

# Church News Ireland

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## Media Review

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## **An atheist country gets the Church it deserves**

**The C of E mirrors our nation. It should come as no surprise that our clergy act as badly as we do, Tim Stanley writes in the Daily Telegraph.**

Having pioneered forgiveness, Christians are the last group to receive it. Why? Because our sin is leapt on as proof of hypocrisy; we were lying all along, and if we can't be saints, no one else need bother.

A charity called the Children's Society has rejected a donation from Justin Welby after he resigned as Archbishop

of Canterbury over the Church's failure to stop a child abuser.

The move is petty and merciless; it's the stuff of our time. I watched Welby's "notorious" resignation speech in the Lords – packed with bad-taste jokes and baffled indifference – and found it tone deaf yet familiar. That's the way every English authority figure spoke 30 years ago. He could've been a disgraced headmaster or a royal, never complaining or explaining, accepting his fate with irony. Anglo-Saxon sangfroid.

But that was another country. We are an American colony now and we demand tears. If they don't come, we withhold forgiveness, for it's not enough to feel sorry or say sorry, you must cry, and we only forgive you if you've cried hard enough.

Just look at the nonsensical conclusions drawn from Welby's error. One: "we must have a woman archbishop". The implication is that men don't care about child abusers as much as women do, which is offensive in the extreme. I'd cheerfully hang them, a policy I'd challenge any nun to top.

Two, "we need a mystic like dear old Rowan", forgetting that Rowan Williams, a lovely man, left Welby a splintering communion. The notion that a church can be saved by piety is an old mistake. In 1292, the Catholic Church took a punt on having a religious pope and elected an 85-year old hermit called Celestine V. Celestine seldom met his cardinals. He struggled to converse in Latin. He neglected his duties and, after enduring five months of non-stop sanctity, the top brass concluded he had to go.

To effect his abdication, one of the cardinals secretly fed a speaking-tube into his cell, through which, in the hours of darkness, he simulated the voice of God. “Celestine,” he whispered, “resign or you will burn in Hell!” It worked. Celestine, no doubt a nervous wreck, stepped down: the only Pope to do so till Benedict XVI.

A good church leader is a good politician, and Welby’s problem was his dearth of charm and grace. He had the right idea, that the Church is dying and must start from scratch. His image of evangelisation isn’t mine – coffees in front-rooms, Mass at the kitchen table – and he neglected the Anglican faith’s strongest card, which is its beautiful parishes. But you won’t save England’s soul by blowing thirty million quid restoring a lead roof.

People projected onto Welby every frustration they have with the Church from every corner of its billowing tent, with the result that he achieved in resignation the thing that escaped him in office: unity of opinion. But there’s no one better to replace him.

Stephen Cottrell of York is arguably accused of worse. The bishops are weak because the institution is weak, and the institution is weak because the culture it draws from is shallow and atheistic – and a state church feels a particular need to reflect the society around it.

Our people have no interest in Christ, so the Church leaders, fearing irrelevance, talk about much else: politics, diversity, carbon. At a recent evensong in Oxford, I was invited to pray for those whose civil rights are threatened by the election of Donald Trump. But when you remove Christ,

Christian behaviour slips out the door, too, with the result that clerics behave as badly as – well, as badly as us.

## **Christmas is a time for moral courage, not just for tradition**

**From London's Old Vic to theatres across Britain, from old movies on TV to Anne-Marie Duff's solo dramatisation on BBC4, A Christmas Carol tops the league of seasonal dramatic fare once more. Catherine Pepinster writes.**

There's nothing like a ghost story at Christmas, and Dickens' tale has three ghosts: Future, Present and Past. But it's not just Ebenezer Scrooge who is haunted by past festive seasons; just about everyone sees Christmas through the prism of their prior experiences.

Plenty who rarely venture into a church during the year love the tradition of Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. We cling to our own families' rituals, often wanting to reconnect to our childhoods, from the tree to the turkey to the carols.

We remember those we have lost; no wonder the Christmas number one last year and this is the 40-year-old song Last Christmas, made all the more poignant by its singer, George Michael, dying on Christmas Day. But amid all the melancholy and the nostalgia, people can lose sight of the message of the first Christmas. The birth of Christ was not about looking back: it was the most extraordinary challenge, a total and irreversible change that altered the destiny of humankind forever more.

If you read what was said to Mary when she first learnt she would be mother to Jesus, she was urged: “Do not be afraid”. Matthew’s Gospel recounts that Joseph, too, learnt of what was to come in a dream, and was also encouraged with the words: “Do not be afraid”.

When the shepherds were out in the field, Luke records, the glory of the Lord was all around them and they were terrified, and heard the words: “Do not be afraid”. Faced with the unknown, all of them were fearful. No wonder.

The future, so often unpredictable, can be something people often feel they just can’t face. It is much easier to cling to well-worn habits and rituals that we know inside out. But at Christmas, amid all the sentimentality, is the message: courage is possible because God is with us.

The message, “Do not be afraid”, is a refrain also found in the Old Testament and one that Jesus later repeats. It becomes clear then that it is about more than reassurance that God will not forsake us. Jesus is urging his followers to not be afraid to speak the truth.

Time and time again those who speak the truth have been disbelieved. They have been silenced. They have been knocked down. Sometimes it can take years to be heard. They are surrounded by so much chatter that they cannot get their words heard. No wonder many people trying to speak up lose heart.

But there’s something else that matters as much as speaking up: knowing when not to speak. Someone who

remains silent throughout the Gospel stories is Joseph, one of those urged not to be afraid.

No words are given to him in the stories of Jesus' infancy. Instead he is a figure who represents those who listen, who watch, and then act.

Silence can be about empathy, providing space where others can speak. It gives an opportunity for wonder too, for responding to what truly matters.

Christmas, then, goes way beyond enjoying our cherished traditions, and remembering the past. Christmas is a lesson in quiet contemplation, courage and truth. A silent night, and a holy night.

## **Alcohol deaths in NI up 65% in a decade**

**The number of people in Northern Ireland dying due to conditions caused by alcohol use has risen by more than 60% in a decade. Abdullah Sabri reports in the Belfast Telegraph**

A total of 341 registered alcohol-specific deaths were recorded here in 2023, according to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

Its analysis is based on deaths related to conditions exclusively caused by alcohol use.

The stats exclude any death only partially attributed to the substance.

NISRA said the 341 registered deaths in 2023 accounted for 2% of all deaths that year. It also found that almost two-thirds of those deaths were men, following a long-term trend.

The study indicated that alcohol-specific deaths here have risen by over 65% between 2013 and 2023 - 66.5% were men.

Further data also showed that between 2013 and 2023, the alcohol-specific death rate for males increased by 35.7%, while the rate for women saw a 95.3% increase (from 6.4 per 100,000 to 12.5 per 100,000 population).

In 2023, the death rate per 100,000 people stood at 12.5 for females and 24.7 for males.

Those aged between 45 and 64 continued to be the more prevalent age bracket for all alcohol-specific deaths, accounting for 63.9% in 2023.

Since 2013, alcoholic liver disease, on average, made up two-thirds of alcohol-specific deaths, increasing from 69.4% in 2013 to 72.7% in 2023.

Mental and behavioural disorders due to use of alcohol have consistently accounted as the second most common cause of death, making up 16.1% of alcohol-specific deaths in 2023.

Regionally, the Belfast Local Government District (LGD) had the highest number of alcohol-specific deaths, with 77 in 2023.

This was followed by Derry City and Strabane LGD, with 49.

Ranking at the bottom, meanwhile, was the Fermanagh and Omagh LGD, with 10 deaths.

The figures emerged as public health experts warned there has been a “catastrophic” rise in deaths caused by drinking in the UK.

The Alcohol Health Alliance (AHA) has called for urgent action from the Health Secretary to redress the “alarming trend”.

In a letter to Wes Streeting, the Alliance - which is made up of medical royal colleges, charities, treatment providers and academics - highlights how deaths caused “solely by alcohol have increased by a catastrophic 42% since 2019”.

In October, Stormont's Health Minister Mike Nesbitt confirmed he was intending to bring legislation forward around the introduction of minimum unit pricing for alcohol, saying alcohol misuse costs Northern Ireland up to £900m a year.

Both Scotland and the Republic of Ireland have introduced minimum unit pricing on alcohol in recent years.

## **British spies foiled two plots to kill Pope Francis in Iraq**

**British intelligence thwarted two terrorist plots to murder Pope Francis during his 2021 visit to Iraq, a new book has revealed. Simon Caldwell writes in the Catholic Herald.**

Spies tipped off the Vatican's security detail that a female suicide bomber had been dispatched to the northern Iraqi city of Mosul to coincide with the Pontiff's historic visit to the city.

They learned too that terrorists also planned to propel a speeding truck loaded with explosives into the Vatican entourage with the aim of assassinating the Pope.

The revelations come in a new book called *Hope: The Autobiography*, a book by Francis co-authored by Carlo Musso, excerpts of which have appeared in *Corriere della Sera*, the Italian daily newspaper.

The Pope wrote: "The [Iraqi] police had alerted the Vatican Gendarmerie to a report from British intelligence: a woman packed with explosives, a young suicide bomber, was on her way to Mosul to blow herself up during the papal visit.

"And a van had also left at full speed with the same intent."

The day after the attempted plots were expected to take place, Francis quizzed a security official about what had happened to the terrorists.

“The commander replied laconically: ‘They are no more’,” he wrote.

“The Iraqi police had intercepted them and blown them up... This too was the poisoned fruit of war.”

Mosul, a city with a large Christian minority, was over-run by Islamic State terrorists in 2014, driving tens of thousands of refugees to the sanctuary of Kurdish-controlled Iraqi territory.

Pope Francis said he wanted to visit Mosul “at all costs” following its liberation to encourage Christians to return and remain in their historic homelands, which were evangelised by St Thomas the Apostle. More at -

[\[https://catholicherald.co.uk/british-spies-foiled-two-plots-to-kill-pope-in-iraq/\]](https://catholicherald.co.uk/british-spies-foiled-two-plots-to-kill-pope-in-iraq/)

## Speaking to the soul

Short reading and a prayer - daily on this site

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