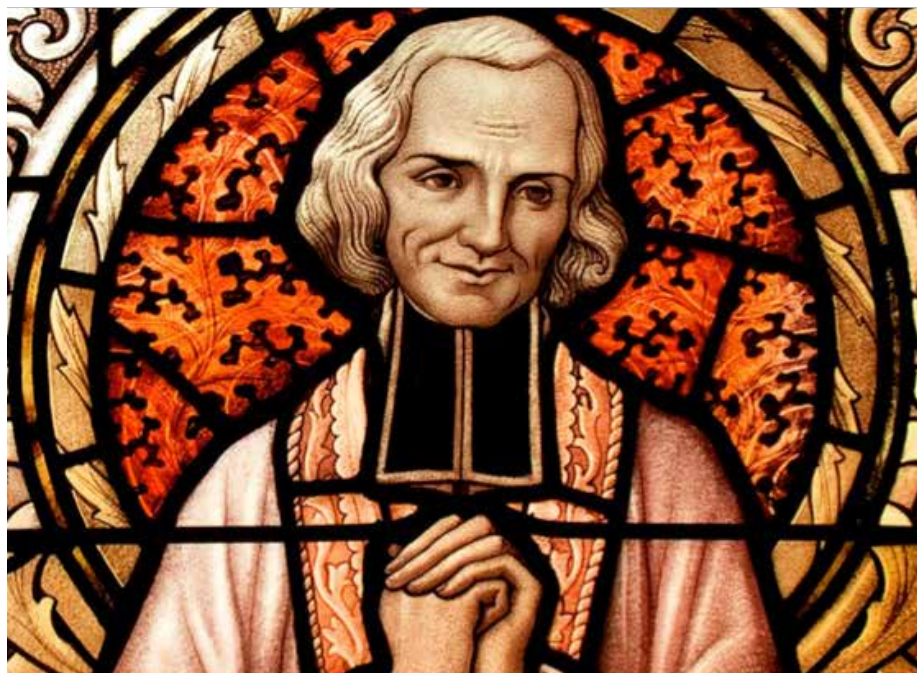
and he had no Latin, which was essential for the priesthood. The Abbe Bally of Ecully, received him among the pupils whom he taught at the presbytery but found considerable difficulty in teaching him anything. Meanwhile, owing to an error, he was called up for service in Napoleon's army in 1809. However, a misunderstanding caused him to be posted as a deserter and then a general amnesty allowed him to return home.

John Mary continued his studies at Verrieres for his philosophy, but he had no aptitude for learning. The seminary at Lyons where he went for theology was obliged to send him away because he could gain nothing from the lessons delivered in Latin. The Abbe Balley took him once more and taught him sufficient theology from a French manual and presented him for ordination in 1815. He was accepted principally on account of his devout life.

On the feast of the visitation in 1814 John Vianney received minor orders in the Cathedral of Lyons. On 12th August 1815 Bishop Simon laid hands on him and anointed him. The following day he offered his first Mass and was appointed curate to the Abbe Balley. After the death of Abbe Balley, he was appointed parish priest of Ars-en-Dombes in the Ain region, a remote and neglected place of 230 souls.

On his way to the lonely and desolate village of Ars, the future Saint rewarded his guide with the promise "You have shown me the way to Ars, I will show you the way to heaven".

"You have shown me the way to Ars, I will show you the way to heaven".





Of the fifty or so families in Ars, only a few showed any interest in the Church or God, but they came for the Curé installation. John Mary was in his 32nd year. At two o'clock the next morning one of the locals went into the church out of curiosity and found the new Curé on his knees. People began to talk, "This is not like the others". His sallow and sunburned face looked wrinkled, but many peasants, who tilled the soil were that way as well.

John Mary was not much taller than five feet and thin; his hair longish and his features angular. He wore rough shoes and an ill-fitting black cassock made of coarse wool. He ate very little, a few potatoes and some milk every day, and once in a while a simple flour snack called maitfaim. He had the ability to live on two hours of sleep and heard upwards of sixteen hours of confession day and night.

The good priest laboured against the immorality and religious indifference that he found amongst his parishioners. He converted his entire parish and eventually became famous as a confessor and spiritual director, with 300 people coming to Ars every day to confess to him. He heard confessions for 13-17 hours each day and had a remarkable gift. The holy Curé felt boundless compassion for sinners. He sobbed at the thought of souls redeemed by the terrible sufferings of Christ being damned for ever.

The Curé suffered attacks by the devil for over thirty years. From 1824 until two years before his death, he suffered both spiritual infestation and obsession, and occasionally confronted people who were possessed.

It goes without saying the Satan is the spirit of evil and is haunted by any form of holiness. The Devil used ordinary methods of temptation. He and the evil spirits

tried to terrify the Curé by noises and moving objects. This is called infestation. Obsession is physical assault of an evil spirit in and through one's consciousness. It was no surprise that Satan would hate John Mary Vianney and try to hurt him. For example, rats would run over him, trying to toss him out of bed. At times, the evil spirit would seize him by the feet and drag him about the room. The Devil declared to him that if there were 3 such men as himself on earth, his (Satan's) kingdom would be broken.

You must accept your cross; if you bear it courageously it will carry you to heaven.

During his priestly life some miracles were attributed to John Mary. He healed the deaf and blind Claudine Venet of Vinegneux on the 1st February 1856. "Your eyes are healed but you will be deaf for another 12 years – It is God's will that it should be so". Her hearing returned when he said it would.

When a boy entered the church with a large tumour on his face, John Mary forgot the crowd that had gathered, and touched the boy's face, and the tumour immediately disappeared.

The Curé of Ars died on the 4th August 1859. Walking behind the funeral cortege was Antoine Givre, who once heard the Curé say to him "You have shown me the road to Ars. I shall show you the road to heaven".

This is a short account of how a simple man without great expectations beyond saving souls transformed an insignificant backwater parish against all odds. St John Vianney devoted his heart and soul to his parishioners and their needs. The

Curé D'Ars was canonised by Pius XI in 1925. The same Pope made him principal patron-saint of the parochial clergy throughout the world in 1929.

The following sayings from the saint I have found very helpful in my journey of faith and I hope others will as well:

1) If you set out to meet God, he will come to meet you.

2) Our home is in Heaven. On earth we are like travellers staying at a hotel. When one is away one is always thinking of going home.

3) God commands you to pray, but he forbids you to worry.

4) You must accept your cross; if you bear it courageously it will carry you to heaven.

5) Those who do not pray stoop towards earth like a mole trying to make a hole to hide itself in.

6) We have nothing of our own but our will. It is the only thing which God has so placed in our power that we can make an offering of it to him.

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Our living faith by Paul Cassidy

Paul Cassidy: has lived in Northern Ireland with his family most of his life and works in the retail sector. He has a keen interest in Religion especially writing about the Catholic faith.



Prayer and faith are at the heart of our Christian religion. Prayer is of great importance. If you can't pray, then practice, since we all start somewhere. Even the greatest of us in the religious life started with a single step. And practice in prayer makes perfect, as practice does in so many other areas of life.

If you want something, then pray, if you want faith, then pray. If you want to overcome something again pray. All is possible for God, for Him nothing is impossible. You can tell the mountain to jump into the sea, if you have faith. For some of us what we need, what we seek, is like asking a mountain to jump into the sea, is it not? Sometimes we have big problems or needs that are overwhelming. But God is all-powerful, what can He not

do? Only have faith. Faith is a constant in our relationship with God. Trust Him. He wants us to trust Him. He sees our lives He wants to help us.

And God has a call for us, a vocation. He has work for us to do, he needs us. And He equips us to do His work that he calls us to do. First, have faith. Put on His armour. When we are asked by Paul to put on armour, we are asked to have faith. We are asked to live in faith. God has important work for us to do. To do this work we need faith. To be effective, we need to be ready and fit for service. If we are reluctant, incapacitated, unwilling or weighed down by the pleasures and comforts of this world we will not work effectively for God, perhaps not at all. So, clean out your house, keep it clean, and

then go and work for God.

So, clean out your house, keep it clean, and then go and work for God.

Marathon runners need to train and prepare, so do we if we want to work for God. So, train now, prepare always. Your faith is not an injection. It cannot sustain itself; it needs nurturing and care. It needs to be strengthened and looked after. The branches on the vine stems in the vineyard do not produce their fruit by accident, they too need to be cared for, to be pruned, watered, and managed carefully. So, too, it is like that with our faith.

So, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can tell this mountain to move from here to there. So, Jesus told us. What could we not do if our faith was greater and bigger than a mustard seed? Jesus tells us to enter by the narrow gate because many try to enter by the wide gate or opening and fail. So, do your best. He is telling us to focus on our faith in God and our relationship with God. Faith is to be lived, breathed, and absorbed deeply into your soul. We live by faith, breath with faith, act with faith, live as if we were spirit in Heaven joined with God. Nothing is impossible to God. We live in a real world and we will be challenged and tested but we go forth in faith, helped by God, for He can overcome all things, help us with all things. There is no need to be afraid. God will help us with all our difficulties in life. Hardship will come to us, but God is always near, and He will always help us in everything. Only, have faith in Him.

We live by faith, breath with faith, act with faith, live as if we were spirit in Heaven joined with God.

For me, the heart of the Gospel is the passage where it says, "Ask, and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matt 7:7). This saying by Jesus is the essence, the heart of the Kingdom of God. By saying this, Jesus invites us to have a relationship of faith in God. We trust that we will receive whatever we ask of Him. So, we only have to ask, and we will receive whatever we want? Does this sound too good to be true? Not at all, for nothing is impossible to God. This saying covers the whole range of the many problems, issues and situations that we may encounter in our human existence and not just worldly needs and issues but all that we need spiritually, too.

Many of us have basic and essential material needs and we also have complex needs, for example, we seek guidance on a difficult relationship or we would like to see an outcome to some problem that is far beyond our ability to influence or resolve. So, Jesus wants us to ask or to seek and we will receive. Or, we may seek opportunities that are not yet present in our lives, hence Jesus says knock and the door shall be opened to you. Spiritually, we can be looking for some opportunity, and Jesus can help us with this too.

Your faith is not an injection. It cannot sustain itself; it needs nurturing and care.

But it is not on a one-off basis that we come to God to ask Him for something or just to satisfy some essential needs.



God asks us to trust Him always and throughout our lives, to have faith in Him. We do this through relationship, through prayer. In time we learn to trust God, to have faith in Him. God, through Jesus, reveals Himself to us in a way never known before in our history. And He has big plans for us. He calls us to know Him in a way never known to anyone before us. This is the Kingdom of God, of which Jesus speaks.

In what other ways can we describe the Kingdom of God? The Kingdom of God acts in changing ways. It is like the tree that grows and grows, and the birds make their home in it. It is like the yeast that expands when mixed with flour and water. This means that the Kingdom of God changes throughout time and throughout our lives. It comes into our lives, enriches us, helps us, amazes us, and yet, we know not how.

The Bible, the word of God, is similar to the Kingdom. It has an ever-changing impact.

Every time you read it you gain fresh insight and inspiration. The Kingdom of God is similar. In each century you can see the ever-changing work of the Kingdom of God, work that has produced so many graces and positive results in our lives. We cannot fully imagine or comprehend the Kingdom of God. It is like the wind; we know not where it blows. But let us listen to the wind to discern the Kingdom in our world and in our lives today.



Draw Near by Sue O'Donnell

'Come closer, come closer,
draw near My child.
Do not hide away from Me
frightened by feelings of your own
inadequacy.
We, the Trinity, take care of you
if you only draw near
to let My love appear as reality.'

'Look at My Son,
He who has begun a good work
in you, with you
that you may believe in Me
as you receive of your Lord,
the Giver of life.
He has overcome all human strife,
being the Christ, the Messiah.'

'My chosen One offering life,
life in all fullness
because He is in Me, of Me.
Invite Christ in by the Spirit
and you will see the world
from a different perspective to human eyes.'

'Rise above the everyday difficulties
by the Spirit of Christ alive in you,
striving above merely surviving,
achieving a full measure of joy.
Joy is My presence among you
giving your life eternal meaning,
a meaning which starts now.'

'When I made your spirit, soul and body
a whole person, complete in My
likeness and image,
it was to experience your spiritual life
through the events which your soul
and body take part in.
Your spirituality is what matters, really
matters.
Life on earth is but short,
offered as a preparation time for

*"Sanctify the Lord God in your
hearts...." 1 Peter 3 v 15*



what lies ahead, the reality of
heaven.'

'This you will experience through your
spirit,
so can you not see the merit
in using this preparation time gainfully?
Come to Me, My child.
Come in Christ.
Come through My Spirit connecting you
to do all through Christ.'

*"....and always be ready to give a
response to everyone who asks you
a reason for the hope that is in you,
with gentleness and reverence."
1 Peter 3 v 15*

'Draw near to Him, and you come
close to Me.
Who else has experienced and can
reveal,
can teach about the full fullness of Me
known both in heaven and upon earth?
The Saviour's birth was to change
mankind
for a better future, known previously
only to Me.'

'But I have told you of this future.
Will you now believe?
Will you receive of Me in My
sacraments,
in My Word spoken by Christ,
in the gift of My Spirit?
Will you lift your eyes heavenwards
to see further than your immediacy?

'Heaven is within reach even upon
earth,
so as to taste and see My goodness,
for those who live with the will
to seek uprightness in Christ.
No, it is not easy in this life.
I did not intend it to be,
as anything worthwhile must be worked
for,
sought after, strived for, to be valued,
truly valued.'

'Come easily is a case of
take it or leave it as you will.
But heaven is not like that.
It is the pearl of greatest price
to be truly treasured above all else.
Heaven is a place, the total embrace of
love,
My love for you, your love for Me
and indeed, our love for every other.'

'But, you will discover through spending
time,
your time given willingly, readily,
heaven is also a state of mind.
That mind where you find yourself
or allow yourself, or train yourself,
to continually be with Me.
Come closer, My child, joy awaits.
Draw near, you will be glad you did.'

*"I speak these things, not with words
taught me by human wisdom, but
with words taught me by the Spirit.
And so I explain spiritual truths to
spiritual people." 1 Corinthians 2 v
134 (personalised)*

*"Blessed be the God and Father of
our Lord Jesus Christ, who according
to His abundant mercy has begotten
us again to a living hope through the
resurrection of Jesus Christ from the
dead, to an inheritance incorruptible
and undefiled and that does not fade
away, reserved in heaven for you, who
are kept by the power of God through
faith for salvation." 1 Peter 1 v 3-5*

Thank You, heavenly Father, for making
us in Your likeness and image. In this
way we are more spirit than anything
else. Guide us and guard us that we
may develop our spiritual life effectively
through the discipline of receiving the
sacraments, praying and reading the
scriptures that we may draw ever closer to
You in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, knowing
Your life within us. I ask this in Christ's
name as He is the full revelation of Your
loving presence here amongst us.

*"Great are You, Lord God, worthy of
all praise, more awesome than any of
the gods. Nothingness, all the gods of
the nations. You Father, it was who
made the heavens, in Your presence
are splendour and majesty, in Your
sanctuary strength and joy. Let us give
You Your due, families of peoples give
You Your due of glory and power, give
You, Lord God, the glory due to Your
name. May we bring an offering, enter
Your courts and bow down to You."
Amen (based on Chronicles 16 v 25-
29).*

Do Not Be Afraid by Fr Thomas Kent



Fr Thomas Kent was ordained a priest in Arundel Cathedral in July 2020 and shortly afterwards was appointed to work within the Catholic Parish of Guildford in the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton. He shares his journey to the priesthood with The Faith Companion in the hope to inspire other young men.

I am only twenty-seven years old, and on the eleventh of July this year, I was ordained to the priesthood in Arundel Cathedral. Sometimes, I can't quite believe it. "Is this really happening to me", I had often thought to myself, "am I actually going to be a priest"? There were moments in the run up to the ordination when I felt really afraid. God knows, there are many other things in life that I would be perfectly happy to have done instead, having a girlfriend for example, or even getting married.

Nevertheless, I believe that becoming ordained was absolutely the right thing to do! I came to the realisation that being a celibate priest is what God desires me to do with my life. I simply cannot do anything better, anything more fulfilling, than what God desires for me. He is the author of all goodness, and his vision is always far greater than anything I can dream of. When I was on my pre-ordination retreat, after several days of prayer and spiritual preparation, the Lord put the following phrase onto my mind: "Do not be afraid". A few days before

the ordination, I then met up with my brother. He wanted to give me a little present; it was a pair of cufflinks –on to the back of which he had engraved the words: "Do not be afraid". There was no way he could have known that these were the same words that had come to me whilst I was on my retreat. I took this as a really positive sign from the Lord.

I haven't always been a committed Catholic. I was baptised and brought up in the Church of England, and although my dad converted when I was eight, my mum and most of the rest of my extended family remained very anti-Catholic. As a result of this family tension, I was never offered First Holy Communion or Confirmation in either church. Later, as a young teenager at school, peer pressure became too much, and as I gradually found more interesting things to do on a Sunday morning, I stopped going to church. This remained the case until shortly before I became eighteen, I finally did become Confirmed as a Catholic. But how did it happen?





Bishop Richard Moth laying his hands on Fr Tom

*I came to the realisation that being a celibate priest is what God **desires** me to do with my life. I simply cannot do anything better...*

My parents had taught me how to pray as a child, and so, when I went through several rough patches at around the age of fifteen, I began to pray almost as though by instinct. It was not formal prayer, more like basic conversation really, except that it was directed towards God. I used to ask Him for help with certain things, and gradually, over time, it became my absolute lifeline. Yet, I still did not think of going to church. Paradoxically in fact, the more relaxed I became, the more I drifted away from the life of the Church. I did all the things I imagine most teenagers did: partying, a little underage drinking, falling in love ... Actually, the experience of falling in love with someone was what ultimately

helped me to go beyond myself, helped me to discover a deep yearning to serve other people in their needs. It was then that my prayer life became more intense, particularly as it became more focussed on another person. After a while, I came to the belief that it is only through prayer that true joy can really be felt.

My experience of a growing intimacy with God led eventually to a far more gripping appreciation of His dying on the cross for us, of His resurrection as a sign of victory over evil, and of His desire for us to receive Him in the Eucharist. I owe this largely to Pope Benedict XVI, who during his visit to the UK back in 2010, was a source of great inspiration to me and my whole family. So much so that it led not only to my own Confirmation as a Catholic, but also to that of my brother and, incredibly, my mum too. It was during one of his addresses – Hyde Park, if you want to look it up – that a powerful attraction towards the priesthood was also ignited,

and it was a fire in my heart that I simply could not put out. You see, the priestly ministry encapsulates everything that I had experienced so far: it is the service of others through prayer and intercession, climaxing especially in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Although I had originally planned to study medicine, at the age of twenty I ended up going into the seminary.

Lord put the following phrase onto my mind: "Do not be afraid"

Being full of idealism about the Church and the power of grace (I believe they call it "convert's zeal") one of the challenges of seminary formation has been an integration of this enthusiasm with the realities of everyday life. In slowly learning to revisit and accept my weaknesses and vulnerabilities, I sense that God has brought about even further healing in my life. In gradually breaking down vain images of self, he has helped me to realise that the fruitfulness of a priest, or indeed of any one of us, depends not so much upon human effort, but upon openness to the Holy Spirit. There were moments when I became very doubtful that I was doing the right thing with my life, only for God to show me that He was really only stripping away my self-assurance and replacing it with trust in Him.

*I came to the belief that it is **only** through prayer that true joy can really be felt.*

The same goes for all of us. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom 8:31). There is no need to be daunted or afraid. If we can learn to truly be ourselves – to become the people God wants us to be – then there is to be found, even in the face of immense suffering, joy in abundance.



Newly ordained Fr Tom

My Search for God by **John Rodger**

John Roger lives in Greater London and is the founder and coordinator of Catholic Street Evangelization.

My Mum was born in 1918 in Austria and baptised a Catholic, but she was non-practising and my Scottish father did not believe in any kind of god. I remember him saying: "John, ask your RE teacher, if there is a god, why are there wars?" So, as I grew up, I heard nothing about religion; my Dad talked more about the teachings of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Madame Blavatsky. Yet my parents' doubts did not stop me from being curious about God. I wondered about how we got here, and I thought about this question from a young age.

I was born in 1944 and food rationing continued until I was twelve years old, although I never had to go hungry. I lived in Brixton and in many ways, I had a difficult and scary childhood, but I won't say too much about that here. I do remember though, that I joined the scouts when I was eleven years old. Wow, that was new-found freedom, going camping to Devon on the back of a great

big removal van! There were no worries about health and safety in those days, so we enjoyed looking over the open back of the lorry at the traffic, laughing with excitement as we saw the countryside for the first time ever.

We camped in a farmer's field and I remember vividly, as if it was yesterday, waking up after midnight one night. I stepped out of the tent and looked up at the sky. Instead of the usual London fog, I saw thousands and thousands of stars, and as I was staring in amazement, I saw others that seemed much bigger. They looked closer and it was as if they were hanging on strings. I cannot explain this experience in words, but I could not stop gazing up to heaven. Heaven stared back at me and I had a deep feeling inside of knowing, a knowing that touched me profoundly and never left me. Even now, this memory makes me want to cry.

Sadly, this revelation did not stop me being a dishonest, swearing, angry, thieving kid!



... I had a deep feeling inside of knowing, a knowing that touched me profoundly and never left me.

I didn't enjoy school and I found learning difficult due to the lack of classroom support, so on my fifteenth birthday, when I could leave school legally, I went to work in the local greengrocers for £3.10 shillings a week. I wasn't there very long- I got the sack when they found out I was taking food home. So, I worked for my Dad as a scaffolder, although it was illegal for under-eighteens to do this type of dangerous work.

I was spiritually searching and soon became interested in positive thinking and the teachings of Al Koran. His focus was on being successful and getting people to like you. Also, in my youth I became involved with spiritualism. I was curious to know where people went after they had died and wondered if you could contact them. So, I took part in seances and witnessed many supernatural activities during this time. I saw unbelievable things happening right in front of me, and I knew there was a spirit world that was real. I knew that if spirits existed, then God must be real too.

In 1999, God intervened and made it clear to me that this was not the right spiritual path. For a couple of days, whenever I opened the Bible, the pages would open at Acts 16:16- the story of the Apostle Paul meeting a woman who was telling fortunes. I knew that God was warning me not to engage with spirits for guidance. Immediately after this revelation, I went to see my local Anglican priest.

The vicar was a bit shocked to meet someone who was so hungry to worship God and he suggested I confess all my

sins. I met him at the font the following day to read out the list of my sins and burn them. On a humorous note, there was a lady present and she nearly fainted when she heard about all the things I'd done! After this, Pamela, my wife and I became involved with our local church, but we struggled to sense the reality of God; somehow it all seemed so dead.

From there I went to Holy Trinity in London; I studied the Alpha Course and became involved in prison ministry. But I could not settle; once again, something was missing. Without going into all the details of our long spiritual journey, we helped another pastor to grow a church and did a lot of street evangelism to draw people in. But eventually we realised that we did not agree with his teaching because it was a prosperity gospel, promising that God would give us all sorts of things if we had enough faith. I realised that this theology made God and Jesus into our servants, whereas we are created to love and serve God and demonstrate his love to the world. After this cult-like experience we journeyed on to all sorts of churches, but we always ended up feeling that we were in the wrong place. Despite our many disappointments, we always knew that Jesus was Lord, so we kept going out on the streets to tell people the good news of the gospel. And then finally, we had a breakthrough in our spiritual journey.

... I became more and more convinced that Christ started only one Holy Apostolic Catholic Church.

We had just moved into a new neighbourhood and one day I was loading up my car with boards and booklets, to go out on the streets evangelising with

Pamela. My next-door neighbour came over to introduce himself to us. He is a Catholic priest, Fr. Andrew Pinsent. Fr. Andrew asked what I was doing, and I told him I was going to Windsor to share the Gospel on the streets.



"That's amazing! I really wish Catholics would do that", he exclaimed.

He told me he worked at Oxford University and explained what he did. I discovered he was a physicist who had previously worked at CERN; a highly intelligent, scholarly man. Somehow, we hit it off and became great friends! My first thought was that perhaps God wanted me to deliver Fr. Andrew from his heresies! (Sadly, I had picked up a lot of false and negative beliefs about Catholics in my previous churches).

At once I was struck by Fr. Andrew's kindness and grace. He never judged us in our conversations with him and his deep love for Christ was obvious. That resonated with me and every time we bumped into each other we would talk. I had so many questions to ask; we talked about St. Augustine, St. John Henry Newman, St. Thomas Aquinas, the history of the Church, and so much more. Through these conversations, Pamela and I transitioned from our Protestant

standpoint to the true Catholic faith. Gradually I became more and more convinced that Christ started only one Holy Apostolic Catholic Church. I could see the truth clearly at last!

After reaching this point, I became terrified I might die before becoming a Catholic! Fr. Andrew arranged for our reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church. His father sponsored me, and his mother sponsored Pamela; what a blessing and a relief! I am so happy that our friendship with Fr. Andrew remains strong, and even though he travels all over the world, he makes time to meet with us. There is no doubt in our minds that God sent him to us, and we have been deeply blessed through knowing him.

I am deeply grateful to Fr. Andrew and other Catholics who encouraged me over the years. My search for God has been an incredible, sometimes painful journey, but in His grace, He has led me safely home. Pamela and I now work as lay evangelists and have fully embraced our mission of sharing the Good News about Jesus Christ with people we meet on the street. We founded a lay apostolate, Catholic Street Evangelisation, around six years ago and the work has spread into Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. Our mission is based on a key scripture:

Our evangelisation is strictly non-confrontational; we hand out free rosaries and tracts, and we pray for people if asked. We are aware that only God can change people's hearts, but we seek to be witnesses for Christ, sharing the joy of our salvation with those who are open to our message. We encourage other Catholics to consider assisting in this work, which has the support of Fr. Andrew, Bishop John Keenan, and other senior clergy within the church (for more information, please visit www.catholicstreetevangelisation.co.uk).

Await in Gathering Joy by Sue O'Donnell

"And You, little child, You shall be called Prophet of the Most High, for You will go before the Lord to prepare a way for Him, to give His people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the faithful love of our God in which the rising Sun has come from on high to visit us, to give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow dark as death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."
(Luke 1 v 76-79)

Angel voices gladly singing,
good tidings on their way they're ringing:
'Soon to be born your Saviour King,
birthed in a stable. What gifts He'll bring.
The promised arrival announced at night,
is human hope for ever made bright.
Mary, chosen mother of a newborn child,
child most holy, meek and mild.
Son of God and Son of man,
new covenant of love God's blessing began.

"...to extend His dominion in boundless peace, over the throne of David and over his kingdom and make it secure and sustain it in fair judgement and integrity. From this time onwards and for ever, the zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this."
Isaiah 9 v 7

Joy is coming, coming your way

Your Christ will in a manger lay.
Each human heart and mind to employ,
Wait, await in gathering joy.
The Saviour of the world on earth,
a unique and holy infant birth.
God is sending, sending a perfect love,
descending to earth from heaven above.
So make ready all you people,
peal out bold bells in every steeple!
Most joyful news to earth will come,

all human hearts at Christmas won.
The Word of truth, of love, of grace,
you must make ready to embrace.
The Light of life, God here in flesh,
offers His joy to you afresh.'
Human voices loudly singing,
heartfelt praise to heaven we're bringing.

*"Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!
Hail the incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel."*
Charles Wesley 1707-1788

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. ... You shall be My people and I will be your God'."
Ezekiel 36 v 26, 28

Prayer of James M. *"My Christ is coming."*

Fitzpatrick O.M.I. *"Wait in gathering joy."*

Isaiah 30 v 18

"Blessed are all those who wait for Him."

"My Christ is coming,

Prayer continued *"Welcome the little boy."* Amen.



The God of small things by Lynne McDonough

Lynne McDonough is a parishioner of the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton and lives with her husband, her three children and four grandchildren. At present Lynne works for a charity who support unpaid family and friend carers in West Sussex.

In Zechariah 4:10 we read, "Do not despise these small beginnings..." It seems God sees the small things, perhaps the things that for us may seem trivial or insignificant. Indeed, Jesus tells us in Luke 12:7 "And even the very hairs on your head are numbered." I recently had an experience that brought home to me that God cares, really cares even about the trivial or insignificant things that may bother or upset us.

I was listening to a scripture meditation early one morning and Psalm 143:8 was mentioned. "Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life." The person guiding the meditation spoke

of someone she knew who prayed this scripture, "before she put her foot out of the bed in the morning". I thought to myself how lovely this verse was and how I would like that kind of faithfulness to pray such a word of trust before I start my day.

I was going to meet up with 3 friends social distanced that afternoon. I wore a pair of earrings that I particularly like and use fairly often. They have no great monetary or sentimental value. That night before going to bed, I noticed that one of them was missing. I was sad about that as they have a matching pendant and as I say, I really enjoy wearing them. They are fairly small and would be hard to find. I had a mask on for some of the time due



to Covid-19 regulations and could only think that when taking the mask off that day, I must have lost the one earring in the car park. However, I did hunt around the house just in case I found the earring and looked next to my bed and around the floor hoping against hope that perhaps the earring had fallen out at home. Nothing.

... she knew who prayed this scripture, "before she put her foot out of the bed in the morning..."

The following morning, as I woke, I decided to pray Psalm 143:8. While praying and thinking of the concerns on my mind, I said to The Lord, "Lord, can I be really cheeky and pray about that earring? I mean if you can find it that would be great." Thereafter thinking about other more significant issues, I started to feel selfish that I could ask God for such a vain and seemingly trivial thing. Thinking about some of the challenges friends and family were facing and many

around the world with so many issues we are experiencing this year. I felt rather shallow. So, in ending I said, "You know what, Lord. Forget the whole earring thing. It's no worries. Like that lady I heard about yesterday, I am going to pray Psalm 143:8 before I put my foot out of bed." I did this and as I literally "put my foot out of the bed" there at my foot was my earring! I could not believe it! I honestly do not know dear reader if it was there all the time and I missed it, I cannot say. What I can tell you is what that fairly cheap and insignificant earring has come to mean to me each time I wear it.

I said to The Lord, "Oh Lord, thank you so much!" In my heart I felt The Lord say to me, "I care about everything that bothers you. Always remember that. Even when it does not work out the way you might like. I see. I care. I am with you even in the small things."

So, each time I see those earrings, I am reminded that I worship a God who is definitely greater, stronger and higher than any other as the song goes and yes, He is also the God of small things.

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Penny's Nephew by Martin Ryan

Most Catholics will I'm sure have heard of Medjugorje, the small village in Croatia where for many years now, since 1981 in fact, a group of young people have claimed to have had a great many apparitions of Our Blessed Lady. The Church takes a long time to officially pronounce on the truth of such events and in the case of Medjugorje we can still keep an open mind on what has happened there. While Pope Francis is personally very sceptical on the sheer number and ongoing duration of the alleged apparitions, he nonetheless recognises the fact that many ordinary Catholics who have gone to Medjugorje have received spiritual blessings and a renewal of their faith. If "by their fruits you shall know them" is applied, then clearly there is a grace at work in this place. So impressive is the pastoral benefit experienced in Medjugorje that the Church has now sanctioned Medjugorje

as a legitimate pilgrimage site, while taking its time to formally declare on the veracity of the apparitions.

Personally, I am not one to seek out apparitions and other supernatural phenomena, preferring to take the Gospel of Jesus as a faith decision, a decision based primarily on the resonance of God's unconditional love fulfilling our deepest human yearnings. But even so, as a young priest in the 1980s, parishioners would ask me about Medjugorje, so I eventually decided to go and see for myself.

And so, in January 1985 I travelled with a lay friend to what was then Yugoslavia, a country that was under the effective control of the Soviet Union – a state that was authoritarian and atheistic, and not likely to encourage an outbreak of religious fervour. Yet while the government was overtly anti-religious, the reality of Yugoslavia was that its



people were almost entirely religious: one third Catholic; one third Orthodox; one third Muslim!

This message was a serious call to a profound personal renewal of faith... by embracing the twin strengths of prayer and fasting.

The week I spent in Medjugorje was a week of great blessing for me, in spite of difficulties of language and sub-zero temperatures! I didn't see any supernatural phenomena but that wasn't really my expectation, and what was truly impressive was the devotion of the local people, and crucially for me – the message Our Lady was purportedly giving through these children (and they were children in the 1980s). This message was a serious call to a profound personal renewal of faith, and to do so by embracing the twin strengths of prayer and fasting. This has a huge resonance with Jesus' declaration about the combined power of prayer and fasting (in Mark 9: 29). Could a group of children really concoct such a deep spiritual message?

Although it wasn't possible for us to be present during the evening apparitions, I was nonetheless able to meet the visionaries and specially to visit Marija Pavlovic in her own home. I cannot deny that Marija struck me as a modest and unassuming young woman, even to the point of shyness, and not someone looking for fame and attention.



One of the biggest positives of my brief stay in Medjugorje was meeting fellow pilgrims and hearing their personal faith journeys. One encounter, in particular, stands out for me. I met an American woman called Penny. It was actually her second trip to Medjugorje, and she told me her story.

She had come to Medjugorje the previous year. It was no easy thing for an American to travel into the Soviet communist bloc, to go behind the "Iron Curtain", and she only did so because she was so very desperate. She had a two-year-old nephew in America who had been born severely brain damaged. The doctors had told the family that he had been born with hardly any brain, really just a stem enabling the most basic bodily functions, and that he would never

develop and never be able to recognise his own parents. As you can imagine the whole family was devastated. As a Catholic, Penny had heard of what was happening at Medjugorje and had made the journey clinging on to some hope of a miracle cure.

But it was now her second visit to Medjugorje, and a year had passed, so I wanted to know how the wee boy was doing now. This is what she told me.

In the year gone by, these good folks had taken to personal prayer and fasting, and their lives had been transformed...

His healing would be the second miracle, and she and her family had no doubt whatsoever that this second miracle would come, and he would be healed by God. No doubt whatsoever. They already had the first miracle: Penny had taken back from Medjugorje the core message of Our Lady, and the entire family and wider acquaintances had listened to this message and embraced it. They had particularly embraced the practice of prayer and fasting. In the year gone by, these good folk had taken to personal prayer and fasting, and their lives had been transformed: relationships were healed, marriages that were falling apart were marvellously restored, young adults had accepted the Catholic faith when before they were tepid or resistant. So many people's faith had been strengthened, to the point that they knew the little boy would be healed – in God's time, in God's way. And so many others had been touched by this visible witness of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

This story emphasises for me the true miracle of Medjugorje. Whatever has

happened there, and to some degree is happening still, is hard to fathom. While I am suspicious of apparitions and other supernatural events, believing that God doesn't directly intervene in creation unless He finds a soul willing to be His voice, His hands, His heart, I yet cannot deny the blessings I received that week in spite of the logistical and physical difficulties. It certainly wasn't a week spent in the warmth of the sun, but I basked in a divine sunshine, at the heart of which was a profound message being voiced by a small group – of village children. A message with the power to touch and transform hearts.

Penny finished by saying to me: "Isn't it wonderful that God can touch and heal so many people through one helpless little child!" The strength of her testimony was truly impressive, and though I never had any contact with her again, I too have no doubt that God will heal the little boy – in His way, in His time.

I later wrote this poem about Penny's nephew:

*"What brings you here?" I asked her,
As we stood, in sub zero air,
On the steps of St. James' church,
Early 85, Medjugorje.*

*Pilgrims both, in search of what?
The latest holy craze, or maybe
Grace, an experience of God?
Miracle, or just curiosity?*

*"It's my second time here", she said.
Penny told her story thus:
Her little two-year-old nephew,
Was the source of all the fuss.*

*Kept alive by strong medicine;
Born with hardly any brain stem;
His devastated parents told,
How he'd never recognise them.*

*The family desperate for help,
Heard of miracles from afar;
Nothing ventured, nothing gained,
Straws grasped, no matter how bizarre.*

*Far behind the Iron Curtain,
Scary for any American;
A small town between the hills,
Not on any tourist guide plan.*

*The only 'gift' to be brought back?
A call to prayer and fasting;
No instant miracle cures here,
Yet something much more lasting!*

*A year past since that first visit;
"How's the little boy now?" I said:
No great change in his condition,
No response from that tiny bed.*

*"But we've no doubt at all whatever,
In God's time, in God's way,
He will be completely healed;
We so look forward to that day!"*

*"That'll be the second miracle!"
She spoke with utter conviction:
"We've already received the first!
So that's no idle prediction..."*

*And what first miracle received?
Friends and wider family,
Given to prayer and fasting:
Lives transformed so utterly!*

*Mary's message taken to heart;
God's grace unleashed through them;
Time spent in prayer and fasting;
Great fruits sprouting from that stem.*

*The strength of her faith plain to see:
"In God's time, in God's way,
We've no doubt at all whatever,
He will be healed, one fine day!"*

*"Isn't it great what God can do!
To use a tiny helpless thing,
Thought by some not worth living,
To deliver widespread blessing!"*

*Medjugorje miracle?
Perhaps the miracle to see:
People taking Jesus' teaching
And example seriously...*



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The Bible Network is bringing hope to believers who are suffering simply because they love Jesus.

Year on year, we're seeing a significant rise in the number of Christians being persecuted across many parts of the world, particularly in Asia. In parts of India, banners hung by religious radicals read: "Christians are not allowed inside." Bibles and study materials are destroyed, and believers are intimidated, beaten or worse.

In southeast Bangladesh, radical Islamic groups have targeted church planters and in the north of the country, Christians have been forced off their land. Recent anti-conversion laws in Nepal make evangelistic work extremely difficult and create significant pressure and danger for church leaders and their congregations.

Today, some 2,000 years after Jesus walked the earth, our brothers and sisters across Africa, Asia and the Middle East are suffering daily because they choose to put their faith in Him. They are experiencing everything from acts of violence to death threats to imprisonment, and even rejection by their own families.

As religious extremism, governmental oppression and persecution grow aggressively around the world, it's vital we share the gift of God's Word to help strengthen the faith of our brothers and sisters and embolden them to tell others about Jesus.



The Bible Network is passionately doing all we can to support those who are giving so much to serve Christ. Last year, together with our ministry partner Bible League International, we reached 756,752 people with the Gospel in 15 countries across the persecuted church. God is moving powerfully through this ministry and we would love you to be part of it.

By giving persecuted Christians the Bibles they're desperate for, you're not only strengthening their faith – you are equipping and encouraging them as they spread the Gospel. As one persecuted believer explains:

It costs just £3.80 to place a Bible into the hands of a persecuted believer. Wherever they are, they will know that a sister or brother in Christ stands with them. How? Because they will finally have God's Word...

They will also be assured, without a doubt, that God is with them. Just as His Word promises: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." (Deuteronomy 31:6).

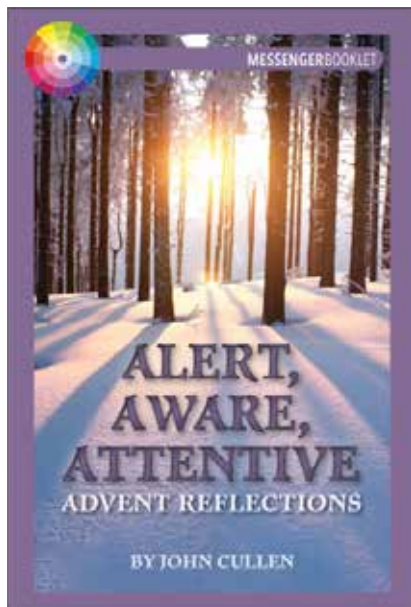
God's Word has been a tremendous comfort to me throughout these uncertain times, as I am certain it has been for you, too. Please, will you give that same comfort to a persecuted Christian? There's no greater gift you could give.

Right now, you can show a believer they're not alone in their suffering. You can bless them with the hope and guidance of God's Word. Visit www.thebiblenetwork.org.uk/emergencyfund to rush your gift of God's Word today.

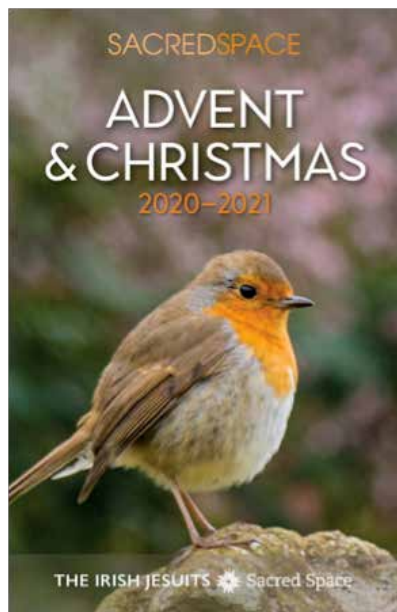
By John Savage Director

Book Review ALERT, AWARE, ATTENTIVE – Advent Reflections by John Cullen

Sacred Space – ADVENT & CHRISTMAS 2020-2021 By John Cullen



*Messenger Publications,
56 pages, 2020, £4.50*



*The Irish Jesuits Sacred Space
Messenger Publications, 107 pages,
2020, £4.50*

John Cullen loves alliteration, as his title suggests, and as you will find throughout these contemporary, homely, pastoral, heart-touching pages. He alludes to covid-19 [pages 18 and 31], WhatsApp [page 45], and weaves in poetry, films - especially *Parasite* - and shows, songs, and lively images throughout. He even has Pope Francis and Greta Thunberg on the same page. His English teacher at school obviously had a profound effect on him, with the one underlined sentence from *Le Morte d'Arthur*: "Let us take the adventure that God sends us." He stresses the faith

fact that God needs originals and has delightful sentences such as: "Matt and Julia were married sixty-five years. They lived in and out of the pockets of each other's hearts." [page 41]. He produces a wonderful "make a path straight" prayer [pages 45-46]; and he packs plenty to treasure in a small space in this superb small volume.

The Irish Jesuits have been producing *Sacred Space* online for every day of the year since 1999, and in recent years have also been bringing out a thick all-year volume in print. They are well

aware that some people prefer print, whether or not they have access to an online source. Now they also have the latest pocket- or handbag-size Advent & Christmas six-week version. It does not matter whether or not the reader/prayer already uses Sacred Space, or is coming fresh to it, as there is a simple "How to use this Booklet" page at the very start. The suggestion is to begin by reading the "Something to think and pray about each day this week" opening section, and then move on to the same daily six-step rhythm, starting with the Presence of God, then Freedom, and Consciousness steps to prepare for hearing the Word of God. "The Word" is the key section, where "inspiration points" are provided, and this is followed by Conversation and Conclusion. There is an added bonus, an Advent Retreat with five sections, each titled "New Beginnings", centring first on

John the Baptist, then Mary, followed by Joseph, Jesus, and the Magi.

Both of these small volumes are full of sparks for your heart and mind, and at the price some folk may enjoy buying both!

Both of these small volumes are full of sparks for your heart and mind, and at the price some folk may enjoy buying both!

[By the way, if you are "up" for Sacred Space all through the Church's Year, The Prayerbook 2021, produced by the Irish Jesuits Sacred Space team, is already out. It is available, 414 pages in paperback, from Messenger Publications, at the very reasonable price of £11.50.]

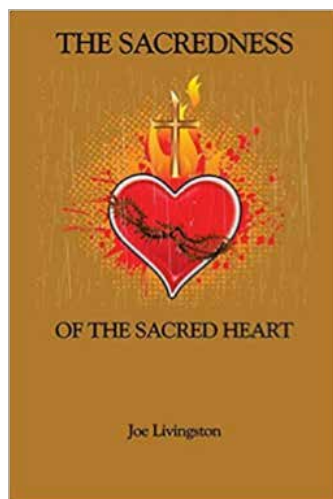
© Reviews by Denis Blackledge SJ

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Book Review The Sacredness of the Sacred Heart **by Joseph Livingston**



Many will know the Basilica of the Sacré Cœur at Montmartre, standing out as it does like a shining sentinel on the Paris skyline. Less well known is that this magnificent consecration to the Sacred Heart was funded entirely from money donated by the faithful during the time of the atheistic French Third Republic. Remarkably, Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament has been maintained there permanently ever since 1855. For many, at that time, France's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 had been understood as a warning of the need for reparation for the state rejection of religion over the ninety years since the French Revolution that began in 1789. One person who would have no difficulty in understanding that is Joe Livingston from Glasgow. After a life of routine faith Joe underwent a powerful religious experience in April 1993, nine months after reading *Pray with your Heart* by Fr Slavko Barabarić. On that fateful day

he issued a challenge to God which resulted in an immediate Damascene response where a voice told him: 'You are mine now'. In Joe's own words, this propelled him to become a 'Christian Evangelist of the Catholic Persuasion' and there can be little doubt since of his total response to his calling. A man who previously described himself as a 'fire insurance Catholic', admitting to having scarcely ever read a book, has since led a mission of healing and public evangelism in countries throughout the world. Living in Scotland myself, I would underline that it is a very symbolic recognition of his impact that as an openly devout Roman Catholic he was even invited to address the Scottish Parliament. Whilst it would be an insult to reduce the breadth of Joe's message to one idea, we might say that, as in the France of 1870, he urgently calls us to challenge the values of the so-called post-Christian world that we now feel obliged to accept. In this book he bids us to re-ignite the tradition of devotion

to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which for some reason has become quietly de-emphasised over the past sixty years.

Joe's most recent short book is thus *The Sacredness of the Sacred Heart*, in which he brings our attention to a devotion previously re-emphasised by Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque in late 17th Century France. Like Joe, Saint Margaret Mary underwent a series of powerful conversion experiences, in her case at the Visitation Convent in Paray-le-Monial, starting in the December of 1673. She received a series of visions focussing on the importance of the reception of Holy Communion, Eucharistic Adoration and in particular attention was drawn to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The aim was to provide an objective focus to help us to understand the diffusion of the divine love, with Our Lord charging Margaret Mary to make this known to the whole of humanity. Joe repeats this message for us by pointing out that small but manageable change can only start from within our own hearts. He reminds us that although the heart is small in size, it is still the most powerful and dynamic organ in the human body. As the heart circulates blood throughout the whole body, it is by our own devotion to the Sacred Heart, we ourselves will be able to contribute to the diffusion of the indwelling graces throughout the whole world. For Joe, the key word here is Love. In everyday language love is generally symbolised by the heart. If we then add to this the Great Commandment that we should love the Lord Our God with all our hearts and all our souls and furthermore that we love our neighbour as ourselves, it is only a short step to understanding how the Sacred Heart can open up this cosmic potential. In his book Joe sets out the devotion in its historical context and bids us to become involved. In the final

chapters he tables a poignant question: Can we still afford to separate the many difficulties our world is currently facing from the determination of so many to exclude God from their lives? This is a short book that makes no attempt to be a theological treatise, maintaining instead a lively motivational conversation with the reader. Of course, we all have our own role to play but as one overmuch submerged in academic analysis, I am left feeling humbly grateful for the vital apostolic energy that people like Joe bring to our Church.

Review by Roderick Campbell Guion

Editor-in-Chief's note: In his book Joe mentions that Pope Francis allowed General Absolution for the whole world during the pandemic which, strictly speaking, didn't happen. Pope Francis offered an extraordinary blessing on the whole world "Urbi et Orbi" on March 27th 2020, in response to the global pandemic and allowed General Absolution under certain circumstances like someone dying from COVID-19 and the priest not being allowed in to hear Confession. Another thing of note is when Joe talks about heart transplant donor recipients experiencing characteristics of the donor after the operation. I questioned Joe about this and here is what he said:

"My brother had a Heart Transplant 20 years ago (I mention this in my book *You Are Mine Now*) He told me that he noticed changes to his character and emotions after the transplant. He spoke to the Heart Surgeon about this, and he told my brother Frankie – " Yes this can happen, it seems the Heart contains some characteristics of emotion from the donor." Therefore, we can see from this how powerful the Heart is not only in a physical sense, but emotionally too." Interesting stuff!

Q: "I would like to know more on the tradition of Our Lady's parents Saints Joachim and Anna. How long after Christ did this tradition spring up and where did it come from? Were Mary's Mum and Dad really named Joachim and Anna?"



Answer by Father Denis Blackledge SJ

Father Denis Blackbridge SJ is a Jesuit priest based at St Francis Xavier Church in Liverpool

A: We are all story-shaped, and we all have family roots. Nowadays there is an increasing interest in tracing one's ancestry, with television programmes and websites galore on the topic. Names are important, and there is a certain pride in being able to go back many generations in researching the story of one's own family. There is a definite desire to get things right, to root out as much detail and information as possible of one's family history.

This longing to know one's roots was innate in Jewish families: names and their meaning were central, and, with many unable to read or write, storytelling, careful listening, and learning to memorise, were vital in their ancestral searching. Just look at the opening chapter of St Matthew's Gospel, where the first seventeen verses go through forty-two generations, right back to Abraham, the founding father of the nation. How many of us now would be able to memorise and retain such an awesome list of names? How many of us now in our twenty-first century could go back the best part of two thousand years in our own family history? Matthew was giving a firm handle to his Jewish listeners of how Joseph's father was called Jacob, and that Joseph was the husband of Mary: and, as Matthew concludes his ancestry passage "of her – Mary – was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

So, Joseph's ancient lineage is thoroughly covered in the Gospel. But what about Mary's? The simple answer is that there are no such family details for her in the Gospels. When the angel Gabriel comes to Mary at the Annunciation in Nazareth, Mary is described as a "virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David". But, look as you might, you will find no further details about Mary's family history in the canonically accepted Gospels.

But, look as you might, you will find no further details about Mary's family history in the canonically accepted Gospels.

What, then, do we know about the parents of Mary? Were they really called Joachim and Anna? To begin to delve into this delicate matter, we have to go to one or two of the apocryphal documents, of which there are many. In other words, we have to delve into writings which are not accepted as part of the canonically accepted New Testament. The chief one we need, written probably about mid-second century, is called *The Protoevangelium of James*. There two other apocryphal documents, *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, and *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which contain hints about the parenthood of Mary. None of the three writings was written by the person named in the title, of course.

Pseudo-Matthew was the main vehicle for popularising both the James and Thomas manuscripts. There are over 100 Greek manuscripts extant for *Pseudo-Matthew*, which introduces “a man in Jerusalem, Joachim by name, of the tribe of Juda. His whole care was his flocks.” He is presented as a wealthy and generous man, who split his livelihood into three parts: one for the poor, one for the pious, and the third for himself. At twenty, so the story goes, he married Anna, daughter of Ysachar, of his own tribe: but for twenty years they were childless. The writer tells us that Anna complains to God because she is childless. She promises God that, should she have a child, she will dedicate her child in the temple. An angel comes and promises her a daughter. Meanwhile, the narrator says, Joachim is in the wilderness with his flocks for five months. He too has a visit from an angel, who promises him a daughter, and predicts her glory. After Mary is born, she is taken to the temple aged three, as Anna had promised. Mary’s wondrous life-story carries on till Joseph appears on the scene, and in time Jesus is born, and a blend of details, both canonical and apocryphal tumble out – you can read them all in *Proto-Matthew*.



as described above.

It is easy to forget that Christian tradition moved East before it moved West, and, given the fact that second century sources were naming Joachim and Anna, and that that tradition has persisted strongly and unchallenged until now, perhaps more in eastern rather than western Christendom, it would be a foolish person who denied Mary’s mum and dad their traditional names.

Many of the fascinating aspects of the story of Joachim and Anna, and the life of their uniquely special daughter Mary, are to be found in the *Kariye* or *Chora* Monastery-become-Mosque-become-Museum, and seemingly about to become Mosque again, which is in what was Byzantium-become-Constantinople-become-Istanbul. Wall after wall is teeming with beautiful mosaics, many of them covering the Gospel and Apocryphal Gospel stories of Joachim, Anna and Mary

[If you want to delve a little deeper, books consulted for this piece are:

The Apocryphal New Testament, A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Version, translated by J K Elliott, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2007 paperback edition

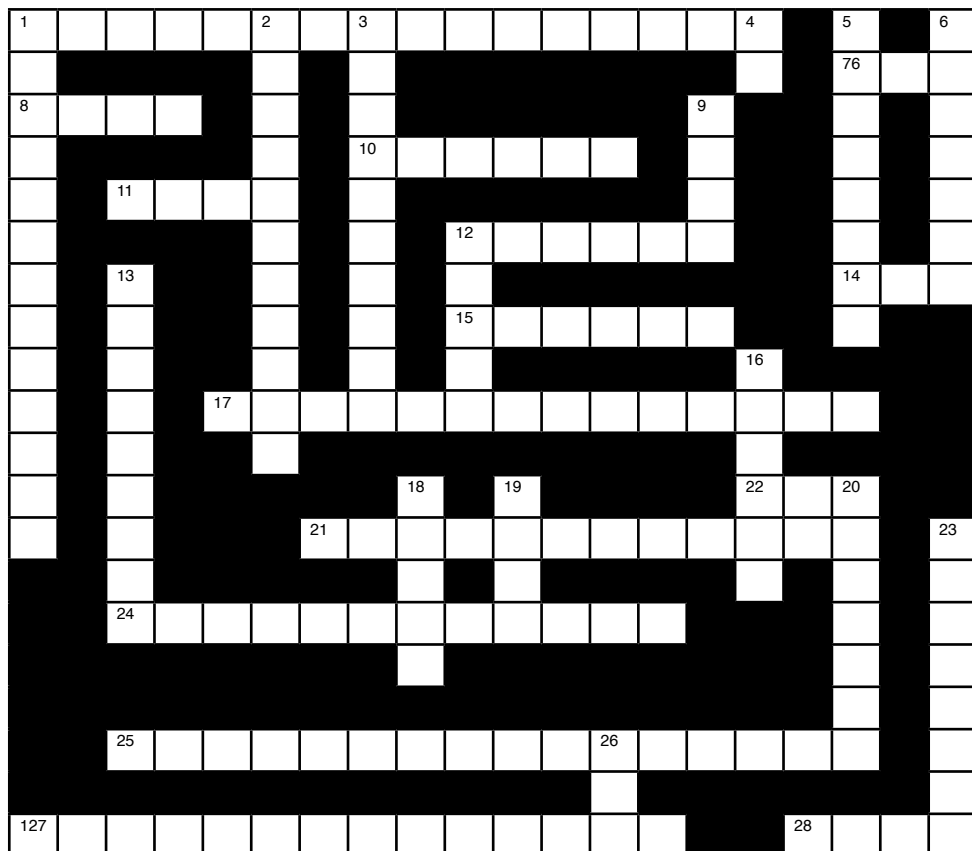
Chora Museum, Official Museum Guide, Bilkent Kultur Girisimi Publication, Istanbul, 2011 edition]

The Answers to Last Issue's Crossword

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Crossword



CLUES ACROSS

- 1 We intercede for them usually in the month of November (5,2,9)
- 7 The Bible is divided into this number of main sections/books known as Testaments
- 8 Number of days or parts of spiritual devotion which make a novena

- 10 The woman who risked her life to help the spies of Joshua escape safely from Jericho
- 11 The strength of Samson was in this part of his body
- 12 The favorite son of Jacob who rose to greatness in Egypt
- 14 The number of wise virgins and the number of foolish virgins according to the parable in the Gospels

- 15 The exceptional God given gift of interpretation of these which Joseph had and which led him to become the ruler of Egypt
- 17 He was born to very elderly parents and was a cousin of Jesus (4,3,7)
- 21 He was powerful but he needed the help of Joseph to save his country
- 22 These animals which appeared first as prosperous and healthy and later turned into the opposite were a sign of things to come in Egypt
- 24 The most important supernatural event which was the genesis of the Christmas season
- 25 Joseph's Egyptian name given by the Pharaoh when he was made ruler of Egypt (9 hyphen 6)
- 27 The monarch who brought the Christmas Tree to England (5,9)
- 28 As in 22 above these too appeared first as very healthy and shortly after turned into the opposite which was a sign of things to come in Egypt

CLUES DOWN

- 1 These two apostles who were brothers were also called these (4,2,7)
- 2 This supernatural phenomenon of God taking human form
- 3 A very holy Capuchin Friar who is now a Saint
- 4 The plural of 'Thou'
- 5 The five wounds of Christ which appeared (and sometimes bled) in the body of 3 above
- 6 King David's eldest Son
- 9 The young girl who loved Joseph had been promised in marriage to this Egyptian god
- 12 Jesus descended from the line of the tribe of this son of Jacob
- 13 King Solomon's mother
- 16 The outstanding gift God gave Solomon
- 18 He wrote the Psalms
- 19 To willingly sacrifice the usual quantity of food for a good cause
- 20 Joseph's wife
- 23 The genealogy of Jesus (from Abraham) was divided into three sections comprising so many generations in each
- 26 This was dropped on a soldier to distract and stop him whipping Joseph



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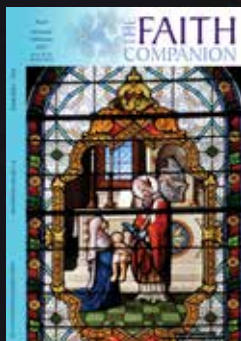
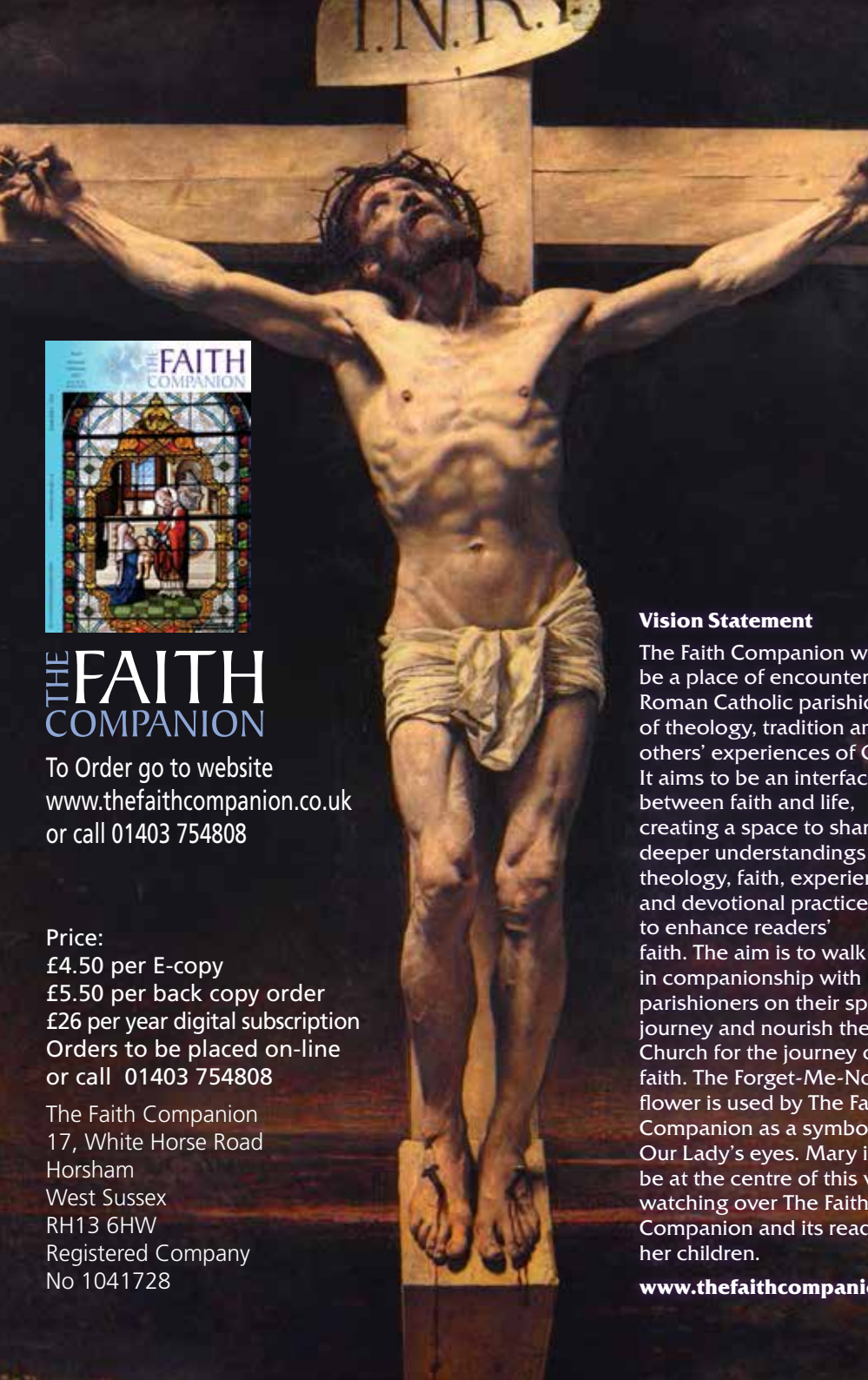
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