



**Image of the day - Canterbury Cathedral**



## **Pope Francis: Meeting with Iraq's top Shiite cleric offered 'universal message' of fraternity**

**On his flight to Rome from Baghdad on Monday, Pope Francis said that Iraq's top Shiite cleric is a "humble and wise man," and their March 6 meeting had a "universal message" about the importance of fraternity, the Catholic Herald reports.**

The landmark meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani took place on the second day of Pope Francis' historic three-day trip to Iraq March 5-8.

During an in-flight press conference on the flight back to Rome March 8, the pope was asked if the meeting with al-Sistani was a message to the religious leaders of Iran.



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“I believe it was a universal message,” Pope Francis responded. “I felt the duty of this pilgrimage of faith and penance to go and find a great, a wise man, a man of God.”

Francis added that these qualities could be perceived only by listening to al-Sistani. “This meeting did my soul good. He is a light,” he said.

The two men spoke for around 45 minutes during a private meeting at al-Sistani’s residence in Najaf, central Iraq, according to Matteo Bruni, director of the Holy See press office. Najaf is the third holiest city of Shiite Islam after Mecca and Medina.

The meeting was a milestone in relations between the Catholic Church and Shiite Islam.

Pope Francis described the encounter with al-Sistani as “very respectful,” adding that he felt honored that the 90-year-old Shiite cleric rose to greet him twice, a thing he ordinarily does not do.

Describing the religious leader as someone with wisdom and prudence, Francis commented that wise people are everywhere, because “God’s wisdom has been spread all over the world.”

Pope Francis’ in-flight press conference ended a trip of a little over three days in Iraq. He was the first pope to ever visit the Middle Eastern country, where he went to encourage the persecuted Christian minority and to foster interreligious fraternity.



Iraqi Christians say goodbye to Pope Francis after an open air Mass at a stadium in Irbil, Iraq, Sunday, March 7, 2021.

The journey took Francis 900 miles within Iraq, where in addition to his meeting with al-Sistani, he spoke to political leaders and Christian communities.

The pope stayed in Baghdad, and also visited the Plain of Ur, which is the birthplace of Abraham, as well as Najaf, Nassiriya, Erbil, Mosul, and Bakhdida, also known as Qaraqosh.

According to Bruni, in his encounter with al-Sistani, Francis “stressed the importance of cooperation and friendship between religious communities for contributing — through the cultivation of mutual respect and dialogue — to the good of Iraq, the region and the entire human family.”

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Aboard the papal plane, Pope Francis also spoke about his 2019 joint document on human fraternity, which he signed with Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of al-Azhar, during an interreligious meeting in Abu Dhabi.

That document, signed on Feb. 4, 2019, “was prepared with the grand imam in secret for six months, praying, reflecting, correcting the text,” the pope revealed.

The document was “a first step,” he added, noting that afterward he was inspired to write his 2020 encyclical on human fraternity, *Fratelli Tutti*.

“The path of fraternity is important,” he said. “Both documents must be studied because they go in the same direction, they are seeking fraternity.”

Francis recalled a phrase used by al-Sistani: that “men are either brothers by religion or equal by creation.”

“And fraternity is equality. I believe it is also a cultural path,” the pope added.

According to Francis, the Church’s thinking on fraternity has changed, especially with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

Pope Francis said that there were critics who accused him of not being courageous, or who said that he had gone against Church doctrine or committed heresy. But he said that criticism was one of the risks of trying to advance interreligious dialogue.

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“But these decisions are always made in prayer, in dialogue, asking for advice, in reflection. They are not a whim and they are also the line that the [Second Vatican] Council has taught us,” he emphasized.

Courtesy The Catholic Herald

See also - The Church in Iraq is alive: Pope Francis at Mass in Erbil - Vatican News

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-03/the-church-in-iraq-is-alive-pope-francis-at-mass-in-erbil.html>

## **Inter- faith advisor appointed by Archbishop McDowell**

**The Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, Most Rev John McDowell, has appointed Rev Suzanne Cousins as his Inter Faith Advisor.**

Rev Cousins, who is Rector of the Benburb Group of Parishes in the Diocese of Armagh, was previously Bishop’s Curate-in-Charge of the Moville Group of Parishes.

Archbishop McDowell said: “In recent years, the World Council of Churches has been developing its role in this area of theology and practice and it is keen to liaise with member Churches in this work. In an increasingly diverse community, here in Ireland and globally, it is important that we are aware of both the limitations and the extent of what can be achieved in inter–faith relations with integrity and love.

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The Revd Suzanne Cousins pictured at the launch of her Braemor Study, *Generous Love in Multi-Faith Ireland*, in March 2018 with (from left) Mr Shafqat Ayub, Shaykh Dr Umar Al-Qadri, (Head Imam of the Al-Mustafa Islamic Education and Cultural Centre, Ireland), and the Revd Canon Dr Maurice Elliott (Director, Church of Ireland Theological Institute). Photo by Lynn Glanville.

“Apart from her invaluable experience of living as a Christian overseas and engaging with Muslim people and communities, Suzanne is a member of the Inter Faith Working Group of the General Synod Commission for Christian Unity and Dialogue, and her MTh dissertation (subsequently published in the Braemor Series) dealt with a central Anglican approach to inter–faith encounter, outlined in the Anglican Communion document entitled *Generous Love*. I am delighted that Suzanne has agreed to act in this capacity.”



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Mrs Cousins said: “I am delighted and honoured to be invited by the Archbishop to serve in this capacity. Inter–faith dialogue and the approach of the Anglican Communion and other Churches has developed significantly since the early days of its formal exploration, so that dialogue no longer belongs solely or mainly in the domain of theological academia. Rather, Christians in Irish society, north and south, can find themselves on an almost daily basis interacting with people of other faiths, who are a growing minority. Inter–faith dialogue is in many ways the domain of everyone, especially with the digitalisation of dialogue.”

## **New Chair of Dublin & Glendalough Youth Council**

**The Revd Alan Breen has been appointed chairperson of the Dublin & Glendalough Youth Council. Alan has been appointed by the Archbishop in succession to the Revd Lesley Robinson**

Alan has been Rector of Kill O’ the Grange in the Diocese of Dublin since 2017. Prior to that he was Curate in Greystones and Chaplain in Temple Carrig School for two years. He has over 20 years’ experience in full time youth ministry. He has been a member of DGYC since 2014.

Commenting on his appointment Alan referred to John 10:10 – A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.





“John 10:10 has always been an important life statement for me,” he commented. “Life is real in its good and bad, and Jesus is with us in all, not just with words, but with active participation. My hope, as we continue to journey in this ministry together with

Susie Keegan our Diocesan Youth Ministry Development Officer, is that in our disconnected society, we can connect in ways that bring life, hope and reality in abundance. We have much to learn from youth leaders and young people alike, and much to offer in who we are as a team. I’m excited to see what God has for us as we continue to bring and be a light to those in darkness.”

Dublin & Glendalough Youth Council (DGYC) was established in 2014 to oversee youth ministry in the United Dioceses. The council is a mixture of clergy and lay

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representatives from around the Dioceses, whose role is to support and encourage youth ministry.

Dublin & Glendalough's Youth Ministry Development Officer is Susie Keegan. Her role focuses particularly on enabling young people to grow in their Christian faith within their local parish context. To that end, Susie seeks to support those who are working with youth in parishes as well as supporting new developments.

Rev Lesley Robinson remains a member of the youth council but has recently been appointed chairperson of the Healthcare Chaplaincy Oversight Committee.

## Lent in Lockdown

**Lent is usually seen as a penitential season and with the continued restrictions on movement and assembly this is particularly so this year.**

However, just as the churches have adapted their worship patterns in the face of the pandemic, so too there are innovative Lenten observances.

Scores of people from different parishes have signed up to take part in a virtual pilgrimage in the Diocese of **Derry & Raphoe**. 'Let's Journey to the Cross' is a joint initiative by the diocese's Children's Ministry, SEEDS, and its ministry for young people, Derry & Raphoe Youth.

Would-be pilgrims were asked to sign up for the Lenten initiative so that between them they would 'complete' the

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3,500 virtual miles from Derry & Raphoe to the Holy Land. Among those taking part are the Bishop of Derry & Raphoe and pupils from the RE department of a local secondary school.

The initiative is being coordinated by the Diocesan Children's Officer for Derry & Raphoe, Kirsty McCartney, who invited people to walk in their own communities – and within their own 'bubbles' – so that their journeys would comply with Covid guidelines.

Kirsty says the virtual pilgrimage has proved so popular, they're on course to walk the whole distance to Jerusalem and back again, and then some. "The response has been brilliant. Participants have already pledged to complete a total of almost than 9,000 miles. This means that by the time we get to Easter Sunday, we will have covered the distance to the cross and back again. And we're now making our way 'virtually' to Iona, as well, which is brilliant because of our diocese's connection to St Columba."

On Ash Wednesday, **Dublin & Glendalough** diocese began a journey through Lent with a short reflection which will continue every day until Holy Week. 'Walking in the Wilderness with Jesus' is provided in the main by Lay Readers. The Archbishop of Dublin began the series and will provide weekly reflections on Sundays throughout Lent. The Diocesan Readers will take over from Mondays to Saturdays providing a thought for the day and prayers for our times based on the readings for each day until Maundy Thursday. The reflections will be posted daily on the Dublin and Glendalough YouTube channel and will also be

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available on the Diocesan website, Facebook page and Twitter.

Among other Lenten initiatives the Bishop of Down & Dromore's reflections on the Book of Nehemiah are available on the Down & Dromore website and on social media from 6am each day until 28 March while the Bishop of Connor is giving a series of six online talks on the theme: 'Faith in the tough times'. The talks will be premiered on the diocesan Facebook page on Wednesdays at 7pm and then available for download.

The Dioceses of **Tuam, Killala & Achonry** hope to raise €11,500 for a new project in the Diocese of Kajiado in Kenya. They will be partnering with Water Drops to fund a pump house to provide fresh, clean water for the village of Imaroro and surrounding communities. They're reading the entire Bible and are hoping for sponsorship of €10 for each of the 1,189 chapters. The parishes are rostered to take a week of reading each on Zoom, daily throughout Lent. More information is available at [tuam.anglican.org](http://tuam.anglican.org) and you can contribute at [idonate.ie/tka/water](http://idonate.ie/tka/water)  
Courtesy the C of I Correspondent to The Irish Times

## **Broadcasts, resources and webinars**

### **Climate Sunday initiative**

**The Climate Sunday initiative is calling on all local churches across Great Britain & Ireland to hold a climate-focused service on any Sunday before 5 September 2021.**



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At this service, congregations are encouraged to make a commitment to greater action to address climate change in their own place of worship and community and to use their voice to tell politicians we want a cleaner, greener, fairer future at the heart of plans agreed during COP26.

A selection of service materials and themed resources are available for all denominations and traditions. The vision is to leave a lasting legacy of thousands of UK and Irish churches better equipped to address this critical issue as part of their normal discipleship and mission.

Churches in England, Scotland and Wales are registering and the organisers are keen that Irish churches take part too.

You can register your climate-focused service on their website here: <https://www.climatesunday.org/register>.

There are resources for both virtual and in person services here: <https://www.climatesunday.org/resources>.

For more information on the Climate Sunday initiative contact [climatesunday@ctbi.org.uk](mailto:climatesunday@ctbi.org.uk) or visit <https://www.climatesunday.org/>

## **CPAS to host free webinar on the subject Leading into the Future: Five Things to Embrace**

**On March 16 and 25. This will be shared at 10-11am and 2-3pm on Tuesday March 16 and from 2-3pm on Thursday March 25.**

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The webinar will explore five things to guide us in leadership at this transition phase of the pandemic, as we progress towards the hoped for release from lockdown.

The speaker is James Lawrence, Leadership Principal at CPAS. There is no charge, but spaces are limited so please book your place here -

<https://www.cpas.org.uk/browse-everything/webinars>

## **Webinar will “read the signs of the times” as COVID-19 pandemic stretches into one year**

A 15 March webinar coordinated by the World Council of Churches (WCC) will, one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, explore the “signs of the times” with an eye for social justice, following a year of suffering and disruption for many around the world.

According to WHO data, over the past year there have been over 99 million cases with over 2 million deaths. The wider impacts of the pandemic have affected almost all areas of life, and thrown pre-existing inequality and discrimination into even sharper relief. In collaboration with its global ecumenical partners WCC aims at galvanizing mutual solidarity and support as an affirmation of our common human fragility which this pandemic has exposed.

With a focus on public witness and diakonia issues, the webinar will present up-to-date information on the pandemic, its impacts and the global response.

Among other aspects, the webinar will highlight impacts and challenges in the spheres of mental health, vaccines, the

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situation of frontline health workers, the wider social and economic consequences, and the special impact on children and youth.

Speakers will include intergovernmental partners, as well as senior representatives of the WCC's ecumenical partner organizations. Voices of healthcare workers, the elderly, the bereaved, youth, children, and other vulnerable populations will be heard.

Link to join the Webinar on Covid-19, 15 March, 15:00-16:00 CET -

<https://www.oikoumene.org/events/webinar-covid-19-vaccination-how-churches-can-ensure-that-stateless-people-are-not-left-behind>

## **Media review**

### **Church of Ireland primate who, perhaps unfairly, lived in shadow of his hymn-writing wife**

News Letter - Gordon Lucy on the life of Bishop William Alexander, who was ordained as Primate of All Ireland 125 years ago. Anthony Trollope's feeble Bishop of Barchester was mere putty in hands of that termagant, Mrs Proudie. As Bishop of Derry, William Alexander may not have been dominated by his famous wife, hymn writer ('All Things Bright and Beautiful', 'There Is A Green Hill Far Away', 'Once In Royal David's City' and more) and poet Cecil Frances Alexander, but in terms of historical profile he certainly has been comprehensively overshadowed by her.

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[<https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/church-of-ireland-primate-who-perhaps-unfairly-lived-in-shadow-of-his-hymn-writing-wife-3157391>]

## **Expert panel to work with mother-and-baby home victims**

BBC NI News

[[] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56283644> ]

## **Mothers' details to be recorded on marriage certificates in England and Wales**

BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour - Interview with Revd Canon Dr Sandra Millar, the Church of England's Head of Welcome and Life Events, on legislation that will allow mothers' details to be recorded on marriage certificates in England and Wales from May 4.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000sr3w> (item starts at around 33:41 interview with Sandra Millar start at around 37:18)

## **Holy wells: Mapping Ireland's hidden heritage**

By Alan Haslam BBC News NI. "Believe that a further shore is reachable from here. Believe in miracles and cures and healing wells." Seamus Heaney's powerful poem The Cure at Troy, recently read by Joe Biden for Irish broadcaster RTÉ, celebrates the thousands of holy wells found across the island of Ireland.

These supposedly sacred water sources are thought by some to have miraculous healing properties.

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[[] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56216763> ]

## **Video game Minecraft a help to deliver worship**

BBC News. Short film with interview with Revd Becky Dyball, of All Saints, Sawtry, Cambridgeshire, on using the video game Minecraft as a way to help deliver worship to younger generations. Includes comment from the Bishop of Ely, Stephen Conway.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-cambridgeshire-56270781>

## **United Ireland rhetoric provoking unionist backlash over NI protocol - former diplomat**

Irish Times

[[] <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/united-ireland-rhetoric-provoking-unionist-backlash-over-ni-protocol-former-diplomat-1.4501397>

[[]

## **The Fleet St editor and the IRA**

Daily Telegraph

[[] <http://digitaleditions.telegraph.co.uk/data/530/reader/reader.html?social#!preferred/0/package/530/pub/530/page/59/article/148574> ]



A member of the Mothers' Union in a video promoting the "No more 1 in 3" campaign against gender-based violence, in November

## **Comment - Empower women to become leaders by Sheran Harper, Mothers' Union World President**

As the world emerges from the pandemic, more needs to be done to create an equal world, says Sheran Harper in The Church Times.

COVID-19 has challenged us all, and women around the world have picked up a disproportionate amount of the heavy lifting as a result of the pandemic. The effects on their lives are far-reaching and unpredictable, from being extremely affected by job losses and poverty globally to an

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increase in domestic violence, which is a direct result of the lockdown.

This is why, this International Women's Day, more than ever before, we must unite to ensure that women can take up their rightful place at the heart of their communities.

The Mothers' Union is committed to empowering women to become leaders, in order to build a better world. With four million members, in 84 countries, we are steadily making progress towards a brighter future by working together in faith to end gender-based violence (News, 27 November 2020), promote self-reliance, and strive for peace and safety for women, their families, and their communities. Every step of this journey gives women the knowledge, confidence, and self-esteem to step forward and become the leaders of tomorrow.

Although the challenges of Covid-19 are many, there are excellent opportunities, too. We are looking more closely at the sort of society we want in the wake of this terrible time.

The Mothers' Union is at the forefront of this, as a charity in its own right and in partnership with other organisations, at home and internationally. In the UK, we work closely with the Together Coalition, who, on 1 March, released their report, Our Chance to Reconnect. The report focuses on what divides and unites us in the UK, and highlights ways of bringing us closer together for healing.

As a worldwide Christian movement, we are focused on building a better future at a global and a local level, and sharing God's love, which teaches that women and men are

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Sheran  
Harper,  
World  
President  
The Mothers  
Union



created equal. The Mothers' Union is also a delegate at the 65th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW65), and we have

already submitted evidence to the commission on the increase in gender-based violence which resulted from pandemic lockdowns.

### **Giving women a voice**

Our work with the UN is an opportunity to demonstrate further the unique part that faith and faith-based organisations play in bringing about positive change for women at every level of society.

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The aims of UNCSW65 fit closely with those of the Mothers' Union, and our submission to the commission for 2021 reflects this. It makes women's participation and decision-making in public life a priority, calling for the elimination of violence in all its forms, the achievement of gender equality, and the empowerment of women and girls. The aim of the Mothers' Union's international and UK-based projects exemplify this, led, as they are, by women acting as community volunteer facilitators and leading by example.

This informs our projects at the grass roots. For example, our literacy projects in Burundi are much broader than learning to read: they also cover relationships, nutrition, crop-growing, and hygiene. Self-reliance programmes in Tanzania help women to become independent by offering financial guidance to help them to set up businesses, escape poverty, and feed their children. And more than 30,000 women in Africa have changed their lives after being part of a Mothers' Union savings-and-loans group.

The Mothers' Union also runs Early Marriage Groups, for example in Ethiopia. The focus of these groups is on preventing early marriage, which can have devastating effects for young women. These include a lack of educational opportunity, obstructed labour, and an increased risk of death in childbirth. Teaching about puberty, menstruation, and the importance of completing their education is key to giving young women an informed say in their future, and encouraging them to become the leaders of tomorrow.

In one instance, a class leader, Awar, was forced to marry at 17. She says: "I use my life as an example. I didn't get an

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education, I got married young. This group helps the girls learn, and that is very important to me. If I had got training like this, my life would have been different.”

This approach is typical of all our projects, which are rooted in faith, but address the issues and challenges identified by communities. As you change the world for one person, this builds the movement, growing it beyond the individual, their community, the region, and the country, until it is a global force of change for women.

For the first time this year, UNCSW65 will be virtual, and the Mothers’ Union delegation will be attending and helping to make a difference. It is our largest-ever delegation: 29 women from 12 different countries.

Courtesy The Church Times, published on International Women’s Day, 08.02.2021

## **Pointers to Prayer**

God of Space and Time, Meet us in the place where we are today. Meet us in the place where we are And transform us by the presence of your Son. In this place, may we encounter the One who embodies your love. Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

God of Space and Time, Meet us in the place where we are today. Meet us at the break of day And be with us in all that lies before us. In the place in which we live, may we see life renewed. Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.



God of Space and Time, Meet us in the place where we are today. Meet us in the place of suffering And bring your healing presence among us. In the place of suffering, enable us to reach out to those beside us. Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

God of Space and Time, Meet us in the place where we are today. Meet us in the place of sorrow And bring your light into our darkness. In the place of sorrow, may we become bearers of your light. Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

God of Space and Time, Meet us in the place where we are today. Meet us in the rhythm of life And renew hope within us. In the community in which we live, may we bear witness to the God of hope. Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

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God of Space and Time, Meet us in the place where we are today. Meet us at the close of day And be with us through the night. Keep us safe and bring us to the dawn of a new day. Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

## Speaking to the Soul

**As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.**

Luke 9:51 NLT

There's a wonderful description of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 50.7 in which it says that he set his face like flint. That is to say he was absolutely fixed on heading in one definite direction in obedience to the Lord. That's exactly what we see here in this verse in Luke's gospel. Jesus knows exactly what's going on. He knows that the Jewish leaders were determined to kill him and yet, even so, he heads to the city where his life would be under greatest threat. If anyone had done a risk assessment of the situation then Jesus would have been told to avoid the area and head back up north to Galilee.

Jesus' complete commitment to his father's will is awesome. He could have chosen to avoid the dangers but his desire is to be obedient and so he heads down south to Jerusalem. He has no fear and takes a route that no Jewish person would ever have been advised to take. He walked through Samaria whose people hated and despised the Jews. Sure enough the Samaritan people kicked up a fuss when they

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knew that he was heading to Jerusalem. This angered James and John who suggested to Jesus that he might like them to call down fire from heaven to destroy the people. But Jesus wasn't impressed and rebukes them for their offer.

As they continued on the road to Jerusalem a man told Jesus that he would follow him wherever he went. Jesus' response was to inform him that "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head." Jesus then invited the man to follow him but he clearly wanted to ensure that the man had no illusions. Following Jesus would require a single-minded commitment. Nothing short of that would do. He was calling on all his followers to set their faces like flint, both then and now.

## QUESTION

Have you set your face like flint in obedience to Christ?

## PRAYER

Dear Father, thank you that you invite me to live a life of obedience to you. Give me strength today to head resolutely in the direction you want me to go. Amen.

