



Image of the day -

Ely Cathedral

Clogher diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes not going ahead

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and in the interests of the health and life of pilgrims, it has been decided that the annual Diocese of Clogher Pilgrimage to Lourdes, scheduled for 5-11 July next will not go ahead. This is the second year that the diocese has been forced to take this decision and it does so with regret, but conscious of the increased number of Covid-19 cases in Ireland and also in France.

Brian Armitage, Director of the Clogher Diocesan Pilgrimage says the decision was not taken lightly. 'We are all conscious of the significance of the Lourdes pilgrimage to so many people of all ages across the diocese, especially the assisted-pilgrims. It is in the interests of all, including staff members, that this decision is taken', he said.

Commenting on the decision, the Bishop of Clogher, Bishop Larry Duffy, says that he believes people will understand the reasoning behind it. 'In a time of pandemic, where there is a serious risk to health and life – especially for those who are vulnerable – it is necessary for us all to serve the common good. This decision, while regrettable, is a necessary one in the present situation', he said.

Bishop Duffy also paid tribute to the work of the medical and nursing staff who travel to Lourdes each year, noting the outstanding contribution that they are making to the care of those who are suffering from the virus here at home at this time. 'The spirit of generosity that impels our medical and



healthcare staff to care for our assisted-pilgrims at Lourdes each year is still to be seen in our hospitals, in our doctor's surgeries and in many settings across our communities during this pandemic. It is that loving care, that fraternal solidarity, which is made manifest in the service and care of others.'

'May Mary, Mother of Mercy and Health of the Sick, who through St Bernadette invites us to come to Jesus through her maternal care, sustain us all in these times and bring healing and peace to those who need it most.'

Virtual Pilgrimage Lourdes2Clogher

Bishop Duffy encourages people to join once more in a virtual pilgrimage to Lourdes this year. In 2020, the #Lourdes2Clogher pilgrimage online was extremely successful, attracting many thousands of people to join in the Masses and other devotions over the course of the days when many of them would have been at the Marian shrine in the southwest of France. The dates will be the same this

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year – 5-11 July. In advance of that, it is planned that there will be series of liturgies and other prayer moments, beginning on 11 February, the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, which is also the World Day of the Sick.

Details of the virtual pilgrimage will be posted on www.clogherdiocese.ie and on the Diocese of Clogher Facebook page.

New course at Church of Ireland Theological Institute

This weekend saw the launch of the Church of Ireland Theological Institute's new Certificate in Christian Theology and Practice, the C of I Correspondent to the Irish News writes.

The new course has been developed as a one–calendar–year, fully accredited programme in partnership with the University of Dublin, Trinity College. It is offered in three distinct pathways – as the new pre–selection Foundation Course for ordination training; as the main component of Diocesan Reader training (here it is supplemented by further instruction and practical training in 'Preaching'); and as adult faith formation for any who may interested in developing their own personal discipleship. A total of forty–three people have registered for the first cycle, and over this weekend they will begin online modules which engage with 'Encountering the Old Testament' and 'An Introduction to the Creeds'. Later modules will move the participants on to studies in 'New Testament', 'Theological Thinking', 'Leading Public Worship' and 'Spirituality and Self–understanding'.



Down Cathedral

Otherwise, the Theological Institute continues with teaching, training and ministerial formation although its programmes have inevitably been disrupted by the restrictions on movement and assembly as a result of the Covid pandemic. The car park in Braemor Park is largely deserted – a sure sign of the diminution of the residential component of the Institute – and the regular footfall down the drive to the RCB Library, into Trinity or over to the local Spar store is silent.

There are currently thirty–five students in either full–time or part–time training for Stipendiary Ministry through the MTh professional course accredited by TCD, and a further twenty–four in training for Ordained Local Ministry through the Open Learning Centre at QUB. There are nineteen curates participating in the Continuing Ministerial Education programme which is also facilitated by CITI, and a group of twelve will complete Diocesan Reader training in the spring of 2021.

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The road to Errigal

Since the onset of the pandemic, virtually all teaching has been delivered online and this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Whereas those courses which are more dependent

on pure academic content can be reasonably transferred to virtual learning and participation, the same cannot always be said for the more formational aspects of training.

Practical experiential learning, communal prayer and community life have all been greatly diminished over the past nine months. Nonetheless, in just the same way that parishes have had to be agile in adapting to new circumstances, the training process is also fitting itself to the new reality. Going forward, church life is likely to continue to avail of a blended approach between in-person and online



gathering, and all of those in training are being prepared towards this eventuality.

The RCB Library, which provides for the reading needs of the Theological Institute, has been running a click and collect service for the students, has been involved in facilitating an e-book scheme and continues to investigate ways in which it can support ministerial education and training.

Coronavirus: Priest's praise as frontline staff weep for dying man

A Catholic priest has said he will never forget the touching sight of hospital staff weeping and praying with a patient as he died with Covid-19, BBC News NI reports.

When Fr Brian Fitzpatrick was called to give the last rites to a patient, four people were gathered around the man's bedside.

At first, the priest did not know who they were as all four were wearing full personal protective equipment.

He presumed it was the dying man's family as one of them one was in tears.

The others were holding the patient's hand and wiping his brow, while one of the group quietly recited a prayer.

The County Armagh priest took his place by the patient's bed in Craigavon Area Hospital and waited for the prayer to finish



Snow in Belfast

When he looked up again, he noticed names were written on the group's visors, along with their job titles.

He then realised it was not the patient's family who were weeping, praying and keeping this sorrowful deathbed vigil - instead it was his young nurses and doctors.

Fr Fitzpatrick, who works in the Catholic parishes of Seagoe and Moyraverty, wrote about the incident on his parish Facebook page last week.

"They were the ones comforting him, weeping for him, praying with him," he wrote.

"These are our frontline staff; they are giving everything in service for us and our family members and I will never forget that touching sight and beautiful experience as long as I live."

Hospital visiting has been severely restricted during this current surge in the coronavirus pandemic.

There are some exceptions for end of life visits, but infection risks mean many Covid-19 patients are dying without their families being able to say goodbye in person.

Bishop institutes his successor in Carrickfergus

The Rev Christopher St John, formerly curate-assistant in St Mark's, Dundela, Diocese of Down and Dromore, was instituted as rector of St Nicholas', Carrickfergus, by his predecessor, the Rt Rev George Davison, Bishop of Connor.

The service on Thursday January 21 was conducted under strict Covid-19 guidelines, and was live streamed on the parish Facebook page.

Describing it as a very 'unusual' institution service, Bishop George told his successor: "I know the people of St Nicholas' and I know that while they are not able to be with you in person here this evening, they are very much with you in their prayers and you will be loved and supported in this place."

The preacher was the Rev Canon Helene Steed, rector of St Mark's and formerly Archdeacon of Clogher and rector of the Clones Group of Parishes in Co Monaghan.

In a sermon recorded in her own church, Archdeacon Steed said: "It feels rather odd to introduce your new rector Chris to you in a pre-recorded sermon, preached in a different church, but life is as it is. And despite these Covid-19

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restrictions, I hope and pray that this service will be special and spiritual to Chris and Andrea, and to all in the St Nicholas' family.”



The Rev Christopher St John

As the service neared a close, St Nicholas' new rector thanked everyone who had worked so hard to make the service possible. “It is such a pity we weren't able to all meet together because of the Covid restrictions, but I have been tremendously encouraged by all of the many messages have received virtually, on Facebook, and I am aware that a lot of people are watching this service,” he said.

Christopher, 54, is a native of Londonderry. He moved at a young age to Newtownabbey where he was a member of the Church of the Holy Spirit, Mossley.

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He has PhD in Adult Education, and a number of Masters' degrees, and worked for several years in adult education and child protection training, before embarking on training at the Church of Ireland Theological Institute seven years ago.

Christopher served his deacon intern year in Holy Trinity, Woodburn, Connor Diocese, before ordination as curate assistant in St Mark's, Dundela, in August 2017.

He is married to Andrea and they have three children.

Catholic bishops of Hiroshima and Nagasaki hail nuclear weapons ban treaty

The Catholic bishops of Hiroshima and Nagasaki welcomed the United Nations treaty banning nuclear weapons that came into force Friday, while expressing disappointment that Japan was not a signatory.

“As Catholic bishops and Japanese citizens of the A-bombed cities, we share Pope Francis' confidence that a world free of nuclear weapons is possible and necessary ‘to protect all life,’” the two bishops wrote in a joint statement Jan. 22.

Archbishop Mitsuaki Takami of Nagasaki and Bishop Mitsuru Shirahama of Hiroshima hailed the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) as an “effective measure for the abolition of nuclear weapons.”

The nuclear ban treaty, which came into force on Jan. 22, is the first multilateral nuclear disarmament treaty in more than

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two decades. It was signed by 86 states, including the Holy See but excluding the world's nine nuclear powers.



The Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima,

The United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, Israel, and other countries possessing nuclear weapons did not sign or ratify the treaty, nor did some ally countries of nuclear powers, including South Korea and Japan.

The Japanese bishops said that the “last major barrier that must be overcome before all countries join the treaty ... is the persistence of the deterrence theory held by nuclear-armed states and countries such as Japan under the so-called nuclear umbrella.”

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“The Japanese government argues that ‘it is necessary to maintain the deterrence of the United States with nuclear weapons under the Japan-US alliance.’ But as the only country to ever be attacked with atomic weapons, Japan should take the lead in signing and ratifying and play a role in promoting dialogue toward nuclear disarmament between nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states,” they said.

Pope Francis visited the ground zero site of the 1945 nuclear attack on Nagasaki on his most recent international trip in November 2019. About 70,000 people died instantly and in the immediate aftermath of the bombing of Nagasaki and another 75,000 by the end of the month.

Nagasaki was a center of Catholicism in Japan for more than four centuries. When the bomb was dropped, 8,500 of the city’s 12,000 Catholics were killed instantly.

“This place makes us deeply aware of the pain and horror that we human beings are capable of inflicting upon one another,” Pope Francis said.

In an interview published on Jan. 21, the Vatican Secretary for Relations with States Archbishop Paul Gallagher said that the Holy See actively participated in the drafting process of the nuclear ban treaty and that “many of its provisions recall directly or indirectly the centrality of the human person [and] the humanitarian paradigm.”

He pointed out that the Holy See has ratified all the main nuclear treaties: the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban

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Treaty, the TPNW, and the safeguards agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

“We are concerned that the nuclear powers often seem to be turning away from nuclear multilateralism and the negotiating table, as evidenced by a certain erosion of the nuclear weapons architecture, highlighted by the abandonment of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the weakening of the Iranian JCPOA (Comprehensive Joint Plan of Action), the uncertainty of the future of the aforementioned START [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty], and increasing military spending not only on maintenance but also on the modernization of nuclear arsenals,” Gallagher said.

“International peace and security cannot be based on the threat of mutual destruction or total annihilation, nor can they be based on maintaining a balance of power or regulating relations by replacing ‘the force of law’ with ‘the law of force.’”

“The ultimate goal of the total elimination of nuclear weapons is both a challenge and a moral and humanitarian imperative,” the Vatican official said.

Book spot

Winston Churchill Fought for ‘Christian Civilization,’ but He Rarely Went to Church

A new biography sorts through the British prime minister’s enigmatic faith, Christopher Gehrz writes

In the popular Netflix series *The Crown*, Winston Churchill first appears at the 1947 wedding of Princess Elizabeth. Two years removed from leading Great Britain to victory in World War II, the former prime minister enters Westminster Abbey to the sound of a patriotic hymn by Cecil Spring Rice: “I vow to thee, my country, all earthly things above, / Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love.”

Tellingly, we don’t hear the second verse, which turns from the United Kingdom to God’s kingdom: “We may not count her armies, we may not see her King; / Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering.” *The Crown*’s way of introducing Churchill may be one of the many liberties that series takes with British history, but it seems appropriate for a politician who was more devoted to his country’s system of government than to the doctrines of the church that Elizabeth still heads.

If you’re enough of a Churchill fan to have devoured Andrew Roberts’s magisterial 2018 biography and yet wanted to read more about religion than Roberts’s brief but trenchant discussion of that topic, you may want to pick up **Gary Scott Smith’s short study *Duty and Destiny: The Life and Faith of Winston Churchill***, part of the Library of Religious Biography series from Eerdmans. (My own entry in the series releases later this year.) The book portrays a statesman driven both by duty to country and empire (“the service of my love”) and by what Smith calls “a profound sense of his own destiny.”

Yet the answer to “who or what he believed determined his destiny—God or fate—is ultimately unclear.”

If not a groundbreaking work of original research, *Duty and Destiny* does manage, in Smith’s words, to synthesize “the many contradictory opinions expressed ... by the army of Churchill biographers” about a story of faith that was “complex, colorful, and compelling.”

Unconventional Faith

Alas, only the first of those three adjectives consistently describes Smith’s book. While the writing is workmanlike, we can expect more eloquence and verve from a biography of such a master of the English language.

In addition, readers hoping for a conventional biographical structure may be frustrated that Smith’s telling of Churchill’s life story doesn’t start until chapter 3 or that so important a topic as Churchill’s marriage appears very late, in a chapter on his retirement years. But at least some of that scene setting is necessary, in part to orient American readers to the religious and political terrain of a country that Churchill believed to be a Christian nation, though not in the way many American evangelicals would understand that phrase. (Having previously published histories of religion in the American presidency, Smith does well at several points in *Duty and Destiny* to draw helpful contrasts between the unconventional faith of Churchill and that of his ally Franklin D. Roosevelt, a committed Episcopalian who

was the subject of an earlier entry in Eerdmans's religious biography series.)

Far less devout than William Wilberforce, Margaret Thatcher, and the other Christian politicians sketched in chapter 2, Churchill nonetheless staunchly supported the establishment of churches whose doors he rarely darkened (save for occasions like royal weddings) and drew freely on the language of Christianity. Indeed, Smith's analysis is most complex and compelling when it turns to Churchill's colorful use of religious rhetoric, a hallmark both of his "locust years" in the 1930s, when he cried out from his political "wilderness" like "an Old Testament prophet," and during the Second World War, when speeches "peppered with references to God ... citations and allusions to Scripture, and images of spiritual warfare between good and evil and light and darkness" sought to "inspire, comfort, and assure beleaguered Britons of their eventual triumph." What such public communications say about Churchill's private convictions is harder to determine, especially when he "had little to gain politically from revealing what he truly believed."

Yet while Smith is surely right that "we will never know definitively what anyone believes in his or her heart of hearts," readers can expect biographers to do more than catalogue the divergent opinions of previous authors. To his credit, Smith doesn't shy away from one conclusion that will disappoint some of his Christian readers: For all his invocations of "Christian civilization" and "Christian

ethics,” Churchill did not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, a figure he mentioned just once, by Smith’s count, in five million words’ worth of speeches. At most, the prime minister did “precisely what his contemporary C. S. Lewis ... insisted that people could not logically do: profess that Jesus was a great moral teacher while denying his claim to be God.”

While Churchill seemed to hold shifting beliefs about the existence of God, the nature of the afterlife, and the veracity of Scripture, his views on Jesus may have been fixed as early as the late 1890s. During his military service in India, a 23-year-old Churchill read skeptics like Edward Gibbon and William Winwood Reade, debated theology and metaphysics with fellow officers, and scorned Christian missions. (That last critique, at least, didn’t last long. Just over a decade later, as a rising young parliamentarian, Churchill praised missionaries like those who had made central Africans “clothed, peaceful, law-abiding, [and] polite.”)

If only Smith would have returned more often to India, whose control by Britain Churchill “fervently defended” long after that stance became “a major political liability.” He agrees that Churchill’s commitment to the Empire “has rightly been criticized as retrogressive, racist, repressive, and repulsive” and concedes that his imperialist values “seem to clash with Christianity’s emphasis on service, sacrifice, and racial and gender equality.”

But Smith is too quick to exonerate his subject for his treatment of India. I'm not sure Churchill deserves any credit for having "correctly predicted the strife between Hindus and Muslims" that attended the independence he opposed, given that he was one of those "British imperialists who strove to create animosity" between South Asia's largest religious groups. Smith does note that Churchill "decried [Mohandas K. Gandhi] as a seditious Hindu holy man," but that passing comment understates the British leader's animosity toward a man he called "a malignant, subversive fanatic" and falsely accused of faking a three-week fast in 1943.

An Imperial Creed

Of course, that's the same year that three million Indians starved to death under British rule. Smith quotes historian Arthur Herman's conclusion that the Bengal famine "would have been far worse" without the British aid that eventually arrived, but he overlooks Herman's more conflicted evaluation in Gandhi and Churchill: Confronted with "the greatest humanitarian crisis the Raj had faced in more than half a century," Britain's wartime leader "proved callously indifferent" and "irrational." He was "resolutely opposed to any food shipments" at a time when ships were needed for military operations against the Axis powers. Disgusted that his boss seemed to view such humanitarian aid "as an 'appeasement' of" Gandhi's independence movement, Churchill's handpicked viceroy, Archibald Wavell, had to threaten resignation to change the prime minister's mind.

This is no tangential matter for a religious biography of Winston Churchill. “Central to many key decisions of his life,” wrote Andrew Roberts, was “this belief that Britain and her Empire were not just political entities but also spiritual ones.” Smith quotes this observation as part of his survey of writings on Churchill in chapter 1, but he doesn’t adequately reckon with it. While he’s surely right to hesitate in ascribing many traditional Christian beliefs to Churchill, Smith would have done well to wrestle more with Roberts’s conclusion that “imperialism was in effect a substitute for religion. ... In the absence of Christian faith, therefore, the British Empire became in a sense Churchill’s creed.”

Christopher Gehrz is professor of history at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. His religious biography of Charles Lindbergh will be published by Eerdmans in August.

Pointers for prayer

Urgent Prayer Request from the Province of Alexandria: The Anglican Church of Ethiopia have asked for our prayers as they see the results of the Tigray crisis unfold. One church leader has described “thousands of people internally displaced just living in empty fields.”

Today we give thanks for those raising awareness of leprosy around the world. It’s World Leprosy Day next week, when

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advocates challenge myths and spread awareness about leprosy, which is totally curable, globally.

We pray today for the church across the world, especially in places where they are experiencing hardship and persecution. We stand together with our sisters and brothers and pray for God to bring relief from their circumstances.

Lord Jesus, you prayed that we would all be united together so the world would believe and experience your love. Help us to put aside that which keeps us apart and work together to share your love through our actions and our lives.

In this week of prayer for Christian Unity with its theme of “abiding in Christ” we’re more aware than ever of the importance of working together to serve the world. We pray for God to unite us together in his love.

Let’s remember and thank God today for friends and connections with different church traditions, and pray that we’ll fully embrace and enjoy the richness of diversity that we all bring to worship and service.

We pray today for God’s help as we unite across denominations to bring hope and practical care to those in need, and ask that any differences and misunderstandings will be overcome through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today we pray for those facing food insecurity globally. Coronavirus, conflict and cuts to UN funding are increasing the risks of food insecurity and malnutrition in 2021, in particular in South Sudan.

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Prolonged restrictions and times of isolation can lead to a loss of confidence in venturing out and interacting with others. We pray for all who are experiencing this and ask God to help us gently reach out with encouragement and understanding.

Speaking to the Soul

Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh? Why did she say, ‘Can an old woman like me have a baby?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return about this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

Genesis 18:13-14 NLT

I love laughter. It's a pleasure to see people really letting rip and having a good laugh. Laughter can be sparked off by any number of things, but it is often sparked off by absurdity. We laugh at clowns because everything they do is ridiculous and turns our normal expectations of life upside down. Sarah's laughter was for precisely this reason. She was about 100 years old, decades beyond child bearing age, and although she had longed for a child in earlier years she had long since got used to the idea that it wasn't going to happen. And then three mysterious visitors turn up at Abraham and Sarah's tent in the desert and inform them that she will give birth. The very thought was hilarious because it was so completely absurd.

But it was true. She was going to have a baby. And the explanation takes us to the heart of the nature of God. Nothing is too hard for him. For us such a thing would stay on the list of impossibilities but God is the creator of Heaven

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and Earth and for him such things are entirely possible. Mary found herself in exactly the same place when she was informed that she would give birth to Jesus. She had never slept with a man and she knew that that would make conception impossible. But the angel informs her that with God nothing is impossible and praise God that's how it proved to be.

When Sarah gave birth to her son there was only one possible name for him – Isaac, which means 'he laughs'. Sarah and all those around her had learnt a vital lesson and it's one that we need to remember. As we live for God day by day we need to remember never to put limits on what he can do. Amazing as it sounds God is the God of the impossible.

QUESTION

When have you seen God work in seemingly impossible ways?

PRAYER

Great God of Creation, help me to learn from this story and not to put a limit on what you can do. Amen.

