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## **Church Leaders' New Year message urges leaders of NI political parties to bring a sense of hope**

The following New Year message was issued by the Church Leaders commenting on Gospel hope, Brexit and political deadlock -

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One of the major themes of the Christmas season is the message of the coming of Light into the darkness of our world. As John says in his Gospel, speaking of the Lord Jesus, “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world” (John 1:9).

Yet some 2,019 years later, there is still much darkness in this world.

We see pictures in newspapers and on television that speak of suffering and despair in different countries and regions, and even here on the island of Ireland, both north and south, many live their lives with a lack of security and an absence of hope.

The ongoing uncertainty of Brexit has added to those worries, both for businesspeople and ordinary citizens alike. Many businesses fear for the future, while many families, struggling to make ends meet today, are anxious about what that future might hold.

It is a great encouragement to see the willingness of people in our local communities to reach out to their neighbours in need through initiatives such as food banks. However, the marked increase in people needing to avail of such facilities is a worrying trend. Added to this, in Northern Ireland the lack of a functioning devolved government not only drains hope from our society, but also has meant an ever increasing pressure on our schools, our hospitals, our welfare system and many other aspects of society's infrastructure. As so often happens, it is the vulnerable and the marginalised that suffer most and they should be at the

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forefront of our thoughts and prayers as we enter into a new year.

While such situations can be very challenging for many people, today across Ireland there are also glimmers of hope. Up and down the island, neighbours are looking out for neighbours. Ordinary people, community and church groups are caring for those in need. People of good intent are stepping up to the mark and giving positive leadership on the ground, working for the common good. In villages and towns across the island political, church and community leaders are making a difference at a local level.

As Church Leaders we have urged the leaders of our political parties in Northern Ireland to do the same – to make a difference and to bring a sense of hope. We were encouraged by the willingness of party leaders to meet with us last September, as we sought to provide a safe space to facilitate open discussion and mutual understanding. A series of regional meetings is also underway, bringing together local politicians, community and church leaders to talk with one another, to build relationships and again to foster mutual understanding. Such initiatives, along with others being taken by different people of good will at local and regional level, can bring glimmers of hope. For that we want to give thanks – it's always better to light a candle than simply to curse the darkness.

The Christmas message of the Light coming into our darkness brings us our ultimate hope, for it is the Lord Jesus Christ who remains the hope of the world. No matter how dark our world might be, the Gospel reminds us, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). At the start of this New Year, may we put our

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trust in Him - as we look to Him in simple faith and in His name seek to bring hope and light to our local community and to this our island home.

May you know the blessing of the Lord in the year that lies ahead.

**Most Rev Dr Richard Clarke**, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of All Ireland; **Rev William Davison**, President of the Methodist Church in Ireland; **Most Rev Eamon Martin**, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of all Ireland

**Rt Rev Dr Charles McMullen**, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, **Rev Brian Anderson**, President of the Irish Council of Churches

## **Primate to meet abuse survivors before crucial conference**

“In the early New Year I will plan for further meetings to enable meaningful and constructive engagement with survivors and others in advance of the Rome convention,” says Archbishop Eamon Martin.

Archbishop Eamon Martin, Archbishop of Armagh and President of the Irish Episcopal Conference, will meet survivors of clerical abuse before the crucial Vatican meeting on the Protection of Minors from 21 to 24 February 2019, Catholic Ireland Net reports.

“As a priest and bishop I have already met many survivors and have always found it a humbling yet important and worthwhile experience,” he told CatholicIreland.net.



“In the early New Year I will plan for further meetings to enable meaningful and constructive engagement with survivors and others in advance of the Rome convention. I will set aside time before going to Rome so that I can hear first-hand the thoughts of victims and survivors, as well as speak to some of their representatives and those who have been providing counselling and support services to survivors of abuse in Ireland.”

His comments came after the steering committee for the 21 to 24 February meeting in the Vatican on the Protection of Minors wrote to the presidents of the episcopal conferences of the world asking them to prepare for the crucial meeting by learning “first-hand” the suffering that victims have endured and meeting survivors of abuse.

Without a “comprehensive and communal response, not only will we fail to bring healing to victim survivors, but the very credibility of the Church to carry on the mission of Christ will be in jeopardy throughout the world,” wrote the steering committee, in a letter signed by Cardinal Blase J.



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Cupich, Cardinal Oswald Gracias, Archbishop Charles J. Scicluna and Fr Hans Zollner SJ.

The first step must be acknowledging the truth of what has happened, continued the letter dated 18 December. “For this reason, we urge each Episcopal Conference president to reach out and visit with victim survivors of clergy sex abuse in your respective countries prior to the meeting in Rome, to learn first-hand the suffering that they have endured.”

The steering committee also asked the bishops to answer the questionnaire attached to the letter. “It provides a tool for all the participants of the meeting in February to express their opinions constructively and critically as we move forward, to identify where help is needed to bring about reforms now and in the future, and to help us get a full picture of the situation in the Church.”

The Holy Father is convinced that through collegial cooperation, the challenges facing the Church can be met. But each of us needs to own this challenge, coming together in solidarity, humility, and penitence to repair the damage done, sharing a common commitment to transparency, and holding everyone in the Church accountable, the letter concluded. Archbishop Eamon Martin, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All-Ireland, is the President of the Irish Episcopal Conference.

## **Queen honours MU stalwart**

Congratulations to Derry and Raphoe Mothers' Union stalwart, Elizabeth Fielding, who has been honoured -

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deservedly - by the Queen for her tremendous work with the Foyle Child Contact Centre.

Elizabeth received a Medal of the Order of the British Empire (BEM), in the New Years Honours which were announced on Friday night. The citation said the honour was "For services to Foyle Child Contact Centre, Londonderry."

Foyle Child Contact Centre is one of the diocesan projects which MU volunteers assist with. It provides a relaxed, neutral environment in which parents and children who no longer live together can meet and spend time in each other's company, in warmth and comfort.

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## Highlights of 2018 in the C of I

The Irish Times C of I correspondent commented on Saturday last -

The year past has been eventful with a number of major anniversaries to recall, some with pleasure, some less so.

Undoubtedly the major anniversary in the life of the Church, and one marked with considerable sensitivity by the state, was the end of World War 1. Major acts of remembrance in Europe and in the large cities and cathedrals of Ireland were complemented by small, local ceremonies where, with almost unbearable poignancy, the names of the fallen were read from memorial plaques on church walls.

On a happier note the 850th anniversary of St Mary's cathedral, Limerick, and the 750th anniversary of St Patrick's cathedral, Armagh, were celebrated and was the bi-centenary of Taney, the largest Church of Ireland parish in the Republic of Ireland.

There were some firsts to remember. The first woman Dean of Cloyne, the Very Revd Susan Green; the first lay Keeper of the Armagh Robinson Library, Dr Robert Whan; and the first Church of Ireland Governor of the Anglican Centre in Rome, the Rt Revd Michael Burrows, Bishop of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory.

And some events, perhaps never to forget – the visit to Ireland of the Pope, and the return to Christ Church, Dublin, of the heart of St Laurence O'Toole.



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## **News Year's message from episcopal survivor of two marathons**

Bishop Ken Good of Derry and Raphoe in what may be his last New Year's message before retirement says -

“It might seem hard to believe now but there was a time – not terribly long ago – when the sight of a group of runners bounding through our streets in cheery unison would have seemed pretty unusual. Not any more, though. Luminous joggers have become quite commonplace, thanks to the proliferation of running clubs, personal trainers and exercise regimes promising to take the lethargic “from couch to 5k” in fairly short order.

“As a survivor of two marathons myself, I’m happy to commend such conversions (so long as people make the changes responsibly). There can be a great sense of achievement in setting oneself a goal, working hard to accomplish it and then finally realising it. I’m sure that as January 1st approaches, there will be quite a few people who will have set themselves the goal of “getting into shape” as one of their New Year resolutions.

“Physical exercise has become big business. And it isn’t just in the physical sphere that people have been taking stock of their lives. Wander through any bookshop nowadays and I’m sure you’ll be struck – as I have been – by the astonishing growth in one particular genre: ‘mindfulness’. There are countless titles on the shelves, offering to help the reader to get his or her life onto an even keel, and to improve the reader’s mental wellbeing in this frantic world of ours.



“It is wonderful to see so many people paying attention to their physical and mental health. "Mens sana in corpore sano", it's said: "A healthy mind in a healthy body". But there is another dimension to people's wellbeing which is observed less keenly, nowadays, and that is their spiritual wellness.

“Some clearer thinking is needed in society, surely, about the link between spiritual health and mental health. The widespread – and appropriate – concern for people's mental wellbeing mustn't be isolated from the part that spiritual practices, spiritual boundaries and spiritual insights can play in enabling human flourishing.

“The less consistent pattern of church attendance these days saddens me. I would say that, of course: I'm a church leader, after all. But the sadness is not on my own account, nor even on the Church's. Rather, I feel for those who might never get to know the kindness and love of our Lord Jesus

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Christ – an experience that can be truly life-enhancing and life-changing.

“So, as the clock runs down on 2018, and 2019 heaves into view, let’s get our lives truly and fully into balance. By all means let’s take care of our physical and mental wellbeing, but let’s not neglect the spiritual. There will be times in our lives when it might be all we have left to cling to, and in such moments we will need to know the breadth and depth of God’s love.

“I wish you a happy and prosperous New Year, and the awareness that prosperity is not measured by wealth alone.

“Thanks be to God for His gift of Jesus Christ, the light of the world.”

## **Iraqi Christians celebrate Christmas one year after Islamic State defeat**

Iraqi Christians quietly celebrated Christmas on Tuesday last amid improved security, more than a year after the country declared victory over Islamic State militants who threatened to end their 2,000-year history in Iraq.

Christianity in Iraq dates back to the first century of the Christian era, when the apostles Thomas and Thaddeus are believed to have preached the Gospel on the fertile flood plains of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates.



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**Children participate in a nativity scene at Mart Shmoni Church in the town of Bashiqa, east of Mosul, Iraq December 25, 2018.**

Iraq is home to many different eastern rite churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, traditionally a sign of the country's ethnic and religious diversity.

But war and sectarian conflict shrank Iraq's Christian population from 1.5 million to about 400,000 after the US-led invasion in 2003. Following the onslaught of Islamic State in 2014 and the brutal three-year war that followed their numbers have fallen further, though it is not known exactly by how much.

In Baghdad, Christians celebrated mass on Tuesday morning – declared a national holiday by government – in

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churches decorated for Christmas. Once fearful, they said they were now hopeful, since conditions had improved.

'Of course we can say the security situation is better than in previous years,' said Father Basilius, leader of the St George Chaldean Church in Baghdad where more than a hundred congregants attended Christmas mass.

'We enjoy security and stability mainly in Baghdad. In addition, Daesh was beaten,' he said, using the Arabic acronym for Islamic State.

Iraq declared victory over the militants more than a year ago, but the damage done to Christian enclaves on the Nineveh Plains has been extensive.

In Qaraqosh, a town also known as Hamdaniya which lies 15 km (10 miles) west of Mosul, the damage is still visible.

At the city's Immaculate Church, which belongs to the Syrian Catholic denomination and has not yet been rebuilt since the militants set it on fire in 2014, Christians gathered for midnight mass on Monday, surrounded by blackened walls still tagged with Islamic State graffiti.

Dozens of worshippers prayed and received communion, and then gathered around the traditional bonfire in the church's courtyard.

Before the militant onslaught, Qaraqosh was the largest Christian settlement in Iraq, with a population of more than 50,000. But today only a few hundred families have returned.

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Faced with a choice to convert, pay a tax or die, many Christians in the Nineveh Plains fled to nearby towns and cities and some eventually moved abroad.

Some have since returned, Father Butros said, adding: 'We hope that all displaced families will return.'

## **Last week in Christian history**

**December 31, 1384:** John Wycliffe, pre-Reformer who initiated the first complete translation of the Bible into English and influenced Hus, Luther and Calvin, dies at about 64. He was condemned at the council of Constance (1415), and his body was disinterred and burned.

**December 30, 1852:** Future U.S. President Rutherford B. Hayes marries "Lemonade "Lucy," so called because, as first lady, she forbade alcohol in the Executive Mansion. The Hayeses were both devout Methodists who began each day with prayer and organized Sunday evening worship services at the White House.

**December 29, 1809:** William Gladstone, four-time British prime minister, is born in Liverpool, England. One scholar has called him "the epitome of all that the evangelicals and the English public asked for in their politicians".

**December 29, 1849:** The carol "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," by pastor Edmund H. Sears, appears for the first time in The Christian Register.

**December 29, 1851:** The first Y.M.C.A. in the United States is organized in Boston.

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**December 29, 1876:** Hymnwriter Philip P. Bliss and his wife fall to their deaths when a bridge collapses under the train they were riding. Bliss's compositions include "Man of Sorrows—What a Name!"; "Jesus Loves Even Me"; "Almost Persuaded"; the music to "It Is Well with My Soul"; and one hymn discovered in his trunk, which was on a different train that night: "I Will Sing of My Redeemer".

**December 28, 1714:** George Whitefield, called "the marvel of his age" for the way his preaching could move an audience, is born in Gloucester, England. His message kicked off America's first "Great Awakening".

**December 28, 1797:** American theologian Charles Hodge, whose three-volume Systematic Theology has influenced seminarians for over 100 years, is born.

**December 27, 1784:** Francis Asbury is ordained superintendent of the Methodist Church in America. He later took the title "bishop," against the wishes of John Wesley

**December 26, 1065:** The first building of Westminster Abbey is dedicated, though legend holds that the abbey was founded as early as 616.

**December 26, 1194:** Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II is born today near the town of Jesi, in the Marche region of Italy. Frederick claimed to be a direct successor to the Roman Emperors of old and united the kingdoms of Italy, Germany, Sicily, and Jerusalem (by marriage and crusade). He was frequently at war with the popes of his era, mostly for geopolitical reasons, and was excommunicated four times during his reign.

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**December 25, 496:** King Clovis, who united Gaul and founded France, is baptized in the Cathedral of Rheims, followed by 3,000 of his soldiers. "Worship what you once burned, and burn what you worshipped," the priest instructed him. However, Clovis and his troops showed little change after their "conversion" and apparently believed Christ was merely a war god who would grant them victory if they prayed for it.

**December 25, 800:** Pope Leo III crowns Charlemagne, the first ruler of the Holy Roman Empire.

**December 25, 1066:** William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, was crowned king of England at Westminster Abbey, officially recognizing his rule and the success of the Norman Conquest of England.

**December 25, 1814:** First Protestant sermon on New Zealand soil preached by Rev. Samuel Marsden, colonial chaplain of New South Wales. Spearhead of the CMS mission to the Maoris, who were baptised in droves in the 1830's.

**December 25, 1865:** Evangeline Booth is born, the last of the Booth children.

**December 24, 1223:** Francis of Assisi stages history's first living nativity scene, complete with live animals, in a cave near Greccio, Italy (see issue 42: Francis of Assisi).

**December 24, 1491:** Spanish ascetic and theologian Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, is born in Guipuzcoa, Spain. His order quickly became a great power in Roman Catholicism and led the Counter-Reformation.



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**December 24, 1818:** Franz Gruber composes "Silent Night" in the St. Nicholas Church of Oberndorf, Austria.

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