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Image of the day - Blackburn Cathedral

News Reports



Catholics should help foster soul of Europe, says Bishop Treanor

Catholics in Ireland have an important role to play in fostering the “soul of Europe”, Bishop Noel Treanor told The Irish Catholic.

Fostering this soul is a “challenge and imperative to work for the promotion of the good [via the European project], for the realisation of what’s true and global and enhancing”, said Bishop Treanor, who is one of the vice-presidents of the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE).

“That remains a challenge for every generation,” he added.

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The inspiration for the European project was born from the “cradle” of Europe’s Judeo-Christian heritage, Bishop Treanor explained.

While concerns remain for Churches in the EU over attacks on freedom of conscience and a lack of “mutual literacy”, he urged Catholics not to “sacrifice the good on the altar of perfection”.

“We have the challenges of forgiveness and reconciliation, and the promotion of the Heavenly City,” the Bishop of Down and Connor said.

“That always entails drama, it always entails discussion, dialogue and ideally efforts to enlighten and persuade.”

Bishop Treanor continued, saying it is also “the task of Churches and faith communities... to critically build up an awareness of the importance of a respect for faith traditions as part of the religious, cultural and historical heritage of Europe”.

Dundalk’s Green Church parishioners get green-fingered

Parishioners at St. Nicholas Parish Church (The Green Church) in Dundalk have joined a global initiative that seeks to plant local species of trees across Parishes helping to support local children in becoming more aware of their local and global environment.



Parishioners of St. Nicholas Parish Church

Going on from the tree planting initiative 'Bugs, bees and native trees' Rev. Richard Moore and Ms. Tori Eveson along with local parishioners took to various churches within the Dundalk group of parishes planting three trees in the grounds of each.

Ms Tori Eveson of St. Nicholas Parish Church who is committee member of the AYAC (Armagh Youth and Children) in the Diocese of Armagh organized some members of the church from Sunday school, Mothers' Union and the church choir, to help plant trees and shrubs within the church yards.

Bugs, Bees and Native Trees project aims to support young people and concerned citizens on the island of Ireland to address issues of the environment, biodiversity and climate change through tree planting and environmental community initiatives.

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Tori registered all five churches within the Dundalk Group of Parishes for this project and all trees are linked to the website www.bugsbeesandnativetrees.com/projects and the aim is to cover the Island of Ireland with newly planted trees.

The local churches involved in the effort included, St. Nicholas Parish Church (The Green Church), St. Mary's Church (Ballymascanlon), St. Andrew's Church (Rathcor Bush), St. Paul's Church (Heynestown) and Creggan Parish Church (Creggan). Report by Jason Newman, courtesy of the Dundalk Democrat

Christmas in Baghdad



The congregation of St George Baghdad was joined by honoured guests and friends in a joyous celebration of Christmas on 26 December, led by parish priest Fr Faiz.

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The occasion included addresses by Dr Mohammed Hussam from the office of Sayyid Ammar al-Hakim, and Sheikh Saddam Zamil, as well



as a performance by a group of talented children.

Representatives from the British Embassy included Deputy Ambassador James Downer, alongside members of the local Community Police.

Members of Dream, an NGO established by Nawar Assim, wife of the Chairman of Iraq's Parliament, were also in attendance. The parish is extremely grateful to Dream for the help it provided St George's School of the Redeemer (al-Fadi) in its efforts to deliver Christmas presents this year.

Oxford University Chancellor writes to Christ Church

Andrew Billen reports in The Times: Oxford fears Christ Church dean dispute is damaging reputation.

The chancellor of Oxford University says its reputation is being damaged by a long-running dispute between Christ Church and its dean.

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Lord Patten of Barnes, a former cabinet minister, wrote to the college's 65 fellows about the dispute with the Very Rev Martyn Percy and requested an urgent meeting to discuss its "protracted and ongoing dispute" and the "damage it is doing to the reputation of the collegiate university"...

...On Saturday the Rev Jonathan Aitken, an ally of Percy, wrote to The Times calling the attempt to classify Percy mentally ill "comic and contemptible". The dean was, he said, "on sparkling form".

Christ Church said: "We have received the letter from the chancellor and vice-chancellor and welcome the opportunity to discuss the situation with them. We have no further comment to make at this time."

Webinars, music, resources, broadcasts and books

CS Lewis Symposium Podcasts

Poet, priest and author Malcolm Guite speaks on "Telling the Truth Through Imaginative Fiction" in this second lecture from the 2013 CS Lewis Symposium at Westminster Abbey.

See also - To mark the 50th Anniversary of CS Lewis' death in 2013, Westminster Abbey hosted the CS Lewis Symposium. In this first lecture Alister McGrath gave a talk titled "Telling the Truth Through Rational Argument" followed by audience Q&A.



Links at -

[<http://www.cslewispodcast.com>]

[[] https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Weekday/The-C.S.-Lewis-podcast/Podcast/34-CS-Lewis-Symposium-Pt-2-Malcolm-Guite-on-Imaginative-Fiction?utm_]

Church News Review of 2021

Here are some of the biggest Christian stories that happened during 2021:

A is for Sir David Amess. The tragic death of the Conservative MP for Southend West shocked the nation and reinforced the need for conversations around hate speech and social media. The 69-year-old was a devout Catholic and his faith was widely recognised and honoured in his funeral. His death also sparked controversy about priests being able to provide the last rites to people about to die.

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B is for Brian Houston. The founder of megachurch Hillsong has been charged with allegedly concealing his father's abuse of a boy in the 1970s. The charges carry a maximum sentence of five years, and his court case is due to take place in January 2022.

C is for Christ the King Church. The Polish Catholic church made headlines in April after the Metropolitan Police stopped a Good Friday church service. Officers were called to the scene following reports of Covid restriction breaches but the church argued they followed all guidelines and said police had exceeded their powers.

D is for Dan Walker. The BBC Breakfast host's participation in Strictly Come Dancing has shone a spotlight on his faith. Walker is a devout Christian and has previously mentioned why he decided to not work on Sundays. He made it to the quarter-finals with his professional dancer Nadiya Bychkova and has been sharing his experience with his more than 260,000 followers on Instagram.

E is for Elevation Church baptisms. US megachurch Elevation Church, from which the Christian band Elevation Worship arose, celebrated 589 people getting baptised during a single weekend in August. A similar story of church growth took place in Wales. St Fagan's and St Luke's Church, Cwmdare, had 52 children and seven adults confirming their faith during a special service. The two churches had pre-pandemic congregations of about 90 people.

F is for Freedom of Speech. A few rows over freedom speech happened this year. One of the most notorious was

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the end of the legal case between The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) and Blackpool Council after BGEA's adverts for an event with evangelist Franklin Graham were banned from Blackpool buses. The case was settled with the Council issuing an apology and paying £100,000 in legal costs and damages to BGEA. In a separate case, Edinburgh Council also issued an apology to Destiny Church for cancelling a Christian conference because of the beliefs of guest speaker Larry Stockstill about homosexuality.

G is for Glasgow and COP26. As world leaders gathered in Glasgow to find solutions to fight climate change during COP26 many Christians also got involved to share the vital role that faith plays. Christians for Climate Action organised a pilgrimage and many churches held special services during the two-week conference. A banner (pictured above) however, was deemed controversial by some as it hung outside The Tron Church located near to COP26 venues. Its pastor William Philip defended the banner and said that explaining the Church's mission to preach Christ crucified and not something else "should hardly be controversial".

H is for Haiti. As well as the political turmoil in the nation and the earthquake which saw many dead and historical churches destroyed, the Caribbean nation made headlines after a group of 17 missionaries were kidnapped and later freed in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti's capital. A gang kidnapped the group in October who were returning from a visit to an orphanage that receives support from Christian Aid Ministries. Five of the missionaries were freed in early December while the remaining 12 made a daring escape on 16th December. The group shared that the words of Psalm

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34 brought comfort during their darkest moments of captivity.

I for Isolation. Although we saw an end to lockdowns during 2021 many people continued to be isolated, especially the elderly. A new study found that at least 41 per cent of UK Christians over the age of 65 said the church leadership failed to offer support during the pandemic.

J is for Justin Welby. The head of the Church of England has made many headlines this year from his sabbatical earlier in the year, the dwindling number of churchgoers in churches across England, his role during COP26 and a number of apologies.

K is for Sir Keir Starmer. The leader of the Labour Party apologised for the "hurt" caused by his visit to Jesus House of All Nations after The Labour Campaign for LGBT+ Rights criticised the church for holding traditional biblical views on homosexuality. Sir Keir tweeted that he accepted it was a "mistake" to visit the church, which has opened its premises up as a vaccination centre.

L is for Luis Palau. Originally from Argentina, Palau died aged 86 after a three-year battle with lung cancer. He preached in more than 80 countries and shared the message of Jesus to an audience of more than 1 billion people through television, radio, print, and live events.

M is for the Methodist Church. The Methodist Church became the largest Christian denomination to permit same-sex marriages in the UK this year. It's after The Methodist Conference voted 256-45 to allow same-sex weddings to

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take place on its premises and by its ministers. Ministers who do not agree with the decision will be allowed to claim freedom of conscience clauses which mean they will not be forced to conduct such weddings if they oppose the move.

N is for Dr Michael Nazir-Ali. The former Bishop of Rochester decided this year to leave the Anglican Church to become a Catholic priest. The 72-year-old said it was a "deeply personal decision" and that it was a move from "one Church to another" and not "a 'conversion' from one religion to another". Fr Nazir-Ali joined the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, a quasi-diocese established in 2011 by Pope Benedict XVI to allow Anglicans to enter the full communion of the Catholic Church whilst retaining much of their heritage and traditions.

O is for Online Church. If there are any positives to the Coronavirus pandemic, one has surely been the big push it has given congregations in the UK and across the world to explore technology as a means to continue to share the gospel. Online Church has stayed with us even when places of worship have reopened their doors. But it has gone even further. The Church of England, for example, launched its first-ever virtual reality worship service. It can be accessed via Youtube and the user is able to experience a 360-degree view from the perspective of a chorister.

P is for Prime Minister. This year we heard Boris Johnson make several references to his Christian faith. In July for example, during an interview with The Times newspaper, he said: "Christianity is a superb ethical system and I would count myself as a kind of very, very bad Christian. No disrespect to any other religions, but Christianity makes a lot

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of sense to me." He made the remarks just weeks after he refused to answer a question about his faith following his Catholic wedding earlier this year.

Q is for The Queen who, in an eventful year in which she lost her husband, experienced personal health challenges and saw conflict within her family, still managed to keep focussed on Jesus. In a speech to the Church of England's General Synod, she said: "For many, it has been a time of anxiety, of grief, and of weariness. Yet the Gospel has brought hope, as it has done throughout the ages; and the church has adapted and continued its ministry, often in new ways, such as digital forms of worship."

R is for Marcus Rashford. The Manchester United striker played a crucial role in challenging the government to provide free school meals for children this year. He has also opened up about his Christian faith, he said: 'It's impossible not to have faith in God and all he does for us'. Rashford also revealed he grew up in a Christian household.

S is for Songs of Praise. The world's longest-running religious television programme celebrated its 60th year anniversary this year. A special programme marked the nearly 3,000 broadcasts since the first transmission in 1961 and featured a message from Her Majesty The Queen.

T is for Hatan Tash. The evangelical and former Muslim evangelist was slashed with a knife while preaching at Speaker's Corner in July. A man dressed in black with a hood and face mask, unleashed a series of violent stabs at Tash's throat and body which left her with wounds to her

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face and hands. Tash collapsed with blood down her face as the assailant fled the scene.

U for Uxbridge. A pastor from north London was arrested but later released after preaching outside Uxbridge Station. Pastor John Sherwood was stopped by police after complaints were made against him. A video shared online showed him remonstrating with two police officers before he is pulled from a raised platform and taken away in handcuffs.

V for Vicar. Following Rev Nicky Gumbel's decision to step down from leading Holy Trinity Brompton church in July 2022, Rev Archie Coates has been appointed to lead the church. Rev Coates, 51, currently leads St Peter's Brighton and his formal appointment will take place in September 2022.

W is for Wilberforce Academy. Earlier this year, an Oxford university college apologised to students for hosting a Christian conference. Worcester College hosted The Wilberforce Academy event, a week-long academy for young people on the Christian worldview, but later said it had been a "serious failure that caused significant distress".

X is for Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain. Both groups have organised demonstrations across the UK demanding action for climate change. As part of the Insulate Britain, Rev Sue Parfitt has been a two-month suspended jail sentence for blocking the M25.

Y is for Youversion. The Bible app celebrated 500 million installs this year. The app, which allows people with a

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smartphone or tablet to access Scripture in more than 60 languages, has been going since 2008 and was one of the first 200 free apps on the App Store.

Z is for Zacharias. An investigation into apologist Ravi Zacharias concluded he engaged in "sexting, unwanted touching, spiritual abuse, and rape" during his leadership at Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM). The report described the horrific experiences of several spa workers who said that Ravi had spiritually manipulated them into performing sexual acts in exchange for money.

Courtesy of Christian Today. Article by Kelly Valencia

Perspective

Family life today and the Holy Family by Bishop Donal McKeown

“When we proclaim by word and deed that marriage and family are of eternal beauty and value, that gives both a vision and support to all involved” – Bishop McKeown

Yesterday we began a journey through the twelve days of Christmas with the characters who make up the Christmas story. These were not static figures, living in a stable with fixed visiting hours. The days surrounding the birth of Jesus were a confusing time as they stumbled from one unexpected event to another, without time to make sense of what was happening. No wonder that Mary had many

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things to ponder in her heart. So what does this feast tell us?

Firstly, today may be the feast of the Holy Family – but it is also the feast of a wholly unusual family. There was nothing typical about Jesus, Mary and Joseph. None of the simple rules for Jewish families in the Holy Land applied. But their holiness came from how they faced the unpredictable situations that they all had to face. And, for all of our families, that is where holiness is won from the hard rock of life. Family and holiness never come neatly packaged and tied up with a red ribbon. Many of the great saints came from strange backgrounds and had chequered lives. Their holiness came from working through the often-painful realities that they had to face. So many of our families would not pass the test as perfect families. We are all scarred by the circumstances of our life. Holiness is closer to heroism than it is to apparent perfection. No family situation is beyond the grace of God. Don't compare your family to somebody else's. Be grateful for the graces that you have. It is in the reality of your life that love and forgiveness can be at work, whatever the obstacles.

Secondly, Christmas tells about God giving Himself in Jesus. And many of the problems that we know from our neighbourhoods are connected with a culture that prioritises selfishness. A market jingle that puts me and my wants at the centre of the world closes us in ourselves. The idea of faithful family relationships calls us out of a preoccupation with self and our hurts and challenges us to build bridges. A society which encourages and promotes long term stable committed relationships is a healthy society. A society that is not sure what it promotes and ends up facilitating

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transitory relationships is unhealthy. What brings out the best in human beings brings out the best for human beings. A philosophy which tells us to expect little will bring little of beauty to birth. The Christmas message of faithfulness and forgiveness is tamed when we put it in a crib with candles and twinkling lights and then walk away.

But Christmas is about divine solidarity with us and an invitation to walk with one another, especially through the hard times. God in Jesus is with us, even when things go wrong and we are blinded or crippled, rejected or lonely. Jesus in the Holy Family asks us to take one step at a time, giving priority to generosity and outreach. That makes us adults. Selfishness and recrimination give us the shallow satisfaction of claiming to be a victim. But that is not food for the long journey, just more fuel for the fire of anger that will never go out, even when somebody else is made to pay. And it keeps us prisoners of childhood pain and forgives childishness. The feast of the Holy Family draws us away from the static crib and ask us to walk the rough road with others, knowing that that faithfulness and solidarity will lead to unexpected graces and blessings.

Thirdly, the Holy Family tells us that there is something profoundly sacred about human relationships. They are not merely useful and often pleasant. When marriage is reduced to a legal contract, then it remains a human construction that is by definition flawed. When we accept that marriage is something sacred, then we are drawn into a different space where grace can play a part. When we proclaim by word and deed that marriage and family are of eternal beauty and value, that gives both a vision and support to all involved. In a secular world, preparation for

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Church marriages need to be clear about the divine dimension of a committed intimate relationship of mind and body. That will be unwelcome when the emphasis on me is challenged. When relationships assume that it is about me and the latest gimmicks of the marriage market, then there is little space for the voice of God who calls me beyond myself. Any sort of semi-detached approach to profound relationships is terribly damaging for the partners and particularly for children who may be affected.

When a society abandons the idea of the sacredness of the family, it does not offer freedom and joy. Rather, it lowers expectations and promotes lack of responsibility and maturity. As the old saying goes, the problem with free love is that someone always pays the price. The feast of the Holy Family invites us to see our families beautiful and sacred, despite their scars.

The Twelve Days of Christmas are about more than sweet cribs and childhood memories. Jesus came into the messiness of the world to offer healing and hope. The family can be a key place where love, relationships and responsibility are promoted. When it is presented as little more than a contract that can be dumped when the going gets tough, then we are all diminished.

Today we pray for all families that they can be the best they can be for the sake of all involved. And we pray that, even when people have been hurt and damaged by close relationships, they will rediscover hope and healing.

Holy Family of Nazareth, in all your example and holiness, pray for us. Amen.

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Bishop Donal McKeown is Bishop of Derry. This homily was preached during Mass to celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family on 26 December 2021.

Poem for today

Noel: Christmas Eve 1913 by Robert Bridges, 1844 - 1930

Pax hominibus bonae voluntatis

A frosty Christmas Eve
when the stars were shining
Fared I forth alone
where westward falls the hill,
And from many a village
in the water'd valley
Distant music reach'd me
peals of bells aringing:
The constellated sounds
ran sprinkling on earth's floor
As the dark vault above
with stars was spangled o'er.
Then sped my thoughts to keep
that first Christmas of all
When the shepherds watching
by their folds ere the dawn
Heard music in the fields
and marveling could not tell
Whether it were angels
or the bright stars singing.

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Now blessed be the tow'rs
that crown England so fair
That stand up strong in prayer
unto God for our souls
Blessed be their founders
(said I) an' our country folk
Who are ringing for Christ
in the belfries to-night
With arms lifted to clutch
the rattling ropes that race
Into the dark above
and the mad romping din.

But to me heard afar
it was starry music
Angels' song, comforting
as the comfort of Christ
When he spake tenderly
to his sorrowful flock:
The old words came to me
by the riches of time
Mellow'd and transfigured
as I stood on the hill
Heark'ning in the aspect
of th' eternal

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