

THE INTERNATIONAL  
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# THE TABLET

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## Nature red in tooth and claw

A challenge to a loving God?

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## US AND VENEZUELA

### CAN THE END EVER JUSTIFY THE MEANS?

**W**hen is it permissible to break international law to achieve some desirable end? In the case of Venezuela, the end may be the freeing of the 30 million citizens of that benighted country from poverty and oppression, and the interruption of a deadly trade in narcotics that kills thousands, possibly millions, with the purported aim of undermining the United States economy and way of life.

The law in question is Article 2 (4) of the United Nations Charter: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State ..." There can be little doubt that the United States is in breach of it, and that its declared intention to "rule" Venezuela until such time as a legitimate government could be installed is a further even more serious breach. But could such breaches ever be justified? The purest moral and legal answer is that contained in the reported dialogue between Thomas More and his son-in-law William Roper, which is described in *A Man for All Seasons* by Robert Bolt.

Roper says he would if necessary "cut down every law in England" to pursue the Devil, to which More replies: "Oh? And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you, where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? And if you cut them down ... d'you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then?" Roper accuses More of making the law into a "golden calf" to be worshipped.

**M**ore's statue stands just outside the Chamber of the House of Commons, whose Speaker he was. His exchange with Roper was highly relevant to the briefing the foreign secretary, Yvette Cooper, gave to the Commons on the repercussions of the United States raid on Caracas, capital of Venezuela, to capture Nicolás Maduro. He was serving as its president though his legitimacy is widely questioned, including by the United States and the United Kingdom. Indeed, it is hard to describe Venezuela as a state at all, given that the machinery of government including the army and police are all part of the industrial-scale trafficking in cocaine which is directed, so the US alleges, by Maduro. It originates from Colombia and is shipped abroad, including to Europe.

Yet only an estimated eight per cent, at most, of the cocaine illegally imported into the US comes via Venezuela. Most enters through Mexico, so there is some other political motivation behind Maduro's capture. Many of the facts of this scenario are disputed and, while corruption is certainly widespread, some doubt whether the tightly organised crime gang Maduro is supposed to lead, *Cartel de los Soles*, actually exists; and, even if there is such a group, whether it has any political purpose, or operates simply to enrich Venezuela's military officer class.

The consensus in the House was that the overthrow of Maduro was a good thing, but that the means – an armed attack on a sovereign state – were deplorable. The reluctance of the British government to say so, with spokespersons from the prime minister down merely repeating its general policy

to support international law, drew much anger from most sides of the House. The consensus was with Thomas More, even though the US's government's position was Roper's – sometimes, the ends justify the means. All this took on a more negative flavour when President Trump declared that he wants the US oil industry to take over oil production in Venezuela. This moves the operation on from law enforcement – detaining the head of a drug-trafficking syndicate – to plain colonial plunder.

**B**ritain may have repented of its imperial past, or at least the worst aspects of it, but the US under Trump clearly wants to embark on an imperial future. It claims the whole of the Western Hemisphere should be brought under its sway. Targets for the expansion of US dominance now include Colombia, Cuba and Mexico; Trump also wants to extend US sovereignty to Canada and Greenland. Canada seems safe for the time being, not least because King Charles III is its head of state and Trump is in awe of him. But Greenland is in

peril, despite being part of the sovereign territory of Denmark, a member of both Nato and the European Union.

What protects Greenland is Article 2 (4) of the United Nations Charter: in other words, international law. Disregarding international law with respect to Venezuela opens the door to disregarding it with regard to Greenland. As More said to Roper: "And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you, where would you hide, the laws all being flat?"

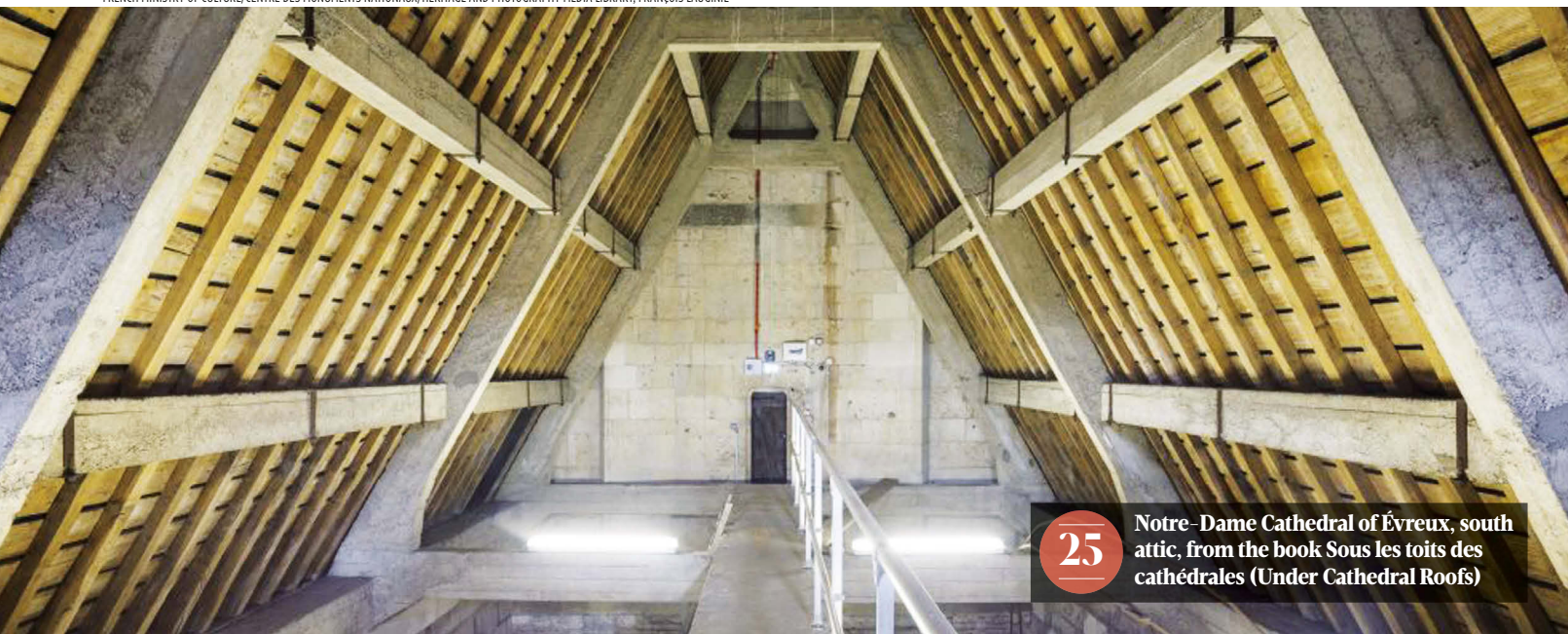
This is highly relevant to the Ukraine

conflict, in two respects. If the US can take over Venezuela (or Greenland), what is to stop Russia taking over Ukraine? If the US's excuse in Venezuela is that it is not a real country with sovereignty that has to be respected but a lawless bandit camp bent on doing harm to its neighbours, what is to stop Vladimir Putin labelling Ukraine as a similar case, and moving in to extinguish that supposed threat? International law is not a golden calf to be idolised, but the very guarantee of peace between nations. And national sovereignty belongs to the citizens of that country, not to its governments, which may come and go.

The second way Ukraine is relevant is in the context of the current peace proposals being hammered out between itself, its European allies and the United States. A viable peace between Ukraine and Russia needs external security guarantees, not only from European countries but also from the US. Britain has taken a leading role in soothing and smoothing President Trump to the point where he may add his weight to peace proposals that are designed to be presented to President Putin as an "offer he can't refuse" – because of American military backing for them.

Denouncing the US' actions in Venezuela on television or in Parliament would be a principled stand in defence of international law. In any other circumstances that would be the right thing to do. But it might be argued that this could be the worst possible moment to annoy Trump. Could this be a moment to concede that, sadly, sometimes the end may indeed justify the means?

**International law  
is not a golden  
calf to be idolised.  
It is the very  
guarantee of peace  
between nations**



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How can the apparent conflict between the language of harmony and balance that runs through Catholic Social Teaching and the preying, plundering and devouring that dominates Creation be resolved? / By MATTHEW WHELAN

# Nature red in tooth and claw

**L**AST MARCH, I took my students into the fields of the World Hunger Relief Farm in Waco, Texas. We found vestiges of the autumn and winter plantings – spinach, kale and carrots – and some recently sown crops such as broccoli, peas and beans. Together, the students, my fellow teacher and I got on our hands and knees and examined the soil. It was after recent rain, so the ground was moist, and the dirt lodged under our nails and stuck to our fingers.

Our immediate task was a diversity count. We were measuring how many kinds of organisms a soil supports so that we could compare this regenerative farm with the neighbouring conventional monoculture. As expected, we discovered an overflowing abundance of life supported by fertile soil and able management. Earthworms, beetles, ants, millipedes, centipedes and springtails were everywhere. Some of us spotted white, web-like strands of fungi, a sign of the invisible world of microorganisms also making a home there.

Digging in the fields that spring day, we witnessed not just life, but death, too. We discerned the remains of roots and plant stems, along with beetle shells and small animal bones, all in different stages of decay and decomposition. Although we could not see them with the naked eye, we knew that countless microorganisms were busy breaking down these materials and releasing nutrients into the soil that the crops above needed for growth. Here was the slow mysterious work, both visible and invisible, whereby the soil and its creatures receive death – and fashion life from it.

**THE SUBJECT** of the course I was helping to teach that semester was agroecology, a discipline that integrates ecological principles and processes into the design and management of agricultural systems. The underlying approach of agroecology is ancient. It's exemplified by

traditional and contemporary farming systems that, by necessity or conviction, regard ecology as the model for agriculture. But agroecology only emerged as a distinct field of study in the twentieth century. Early agroecologists were agricultural scientists critical of agriculture's increasing subservience to what historian Deborah Fitzgerald calls "the industrial ideal" in agriculture. They contended that ecology, not industry, should be agriculture's guiding model and primary measure.

Central to the ecological model agroecology proposes is death. You don't need to be an agroecologist to observe the presence of death in the wider created order. Farmers, naturalists, poets and other keen observers have always noticed what my class saw in the fields that March afternoon. However, the study and practice of agroecology presses this truth upon us, forcing us to confront the ubiquity of creaturely death to agriculture, and therefore, to human life.

It's no exaggeration to say that every facet of agroecological farm management depends upon death. The soil is made from death – the remains of dead plants, animals, and microbes. But death is important in other ways, too. Agroecologists manage competing insects through biological rather than chemical control, mimicking predator-prey dynamics in natural ecosystems. Consider also the decomposed organic matter that improves water retention in soils, or the integration of animals into biodiverse, mixed crop-livestock systems. Such systems involve animals eating plants (and contributing manure to the fields) but also their eventual slaughter.

And harvest is also a kind of death, both the fruit of the farming operation and its eventual destination. Every meal we eat is made of it. Whether we are omnivores, pescatarians, vegetarians or vegans, other creatures become our nourishment, their bodies become ours. All ecology, all food, all life is predicated on death.

**Here was the slow mysterious work whereby the soil and its creatures receive death – and fashion life from it**

In addition to agroecology, I'm also a student of Catholic Social Teaching, a living tradition whose modern form begins with the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, and extends into the present. The tradition is interdisciplinary: it reflects upon the Christian faith and aims to guide Christian behaviour by learning from other branches of knowledge, including philosophy, social science, and more recently, in Pope Francis' *Laudato si'*, the natural sciences.

Francis' encyclical drew the natural sciences into Catholic Social Teaching in novel ways. "If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done," he wrote, "no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out." Over a decade after its publication, *Laudato si'* continues to shape conversations at the intersection of faith and ecology.

Francis' vision of care for our common home has profound convergences with agroecology. For instance, he proposes resisting our throw-away culture by attending to the "exemplarity" of ecosystems, especially to how ecosystems absorb and reuse "waste". (I use quotation marks because ecological systems do not produce waste; the concept belongs to industrial systems.) Francis points out that plants feed herbivores, which, in turn, become food for carnivores, as well as how the by-products of all these processes return to the soil to nourish other plants. Francis wants industry to imitate this circularity, urging the development of new ways to absorb and reuse waste. In so doing, we can better care for the soils, waters and forests upon which life depends. For Francis, studying how ecosystems work becomes a guide for the transformation of economic life.

These recommendations, whether Francis knew it or not, are agroecological in spirit, resonating with agroecology's view that we should farm in nature's image, not industry's. The convergences with agroecology only deepen as the argument of *Laudato si'* unfolds. Later on, for instance, Francis urges "greater investment ... in research aimed at understanding more fully the functioning of





ecosystems” – exactly the kind of research agroecologists do. And when Francis champions “a sustainable and diversified agriculture” based on complex crop rotations and rooted in communities that care for their local ecosystems, he echoes core agroecological principles such as crop diversification and the support of earth-keeping communities.

**CATHOLIC SOCIAL** Teaching has much to learn from agroecology and how its approach to agriculture can mitigate climate change and support more just and creative adaptations in the face of it. Agroecology offers concrete ways of living out the tradition’s commitments; in the process, it can also draw us into new forms of solidarity across communities and ecosystems.

At the same time, taking agroecology seriously also offers difficult lessons for Catholic Social Teaching – particularly its tendency to neglect the role of death in ecological systems. *Laudato si’*, like other Catholic Social Teaching documents, consistently uses words such as “harmony” and “balance” to describe the created world. The problem here is not that such harmonies and balances don’t exist – they do, though agroecological science describes them with far more qualified and nuanced language.

Rather, the issue is that invoking simplistic notions of harmony and balance slips into what we might call an idealised ecology. Such an ecology pictures the created world as if it were free from the harsh realities of predation, decay and mortality.

There are understandable reasons we might prefer not to think about such realities. And the increasingly urbanised lives we live make avoidance all the easier. Yet avoidance is not just a flight from these realities but ultimately a kind of injustice toward the countless

creatures upon which we depend for our daily bread and that make our embodied lives possible. Agroecology can help loosen the hold that idealised ecology has upon us. It can help us acknowledge that our lives are gifts of death.

This raises some unsettling theological questions. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, when new sciences such as ecology and geology began to show the ubiquity of death in Creation, Alfred Lord Tennyson asked in *In Memoriam*: “Are God and Nature then at strife?” Tennyson could see the issue clearly: there is an apparent conflict between what Christians believe about God and what we see in a created world that is “So careless of the single life” of creatures.

How does the created world testify to a God who is love, and who creates, sustains, and redeems the world in love? For Tennyson, there seemed to be abundant evidence to the contrary. Nature’s redness “in tooth and claw” clearly “shrieks” against the “creed” that “God is love indeed” and the belief that love is “Creation’s final law”. Not love, then, but “ravine” – preying, plundering, and devouring – appears to be the basic truth about Creation.

Tennyson’s anguished question hasn’t gone away. It surfaces whenever Christians appeal to ecology as a source of wisdom – as they should – but then pass too quickly over the role of death in sustaining life. *Laudato si’*, for all its importance in compelling care for our common home, leans on the language of harmony and balance without fully confronting this tension.

Admittedly it’s a tension with no easy solution. Here lies a challenge to Catholic Social Teaching as it continues to develop its teaching on ecology and learn from disciplines such as agroecology. In *Laudato si’*, Francis, like his predecessors, invites us to see the created world as “a magnificent book in which

God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness”. That book “carries a moral message that human beings are capable of discerning,” as the International Theological Commission wrote back in 2009. Put more plainly, Catholic Social Teaching is committed to the belief that the created world not only helps us discern God but that it also offers real guidance for how we should live our lives. Agroecology can teach us about Creation’s message and how we can respond to it.

**YET CREATION’S** message is, at best, a mixed one. From it, we certainly learn about the exemplarity of ecosystems, along with interdependence, circularity and resilience. But we also find competition, predation and death. And it’s crucial to see that the lessons we can learn aren’t always directly applicable to human life. For instance, dealing with insects such as aphids, mealybugs and spider mites that eat garden crops isn’t the same as dealing with our neighbours – or our enemies. Agroecologists might encourage ladybirds to control these unwanted guests, but that hardly provides a model for human relationships. In this sense, Tennyson is right: read just by itself, Creation does not clearly testify to a God of love.

That is why the book of nature must be read alongside another book through which God speaks and reveals who God is: the book of Scripture. The two books must be read together, the former in light of the latter. In the creaturely world we experience, the strong often prey on the weak – a lioness teaching her cubs to hunt by catching, wounding and then releasing a vulnerable antelope for them to practise, or a ladybird moving among the leaves, using its speed and sharp mandibles to devour dozens of aphids in a day.

But the book of Scripture offers a different message about God and the world. It proclaims the God of love, who creates the world in love and sustains all creatures in it. Sparrows are counted and remembered (Luke 12:6-7). “Look at the birds of the air,” Jesus says in Matthew’s gospel. “They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (6:26). Even creatures that might seem insignificant to us are not so to their Creator.

This love does more than just create and sustain – it takes flesh in Jesus Christ. In him, we see that mercy is God’s way to us and with us, and it is also our way back to God. Again and again, Jesus sides with the sick, the hungry and the weak. He calls for them to be healed, fed and lifted up. His solidarity with them is so complete that he even identifies himself with them. “Just as you did it to one of the

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least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (see Matthew 25:40). Here lies the standard of our salvation. And, as St Paul insists, this is a love stronger than death itself (Romans 8:38-9). Death, the last enemy, will one day be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26). In the new Heaven and new Earth, every tear will be wiped away, and mourning, crying and pain will be no more (Revelation 21:1-4). This is why we must learn from the book of nature but not rely on it alone to show us how to live. In Christ, we glimpse what Creation is still groaning to become.

*Laudato si'* is one of Pope Francis' many gifts to the Church. In it, he called the Church and the world back to the book of nature and to what it can teach us about caring for our common home. Yet as we continue to read that book and learn from it, we must do so honestly, without ignoring its difficulties or idealising its ecology. Only Christ shows us that love – not death – is God's final word.

**Matthew Whelan** is associate research professor of theology at Duke Divinity School, North Carolina. His books include *Blood in the Fields: Óscar Romero, Catholic Social Teaching, and Land Reform* (Catholic University of America Press) and *Christianity and Agroecology* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

## The Tablet poem

### Not What You Think

By Polly Walshe

It was not what you think. No, not what you think.

It fell onto the lawn, the dull steppe of my self, and formed a shallow pool. You'd miss it if you blinked

or yawned or sighed or if you stopped for a rethink. It fell like sudden rain on a dusty kitchen shelf and wasn't what you think, no, not what you think.

There was no time, none at all, to crane over the brink or question anything, interrogate myself, my so-called goals. I would have missed it if I'd blinked.

Impressions? It was pale, or green, but let me think... As for the date, I'm vague. It might have been the twelfth, who knows? It wasn't what you think, not what you think.

You could question my intelligence, then wink and cast aspersions on my sturdy mental health – I'd be indifferent. You'd miss it if you blinked

or dithered on the wisdom of engaging with a shrink to reconstruct the innocence you lost. In brief, it was not what you think, no, not what you think. It filled a hollow soul. You'd miss it if you blinked.

**Polly Walshe** is a poet and painter. Her pamphlet *Silver Fold* was published by New Walk in November 2024.

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When the law is violated, and even when the short-term outcomes might be celebrated, the peace on which all human flourishing depends is threatened / By MARY ELLEN O'CONNELL

# The law of peace

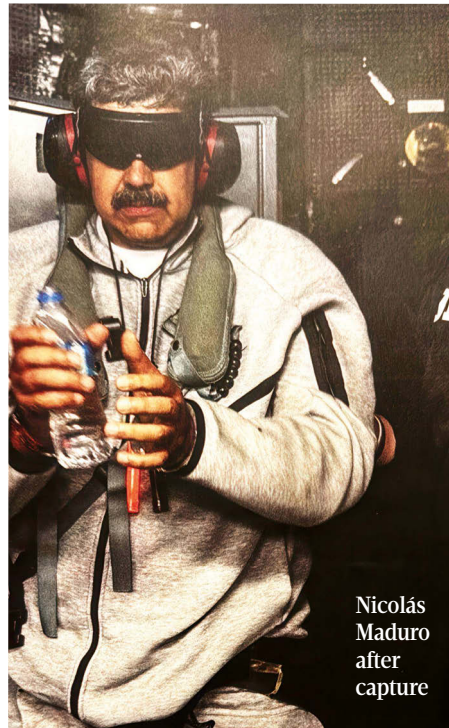
**P**OPE LEO appealed for one day of peace on Christmas Day 2025. He was ignored. Around the globe, fighting continued. Russia carried out brutal attacks in Ukraine. The warring parties in Sudan committed atrocities. Israeli forces and Hezbollah militants exchanged fire in southern Lebanon. President Donald Trump ordered missile strikes against alleged Islamic State targets in Nigeria as “a Christmas present” for Christians. Unknown numbers of people died. Then, on Saturday 3 January, Trump ordered a military attack on Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, seizing President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, and declared he would “run” the country.

The details of how many have been killed and the extent of the destruction are still unknown and may never be known. We do know the US acted in defiance of fundamental international law. And we also know that to restore respect for international law will not be easy. It will only happen if international leaders resist the temptation to be complacent, and refuse to concede that such breaches are inevitable in a world in which power is increasingly equated with military might rather than dedication to principle. European leaders who have given Trump a pass on Venezuela also want the US to respect and defend Denmark and Ukraine’s fundamental rights. They cannot have it both ways. The law needs consistent and forthright support.

**THE PROHIBITION** of the use of force applies to all the armed conflicts raging in the world today. It is ancient and is based on fundamental moral principles. Even when it is violated time and again, it endures. It is inherent in the very concept of community. The danger is not that this law will be lost but that if it is ignored or repeatedly broken with impunity, then ordinary men, women and children will continue to suffer the harms of war: death, homelessness, disease and poverty. To thrive, human beings need peace. To lead fulfilling lives – spiritually, physically, intellectually and emotionally – they need peace.

It is an act of faith to understand the law of peace and to promote it.

Three major areas of international law are relevant to the use of force by the US in Venezuela last Saturday: the United Nations Charter, which prohibits the use of force; international human rights law, which governs attempts to capture and prosecute Venezuelan officials; and the principles of self-determination and territorial integrity, which restrict any attempt by the US president to “run” Venezuela.



Nicolás Maduro after capture

The UN Charter is the foremost international treaty, signed in 1945 to “end the scourge of war”. Its central legal principle, Article 2 (4), outlaws all resort to significant uses of armed force by states, with limited exceptions. The only limits on Article 2 (4) are when the UN Security Council authorises force in narrow circumstances and when a state is the victim of armed attack (Article 51). Even these limits are circumscribed by the ancient teaching that when force is justified, it must also be necessary to accomplish the lawful purpose; all peaceful or less harmful means of resolving the situation must have been exhausted, and the actions taken must be proportionate to the threat faced and to the violation of law that gave rise to the right to use armed force.

With these rules in place, the charter goes on to establish the UN as an organisation designed to respond to threats to the peace, breaches of the peace and acts of aggression. This is the primary work of the Security Council, but when the council is stymied, the General Assembly takes over. It has done so with respect to the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, passing resolution after resolution to keep the law alive and in front of the international community. The International Court of Justice is contributing as never before to the peaceful settlement of disputes and the vitality of the law itself.

The law as interpreted in the world court’s

key decisions makes clear that there was no right for the US to use military force against Venezuela. The Security Council did not authorise it. Venezuela has not attacked the US. Trump’s attempt to characterise the illicit drug trade as “an armed attack” defies common sense. Some might argue that consent from Edmundo González Urrutia, who was recognised by the US, most European nations and Argentina, Peru and Uruguay as the winner of the 2024 Venezuelan presidential election, could have authorised the use of force, but the stronger legal position is that the president is the person who holds actual power. (Moreover, Trump is disregarding González and María Corina Machado, the leader of Venezuela’s opposition movement and recipient of the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize, and instead partnering with Maduro’s deputy and ally Delcy Rodríguez, who was sworn in as interim president on Monday.) The persons holding actual power in Venezuela have immunity from criminal prosecution in foreign national courts. It is a violation of due process to snatch people under the cover of an armed conflict to stand trial. It is a mockery of the law to violate the law to secure justice and accountability for crimes.

**THE MANY CONTRADICTORY** statements issuing from the US on Venezuela’s future raise serious concerns. There is no legal right, for example, for a foreign power to seize Venezuela’s natural resources, as Trump has declared his intention of doing. Replacing a country’s leader with a compliant alternative and dictating the government’s policies is a form of colonial or imperial control, outlawed by the UN since the 1960s. This is the law that is binding on all – it is the law of treaties that reflect the solemn promises of states. Many of the principles are known as *jus cogens*: peremptory norms from which no derogation is permitted. This law endures but needs the constant effort of people of good faith for it to be honoured in the face of perceived short-term benefits of removing a dictator or making financial profit.

The people of Venezuela are reeling with shock over the events of this week. The future destiny of their country is for them and them alone to decide. They will benefit from the modeling of adherence to law in other countries and in the international community.

Christmas 2025 was marred by war. Acting now in defence of legal order provides the best chance for peace during Christmas 2026 and beyond.

Mary Ellen O’Connell is the Robert and Marion Short Professor of Law at Notre Dame Law School and Professor of International Peace Studies at Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute. Her books include *The Art of Law in the International Community* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

# Man with a mission

Young people are reported to be increasingly open to religious belief; the Norbertine abbot who coordinates the Church's work communicating the Gospel tells **Ruth Gledhill** why he is not surprised

**P**OPE FRANCIS would often remind Catholics that the fundamental work of the Church is mission. His successor has taken up the baton. In his Christmas address to members of the Roman Curia, Pope Leo urged his closest advisors to be "more mission-oriented". "By her very nature", he said, "the Church is outward-looking, turned toward the world, missionary", adding: "The Church exists to invite people into the good news of God's love." The man leading that work on behalf of the Church in England and Wales, the director of mission at the bishops' conference, is Abbot Hugh Allan O.Praem.

I went to visit Hugh Allan at the priory in Peckham, south-east London, where he serves as abbot. Born in Hatfield, Hertfordshire, in 1976 to a Scottish Presbyterian family Allan became a Catholic at the age of 16. After training to be a teacher at St Mary's University, Twickenham, he joined the Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré, better known as the Norbertines. In 2006, only four years after his ordination to the priesthood, he became superior of the Norbertine community in Manchester. He was 29 and, at the time, the world's youngest Catholic religious superior.

In 2016 he was appointed apostolic administrator of the Falkland Islands and ecclesiastical superior of St Helena, Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha for five years. At the same time Allan was elevated to the title of "Titular Abbot of Beeleigh". The Norbertines have been in Peckham since 2022, when they took over the care of the Parish of Our Lady of Sorrows.

As director of mission for the bishops' conference, Allan works tirelessly and good-humouredly to help bring the Gospel not just to the fast-growing community at the neo-Gothic former Capuchin church and friary in Peckham but to the wider Catholic community and beyond. He is also Vicar for Religious in the Archdiocese of Southwark, one of the directors of the St Oscar Romero Catholic multi-academy trust, which operates 16 schools in south-east London, and chaplain at King's College Hospital in Denmark Hill. "It's quite an interesting sort of life because I live a monastic life with my community, but then, after morning prayer, I get my satchel and pack my lunch for the day and I take the commuter train to the bishops' conference's offices in Victoria. But it's wonderful – I enjoy it."

His boss until recently was Greg Pope, the first layman to be appointed general secretary of the bishops' conference. (He stepped back from that role in September.) There were some



RUTH GLEDHILL

raised eyebrows that, as a senior Religious, Allan answered to a layman. We joke that at least his boss was a Pope. Allan tells me, "Greg is one of those people who is not only liked, but respected. I call him 'the boss', which he hates, but he is my boss, which I like."

**DOES HE FIND** the supposed surge in faith among GenZ adults claimed by *The Quiet Revival*, the much-discussed report commissioned last year by the Bible Society, credible? "Yes, I do, particularly amongst the young. There's certainly something going on. I can see that just from my own community life in south London. Last year, we had 16 people doing the RCIA in preparation for Baptism. That's wonderful for a medium-sized parish." In the past, he said, "there might have been eight or nine, but in recent years, it's always been in double digits".

"I notice it too commuting to and from work. When I'm travelling on the train or the bus, I'm often approached by young people. I travel in my collar so they know that I'm a priest. People want to talk about God, and about faith, but because they have been brought up in a society in which faith isn't really spoken about, they don't necessarily have the language of faith. So they say they're 'looking for something more' or they're 'looking for something extra' or for 'purpose' or 'meaning'. What they're circling around is that they're yearning for God, and you sort of see that within them. And when you talk to them, you discover more and more

that that's really who it is they're looking for."

Why does he think this is happening now, after years of Christianity being in decline? "You have to look at where society is as a whole," he tells me. "We live, sadly, in this era of fake news and of so much anger and heat in debates and arguments that it's difficult for people to discern the truth. And there is also dissatisfaction with society. People are looking for something greater, for something more. They are looking for the other. And this opens up a space for belief and faith, and allows God into their life."

He continues: "Because there is so much on social media, where people can – and do – say what they like, they live in a galaxy of different opinions and different thoughts, and it's hard for them to see what's *real*. People have, I think, a profound desire to find what's *true*. Our Lord tells us, *I am the way, the truth, and the life*. And what I feel is happening with young people, is that they are looking for the way, they're looking for the truth, and they're looking for life."

When I was young, I tell Allan, we were all looking for that too, but young people around me turned to Eastern religions or to alcohol or drugs. Is that still happening? Allan looked thoughtful. "That is still happening for some young people – particularly the recourse to drugs. Some people are always going to look in places that aren't going to lead to anything good. People look for anything that will take the edge off their troubles and eventually they can end up in these raw dead ends." And there is another factor. "I think, as well, every generation reacts against the generation that went before. That's how young people are. And you've now got a younger generation for who, if they're looking for an alternative, for something different to their parents' generation – our generation – belief in God is revolutionary. It's now rebellious to believe in God."

Allan also points to something deeper. "All of us are made in the image and likeness of God, whether we believe it or not, whether

we know it or not. Within all of us, there is always a yearning for God. We may not know what it is, but it's there. St Augustine talks about this in his *Confessions*." Allan sees Augustine as a model for young people. They want to experiment, to try different things, like Augustine, but eventually, as he did, they find God to be the source of all that's true and

real." Belief in God, Allan says, "gives you an identity and a dignity that nobody can take from you". I think of the line at the beginning of the *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

I wondered if any of this new-found curiosity in God among young people might be attributed to Pope Francis, and whether there had been any "Pope Leo bounce"? "Francis was a very attractive figure to young young people because he could reach across divisions.

**'I am often approached by young people. I travel in my collar so they know that I am a priest'**



## ANNE BOOTH

I think that's what young people want as well. They don't want to live in boxes. They want life to be joined up." Allan has also seen a bounce since the election of Leo. "On the bus or the train, if Leo comes up in conversation, there's an instant smile. There's an instant connection. Young people really do connect with Leo, as we saw in Rome in the summer at the youth events. As an American friend said to me, 'He's the real deal.' He is kind, and that comes across; you can't manufacture that. That's a very real part of his gift, there's a natural kindness and warmth and compassion that comes from him. He's quite a shy man, and he's always trying to work through that, and I find that quite disarmingly lovely."

**HOW DAMAGING** to his work has the sexual abuse of children by priests and the attempts by Church leaders to cover it up been? "You can't underestimate the damage it's done. It was horrific. It is an issue that comes up, not so much from younger people, but people in their forties, fifties, sixties. The younger generation see problems in every institution – whether it's the government, whether it's schools or colleges, whether it's the clubs they belong to, wherever there's an institution, they see there are problems, there are issues."

I think with young people and the Church they're not blind to the faults of the institution but there is a sense that there's a person that they want to get to know, who is Jesus Christ. You know, there's a lovely phrase, attributed to Pope Leo: "Our greatest duty is to communicate the beauty and joy of knowing Jesus Christ." I think that's what young people are looking for. (I checked afterwards: the phrase does indeed come from Leo, or at least from Archbishop Robert Prevost, as he was when he said these words in an interview he gave to Vatican Media shortly after he had been appointed prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops by Pope Francis.) "I may be wrong. I usually am. My community will tell you I'm wrong all the time. But my sense is that there's a real desire for a relationship with Jesus Christ."

Norbertines follow the Rule of St Augustine, so, unsurprisingly, Allan and his fellow religious are enthusiastic about the new Pope, who is of course an Augustinian. "When he speaks, when he preaches, when he acts, you can see the spirit of Saint Augustine, which combines mission with communion. Living together in community and friendship is essential. I think you can that with Leo. He is trying to be a good companion, a good friend."

As I prepare to leave, Abbot Hugh tells me that, almost more than anything else, he would like to see the standard of homilies improve – echoing a cry that came up from the laity in the synodal process. "My first parish priest, God love him, told me that when you preach, you should always preach as though you know your hearers have had their hearts broken. And, he told me, you, as a priest, have probably had your heart broken at some point as well. If you have, and you have that understanding and empathy, you will communicate better and touch more hearts. Maybe as the Church, that's something we need to be better at."

## Paddington was alone, without family, in a strange land. He needed friends, family and love



I RECENTLY saw *Paddington: The Musical* with my twin daughters. They are in their twenties and I am 60, but we were all very excited because we already loved the books and the films, and one of the girls had booked our tickets months in advance, as soon as she had heard they were going to be turned into a musical. The plot was closely based on the first film rather than on any of the books, with a few twists and some original songs and dances added.

Everything about the evening felt perfect. It was a late birthday celebration with my twins, and I love their company. We were there, by chance, when the incredibly talented writer and composer of the songs, Tom Fletcher, was also in the audience. One of the girls took a picture of the back of his head on her smartphone to share with the family chat. We were right at the back of the stalls, and there were lots of heads in front of my and her sister's seat, so she went and got two booster seats for me and her sister, which, after I got over the embarrassment, was a stroke of genius. I ordered popcorn to be delivered to my seat, which we shared. One of my daughters had brought gingerbread-flavoured chocolate reindeers for us to eat, so we had a lovely impromptu picnic. There were many adults in the audience without children, which I found very moving. It was so cheering to sit in a theatre and know that all these adults wanted to spend an evening watching a story written for children of a little bear from Peru coming to London and finding love and welcome.

Once the musical started I was even more moved. *Paddington* is absolutely gorgeous, and everybody cried out with delight when he took the stage. The tears came with the scene of *Paddington* on a boat, on his way to England with many other people, the waves projected on the screen behind them. The whole musical was so full of fun and warmth and incredible music and dance, but always, at the heart, was the understanding that *Paddington* was alone, without family, in a strange land. He needed friends and family and love, and, in spite of peril, that is what he would find, and it was what everyone in the audience wanted him to have. It was

the most beautiful celebration of goodness and felt such a stark contrast with the current rhetoric about immigrants and refugees. I thank God for it.

I HAD SUCH a special family day with my girls. I am so happy they are making their own way in life but I do miss them and it was lovely to be together again for such a special treat. They no longer live at home with us. Instead, we have a young woman, someone else's precious daughter, living with us while she has a stressful wait for her asylum claim to be accepted. She has been in the system for five years, and has been moved around the country, living in the asylum hotels so misrepresented in the press. I can hear her singing hymns upstairs and I feel honoured to witness such faith, but I am appalled by the hostile environment she is forced to live in, and by the proposal to keep her hanging in the asylum system even longer, as if she needs to be further punished for daring to trust that we want as much for a young refugee woman as the adults in a theatre did for a cuddly little bear. It is lovely to pray with our guest and to talk together about our shared belief that Jesus will look after her. It is all the more shocking for me to hear people gathering in threatening groups outside asylum hotels say they are "defending Christian values".

I am so heartened by *Paddington: The Musical* and grateful to Tom Fletcher and the cast and creative team for this wonderful show. Ten years ago I wrote a children's book called *Refuge*, which tells the story of Jesus, Mary and Joseph fleeing from Herod and finally finding sanctuary in Egypt, told in the voice of the donkey who carries them all to safety. It was published by Nosy Crow and beautifully illustrated by Sam Usher. It has now been re-issued as a charity book. I hope it can contribute in a small way, like *Paddington: The Musical*, to renewed empathy and love for refugees.

(See Mark Lawson, *theatre*, page 20.)



**Anne Booth** has published 27 books for children. Her second novel for adults, *Sweet Mercies*, is now in paperback (Vintage, £9.99; Tablet Bookshop £8.99).

Although his novels – teeming with priests and nuns toiling away in a fallen world – sold well and were regularly adapted for film, stage and television, since his death the Scottish convert Bruce Marshall has faded into obscurity / By MICHAEL DUGGAN

# In the shadow of the titans

**I**N 2016, POPE Francis published *The Name of God is Mercy*, a face-to-face interview with the journalist Andrea Tornielli. In a chapter titled “Looking for the Smallest Opening”, Tornielli, who was later appointed by Francis to the Vatican Dicastery for Communication, speaks about a passage from a novel in which a French priest is listening to the confession of a young German soldier about to be executed by partisans. The soldier mentions various sins of the flesh and the priest explains that, to obtain absolution, he has to repent; and here a sticking point is reached. The soldier says: “How can I repent? It was something that I enjoyed, and if I had the chance I would do it again, even now. How can I repent?”

In desperation, the priest asks the soldier whether he is, at least, sorry for not being sorry. The soldier agrees. In Tornielli’s words, “The door was opened a crack, allowing absolution to come in ...”

“It’s true, that’s how it is,” Francis responds, calling the episode a “a good example of the lengths to which God goes to enter the heart of man, to find that small opening that will permit him to grant grace”. The late Pope embarks on a long reflection on God’s mercy being infinitely greater than our sins, his medicine “infinitely stronger than our illnesses”.

Tornielli writes that this fictional example of the subtler workings of divine mercy comes in a 1949 novel *To Every Man a Penny* by Bruce Marshall (1899-1987), recently reissued by the American publisher Human Adventure Books. In fact, however, the episode comes from another Marshall novel, *The World, The Flesh and Father Smith*, set in Scotland rather than France. The dying but reluctant penitent is an old sailor who has been recounting times spent with prostitutes in Buenos Aires and Hong Kong. Just after absolution, he dies, his face shrinking “away and away, as if it were trying to become a baby’s face again”.

Bruce Marshall was Scottish by birth, an accountant by profession and Catholic by way of conversion. (Of his mingled careers, he once said: “I am an accountant who writes books. In accounting circles I am hailed as a great writer. Among novelists I am assumed to be a competent novelist.”) He was a soldier too and fought in the First World War, suffering injuries six days before the Armistice

that led to the amputation of one of his legs. Marshall served again in the Second World War, working in military intelligence and administration, and assisting the French Resistance in their struggles against the Nazis. He lived most of his adult life in France.

As a novelist, Marshall was a contemporary of the likes of Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, but he never approached their eminence in the world of Catholic letters and has rather faded from view. He is nowhere to be found (or at least nowhere that I could find) in a number of comprehensive surveys of twentieth-century Catholic literature. Yet, in his day, Marshall’s books were published in nine languages, drew favourable reviews in *The Tablet* and elsewhere, and were adapted for film, stage and television.

**CATHOLICISM** is square and central to them. Marshall was included in the Gallery of Living Catholic Authors created in the mid-twentieth century by an American nun, Sr Mary Joseph Scherer of Webster College, Missouri; and along with Greene and Waugh (both also in the gallery), his case was once examined by the Holy Office. The novels teem with priests and nuns, sacristans and parishioners, toiling away in a fallen world. You can be no more than a couple of pages into a Marshall novel to find yourself immersed in a bishop’s reflections on Hell, what it is really like and who, if anyone, is in there.

Marshall’s priests, often simultaneously wise and naive, are frequently irritated: irritated by their flock, by the ways of the world, by each other, or by their own personal shortcomings. A question stalks several of his novels: how much can a single priest achieve in a quotidian world so distant in its doings from the teachings, demands and practices of the Catholic Church? His priests turn over in their minds the mysterious workings of salvation and God’s mercy in a world full and fallen with multitudes unknowingly waiting to be gathered into God’s basket like so many “gaping fish”. It is a world grown anonymous and industrialised, a world totally removed from the setting of the gospels, a world where church bells “decant their blessings on the heedless”.

The path of evangelisation never runs

smoothly. Morale-boosting instances of souls won for Christ are rare. In *To Every Man a Penny*, a Parisian ticket inspector on the Métro, with whom the Abbé Gaston, the hero-priest of the novel, is on friendly terms, says that he has read in a book that religion was “against pride, free love, bad temper and laziness”. He thought that was “rather a lot of things to be against if it wanted to appeal to a Frenchman”. The priest tells his friend that he is “looking at the matter upside down”.

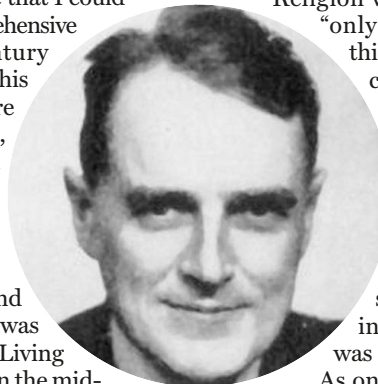
Religion was against certain things “only because it was for other things ... humility, generosity, chastity, meekness, temperance, brotherly love and diligence”. The abbé’s sincere, well-thought-out reply gets him nowhere, however. The ticket inspector simply says that “the things religion was for sounded even more depressing than the things religion was against”.

As one of his priestly characters reflects, it is “the hardest thing in the world for one human being to shine into another human being the glow that burned within himself, even when the glow was from God”. And this clash between sanctity and complacency and corruption is never simply a clash between the world and the Church: it is a clash within the Church and within the clergy themselves.

Nevertheless, the beleaguered priest always has the sacraments to call on, along with all of the other supernatural machinery of the Church. Often in Marshall’s stories, the hard-pressed priest retains “the sweet, ineffable, unfailing mystery” which only his own unworthy but consecrated hands can perform. An ageing Abbé Gaston tells a group of young, newly ordained priests that even though, in the Mass, they were doing “a great and a glorious and a shining thing ... the world would see it as a dull thing”. That too was “part of the mystery”.

Marshall clearly loved the Church in its most elevated, otherworldly aspects. He loved its eternal, unchanging teachings. But he also knew that these endeavours and teachings had to come down to earth. Thus he was also, one might say, the novelist of *Rerum Novarum*. His priests seem imbued with its spirit and worldview, especially when it comes to disgust with the easeful rich and their disdain for the poor on whose labour they subsist.

Fr Smith, for instance, harangues fellow



**The books are full of unflattering glimpses of the wealthy, sealed off from those who sweat and toil**



priests about allowing people to believe that the Church “teaches a short-range rather than a long-range morality”. By which he means that they “hear the adulterer, the thief and the murderer condemned from our pulpits, but not the employer of sweated labour, not the shareholder in armaments factories, not the men who make their money out of films about gangsters, not the politicians who compromise with the perpetrators of cruelty in faraway lands”. The Abbé Gaston’s best friend is Bessier, a Communist whom he met for the first time on the front line in northern France during the Great War. He ends up conducting the wedding ceremony when Bessier’s only son marries a Catholic girl.

Marshall’s novels are full of unflattering glimpses of the wealthy and complacent, often seen through the windows of sleek and shiny cars or expensive restaurants, sealed off from any meaningful or equalising encounters with those who sweat and toil. One wonders whether Marshall’s professional endeavours as an accountant exposed him to one too many of this type, leaving him with a simmering pot of rage that he drained off into his fiction.

Marshall was a relentless pricker of all bubbles of smugness and complacency, ecclesial or secular, releasing stinging epigrams on the reader, sometimes when they are least expected. My favourite in this regard comes from *Vespers in Vienna* (1947), reissued as *The Red Danube* after the name of the film (starring Walter Pidgeon, Ethel Barrymore, Peter Lawford, Angela Lansbury and Janet Leigh) that was made of it in 1949. It is a novel not about a priest but a soldier: it opens just after the end of the Second World War with Colonel Michael Nicobar being summoned from Rome to Vienna to take part in the rehabilitation of Austria. High-ranking British army officers lined up in a bar, all drinking sherry and vermouth, are summed up as “good chaps primarily because they weren’t better chaps” – as rich and pithy a demolition of a certain form of attitudinal privilege as one could hope for. I like, too, the French cardinal who thinks that “the backwards peoples were those who had been sensible enough to stop at their destination when they reached it and the progressive peoples those who had been blind enough to go charging past it”.

**AND WHILE** the novels are rambling and essentially good-natured, we also read them knowing that we may never be more than a sentence or two away from an incident starkly confronting us with all of the disasters that can be inflicted on the flesh by war and poverty, and with mortality itself. Marshall never lingers on gore, but still he recounts clearly and succinctly things he has obviously seen with his own eyes. We need to know about such things, he seems to be reminding us, since such things are done.

How then do we explain Bruce Marshall’s relative obscurity in both popular and learned understanding of Catholic literature, an obscurity which no signs of lifting? He doesn’t, for instance, trouble the pages of *Converts*,

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The 1949 film *The Red Danube*, set in post-war Austria, was adapted from Marshall’s novel *Vespers in Vienna*; left, author Bruce Marshall

Melanie McDonagh’s new study of British artists, writers and thinkers who swam the Tiber between the 1890s and 1960s. Partly, of course, it comes down to the difficulty of standing out in an immensely crowded field (of which McDonagh’s book provides such a vivid reminder).

Marshall suffers from being in the shadow of the titans, Waugh and Greene. In 1953, Dom Giuseppe De Luca, giving an opinion to the Holy Office when it was investigating whether Graham Greene’s novels should be added to the list of condemned books, wrote that “Greene and Evelyn Waugh, according to expert opinion, are to be considered the two major living English novelists ... Their level, unlike that of a Bruce Marshall, is not that of average I.Q.s or, like the clergy in general, that of uneducated readers or pure professionals. Their level is the higher intelligentsia in the contemporary world which they sway and influence towards Rome.”

This is unduly harsh. Marshall’s novels contain serious food for thought about the place of faith in a modernising world. He was clearly, however, not as fastidious as Greene or Waugh, as evidenced by a prolific output accomplished while pursuing a career

wholly divorced from writing fiction. One suspects that the first manuscript version of a Marshall novel was also often close to the last.

His books can have the feel of cigarettes, one lit off the end of the other – whether thematically, in their settings, in the deployment of character types or in a certain comedic tone – and he can drag too hard and too long on them. His subject matter was not really the rarefied anguish of the middle and upper classes, but religion at street level – a feature which has perhaps stood against him too.

Nonetheless, the obscurity of Bruce Marshall is unmerited. I turn to him when I need reminding of some important truths about the faith, such as this final reflection of the Abbé Gaston, when he realises that the wonder of the Church is “that the Holy Ghost should be able to hold it together, when God had made it of such weak men. And the Lord always had his arms about the Church, that the Church might not fall apart, when weak men stood at its altars”.

**Michael Duggan** is a freelance writer living in Surrey.



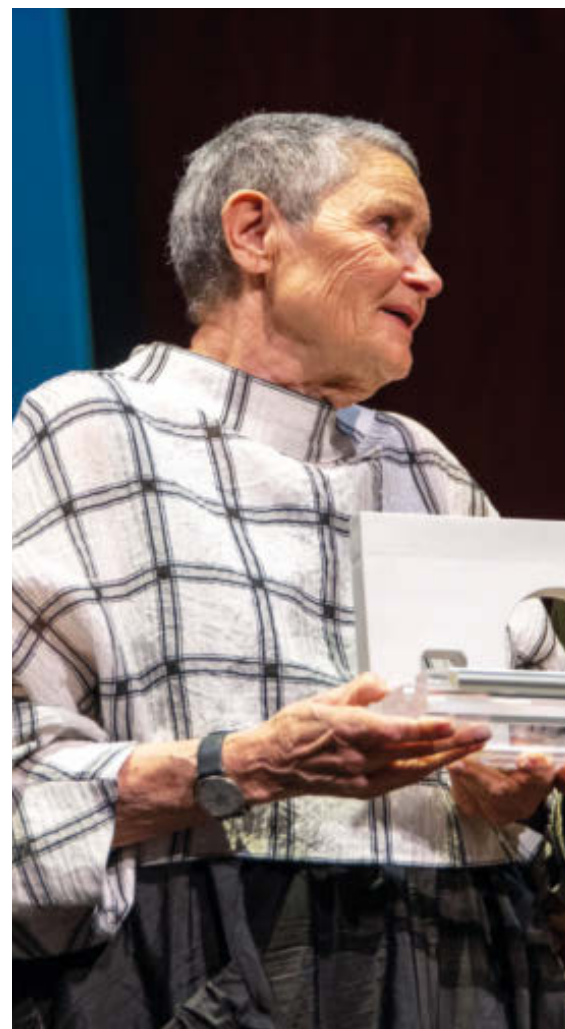
# Common ground

A young Palestinian and a young Israeli who have each lost a family member to violence now speak for a forum that bridges the divide between their peoples – and hopes for a future in which they live together as equals / **By JULIAN MARGARET GIBBS**

**“I GREW UP** in a refugee camp in Bethlehem. My name is Ibrahim. I want to say to you all that when I come into a church, I feel the holiness.”

We are in St Mary’s Anglican parish church Stoke Newington, north London, and two members of the Parents Circle – Families Forum (PCFF) are talking to the congregation. Both are young men – Ibrahim Al-Jaafari, a Palestinian student nurse, is 20 and Mai Albini Peri, an Israeli, is 30. Set up in 1995 to bring together bereaved people from both sides of the divide, the PCFF is the only peace organisation jointly founded and run by Israelis and Palestinians. Their representatives always speak together, just as Mai and Ibrahim are doing now.

As Ibrahim’s opening words suggest, he, a Muslim, is respectful of other cultures and religions. Mai is similarly thoughtful. “What I want for my people shouldn’t come at the expense of others. We should all be able to go to our holy sites, for example.” This mutual respect is fundamental to the way the PCFF works. Made up of 800 bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families, its core events are dialogue meetings where representatives share stories of loss and explain their decision to work through communication rather than revenge. Though the organisation is now banned from Israeli schools and Palestinians are not permitted in Israel, it persists in this mission. Its annual youth camp was held in another country, Cyprus, this year and its largest event, a joint commemoration of



deaths on both sides of the conflict, took place simultaneously in separate ceremonies streamed together around the world.

**AFTER THE SERVICE**, the young men tell me more about what has brought them into the PCFF. When Ibrahim was nine, his adored older cousin Jihad was shot with an illegal, explosive bullet by an Israeli soldier during a raid on their camp. “His heart and lungs were shattered. All his dreams ended in a second.” The Israeli media reported this murder as the killing of a terrorist. Sorrow and trauma filled Ibrahim for years; but when he was 14 his uncle, already a leader within the PCFF, encouraged him to join. Attending its summer camps led to his training to become a “young ambassador for peace”.

It was in this group that he met Mai, whose Uncle Danny was killed by Hamas on 7 October 2023 and whose grandfather, Haim, a left-wing peace activist, was taken hostage and killed four months later while being held in captivity. Mai feels ardently that becoming part of the PCFF is a way of continuing his grandfather’s mission. For Mai, working towards peace means working towards equality. Five years ago, he says, he would have hotly debated the question of whether a one- or two-state solution was the most likely to achieve this outcome. But, he told me, “the only thing clear to me now is that the future consists of Jewish and

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**Pastoral  
Review**





The Parents Circle – Families Forum, which unites bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families, won a human rights award last year

Palestinian peoples living as equals together in the land we both call home”.

Mai's hope is that “when politicians finally say, ‘enough is enough, we want peace’, we will be there, already a strong organisation”. I ask them both how this strength is built up in practice. At the annual youth camp, they explain, 50 bereaved teenagers, Israeli and Palestinian, hear each other's experiences of losing family members. For Israelis, this is often the first time they have met Palestinians. “They come across them only in rocket attacks or in the news, shooting up a bus or a coffee shop,” says Mai, “but not every Palestinian is a member of Hamas.”

Ibrahim discovered that most Israelis have no idea of the conditions many Palestinians live under. “For example, the conditions in refugee camps, with no water or electricity. When I told one guy I had to go 14 days without showering, he thought I was joking.”

Israelis, Mai points out, are taught to think of Palestinians as enemies. Ibrahim adds that Palestinians do not need to be taught this: “Almost all of us have encountered Israelis only at checkpoints and these encounters are not pleasant.” A wrong move at one of the 800 or so Israeli military checkpoints in the West Bank can result in being shot. It is often

hard for young people from either side of the divide to hear these stories.

Ibrahim and Mai have been trained by the PCFF in “active listening”: no opinion must be dismissed, however extreme; all responses must be logical and kind. I am impressed by the skill with which they negotiate their own areas of disagreement. When I ask how they feel about the current fragile ceasefire, Mai expresses cautious optimism. “People are sick of what is happening. That is good. Most of the hostages are back – there is some sense of hope.” Ibrahim, however, points out that since 7 October things have become much harder in the West Bank: schools, universities and hospitals are closed, every village has a gate guarded by the IDF, unemployment runs at 90 per cent. “There is not much feeling of hope. And the ceasefire is very shallow.” Both emphasise their desire for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

**THE GREATEST** difficulty they each face is in managing relations with their own communities. Mai is accused of being a “leftist traitor” and Ibrahim of being a “normaliser”, which for him seems to carry the implication of “collaborator”. Both have their responses ready.

Ibrahim asks: “How can you call me a normaliser when the people I work with work for human rights and are against the occupation?” Mai's response is to point out that the best way to honour those who have died is to make sure nobody else dies. “And,” he adds, “we each have this privilege as a member of a bereaved family: you can't tell us we don't know what we're talking about.”

What do Ibrahim and Mai hope for from their visit to Britain? People in the international community “see our conflict from far away and feel a need to take a side”, says Mai. “I want to change what people see – to show them a different side of the picture.”

“I *almost* agree with Mai,” says Ibrahim with disarming tact. Unlike Mai, he has no problem with Palestinian rights being an issue in local elections in the West. He believes passionately, however, that support must not be simple-minded: “We really want to get the message across that this is not a football match.” He concludes: “If you are pro-Palestinian, you will be for the rights of *all* people. Being against certain people just for their ethnicity is contrary to that.”

Julian Margaret Gibbs is a freelance writer.

#### Tablet Webinars

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**Margaret Hebblethwaite**, author, journalist and theologian, will reflect on Mary, the mother of Jesus, and consider how much Jesus learned from her. This accessible, illustrated talk will consider how her message of social justice, and her commitment to God's will, can be a model for us in 2026, in our world of refugees and the bereaved.

**Blessed Pauline Jaricot | Wednesday 14 January 2026 6.00pm – 7.00pm GMT**



**Fr Anthony Chantry** explores the life and legacy of Blessed Pauline Jaricot, founder of the Association for the Propagation of the Faith. This webinar reflects on how her prayerful, generous faith — rooted in small, everyday acts — continues to inspire Christians to share in the Church's mission today.

**St Thomas Aquinas: Faith and Reason | Wednesday 21 January 2026 | 6.00–7.00pm GMT**



**Fr Thomas Joseph White, O.P.** will explore the enduring relationship between faith and reason in the thought of St Thomas Aquinas. Drawing on Aquinas's theological vision, this session considers how intellectual seriousness, spiritual depth and openness to truth can help Christians engage confidently with contemporary culture and questions.

**St Elizabeth Ann Seton | Wednesday 28 January 2026 | 6.00–7.00pm GMT**



**Dr Anna Abram**, Principal of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, will reflect on the life of Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first native-born US citizen to be canonised. Her story as a wife, mother, educator and convert offers a compelling vision of holiness rooted in ordinary life, resilience and vocation.

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Amazingly, more than half of us in the UK aren't getting our daily recommended magnesium intake from our diets. More and more Brits are now discovering the link between a lack of magnesium and persistent low energy, and finding that a supplement can help, like 67-year old Ingrid Ord, a psychotherapist based in Warwick.

'We moved into our house in December and there was so much I wanted to do. And I realised that I was utterly exhausted. I found I was doing nothing, just the absolute basics. And I was desperate.'

Then Ingrid read about a supplement called Magnesium+\* developed by FutureYou Cambridge, a leading food supplement company known

for making formulations backed by extensive scientific research.

'I looked at the research and I liked the science behind the supplement. I thought, right, I like this – let's try it. I'll do it for three months, and see if there's any improvement.

'Now I find that, after a bit of a rest, I feel more physical energy so I can do a few things around the house. I feel rejuvenated.

'I can walk more, which is very important for me – I've got two beautiful rescue dogs, and love to have fun with them walking in the fields.'

**'We've got a beautiful place here to walk – a small hill, for most people – but for me it's quite a challenge. And**



**'I feel rejuvenated.'**

**I can get up to the top now and look at the incredible view.'**

Unlike supplements that use magnesium oxide, Magnesium+ uses a naturally-occurring mineral called magnesium lactate, which is adept at optimising and maintaining levels of magnesium in the body.

Your magnesium levels build gradually, so Magnesium+ is designed to support you over time.

To help you get started with a daily habit this winter, you can enjoy **50% off your first 3 months** when you subscribe.

## Why choose Magnesium+?

★ Trustpilot ★★★★★  
EXCELLENT Over 13,500 reviews

- **Reduces tiredness and fatigue:** Scientifically proven to support energy levels
- **Highly Absorbable Formula:** Magnesium lactate for better absorption, easy on the stomach
- **Includes vitamin B6:** Reduces tiredness and fatigue and supports energy metabolism



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Customer Care

**\*Magnesium contributes to a reduction of tiredness and fatigue, normal energy-yielding metabolism, muscle function and normal psychological function and the maintenance of normal bones. Magnesium+ also includes vitamin B6, which contributes to the regulation of hormonal activity.** Introductory offer valid for new UK customers only. Offer expires 28th February 2026. See [FutureYouHealth.com/MGM101](https://FutureYouHealth.com/MGM101) for full terms and conditions.

## 50% OFF FOR 3 MONTHS

Start your Magnesium  
subscription trial for just  
£7.50 every 28 days for 3  
months (normally £15).

## 0800 808 5740

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**FutureYouHealth.com**

quoting code

## MGM101



You will be enrolled into a flexible  
subscription, which you can cancel  
anytime without obligation. Your first  
3 boxes will cost £7.50 every 28 days;  
thereafter, each box of Turmeric+ Gold  
will cost £12



## Old Labour

SIR PATRICK DUFFY, the son of a Mayo-born coal miner from Rossington, near Doncaster, who served as under-secretary for defence in James Callaghan's government, was the embodiment of the old religion: a Labour centrist, Catholic, pro-life, pro-Irish reunification, pro-investment in the Royal Navy. He was believed to have been the UK's longest-living former MP: he might also be able to boast the longest time spent waiting between receiving the last rites – performed by a priest after his Fleet Air Arm plane had crashed near Scapa Flow in the Orkneys during the Second World War – and departing this world for the next, which he finally did on 2 January at Doncaster Royal Infirmary 80 years later, aged 105.

"There was no Catholic church in Rossington," he told Peter Stanford when he was interviewed for *The Tablet* in his 100th year. "But Mass would be celebrated in a local school. The priest picked me as his first altar boy. He'd drive round in his Morris to say Masses in the pit villages, and in between he'd instruct me in Latin. It was a great start." He recalled energetically swinging the thurible during outdoor Corpus Christi processions



and producing clouds of incense. In his eighties, he walked the Camino six years in succession.

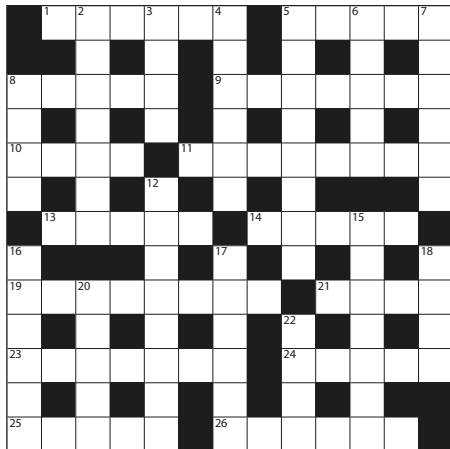
The wartime flying accident kept Duffy on full Navy pay while he studied for a doctorate at the LSE. He secured a seat in Parliament, first in Colne Valley, and then, from 1970 to 1992, in Sheffield Attercliffe. He became president of the Nato Assembly towards the tail end of the Cold War; he had a private audience with Pope John Paul II in October 1989, a few weeks before the fall of the Berlin Wall. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1991 and received his papal knighthood in 2017.

WHAT MAKES a cure miraculous? On the evening of 28 July 1923 a jubilant crowd gathered to watch Jack Traynor, a mariner and coal merchant from Liverpool 8, cheerfully pushing his own wheelchair along Liverpool Lime Street railway platform. Just one week earlier, Traynor, suffering from epilepsy, a paralysed right arm, paraplegia of the legs, ulcers and wounds and a surgical hole in his skull, had left from the same station with the first Liverpool archdiocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes. Everyone in Liverpool has always known that his cure had been a miracle, but somehow the process of authentication had got bogged down and then forgotten, until Dr Kieran Moriarty – a consultant physician – dug out the old files and conducted further research. On 8 December 2024, Archbishop Malcolm McMahon of Liverpool formally declared the cure to have been a miracle.

Dr Moriarty will tell the story in Westminster Cathedral Hall, Ambrosden Avenue, close to Victoria Station, on Saturday 7 February, from 11.30 to 1 p.m. Mass in honour of Our Lady of Lourdes and World Day of Prayer for the Sick will follow in the cathedral next door at 2 p.m. For details, go to: [www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/dr-kieran-moriarty-talk-on-lourdes-71st-miracle-john-jack-traynor-tickets-1976728613495](http://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/dr-kieran-moriarty-talk-on-lourdes-71st-miracle-john-jack-traynor-tickets-1976728613495)

## PUZZLES

## PRIZE CROSSWORD No. 984 Alanus



Please send your answers to: Crossword Competition 10 January 2026, *The Tablet*, 1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY. Email: [thetablet@thetablet.co.uk](mailto:thetablet@thetablet.co.uk), with Crossword in the subject field. Please include your full name, telephone number and email address, and a mailing address. **Three books – on the Apocryphal Gospels, the Catholic Reformation and the Old Testament – from OUP's Very Short Introduction series will go to the sender of the first correct entry drawn at random.**

## Across

- 1 Geometric Trafalgar link (6)  
5 Father of "Faith of Our Fathers" (5)  
8 Indicate reward for draw (5)  
9 Gordon in annoyance or mild surprise (7)  
10 Entrails for garters threat (4)  
11 Curiously recanted liquid container (8)  
13 German city in Europe's sensitivity (5)  
14 Room for exam preparation? (5)  
19 Recipient of message from Paul concerning Greek letter and colour (8)  
21 & 24 Across: Caesar's surprised identification of one of his assassins (2,2,5)  
23 Amputate bad meat (4,3)

## 24 See 21 Across

- 25 Devious gym exercise in passageway by chapterhouse (5)  
26 Freshest news (6)

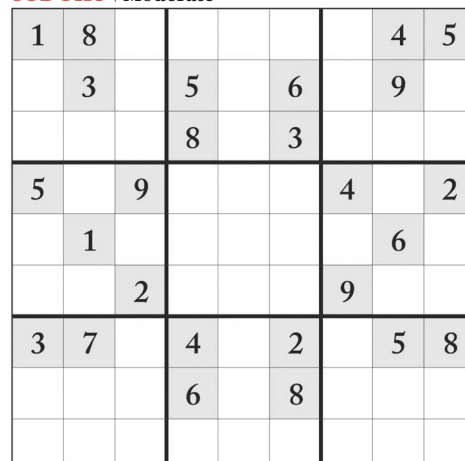
## Down

- 2 We follow noiseless end (7)  
3 Singer of choral tone poem (4)  
4 Badge with problem blemish inside (6)  
5 Sent fair arrangement for delicate crafts (4,4)  
6 Sound sheepish and turn table (5)  
7 Turner work of tennis action (6)  
8 Line hangers belonging to girl (4)

## 12 Queen of Ithaca, Mrs Odysseus (8)

- 15 Alternative routes of French trips (7)  
16 Changes of Cheops over time (6)  
17 In very happy mood concerning Rosary mysteries (6)  
18 Back up concerning perfect state (4)  
20 Tusk stuff on African coast (5)  
22 Encouragingly incite to beat up (4)

## SUDOKU | Moderate



Each 3x3 box, each row and each column must contain all the numbers 1 to 9.

## Solution to the 13 December puzzle

2	5	7	8	6	9	4	3	1
3	1	8	4	5	2	6	7	9
9	4	6	7	1	3	2	5	8
1	2	5	6	7	4	8	9	3
4	6	9	1	3	8	5	2	7
7	8	3	9	2	5	1	4	6
5	3	1	2	9	6	7	8	4
6	9	4	5	8	7	3	1	2
8	7	2	3	4	1	9	6	5

## Solution to the 13 December crossword No. 982

**Across:** 1 Coyote; 5 Lamba; 8 Motel; 9 Simplan; 10 Lyre; 11 Hydroxyl; 13 Wotan; 14 Scots; 19 Night sky; 21 Hera; 23 Hittite; 24 Altos; 25 Roses; 26 Norden.

**Down:** 2 Ontario; 3 Owls; 4 Essays; 5 Limerick; 6 Milex; 7 Annals; 8 Milk; 12 Matthias; 15 Theatre; 16 Anchor; 17 Skreen; 18 Cats; 20 Gates; 22 Hair.

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# LETTERS

• THE EDITOR OF THE TABLET •

✉ 1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY @ letters@thetablet.co.uk

All correspondence, including email, must give a full postal address and contact telephone number. The Editor reserves the right to shorten letters.

## Puzzle over Moth

● As I move towards my 80th birthday, I reflect that I have spent most of my life trying to commend the Gospel of Christ (37 years of priestly ministry and nearly 50 years of Jesuit life), teaching the range of Christian doctrines (Trinity, Christology and Salvation), and trying to articulate a “theology of atheism” as a resource for the Church in the emerging post-Christian West.

At times, I have found that my mind is battered by what can and cannot be said, but all this pales when faced with the mystery of the appointment of Richard Moth as Archbishop of Westminster (“Taking up the reins”, 3 January).

I find myself puzzling over the consultation for this appointment: how broad was it? Who had the chance to contribute? Was it taken seriously? How deeply were the laity involved, including those coping with sexual abuse in the Church?

Were there other, perhaps better, candidates, with better gifts to offer? Do we need what the editor calls a “continuity candidate” – more of the same? Has “the same” been all that great? We’ll never know, but a Church committed to synodality should not be restricting the scope of final discernment to an episcopal committee, and this smacks of a deal done among bishops.

After Vatican I approved the doctrine of papal infallibility, Cardinal Newman kept silent. He said he was waiting for the “echo”, the sign that this teaching resonated with the *sensus fidelium*, the feeling among the people of God, clergy and laity that this was the right decision.

Is there an “echo” among laity and clergy in relation to this appointment?

JOHN MCDADE

SALISBURY, WILTSHIRE

## The quiet American

● In 1955 – the year I was born and seven days later Robert Prevost was born – Graham Greene published his novel *The*

## TOPIC OF THE WEEK

### Clericalism digging in

**IT'S SO SAD** to read three letters from dedicated, deep-thinking women (Letters, 3 January) giving up on the Church opening all recognised ministries to women.

First, because as long as governance is confined to a specifically male hierarchy, all the valuable roles they extol will continue to be at the whim of a caste they can't join.

Second, because it capitulates to the latest Vatican reassertion that physical masculinity from birth is essential to preserving the divine order of salvation.

This phrasing comes from a letter to Pope Leo from the chair of the most recent commission on women deacons, Cardinal Petrocchi, published on 4 December 2025.

As Mary Varley observed (Letters, 20/27 December 2025), this represents a digging-in of male clericalism, as well as the present form of ordination being an elevation of status with which no decent woman or man would want to be associated.

Perhaps the bureaucratic manoeuvring indicates some shamefacedness over the quite crude affirmations in the letter that only biological masculinity admits full representation of Jesus in presiding at Mass and therefore exerting institutional authority. Hitherto, this has been clothed by a mystical sort of theologising, most notably by Hans Urs von Balthasar and his followers.

Perhaps we can be grateful for such a clear showing of our male hierarchy's cards.

OLIVE POWELL

MANCHESTER

**THE MAJOR “SURPRISE”** in the letter on women deacons by retired Italian Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi, who chaired Pope Francis's second commission for the Study of the Diaconate of Women, is that it presents a partial report of a few anonymous votes by unnamed persons

(“Eamon Martin surprised at women deacons decision”, 3 January).

The letter is not the report of Study Group 5, one of the ten (now twelve) such groups appointed to respond to the Synod's requests. The anonymous members of Study Group 5, led by Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith Undersecretary for Doctrine, Msgr Armando Matteo, were to review the question of ordaining women as deacons.

However, Study Group 5's interim report does not address women deacons. Rather, it delegated its responsibility to the Petrocchi commission, which had completed its work years earlier and was re-formed in February 2025 to consider the global submissions about women deacons. Hence the creation of the Petrocchi letter to Pope Leo.

The letter presents such questionable Christology that it is neo-Arian. It assumes that Jesus was and remains only a male human, not the living Son of God. It evidences a theme that women cannot image Christ, the Risen Lord; its logic implies women are not made in the image and likeness of God.

However, as the Archbishop of Dublin points out, it does not rule out the ordained diaconate as a permanent vocation for women. The letter affirms the fact that the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate is something the Magisterium – that is, Pope Leo – must decide.

One can only hope that the cardinals, who were due to meet in Rome on 6-7 January will understand the damage repeated postponements and this letter have caused.

PHYLLIS ZAGANO

MEMBER OF THE 2016-18 PAPAL COMMISSION FOR THE STUDY OF THE DIACONATE OF WOMEN, HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY, HEMPSTEAD, NEW YORK, USA

*Quiet American*. Its prophetic picture of future American involvement in Indochina (Vietnam) and its wider foreign policy caught the public mood.

Blinded by American exceptionalism, the idealist CIA agent Alden Pyle cannot see the calamity ahead. The present occupant of the Oval Office suffers from a similar blindness.

Thankfully, we now have a quiet American in office in the Vatican. His quiet voice and

gentle smile belie his moral vision and steely determination. In continuity with his much-loved predecessor, Francis, he is steering the Church into a new era. Internal squabbles about liturgy and language do not obscure his wider vision for Church unity and world peace.

Like Francis, he has a long-sighted vision to bring the teachings of Vatican II from off the page into real life. Self-reverential arguments (like

those of the apostolic brothers James and John) give way to the gentle but clarion call to build the Kingdom of God in today's world.

Welcome, inclusion, compassion, and justice for the meek and the foreigner take priority over the noise and clamour of world domination, of one man or one nation.

As Leo calls his brother bishops together to clarify his future agenda, will we hear



again the Good News and peace on Earth for all, long after the vulgar shouts of *Maga* are silenced?

We should all thank God for giving us this prophetic Quiet American at this time in our noisy, dangerous world.

**(BROTHER) RAY LYONS**  
SOUTHAMPTON

## Reparation for abuse

● The article by Andrew Graystone ("The abuse vacuum", 6 December 2025), and two letters of the same date, all point out how deeply the Catholic and other Christian churches have been wounded through sexual and psychological abuses by persons in positions of trust and responsibility.

Much has been said and provided to prevent future wrongs by safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. More is surely needed by way of reparation for victims. None of your correspondents seem to mention this. Compensation has been awarded in some cases, but by itself is insufficient.

A minimum approach would offer rehabilitation and reintegration to all who have suffered abuse, starting with those whose histories have been confirmed at the level of criminal and civil justice. Not all will accept such restoration, but some may. Such action would at least show that the Churches are

serious about repairing the harm already done.

It can perhaps best be put in place by ecumenical cooperation. Most or many Churches need to be remade, which is indeed the aim of the movement for synods, initiated by the late Pope Francis.

**LORD HYLTON**  
BATH, SOMERSET

## Stillbirth trauma

● In your Christmas editorial ("Hope in the birth of a baby", 20/27 December 2025) I was interested in the example of stillbirth and shocked to read of the lack of parish and diocese support for those families who endure this particularly tragic bereavement.

Fifty-five years ago I suffered an ectopic pregnancy, a traumatic experience both physically and spiritually. When I spoke to the visiting priest and asked about baptism, he told me not to worry myself over that.

Meant to be sympathetic, no doubt, and obviously it was not a viable pregnancy, but nonetheless the same as the beginning signs of my previous two children, with the same powerful emotions and expectations.

One would have thought that any pre-birth bereavement would receive a different kind of conversation now as a matter of basic training in pastoral

care, and there may be parishes where this is the case. I certainly hope so.

**ANNE CONNOLLY**  
EDINBURGH

## Synod in Norway

● The questions raised by Austen Ivereigh ("Opting out: why bishops are saying No to synodality", 13 December) gave me much to reflect on. In Norway we have had only a few articles in the national news magazine, *St Olav*, about the synodality process.

When I asked a close assistant to the former bishop of Oslo when we would get more information, I was told that "we have the pastoral council".

With a new, younger bishop this year, I had more hope. But nothing; still not a word about the pathways for the next three years' worldwide implementation of the synod's final document that Pope Leo has approved.

**HANNEKE ORNE BRUCE**  
OSLO, NORWAY

## Ploughing ahead

● Prompted by Adrian Chiles ("Ploughing is coming home", 25 October 2025) I was reminded that until the nineteenth century, days like Candlemas, Rogation and Lammass were of considerable significance in the English

country calendar. In rural parishes, on the Sunday after Epiphany, the communal plough was garlanded with ribbons, before being blessed in the Church. In the subsequent weeks, farmers would take turns to do their ploughing before the instrument was cleaned and returned.

Few of the "tractor generation" would understand what Jesus is talking about when he says: "No one, having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God."

Until the twentieth century, the horse, ox or mule went in front with ploughman following so, if he was looking back, he would not be ploughing straight. Jesus wants his disciples to look straight ahead and leave our old lives behind.

**RICHARD STRANACK**  
EXMOUTH, DEVON

## Down with trees

● Now that Christmastide is over, can anyone give me a convincing reason why Christmas trees, usually gaudily decorated and sometimes with flashing lights, are appropriate additions to the sanctuary?

A crib should be enough to remind both adults and children of the reason for celebrating Christmas.

**JOHN FRYER**  
NEW MILLS, DERBYSHIRE

## THE LIVING SPIRIT

AND LITURGICAL CALENDAR

My understanding and speaking, my leisure, my activity my doing and thinking, my good and ill fortune, life and death, health and sickness – let absolutely all that I am, experience, feel and understand be employed and expended for [the monks under my care], for whom you yourself did not scorn to expend your very life. And so I pray you teach your servant, Lord, teach me by your Holy Spirit how I may spend my substance for them. Grant, Lord, by your grace, that I may bear patiently with their frailty, sympathize kindly and support with tact. Let your Spirit teach me to console the sad, strengthen the faint-hearted, raise the fallen; to be weak with the weak, indignant with the scandalized and to

become all things to all men, that I may win them all.

**ST AELRED OF RIEVAULX (1132-67)**  
FROM *THE CISTERCIAN WORLD; MONASTIC WRITINGS OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY*, TRANSLATED BY PAULINE MATARASSO (PENGUIN CLASSICS, 1993)

This shewing was made to teach our soul wisely to hold fast to the goodness of God. And in that time the method of our praying was brought to mind: how we tend, through lack of understanding and knowledge of God in his love, to spend too much time on petitioning him. Then saw I truly that it gives more honour to God, and more true delight, that we trustingly pray to him through his goodness and cling to him through his grace, with true confidence and



in steadfast love, than if we took all the words that the heart can think. For if we use all these words, it is too little, and not truly worthy of God: but to rely on his goodness is all we need, and there nothing whatsoever is lacking.

**JULIAN OF NORWICH**  
FROM *A MONTH WITH JULIAN OF NORWICH* EDITED BY RIMA DEVEREAUX (SPCK, 2018)

To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.

**THOMAS MERTON**  
FROM *NEW SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION* (NEW DIRECTIONS, 2007)

### ◆ CALENDAR ◆

**Sunday 11 January:**  
The Baptism of the Lord  
(Year A)

**Monday 12 January:**  
Feria or St Aelred of Rievaulx,  
Religious

**Tuesday 13 January:**  
Feria or St Hilary,  
Bishop & Doctor

**Wednesday 14 January:**  
Feria

**Thursday 15 January:**  
Feria

**Friday 16 January:**  
Feria

**Saturday 17 January:**  
St Anthony, Abbot

**Sunday 18 January:**  
Second Sunday of the Year

◆ ◆ ◆

For the calendar for the Missal of 1962  
go to [www.lms.org.uk](http://www.lms.org.uk)

THE CONSTANT WIFE by Laura Wade, after Somerset Maugham, Chichester Festival Theatre (20–24 January) • ELGAR: THE KINGDOM, Royal Festival Hall, London (29 January) • SUE WEBSTER: BIRTH OF AN ICON, Firstsite, Colchester (opens 31 January) • WUTHERING HEIGHTS starring Margot Robbie (in cinemas 13 February)

# In search of Smiley's people

John le Carré created a moral universe that came to define spy culture, but the new BBC series of *The Night Manager* is too far removed from his guiding hand, says **Lucy Lethbridge**

**T**HE NOVELS of John le Carré, who died five years ago, have come to define the world of post-war espionage. The players of his Great Game inhabit a moral universe in which those who think they are moving the chess pieces are always themselves being moved about the board by yet another player, in yet another game.

Ask someone to imagine a Cold War spy and chances are they will think of someone resembling George Smiley, the shadow master of the Circus, whose blank and forgettable exterior hides both his personal disappointment and his strategic brilliance. Le Carré's spies are in the business because they have a taste for concealment and betrayal. In this sense, they are the perfect means by which a novelist can get to grips with one of the great tasks of life: how to be fully oneself.

The defining feature of le Carré's own beginnings (he was born David Cornwell in 1931) was that his father, Ronnie, was a con-man. "Evasion and deception were the necessary weapons of my childhood," he wrote in *The Pigeon Tunnel* (2016). He worked for both MI6 and MI5 during the 1950s and 1960s and published *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* in 1963. It was an instant bestseller – as was almost everything he subsequently wrote over the course of the next 60 years – and it defined forever the image of the spy as a figure of lonely pathos, forever trapped in the hall of mirrors that is a life of deceit.

**LE CARRÉ-WORLD** was cemented in the collective imagination by numerous screen adaptations of the novels, the most recent of which was *The Night Manager*, which appeared as a BBC television series in 2016. The novel was published in 1993 and has at its centre a typical le Carré loner, Jonathan Pine, a former army officer now employed as the night manager of a smart Cairo hotel. Pine finds himself drawn into working with a maverick branch of British intelligence to infiltrate the entourage of Richard Roper, a billionaire whose humanitarian activities are a cover for illegal arms dealing.

The *Night Manager* adaptation was a huge success. The depiction of the charismatic Roper in particular, played with chilling brilliance and a kind of languid dynamism by Hugh Laurie, drew on another of the themes which run through le Carré's novels – that of



He dissembles, he seduces, he lies: Tom Hiddleston (left) reprises his role as an intelligence infiltrator in a series inspired by John le Carré (inset right), seen alongside the cover of his first bestseller

social class and the way the language of class is employed to expose and to conceal.

In Roper and his campily ruthless sidekick Major Corcoran (Corky), we see not only

killers and sadists but bullies leveraging power on the world stage as once they did in the common rooms of their public schools.

Now *The Night Manager* is back for a



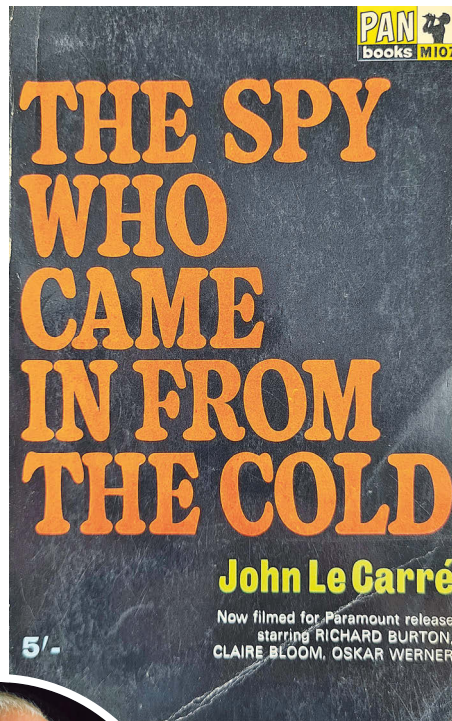
second series, the plot “inspired” by le Carré but not based on one of his novels. Tom Hiddleston, who played Jonathan Pine to great effect in the first series, is back again, this time working in an obscure dungeon of British intelligence under the name Alex Goodwin.

Hiddleston told *The Times* he loved the part. “I’m fascinated by the tension between his internal world – turbulent, traumatised, on fire – and his external persona – immaculate, contained, controlled. He disassembles to discover the secrets of others. He seduces to betray. He lies to tell the truth.”

**IN THE SECOND SERIES**, Hiddleston (who nine years later looks tense and self-controlled but is alarmingly, appropriately, altered from the golden young man of the first series) is made to adopt a number of roles for which backstories have been created by renegade colleagues in MI6. They are renegade because (in true le Carré fashion) the top brass are not only unsupportive of their attempts to prise out a dodgy Colombian drug dealer called Teddy dos Santos, but may well be behind the sudden death of Jonathan Pine, aka Alex Mayhew.

It looks, as before, as though the suits are in cahoots with not only corporate corruption, but global criminal gangs. To foil them, Jonathan Pine, aka Alex Goodwin, must go rogue in Cartagena as Matthew Ellis, a successful investment banker with a taste for risky business in both his private and public life.

The accoutrements of the new series feel more James Bond than le Carré. A meeting



of British intelligence is held in an underground office that looks more like the lair of Spectre than the dreary back offices where George Smiley and his Circus colleagues congregated. There are lashings of casinos, expensive suits, lovely women and smart hotels. They feel like adornments.

I always found it unconvincing that Roper was so ready to believe that Pine was a coldly efficient psychopath: there’s something about Tom Hiddleston’s round and trusting blue

eyes that work against him in this role. Here, it is difficult to take him seriously as Matthew Ellis, especially as Pine must have had about two days to prep for the part. And doesn’t social media, or the internet in general, somehow make concealment of this kind more difficult? Or perhaps it makes it easier? At any rate, it all seems a bit too easy – and I think, in the spirit of le Carré, that we need to know a bit more of the struggle if Pine is not to end up just a cipher for something vaguely “le Carré-ish”.

“Real truth lies, if anywhere, not in facts but in nuance,” le Carré wrote. So far in this series, there is not a great deal of nuance and there are very few facts. One of the compelling features of the best le Carré novels is that they tell the reader how a person might disappear, into a fantasy or a different person or the story of someone else. It’s not easy, and it takes more than wafting into a casino wearing a tuxedo.

At the time of writing, only the first two episodes of *The Night Manager* were available to watch – but I was struck by how little even of the spirit of le Carré seemed to remain. It was as if the writers had extracted one idea (that of the spy embodying different personae) and then squeezed its juice into a predictable and formulaic television thriller.

Roper, assumed dead, is going to turn up again and that is an exciting prospect. And Angela Burr, the engaging MI6 maverick of series one, makes a reappearance, which is good news as she is both interesting and reassuring. I look forward to seeing the ghostly Sandy Langbourne again too. But can the character of Jonathan Pine develop the complexity necessary to carry the drama? Without the guiding hand of John le Carré, who properly understood shadow men, I am not convinced he can.

## RADIO

### Mind the poem

Verse power on the Tube

D.J. TAYLOR

Artworks: Poems on the Underground

BBC RADIO 4

**WHEN DID BRITAIN** stop being a poetry-loving nation? Half a century ago, the world seemed full of popular reciters, with grandparents spontaneously launching into renditions of “The boy stood on the burning deck” and Sir John Betjeman voyaging around Metroland for television.

If poetry has any kind of public face these days, you suspect it can be found not in the spectacle of poets laureate writing for national newspapers, but in the poems displayed on Tube carriage walls alongside adverts for skin cream and vitamin supplements.

This celebration of the Poems on the

Underground scheme’s fortieth anniversary (6 January and BBC Sounds) brings together a wide variety of complementary – and indeed complimentary – voices. They include 91-year-old Judith Chernaik – the American expat writer who, inspired by *As You Like It*, in which sonnets are nailed to trees in the Forest of Arden, suggested the idea to her poet friends Gerard Benson and Cicely Herbert – as well as Ann Gavaghan from Transport for London’s (TfL) People and Places Programme, and numerous passengers and poets to whom the poems have brought either pleasure or exposure.

**FOUR DECADES ON**, the informal selection committee consists of Chernaik and the poets Imtiaz Dharker and George Szirtes; five-hour meetings are not uncommon before the unveiling of the next six-poem roster. There is Arts Council involvement, but most of the backing comes from TfL.

Fascinating as these administrative details are, much of the interest in this retrospective lies in its exploration of the scheme’s appeal to punters. To the sensation of a friendly voice

“whispering in your ear”, as one strap-hanger puts it, could be added the fact that time spent in transit – as part of a trapped, sequestered, captive audience compelled to attend to whatever diversions are at hand – is a pretty good place to be exposed to literature.

There’s also the lure of escapism, an alternative reality waiting to be explored a foot or two above one’s head. Why worry about adverts reminding you of your insufficiently pearly teeth or inadequate investment strategy when between them lies an invitation to a fully fledged imaginative world? Here too, as Gavaghan reminded us, lurks evidence of human beings at work behind the machinery on which Underground travel relies. The daily commute might be a modern version of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), but softening influences are at hand.

All this turns out to have been genuinely uplifting: a terrific idea; a bureaucracy with a heart (London Underground, as it then was, offered to match the £1,000 levied to launch the scheme); and a general satisfaction born of thousands of tiny epiphanies in those moments before the carriage doors slide open.

## CINEMA

## To be, or not to be, grieving

Shakespearean catharsis

ISABELLE GREY

Hamnet

DIRECTOR: CHLOÉ ZHAO

**WHAT WAS IT LIKE** to live with William Shakespeare? To love a man who, as his wife says in this film adaptation of Maggie O'Farrell's 2020 novel *Hamnet*, "has more inside him than any man I've ever met"?

The aspiring writer (Paul Mescal), who is never named in the film until he emerges as a playwright, is tutoring Latin to pay off his father's debts when he first meets Agnes (Jessie Buckley, both pictured), a herbalist, falconer and beekeeper whom we see curled up asleep, as if literally at one with nature, in the near-mythic forests that surround them. Their mutual passion is immediate and, when she becomes pregnant, their families are forced to accept their marriage. They will have three children: a daughter, Susanna (Bodhi Rae Breathnach), and twins, Judith (Olivia Lynes)

and Hamnet (Jacobi Jupe), but he had first won her by telling a story, Orpheus and Eurydice, that foreshadows what is to come.

For this is a film about grief, about how its ferocity can isolate and divide people and, more specifically, about how Shakespeare was unable to deal with the death of his 11-year-old son from plague in any way other than through his writing. Agnes, though, is unable to understand his silent internal process and furiously accuses him of inhabiting a place in his head that is more real to him than the loss of their son. When he returns to London and his work in the theatre, she feels abandoned.

Oscar-winning director Chloé Zhao (*Nomadland*) wrote the screenplay with O'Farrell, making the original story more linear and less fey and adding a devastating end section in which Agnes, believing her husband to be indifferent to her grief, watches a performance of *Hamlet* (the names Hamnet and Hamlet were then almost interchangeable, and Hamlet is played by Jacobi Jupe's older brother Noah), and finally understands the alchemy and metamorphosis of experience that has been taking place inside his head. It



is an extraordinary revelation of an artist's process: Agnes' knowledge of plants feeds into Ophelia's lines, for example, while his own inability to comprehend where his dead son is, how he can just have gone, gives new depth to Hamlet's "To be, or not to be ..."

Zhao has not only told a subtle and powerful story, but elicited extraordinary performances from her actors, including Emily Watson as Shakespeare's mother. Mescal captures both a frustrating inarticulacy and a strong and alluring sense of a mysterious interiority that he himself cannot entirely control. And Buckley, in lust, in childbirth, in motherhood, in grief, becomes as raw and elemental as the tangled forests to which she seems to belong. Her first transformative experience of theatre, in a packed Globe, is made even more potent by her awareness of an audience that clearly knows there is value in her husband's work. Witnessing how strangers can be so moved by a story that feels entirely personal to her, she finds this shared moment of catharsis healing and even euphoric. She conveys her growing wonder – and forgiveness – in a remarkable performance. Truly a play within a play.

## THEATRE

## Small bear makes huge splash

Setting a new theatrical bar

MARK LAWSON

Paddington: The Musical

SAVOY THEATRE, LONDON

**SHOULD YOU FANCY** a family outing to *Paddington: The Musical* – and given the reviews and word of mouth, that's an understandable ambition – tickets are already selling fast into the next half-term period. You might want to aim for Easter or even Christmas, demand being such that bookings are now open until February 2027.

No new show has seemed such a certain commercial hit since the premiere of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, which will celebrate a decade in London this summer (while marking many years in other global capitals). Theatre reviews rarely praise producers, but it feels germane that both the drama about J.K. Rowling's boy wizard and now this song-and-dance show featuring Michael Bond's sweet-toothed immigrant bear were put on stage by Sonia Friedman. As well as having a feel for family entertainment that rivals Walt Disney, Friedman has also been responsible for some of the most powerful recent speech dramas, including Robert Icke's devastating



modernisation of *Oedipus* and Sir Tom Stoppard's final play, *Leopoldstadt*.

The mark of a Friedman production is setting the highest standards for writing, direction, acting, design, lighting – plus, recently, the newest theatre arts of digital projection, animatronics and puppetry – and then identifying talent that can achieve them. *Paddington: The Musical* is such an intricate collaboration that the large-sized A3 programme fills two pages of smallish type with those involved.

This latest Friedman show was in development for several years, much of that involving the pivotal creative challenge: how convincingly to animate theatrically the tiny bear that Michael Bond first drew in 1958. Objectively, the solution involves an actor – Arti Shah, who is four feet tall due to the condition pseudoachondroplasia – inside an animatronic Paddington whose reactions are controlled and voice provided by an off-stage performer, James Hameed. Brief appearances by Hameed and a joint curtain call for him and Shah make clear the labour-sharing but, during the action, it feels irrelevant: the charming, marmalade-addicted *Ursida* from Peru is simply, somehow, astonishingly alive before us.

That feat of characterisation would be satisfying in a drama, but Friedman has raised the stakes by setting this beautiful visual illusion within a musical – a notoriously difficult form due to the need for spoken dialogue and songs that work both individually and together. Jessica Swale's script makes much of Paddington's status as an

immigrant asylum seeker and, given the political mood, I feared this might wound the show in some reviews; in fact, it seems to have been accepted as a sweet plea for social cooperation of a sort standard in today's children's literature. The songs – by Tom Fletcher, a mature graduate of pop-rock band McFly – largely follow the rule of Stephen Sondheim, the Shakespeare of modern musical theatre, that numbers must advance the action or express in song an emotion that could not be expressed in speech.

**PEAKS OF THE SCORE** include "The Rhythm of London", an anthem to the story's host city that is also beautifully sampled in Tom Pye's designs, and "Pretty Little Dead Things", a theme tune for Millicent Clyde (Victoria Hamilton-Barritt), a very Cruella De Vil villainess who hopes to exhibit the title character stuffed at the Geographer's Guild. Tom Edden and Bonnie Langford, with her signature dance splits, give fine comic support as a taxi driver and a lodger, Mrs Bird, who become trapped in the action.

So slick is the result that the RSC's dramatisation of Roald Dahl's *The BFG*, opening soon afterwards last month in Stratford-upon-Avon, suffered in comparison both for not being a musical (a curious decision given the global success of its previous Dahl show, *Matilda*) and the relative lack of ambition of its mechanical and digital characterisation. In other times, *The BFG* might have seemed fine – but *Paddington: The Musical* is one of those achievements so exceptional that it becomes a benchmark that other theatre pieces can only fail to reach. A production with a tiny protagonist has gigantic impact.

JOHAN PERSSON



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## Who was Hannibal Lecter?

In an insightful memoir, one of our greatest actors reveals that he uses relations and acquaintances as inspiration in major roles

MARK LAWSON

### We Did Ok, Kid: A Memoir ANTHONY HOPKINS

(SIMON & SCHUSTER, 368 PP, £25)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £22.50 • TEL 020 7799 4064

**T**HE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES of actors are often disappointing. Later generations wanting to know about Laurence Olivier will find less insight in his *Confessions of an Actor* and *On Acting* than in many biographies.

The difficulty is that memoirs describe the writer's life while an acting career consists of occupying others' lives, often mysteriously and instinctively. All Olivier books contain the story of cast members saluting a particularly great performance as Othello and finding Olivier downcast due to having no idea of why it was great, and therefore having no prospect of repeating it.

Perhaps ominously, Sir Anthony Hopkins, despite being one of the few to match Olivier's theatrical magnetism (plus surpassing him on screen), has no idea, despite acting with and being directed by the older man, how he did it. "My God, what an actor" is as far as Hopkins' analysis of Olivier goes in *We Did Ok, Kid: A Memoir*.

As for Hopkins' own work, it worried me, having interviewed him a few times, that questions on technique brought a dumb shrug that there was nothing much to it: he just copied the way an uncle walked or a colleague talked. But while the book contains attempts at evasion – the last 10 per cent consists of his favourite poetry, including T.S. Eliot and Ecclesiastes – it also admits genuine insights about the man and acting.

Intriguingly, the line about copying a relative or acquaintance for each role – which seemed to me a journalist-distancing *sh\*tick* – is true, or at least repeated for readers, with the intriguing difference that the models are identified.

His Academy Award-winning portrayal of the cannibalistic serial killer Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* was apparently based on his teacher at Rada, Christopher



ALAMY/ABACA/BALKIS

Anthony Hopkins, December 2025

Fettes. Before the famous acting school nervously searches its records to check that all past students survived the year, the actor explains that his inspiration was Fettes' pedagogic demeanour: "He spoke crisply and stared at you with a penetrating stillness. He didn't waste a single gesture or word ... it could be like an ice pick impaling us."

There is a tremendous scene in which Fettes, thrilled at his graduate winning an Oscar, takes Hopkins out to dinner and asks how he constructed Lecter's character and is told the inspiration was the questioner, allied to the blood-slurping sound employed by Bela Lugosi as Dracula. Fettes, to his credit, was thrilled.

Another revealing section involves Hopkins' portrayal of the Murdochian media tycoon Lambert Le Roux in David Hare's and Howard

Brenton's *Pravda* in 1985, still the National Theatre's most profitable new play and, 41 years later, one of the most intense and electrifying stage performances I have ever seen. In rehearsals, Hopkins mentions having once read – his energetic lifelong self-education is an impressive aspect of the narrative – that Hitler had a thousand books but boasted of never reading one because he knew he was

right. The writers immediately incorporated the detail in the script.

Earlier in his career, Hopkins was at risk of modelling himself on Richard Burton who, spookily, also came from Port Talbot and whom the younger Welsh star actor had met as a child: another stonking anecdote. Burton dissolved his talent in alcohol and died aged 58. Writing at the end of his ninth decade, Hopkins tells in unsparing detail how he almost died young twice, once on a drunken drive across America and then from cirrhosis of the liver while appearing on Broadway in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, a part in which he was followed by Burton, although he avoided his fellow Welshman's medical fate when a colleague directed him to Alcoholics Anonymous: he still attends meetings. In an illustrative double, Hopkins' book tops two Amazon categories – Actor Autobiographies and Alcohol and Drug Abuse Memoirs.

**THERE IS** a certain sort of life story that works best as audiobook. The exemplar here is Bruce Springsteen's 2016 *Born to Run*, a reasonable read but which, when listened to, has the impact of a box set of unheard spoken word albums. Hopkins' prose so echoes his throaty staccato tones – his first London flat was "top floor. The bare spartan minimum. I liked it. It had a gas fire and a small kitchen alcove. But I never cooked" – that one imagines his performance of it might repeat the Springsteen effect.

Alas, he was unable to record it because his house in Los Angeles' Pacific Palisades burned down in last January's wildfires, understandably disrupting his diary so that Sir Kenneth Branagh deputised at the talking book recording, a mark of respect as Branagh has often vocally shadowed Olivier, narrating, for example, the sequel to the TV documentary series *The World at War*, the first run of which had a voiceover by the senior theatre grandee. His resilience in surviving that latest of many life disasters is affecting.

Although Hopkins delivers the closing poems, we might hope for a full audio version, perhaps to coincide with this year's paperback. For readers, there is a sense of hearing one of the great acting voices through a thickish wall, but the eavesdropping is often enthralling. As an actor, Hopkins is another Olivier; as a memoirist, far superior.

**Writing at the end of his ninth decade, Hopkins tells in unsparing detail how he almost died young twice**

# Hidden in plain sight

MICHAEL CARTER

## Domination: The Fall of the Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity

ALICE ROBERTS

(SIMON & SCHUSTER, 432 PP, £10.99)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £9.89 • TEL 020 7799 4064

**I**N THE EARLY YEARS of the fourth century, the Emperor Diocletian initiated Rome's last and greatest persecution of Christianity. Its victims included martyrs whose feasts remain in the church calendar to this day: Agnes, Pancras and Sebastian, to name but a few. Fast forward to AD 380 and Emperor Theodosius the Great declared Christianity the official religion of the Empire. Ten years after that, St Ambrose, high-born erstwhile imperial administrator turned Bishop of Milan, excommunicated Theodosius who, in a fit of political pique, had ordered a massacre that claimed thousands of lives.

Just how and why Roman emperors went from persecuting Christian clergy to kneeling in penance before them, and the reasons why men of high birth and talent opted to become bishops, provide subjects for Alice Roberts' *Domination*. It tells a lively story that unfolds over almost seven centuries, from the time of St Paul to the age of Anglo-Saxon missions. Along the way, we encounter a monastery on a windswept Welsh headland, hermitages in the burning sands of Egypt and Syria and the imperial capitals at Rome and Constantinople.

The argument of the book can be summed up thus: Christianity was never really the religion of the poor and peaceful, and its rise to dominance in the late Roman world was all down to a thirst for power and wealth.

Roberts tells us that she was "astonished by the answers she found", of the "many myths" that she "uncovered, exposed and pierced". Evidence for all this – both archaeological and documentary – was "hidden in plain sight". Despite Roberts' evident excitement in piecing together her argument, little she says is new. Many of her assertions have



A marble head of Emperor Diocletian, from the Istanbul Archaeology Museum

a long pedigree, often ultimately traceable to Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Whether Constantine's conversion to Christianity was genuine – the subject of an extended chapter – was a standard undergraduate essay question back when I studied this period almost 40 years ago. Then, too, I was required to engage with the already substantial literature concerning the important role that bishops from senatorial families played in the running of the Church, and how the Church assumed many of the roles of the fast-decaying imperial administration.

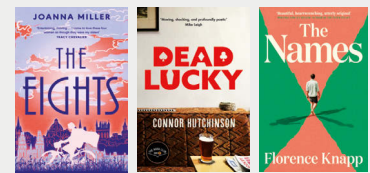
**NOBODY FAMILIAR** with the period will be surprised to learn that the Roman Basilica, a large public building put to multiple functions, provided the architectural model for major churches erected from the time of Constantine onwards, nor that the ceremonies, vestments and other bling adopted by the Church were inspired by those used at the imperial court.

Roberts, like all authors, brings her own perspectives and interests to her subject. A patron of Humanists UK, she's unable or unwilling to countenance the spiritual appeal of Christianity to the people of late antiquity: the accessibility of its theology, its basic principle that *princeps*, prelate and pauper were equal in the eyes of God, its ability not only to make a miserable existence here on earth more bearable both spiritually and physically, but to offer hope for the hereafter.

At times *Domination* reads more like Dan Brown than Peter Brown, the eminent scholar of religion and society in late antiquity, whom Roberts barely cites and doesn't include in her bibliography. It's a serious omission. Despite these reservations, however, the book is a reminder of the undoubted and enduring relationship between the Church and power and wealth, and will, I'm sure, inspire many readers to find out more about the world of late antiquity – and to discover a fuller explanation as to why Christianity became its dominant religion.

ALAMY: GOKHAN DOGAN

## SPEED READING



LUCY POPESCU

loves debut novels

The First World War haunts Joanna Miller's meditative debut *The Eights* (Fig Tree, £16.99; *Tablet* price £15.29) which begins in 1920, as Oxford finally awards degrees to women. Four students, neighbours on corridor eight, become friends: Dora, grieving the loss of her brother and fiancé, arrives in their place. Beatrice, daughter of a renowned suffragette, is determined to make her own mark; Otto, a brilliant mathematician, prefers socialising; and Marianne, mousy daughter of a vicar, harbours a secret. Miller's meticulous research evokes a vivid portrait of 1920s Oxford.

In *Dead Lucky* (Corsair, £20; *Tablet* price £18), Mancunian Jamie Fletcher works in a funeral home, tending to corpses before cremation with scrupulous care. After work, he drinks with best mate Trick at the local working men's club and worries about keeping his girlfriend happy – she wants to settle down and buy a home. But Jamie's gambling addiction is spiralling and threatens to destroy everything he holds dear. Connor Hutchinson brilliantly captures the grip of addiction: the lies Jamie tells to protect his secret and his slow unravelling.

Can a name shape a life? Florence Knapp poses this question in her beguiling first novel, *The Names* (Phoenix, £16.99; *Tablet* price £15.29). In 1987, Cora, accompanied by her young daughter Maia, is about to register her son's birth. Her husband Gordon expects her to name the baby after him. But she's torn between Bear, suggested by Maia, and Julian, her preference. The choice could alter the direction of all their futures. What follows is three versions of one family's fate and a layered exploration of coercive control and its emotional fallout.

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## Aristocrat turned Communist

ARIANE BANKES

### Troublemaker: The Fierce, Unruly Life of Jessica Mitford

CARLA KAPLAN

(HURST, 616 PP, £27.50)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £24.75 • TEL 020 7799 4064

**W**HAT MOST DRAWS me to a book is the confluence between the voice of the writer and the subject, and Carla Kaplan's biography of Jessica Mitford would seem to be a perfect example. Jessica (Decca), fifth daughter of the Redesdales, was – against stiff competition – the sparkiest of those extraordinary sisters, and Kaplan has her measure, bringing a sharp wit and droll turn of phrase to her account of Decca's roller-coaster life. And what a singular story: British aristocrat turned American Communist, agitator, campaigner, journalist, muckraker, memoirist, scourge of the corrupt and venal American funeral industry, and so much more.

Decca was unusually driven and unswervable, from the moment, as a child, she started her Running Away Fund to escape the constraints of Mitford life, to her full-blooded engagement with civil rights among the dockers and downtrodden of Oakland, California, where she was to settle with her second hus-



The indomitable Decca Mitford

band, left-wing lawyer Bob Treuhaft. Meanwhile, she employed the Fund to run away to the Spanish Civil War with the first love of her life, Esmond Romilly, Churchill's nephew, whose ruthless combination of charm, chutzpah and delinquency saw them through their ill-conceived plan to throw in their lot with the Spanish Republicans, and a deft relocation to America on the eve of the Second World War. His luck ran out in 1941 when he was shot down over the North Sea, leaving Jessica widowed with their small daughter.

Thereafter, her passion for social justice and racial equality turned her "from aristocrat

to activist", as she learned the ropes of grass-roots campaigning from her well-connected mentor Virginia Durr, and launched into a lifetime of battling prejudice and oppression. Indefatigable and indomitable, she was a brilliant organiser and strategist and a formidable opponent, not averse to exploiting her aristocratic credentials to further her cause. But her success owed as much to her irrepressible wit and irreverent humour, which also attracted Treuhaft: they became fellow warriors in the civil rights movement, and parents to two sons in between their tireless lobbying, litigating, leafleting and speaking up and down the country for the cause.

Journalism offered Decca a new avenue of attack, and she discovered a flair and an appetite for "muckraking", skewering the ills of America in collaboration with Bob. Their joint exposé of the funeral racket, *The American Way of Death* (1963), made her an overnight celebrity, building on the success of her classic memoir, *Hons and Rebels*, an early foray into the unstoppable tide of books about the Mitfords. Decca's relations with both parents and sisters were fraught from the off, given her Communist leanings, and it is shocking to learn how maliciously they gossiped about her. But though she had turned her back on the lot of them, she was later drawn back to her roots, visiting Debo at Chatsworth and Nancy in Paris, and making peace with all but the unforgivable Diana Mosley. Carla Kaplan is shrewd and spirited in her portrait of the remarkable Decca, the one Mitford who undoubtedly made the world a better place.

## Badgers by moonlight

ISABEL LLOYD

### Night Life: Exploring Britain's Wild Landscapes After Dark

JOHN LEWIS-STEMPEL

(DOUBLEDAY, 160 PP, £12.99)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £11.69 • TEL 020 7799 4064

**I**N THIS, the darkest season, the dark is in retreat. Light pollution – from houses, streetlamps, office blocks, shop windows – cuts us off both from the stars and from the proper, sightless state of the night. Yet, as John Lewis-Stempel points out in this latest love song to the natural world, 70 per cent of all animals are nocturnal. "Nature abhors waste," he says, "including wasted time", and nocturnality allows life to utilise every scrap of it. The night is earth's largest habitat, and when we close our curtains and our minds to it, we miss wonders.

Not this author, though. In his follow-up

to 2022's *Nightwalking* – which described, with lyricism, learnedness and wry humour, four midnight rambles taken in four seasons – Lewis-Stempel constantly throws himself into the dark, torchless and often alone. He walks through tunnels of Herefordshire trees at midnight, hissed at by owls, screamed at by foxes. He nearly falls down an inky, 40-foot sand dune on a beach in Cardigan. He climbs a fell in the middle of a Lear-like gale, and ends "atop a mountain in winter in absolute surround darkness", feeling simultaneously like an atom and a god.

During all of this, he exercises his well recognised talent for bringing nature to life. Those who've read, for example, *Meadowland*, will be familiar with his cast of badgers, hares, foxes and owls. But he finds new ways to bring them into our mind's eye. An ungainly badger he disturbs after dark blunders off, "a plump man in baggy trousers"; by moonlight "a black fox [runs], as smooth as a silk streamer over the blanched hayfield".

The walks are interspersed with short treatises on stars (the Plough is not a constellation "as every astronomer under the moon will wish to tell you"), on nightingales and the

varied attempts to transcribe their song, on the different ways bats vocalise – most force air through their two upper front teeth, like a doorman whistling for a taxi, but the horse-shoe bat emits, Barbra Streisand-style, through "its magnificent snuzzle". Though the section on moths is a bit sloppy – implying that all moths eat clothes, when in fact only three of the UK's 2,500-plus species do – these diversions are insightful enough to make you want to sit in a darkling wood and watch, as he does, for waltzing bats.

But it's near the end that Lewis-Stempel is most persuasive about why we should all take a turn in the dark. Humans being daylight creatures, stepping into the night is never a neutral act. "Some feeling," he says "is always engendered." And what is that feeling? Sometimes it might be fear. Sometimes, not. The night is a liminal space, where the senses are heightened but the mind wanders. Nightwalking alone and unencumbered by everyday life is, he says, "intoxicating. You can never be so free as you are at night under the moon and stars. You could drown in the delight of it." In this, the darkest season, I think I might agree.

# NEWS BRIEFING

THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

## Missionaries death toll

The annual report from the Pontifical Mission Societies' **Agenzia Fides** said that 17 missionaries were killed across the world in 2025. Of these, 10 died in Africa, of whom five died in Nigeria with the others in Burkina Faso, Kenya, Sierra Leone and Sudan; they comprised six priests, two seminarians and two catechists. The Americas saw four missionaries killed in 2025: one priest in Mexico, another in the United States, and two religious sisters in Haiti, members of the Order of Saint Teresa, who were murdered in March. In Asia, a priest in Myanmar and a lay teacher in the Philippines died, while in Europe a priest was killed in Poland.

A series of coordinated terrorist attacks killed at least 32 Christians across northern and central **Nigeria** during Christmas and New Year celebrations. Observers said the attacks in Adamawa, Kebbi and Plateau states were a reaction to US strikes on jihadist targets in Sokoto state on Christmas Day. In Adamawa, militants from Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) attacked three predominantly Christian communities, killing at least 15 people and burning more than 200 houses. US Congressman Riley Moore said ISWAP's declaration that Christians are "legitimate targets" removes any doubt about religious persecution in Nigeria.

The president of **Nigeria's** Senate, Godswill Akpabio, withdrew a series of defamation suits saying he was inspired by a New Year's Day sermon. Akpabio said the homily delivered by Fr Donatus Udoette at Sacred Heart Parish in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, prompted a moment of reflection. "I had almost nine cases in court against some individuals who defamed me..." he said. "But I listened to the priest and suddenly realised he was talking to me." Akpabio filed several defamation suits in 2025, including one for N200 billion (£100 million) against Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan after she accused him of sexual harassment.



The Archbishop of Tehran-Isfahan, Cardinal Dominique Joseph Mathieu, warned that "the spectre of renewed hostilities" threatens Iran at the start of 2026. In a message ahead of the World Day of Peace on 1 January, he reflected on Israel's 12-day war with Iran in June 2025, warning that "the belligerents are preparing for the worst". His message appeared amid protests against the government, with large numbers demonstrating against worsening economic conditions. "It is undeniable that ordinary people want to live in peace, far from the horrors of war, as daily life is already difficult enough under the weight of sanctions," Mathieu said. (Pictured, demonstrators march over a bridge in Tehran in late December.)

Bishop Edward Hiiboro Kussala of Tombura-Yambio said 2026 is a Kairos moment for **South Sudan** as it recovers from conflict, environmental destruction, the abuse of human rights and widespread youth unemployment. A general election is planned for 22 December 2026, the country's first since its independence in 2011. "This is not merely politics, it is about the soul and future of South Sudan," Bishop Kussala said in a New Year pastoral letter.

Authorities in the western **Indian** state of Maharashtra arrested a priest of the Church of South India (CSI) on charges of proselytisation, prompting angry reactions from church leaders and politicians in his native Kerala. Sudhir William was attending a prayer meeting in Shingori in Nagpur city on 29 December when police arrested him, his wife and others based on a complaint from a Hindutva group. Two days later, they were granted bail by a local court. Bishop Malayil Sabu Koshy Cherian of the CSI Diocese of Madhya Kerala called the arrest a "violation of constitutional freedoms". He said William has been serving in Maharashtra for 12 years "focusing on educating

children and supporting local communities".

Archbishop of Dhaka Bejoy Nicephorus D'Cruze paid tribute to **Bangladesh's** first female prime minister, Khaleda Zia, who died on 30 December aged 80. He said "her love for her country, respect for others and compassion for the poor made her unique". Despite their differences in views she was "determined, courageous and uncompromising".

A 55-year-old priest went missing in the Archdiocese of Palo, in the central **Philippines**, two days before Christmas. Fr Edwin Caintoy was last seen in a bus terminal near a Tacloban City mall on the morning of 23 December, according to the archdiocese's chancellor Fr Gwen Lovelino Padagdag. "We earnestly ask the faithful to keep Fr Caintoy in their prayers," Fr Padagdag said. Police suspected Caintoy was suffering depression after his sacristan, whom the priest was sponsoring for his studies, reportedly ran away.

**Canadian** police arrested an Indian priest serving in the Archdiocese of Toronto and charged him with sexual assault of a minor. The archdiocese said

Peel Regional Police charged Fr James Cherickal with one count of sexual assault and one count of sexual interference. The 60-year-old Syro-Malabar priest from Kerala has served in other parishes of the archdiocese over three decades.

## Archbishop apologises

Archbishop Gregory Aymond of **New Orleans** issued a public apology to survivors who say they were abused as children by someone connected to the Catholic Church. Beginning on 4 January, his letter of apology was published in newspapers across Louisiana as part of the archdiocese's bankruptcy settlement. Aymond expressed "profound regret over the tragic and inexcusable harm" survivors suffered.

Governor Jenniffer González-Colón signed a law changing **Puerto Rico's** civil code to recognise a foetus "at any stage of gestation within the mother's womb" as a "natural person". Abortion is legal in Puerto Rico to preserve the health of the mother. Under the new law, the rights of the unborn child "do not lessen the power of the pregnant woman to decide about her pregnancy in accordance with the law".

**Nicaragua** has banned tourists from bringing Bibles into the country, according to the UK advocacy group Christian Solidarity Worldwide. It reported that notices at bus terminals in Costa Rica with routes to Managua say journals, cameras and books, including the Bible, are banned.

Sources in the **Spanish** bishops' conference said Pope Leo may visit Spain in June. Conference president Archbishop Luis Argüello of Valladolid was to meet with Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin on 9 January, reportedly to discuss the visit, which would be the first by a pope since Benedict XVI attended the 2011 World Youth Day in Madrid.

Compiled by **Patrick Hudson, Ellen Teague, Bess Twiston Davies, Dickson Adeyanju and Rita Joseph.**





“Your compassion was a lifeline. Your prayers strengthened captives and their families. You ensured the world did not look away.”

Sr Mary T. Barron OLA, offering thanks for the return of children kidnapped from her congregation's school in Nigeria in December.

VATICAN / Leo says the Good Shepherd will still welcome all those who are weary

## Pope closes Holy Door, ending the 2025 Jubilee Year of Hope

PATRICK HUDSON

**POPE LEO** closed the Holy Door at St Peter's on the Feast of the Epiphany to end the 2025 Jubilee Year of Hope.

Before Mass in the basilica, Leo conducted the rite to close the door, “confident that the Good Shepherd will ever keep open the door of his heart to welcome us whenever we are weary or burdened”. In his homily, Leo said the door “has seen a stream of innumerable men and women, pilgrims of hope, journeying towards a new Jerusalem, the city whose doors are always open”.

Such people offer an example of spiritual searching “much richer perhaps than we can comprehend”, he said, and the cathedrals and shrines they visit “must diffuse the aroma of life, the unforgettable realisation that another world has begun”.

“Let us ask ourselves: is there life in our Church? Is there space for something new to be born? Do we love and proclaim a God who sets us on a journey?”

He continued: “The Jubilee reminds us that we can start



Pope Leo brings an end to the 2025 Jubilee Year of Hope

anew, indeed, that we are still at the beginning and the Lord wants his presence to grow among us as God-with-us. Yes, God challenges the existing order, for he has plans that inspire his prophets even today. God is determined to rescue us from both old and new forms of slavery.”

The Jubilee, Leo said, should teach Christians to abandon “a distorted economy that tries to profit from everything”, instead “to recognise a pilgrim in the

visitor, a seeker in the stranger, a neighbour in the foreigner, and fellow travellers in those who are different”. “If we do not reduce our churches to monuments, if our communities are homes, if we stand united and resist the flattery and seduction of those in power, then we will be the generation of a new dawn,” he said.

The Vatican said 33,475,369 pilgrims from 185 countries visited Rome during the year, exceeding a previous projection of 31 million. Of these, 62 per cent came from Europe and 17 per cent from North America.

Archbishop Rino Fisichella, pro-prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelisation responsible for organising Jubilee events, said the city's other pilgrimage sites reported “unprecedented attendance”. Presenting the figures on Monday, he insisted that the visitors were not tourists but a people with “a great desire for prayer and conversion”.

That evening, more than 5,000 volunteers who assisted Jubilee pilgrims at St Peter's made the final passage through the Door before it closed next morning.

## Israel bans humanitarian organisations from Gaza

ELLEN TEAGUE

**CARITAS** Internationalis and Caritas Jerusalem are among dozens of humanitarian organisations that Israel has banned from operating in Gaza.

The Israeli authorities announced last week that 37 international aid organisations would be barred from the territory from 1 March.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk described the move as “shameful”, while the UN and the European Union warned it would deprive Gaza residents of vital aid, particularly food. Gaza's Ministry of Health has recorded 455 deaths caused by malnutrition since October 2023, including 151 children.

Last March, Israel set a 10-month deadline for non-governmental organisations to meet new requirements, which mandate the complete disclosure of staff, funding and operational structures. It said this was necessary to expose any links to terrorist organisations.

A spokesman of the Latin Patriarchate said that Caritas Jerusalem is “a humanitarian and development organisation operating under the umbrella and governance of the Assembly of the Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land”. He said Caritas Jerusalem has not “undertaken any re-registration process with the Israeli authorities” and Caritas Internationalis does not make “any direct interventions within the country”. “Caritas Jerusalem will continue its ... operations in Gaza, the West Bank and Jerusalem, in accordance with its mandate,” he said.

The Israeli measures mean organisations cannot bring aid into Gaza but may operate with supplies already in the territory.

## Photographic record captures mystery of lofts of cathedrals

TOM HENEGHAN

**EIGHT** photographers recorded the variety of wood, brick, metal and reinforced concrete that supports the roofs of France's biggest churches, in images published in a new book.

*Sous les toits des cathédrales* (“Under Cathedral Roofs”), issued by the National Monuments Centre, shows everything from hewn wooden beams dating back to the Middle Ages to ribs of inflammable materials installed

in the last two centuries. The initiative followed the French state's decision to fireproof the lofts of the 89 religious buildings – mostly cathedrals – that it owns under *laïcité* laws, after the 2019 fire at Notre-Dame de Paris burned through its medieval “forest” of roof supports. The fireproofing will interrupt the long perspectives the lofts once offered visitors.

“This photographic survey is to preserve the memory of a heritage that will never be seen again,” Isabelle Chave, a Ministry of

Culture official leading the project, told *La Croix*.

One photographer described cathedral lofts, some resembling inverted ship hulls, as places “difficult to access, plunged into twilight, somewhat hidden, [exuding] the same mystery as caves”.

Some cathedrals hit by fire or destroyed in the world wars were rebuilt with stone or steel to hold up the roofs, but the Notre-Dame restoration completely reconstructed its wooden “forest”.

Only 59 cathedrals have a fire detection system, *La Croix* reported. Many of the thousands of parish churches in France, which belong to their localities, cannot afford such precautions.

VENEZUELA / Pope demands respect for international law

# US attack a 'cause for deep concern'

BESS TWISTON DAVIES  
and FRANCIS McDONAGH

**THE UNITED STATES'** attack on Venezuela is a cause for "deep concern", the Pope said, demanding respect for international law.

"The good of the beloved Venezuelan people must prevail over every other consideration," Pope Leo said after the Angelus on Sunday, the day after US special forces captured President Nicolás Maduro and his wife in an attack on Caracas.

Leo called on all parties to pursue "paths of justice and peace, guaranteeing the sovereignty of the country, ensuring the rule of law enshrined in its constitution, respecting the human and civil rights of each and every person and working together to build a peaceful future of cooperation, stability and harmony".

Speaking after the attack last Saturday, US President Donald Trump said that with Maduro in

custody, "we will run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition", stating that the vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, had agreed to cooperate.

Maduro was taken to New York, where he and his wife Cilia Flores appeared in court on Monday to face narco-terrorism charges. "I am not guilty. I am a decent man, the president of my country," he said. As he was led out of the courtroom, Maduro told an onlooker, "I am a man of God" and "I am a prisoner of war".

The Venezuelan bishops' conference issued a message "rejecting any type of violence" and asked that "the decisions that are taken be carried out for the wellbeing of our people".

The Bolivian bishops' conference sent a letter offering "its prayer, its fraternal closeness and its solidarity in the face of the very sensitive social situation of the Venezuelan people, aggravated



US military helicopters seen over Caracas at the start of the raid

by recent events related to the arrest of their nation's president".

Pax Christi International called the attack "a direct threat to the foundations of sovereign co-existence among states".

Relations between the US and Venezuela have deteriorated dramatically in recent months, with Washington deploying forces in the Caribbean and ordering strikes on vessels it claimed were smuggling drugs from Venezuela.

In its Christmas message, the Venezuelan bishops' conference had said that its people were "overshadowed by ... warlike actions near our coasts with regrettable loss of life [and] the presence of a foreign military power in the international waters

of the Caribbean". It condemned a "political dynamics where freedom is removed from citizens ... who think differently".

"The populace is subject to widespread impoverishment, there is galloping inflation, the economy is disintegrating, our natural resources are being confiscated, new economic sanctions are being imposed," it said.

Following the Pope's comments at the Angelus, US ambassador to the Holy See Brian Burch said Leo had "emphasised the need to work together to build a future for the Venezuelan people based on cooperation, stability and harmony ... Thanks to President Trump's decisive leadership, Maduro will now face justice."

## End political dynasties, says cardinal

PATERNO R. ESMAQUEL II

**CARDINAL** Pablo Virgilio David has condemned political dynasties and called on Filipino lawmakers to act against them.

David, the Bishop of Kalookan, in a homily for the Feast of the

Holy Family on 28 December, compared political dynasties to "Herod's household", contrasting them with the selfless household of Joseph in Nazareth.

"There are families that turn politics into business and pass it on as an inheritance, families that turn power into entitlement, and public office into private property," said David.

In the Philippines, many political dynasties – with power passed down through a family's generations – have ruled towns, cities and provinces for decades.

Studies say this has contributed to corruption and persistent poverty in the country.

"Political dynasties, too, are families," David said. "They protect their turf. They keep power within the clan. And like Herod's household, they often collapse from within – siblings against siblings, parents against children, spouses against spouses – once fear and insecurity take over."

The cardinal said that when a family like Herod's dominates a country, "it slowly destroys the

nation as well". Law makers should heed "a clear majority of Filipinos" who want to end political dynasties. A recent Pulse Asia survey found that 54 per cent of Filipinos want Congress "immediately [to] pass a law banning political dynasties".

"To our dear Philippine legislators: You have been elected and are being paid by the Filipino people to be their 'representatives,'" said David. "Whose interests do you represent? And why should you remain in office if you no longer represent their interests?"

## 'Affirm dignity of migrants'

**CATHOLIC BISHOPS** in Kentucky and Wyoming have issued statements affirming the human dignity of migrants as the Trump administration continued its mass deportation policy into the

New Year, writes Brian Fraga.

"Nations have a right and responsibility to control their borders and to enforce laws meant to protect the population, but all laws must be enforced in a just and predictable manner that respects the God-given dignity of each human person," said the Kentucky statement, published on 4 January when the US Church celebrates the

Feast of the Epiphany. It followed a similar statement issued on 18 December by the bishops of Wisconsin, who said that while immigration is a "profoundly complex issue", there is also "no inherent contradiction in upholding human dignity, the common good and the rule of law".

On 23 December, Bishop Earl Fernandes of Columbus, Ohio, lifted

the Sunday obligation for those in his diocese who fear deportation. The Diocese of San Diego is set to open the Pope Francis Centre to support migrant communities. In Florida, Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami said Mass on Christmas Day for immigrants detained at the Krome Detention Centre and Everglades Detention Facility, known as "Alligator Alcatraz".



## SWITZERLAND

# Mass for victims of ski resort fire

**BISHOP** Jean-Marie Lovey of Sion said a Requiem Mass for the victims of the fatal New Year's Eve fire at a bar in the Swiss ski resort of Crans-Montana, *writes Natalie K. Watson*. Police have identified the 40 who died, among whom were 20 minors, and 116 injured.

The Mass on Sunday morning in the Saint-Christophe chapel in Crans, in the canton of Valais, was broadcast live on national television before a procession to the site of the disaster, where mourners laid flowers.

Church bells rang throughout the Diocese of Sion on 2 January. Churches in Switzerland, Italy and elsewhere offered their condolences.

The Vatican said Pope Leo mourned with the families and “asks the Lord to welcome the dead into his dwelling place of peace and light and to strengthen the courage of those who suffer”. Speaking after the Angelus on Sunday, Pope Leo said he wished “to express once again my closeness to those suffering as a result of the tragedy” and “to assure them of my prayers for the young people who died, for the injured and for their families”.

## SOUTH AFRICA

# Priest in hiding over death threat

**A SOUTH AFRICAN** priest went into hiding after he received death threats from parishioners, *writes Marko Phiri*.

Local reports said Fr Nkosinathi Ngcobo, based in the coastal city of Durban, received the threat in a letter delivered by an altar server last month.

Bishop Kwenzakufani Zondi, an auxiliary of the Archdiocese of Durban, confirmed the priest's departure.

“Yes, Fr Ngcobo is not at the parish at the moment. He left due to internal problems within the parish,” he said.

“I am aware of the issues surrounding Fr Ngcobo. It became clear that there were some parish members who did not like him. This is not unusual in our line of work – not everyone will like you.”

The priest's flight came weeks after the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference raised concerns about the “normalisation of violence in educational spaces”, following reports of escalating murder cases within school premises. South Africa's murder rate is 95 per cent higher than the average for G20 countries.

# VIEW FROM ROME

Patrick Hudson



**I T WAS HARD** not to feel a bit down at the end of the Jubilee. Besides the natural end-of-the-party melancholy, the rain kept everybody indoors.

After Pope Francis opened the Holy Door in St Peter's for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in 2015, he welcomed a beaming Benedict as its first pilgrim, making a beautiful merit of their peculiar relationship; this week, the solitary Leo kneeling at the door Francis opened from his wheelchair last Christmas expressed something of 2025, another moment defined by two popes.

The archpriest in each of Rome's basilicas rehearsed the same message as they closed their Holy Doors, starting with Cardinal Rolandas Makrickas at St Mary Major on Christmas Eve: “What is being closed is not divine grace, but a special time for the Church, while what remains open forever is the heart of merciful God.” Leo made the same point, explaining that those who passed through the door at St Peter's were journeying towards “the city whose doors are always open”.

That special time is a glimpse of God's eternal present, and closing the door is itself an expression of hope: recognising human limits that don't apply in the Kingdom. Like the death of one pope and the election of another, we can be happy because we are sad.

Ruminating on such contrariwise truth lacks the fizz of jubilee, and the grim January weather has heralded too many grisly reminders of how worldly the world is. Leo's plea for a “year of peace” in 2026 was always going to be a big ask, but the bizarre US assault on Venezuela almost seemed a mockery. How can the Church referee grotesques like Donald Trump and Nicolás Maduro?

The Pope's defence of Venezuelan sovereignty at the Sunday Angelus was just the surface of Vatican manoeuvring around the Chavista regime. At the Secretariat of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin is a former nuncio to Caracas while the *sostituto* Archbishop Edgar Peña Parra is himself Venezuelan, turning diplomatic complexities into sensitivities. Meanwhile, Cardinal Baltazar Porras could not attend the extraordinary consistory in Rome this week because the Venezuelan authorities confiscated his passport in December.

A Vatican blurb in December said the consistory called for 7-8 January was “aimed at fostering a common discernment and offering support and counsel to the Holy Father”. The cardinals who gathered in St Peter's on Epiphany might have hoped for a retreat-like conclave-manqué, but the Jubilee is over and the world is breaking in – as if it wasn't

there already. It's enough to get you down, but at least it was due to stop raining.

**T HE JUBILEE** was, in strictly logistical terms, judged a success. The Dicastery for Evangelisation said an extremely precise 33,475,369 pilgrims had attended its events in Rome, exceeding expectations despite Pope Francis' illness and death stopping many from taking place in the first half of the year. Archbishop Rino Fisichella explained the methodology to establish which pilgrims attended multiple events or visited several basilicas on one trip, though I can't pretend I understood it.

He was speaking at a press conference alongside a panel of officials from national and local government discussing the *metodo Giubileo* of cooperation between agencies, starting with the long-planned renovations to city monuments and infrastructure and running up to the last pilgrimage through the Holy Door. The Mayor of Rome Roberto Gualtieri declared that the millions of pilgrims “had not removed any of Rome's capacity to welcome tourists or to offer services to its citizens”.

Roman taxi drivers and shopkeepers will tell you a different story: the Jubilee did not bring the bounce in trade they were hoping for. As for the city's services, we might weigh the mayor's comments against those of Cardinal Baldassare Reina at the closing of the Holy Door in St John Lateran, Rome's own cathedral, on 27 December. He told a congregation including Gualtieri it was “a city where many have lost hope”.

After the press conference, standing in the splendidly restored Piazza Pia and watching a fridge float down the flooded Tiber, I thought they both might have a point.

**W HILE THE** dog-end of a Jubilee isn't specified in the liturgical calendar, the days between New Year and Epiphany had that flavour. My wife and I joined a pilgrim group at the bottom of the Via della Conciliazione on 1 January, when the mood was urgency mixed with bemusement: everyone there either wanted their plenary indulgence sharpish or thought this was a way to skip the queue into the basilica.

The lime-green-jacketed volunteers gave the pilgrim cross to a tired-looking Filipino gentleman who almost sprinted up the road to the Holy Door. A few of us mumbled the prayers to ourselves as we jogged behind before we stumbled past the brass panels into the offensive vastness of St Peter's. Spiritually enriching? Not a bit. But I'm still missing the Jubilee.

# NEWS BRIEFING

FROM BRITAIN AND IRELAND

## Pupils feed homeless at Xmas

Pupils at St Gregory's Catholic primary school in Coventry prepared **hot meals for the homeless** over Christmas. Guided by the school's catering team, pupils from years five and six prepared vegetable soup, those in years three and four baked sausage rolls, and students in years one and two made chocolate crispy cakes.

Peter Ho and Anthony Reilly, two seminarians for the Diocese of East Anglia, were **ordained to the diaconate** by Archbishop of Birmingham Bernard Longley at St Mary's College, Oscott, on 20 December.

A course to teach people **Gregorian chant** begins today in St John's Cathedral, Portsmouth. "Embrace the Timeless Art of Chanting" will include teaching of vocal techniques and interpretative skills as well as the historical context for Gregorian Chant. Led by professional music director and chant teacher Dominic Bevan, the teaching panel also includes Abbot Xavier Perrin OSB of Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight and Fr Matthew Jarvis OP, the prior of St Dominic's Priory, London.

Green Christian, an ecumenical environmental organisation, has recommended **"veganuary"** – an initiative that encourages people to try eat a vegan diet for January and beyond. Veganuary encourages moving to a plant-based food as a way of protecting the environment, preventing animal suffering and improving health.

MARIA HEATH



A new "home-grown community" has opened in the Diocese of Northampton. An initiative of Mission Northampton, an office in the Diocese of Northampton, the St Elena House of Mission and Prayer is a response to the Church's call to become mission-orientated, where single people share a house and dedicate significant time to mission and prayer. With two people living in the new mission house and another due to join, Northampton's director of mission Maria Heath told *The Tablet* the community will focus on "establishing 24/7 prayer", as well as "providing a safe and welcoming space for people who are unchurched but are interested in exploring faith". (Pictured: episcopal vicar for mission Canon Simon Penhalagan with members of the new St Elena House of Mission and Prayer.)

St Vincent's Centre, Newcastle, has received a "City of Sanctuary" award recognising the centre as a safe place for those **seeking refuge**. The community centre run by the St Vincent de Paul Society provides free, nutritious three-course lunches every Tuesday to more than 150 people.

## Scots push on with Children Bill

The Scottish Parliament will continue to debate proposed

legislation that has been criticised by the Church in Scotland for making a distinction between **religious education** and religious observance. The Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill proposes that schools be required to consider the views of pupils when parents ask for their children to be withdrawn from religious

observance or religious and moral education.

**Fr Simon Bishop SJ** died on Sunday at the age of 58, in his thirty-third year of religious life. Jesuits in Britain said: "Simon touched the lives of many through his ministry as chaplain, director of spirituality, vocations promoter, and novice master. We give thanks for his generous life and ministry, and we pray for the repose of his soul and for the consolation of his family, friends, and all who knew him." Fr Bishop was born in Tanzania on 28 March 1967 and spent part of his early childhood in Fiji. He was educated at Stonyhurst College and read theology at the University of Cambridge.

The co-founder of Social Justice Ireland, **Sr Brigid Reynolds**, has died. She set up the organisation with Dr Seán Healy SMA in 2009 and they led it until their retirement in 2023. Chief executive John McGeady said: "Brigid made an indelible mark on social justice advocacy in Ireland. Guided by a vision of society in which each person's dignity is honoured, Brigid was dedicated to addressing inequality, poverty, and social exclusion." Born and raised on a farm near Mohill, Co. Leitrim, Sr Brigid was educated with the Marist Sisters in Carrick-on-Shannon and graduated with a science degree from University College Dublin.

Compiled by **Ruth Gledhill, Bess Twiston Davies, Ellen Teague, Aili Winstanley Channer and Andy Drozdziak.**

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We have a number of Catholic schools throughout the UK who are on a waiting list for a copy of *The Tablet* and its associated back archive dating back to 1840. If you would like to sponsor a copy of *The Tablet* for a school or to find out more about *The Tablet* schools campaign which aims to ensure every Catholic School has access to *The Tablet* and its archive, then please email Amanda Davison-Young on: [adyoung@thetablet.co.uk](mailto:adyoung@thetablet.co.uk)

"Educating is an act of love, it is like giving life"  
Pope Francis





PERSON IN  
THE NEWS

**Fr Tony Flannery**, in *The Irish Times*, on celibacy: "It would be wonderful if the leadership of the Irish Church began by inviting men who left the priesthood due to the celibacy rule to come back to ministry."

**BIRMINGHAM** / Liturgy commission aims to encourage prayers and pilgrimages

## Archdiocese seeks resources on its saints to add to supplement

BESS TWISTON DAVIES

**THE ARCHDIOCESE** of Birmingham has appealed to schools and parishes for resources they possess on local saints in a drive to foster prayer for their intercession and encourage pilgrimages.

"Although there is great devotion to the saints and blessed among many in the archdiocese, others know much less about them," said Fr Allen Morris, a member of the archdiocesan liturgy commission and parish priest at St Nicholas, Sutton Coldfield.

He discovered this while co-ordinating a light revision of the Diocesan Supplement – the set of prayer texts and Mass or other liturgical readings used for celebrations featured in the Diocesan Liturgical Calendar.

Fr Morris said the archdiocese has additional plans to produce

material on local saints for individual use and by parishes. A guide list published on the archdiocesan website names St John Henry Newman, St Edmund Campion, St Richard of Chichester and lesser-known saints like St Agnellus of Oxford and the Martyrs of Warwick.

Any information sent to the archdiocese by schools or parishes will not appear printed in the supplement, but as additional resources which expand "on the information that will be provided in the supplement, and offering guides and so on to encourage pilgrimage to places associated with the saints and blessed," said Fr Morris.

He specified that the "use of the supplement" would help foster devotion to local saints, "through the domestic, personal, parish and community prayer that the supplement itself is there to resource".

The revision of the supplement is to bring the archdiocesan texts in line with those in the edition of the Missal and Lectionary approved for use in England and Wales.

"The principal innovation planned is to include proper Second Readings for the Office of Readings for each celebration," said Fr Morris.

None of the updated material, which includes a revision of the liturgical calendar approved by Archbishop Bernard Longley of Birmingham, may be used until approved by the Vatican.

Fr Morris told *The Tablet*: "Work is presently in hand to submit the proposals to the Dicastery for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments for recognition. This is likely to take place before the beginning of Lent this year."

*To share information on saints with the archdiocese, please email fr.allen.morris@rcaob.org.uk*

## Upbeat fundraising forecasts

AILI WINSTANLEY CHANNER

**CATHOLICS** in Fundraising, the UK's leading network for Catholics engaged in this work, predicts that new leadership in the Church is creating a new impetus, making 2026 a year of "opportunity and renewal" for Catholic charities, schools and parishes. The Catholic Generosity Report for the first time will benchmark charities based on their collective impact. The report will be released at a conference in June at St George's Cathedral, Southwark.

Catholics in Fundraising said: "2026 marks a historic moment for the Church: a new Pope, a new Archbishop of Westminster and most British episcopal sees filled. Leo's first encyclical, *Dilexi te*, illustrates his likely emphasis on the just application of wealth."

The apostolic exhortation *Dilexi te* on "Love for the Poor", published in October 2025, raises concern at the increase in wealth inequality and encourages Christian works of charity.

Catholics in Fundraising also suggested that Archbishop-elect Richard Moth, as the new president of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, informed by his experience as chair of the department for social justice, will bring a new focus on church charities and their role in evangelisation.

They predicted that the growth of the global economy forecast for 2026 means that there is an opportunity for international fundraising and cultivating relationships with overseas donors, especially in the US, where there is strong Catholic philanthropy.

The UK fundraising environment remains challenging, due to cost-of-living pressures continuing to limit individuals' ability to donate. However, legacy-giving will remain strong.

## Dublin models sustainable funding plan

**NEW INITIATIVES** are being developed in the Archdiocese of Dublin to ensure its funding model "is sustainable into the future", Archbishop Dermot Farrell has told *The Tablet*, writes Sarah Mac Donald.

In its 2024 financial report, the largest diocese in the Irish Church reported a deficit of €3.2 million (£2.77m).

The total parish income for that period was €31m (£26.8m), down from €31.1m (£26.9m) in 2023, while expenditure amounted to €34.2m (£29.6m).

Collections in support of the priests of the diocese were €14.1m (£12.2m), down from €14.3m (£12.3m), while the share collection amounted to €5.7m (£4.9m), up from €5.6m (£4.8m).

Speaking to *The Tablet* about the financial challenges Dublin faces, Archbishop Farrell said measures to



manage the diocese's cost base are being considered which will "primarily" look at building requirements into the future.

"A significant portion of parish buildings are listed by local authorities as protected and these buildings are especially expensive to maintain," he said. Dublin is currently implementing Building

Hope, the pastoral strategic planning initiative of the diocese, to address declining priest numbers and diocesan finances.

The 361 priests are mainly elderly and there have been just two ordinations since 2020.

Dublin's 195 parishes have been grouped into 53 partnerships, which will see a greater sharing of resources and priests while enabling more members of the laity to become involved as volunteers and in paid lay ministry roles.

The number of staff employed centrally by Dublin Diocese was 44 in 2024, an increase of three on the previous year, at a cost €2.8m (£2.4m), up from €2.6m (£2.2m) in 2023. "Parishes actively encourage volunteers to participate, but it is also anticipated that the number of paid pastoral roles will increase," Archbishop Farrell said.

DUBLIN / Messages on World Day of Peace follow Pope's lead on meaning of faith

# Build trust, hope and fraternity

AILI WINSTANLEY CHANNER

"ENDURING peace is born of compassion and respect; it is born of patience, of attention to the other, of the conviction that the one who presents themselves as different, as other, is actually like oneself, is a true sister or brother of mine," said Archbishop of Dublin Dermot Farrell at Mass for the World Day of Peace on 1 January.

Archbishop Farrell celebrated at Newtownpark Avenue Church in Dublin with apostolic nuncio Archbishop Luis Mariano Montemayor and Archbishop Emeritus Diarmuid Martin as concelebrants.

Archbishop Farrell said that this patient process of building trust and the recognition of fraternity across differences "is what our faith means when we say peace is born of hope", referring to Pope Leo XIV's message for the World Day of Peace. Leo said that peace can arise from "every spiritual, cultural and political initiative that keeps hope alive".

He paid tribute to the role of the commitment of ordinary people to "compassion and respect for the other" in building peace in Northern Ireland: "There is no enduring peace without the commitment of ordinary people."

"In the words of Pope Leo, we are to 'foster a civic culture that promotes self-awareness in civil



Archbishops Farrell, left, and Martin talk to attendees at the Mass

societies, forms of responsible association, experiences of non-violent participation and practices of restorative justice on both a small and large scale."

Archbishop Farrell said that, while "good leadership is vital", we also need "to take to heart that good leaders bring people with them". He compared the process of building peace across all levels of society to "our response to the climate crisis", where alongside governments' "critical" role, "the contribution of every single person is important".

Archbishop of Armagh Eamon Martin also celebrated a Mass for the World Day of Peace. He quoted Pope Leo, who said, "It has become increasingly common to drag the language of faith into

political battles, to bless nationalism and to justify violence and armed struggle in the name of religion. Believers must refute, above all by the witness of their lives, these forms of blasphemy that profane the holy name of God."

Archbishop Martin said: "Like Pope Leo, I am hopeful that even amid what the late Pope Francis called 'a Third World War fought piecemeal', peacemakers can continue to resist the spread of darkness, standing as sentinels in the night."

"My wish on this World Day of Peace is that Christians everywhere, who regularly exchange the sign of the peace of Christ, will be active peace ambassadors in the Church and in the world."

## Pax Christi resource pack distributed

WITH THE support of the bishops' conference of England and Wales, nearly 1,400 parishes in 10 dioceses have been sent the Peace Sunday resource pack and Pax Christi hopes to distribute 20,000 of its new Peace Sunday prayer cards, writes Ellen Teague.

The Archdiocese of Liverpool's Justice and Peace Commission has organised this year's Peace Sunday Memorial Lecture at 2 p.m. on 18 January at St Vincent de Paul Parish in central Liverpool. In light of Pope Leo XIV's recent World Peace Day Message, Dr Joanna Frew will speak on "Towards an 'Unarmed and Disarming Peace': Seeking Sustainable Security for an Unstable World."

This year's crib offerings in the archdiocese will be sent to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem to support Christian communities in Israel and Palestine.

St George's Cathedral Southwark, where Pat Gaffney will speak at the 10 a.m. Family Mass, will mark the day with Pax Christi prayer cards and other resources distributed to the congregation. St Mellitus, at Tollington Park, will hold an appeal and second collection for Pax Christi and use the Pax Christi prayer as part of the bidding prayers.

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## St Scholastica's Retreat



### Job Opportunity:

### Warden at St Scholastica's Retreat, Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire

Following the retirement of our Warden, the Trustees of St Scholastica's Retreat are looking for an enthusiastic, energetic, caring and experienced person to deliver a range of services to the residents and Board of Management of St Scholastica's Retreat, an almshouse charity providing 36 self-contained residential units for Roman Catholics in financial need who are over the age of 60 years. We are located in the town of Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire.

As Warden, you will play a key role in the day-to-day management of the charity as it plans to expand over the next few years. Day-to-day duties will include assisting the Trustees in fulfilling the charitable and spiritual aims of the Trust: in particular, 'to support elderly Catholics to live independently within the community of St Scholastica's Retreat'. To this end, to act as manager and administrator of St Scholastica's Retreat. As Clerk to the Trustees, to assist the Trustees in strategic planning for the Trust and for St Scholastica's Retreat.

Previous experience of working in the charity sector would be an advantage. The role offers a competitive salary, pension, holiday entitlement and accommodation on-site in a three bedroom house.

Further details and job description can be found at  
[www.stscholasticaretreat.org.uk/warden-vacancy](http://www.stscholasticaretreat.org.uk/warden-vacancy)  
Applications close 9 Feb.

# How nice is rice?

ROSE PRINCE

**R**ICE, SPICES AND butter are the ingredients for kitchari, an Indian dish that can trace its origins back to the fourteenth century, but in the age of the Raj smoked fish and boiled eggs were added to the mix, and the dish was renamed kedgeree. The wrongs and rights of imperialism may still be contested but no one disputes the benefits for the British palate. Our kitchens would be duller and less exciting places had the returning colonialists not brought back with them their own versions of curries, chutneys and breads.

The unifying ingredient is – of course – rice. The British have been eating rice regularly since the fifteenth century, mainly as a sweet pudding. A luxury for us, in India rice is a necessity. Indians go to work on rice; we often play with it, using it in more frivolous dishes. Kedgeree fits into the frivolous category. Upper- and middle-class Victorians served it for breakfast. I remember going to old-fashioned parties in my late teens and there would be a midnight “breakfast” after the dancing was over, with piles of kedgeree on offer to soak up the alcohol before the journey home.

I do not have great memories of this stodgy “kedg”. But take kedgeree back to its roots and there is something truly elegant to enjoy. A few years ago, Cricket, a fashionable Soho restaurant, began serving a modern version of kitchari with added haddock and soft boiled egg: it’s still on the breakfast menu. It opened my



**There would be a midnight ‘breakfast’ after the dancing was over, with piles of kedgeree on offer**

eyes to the cheerful possibilities of combining authentic Indian rice cooking with creative British interpretation. Undyed haddock is best, or use smoked hake, hot smoked salmon or kippers.

**KITCHARI WITH SMOKED HADDOCK, SOFT BOILED EGGS AND CHUTNEY**  
SERVES 4-6

**750g** boneless undyed smoked haddock  
**500ml** whole milk  
**300g** rice  
**600ml** water  
**6** soft boiled eggs (5 minutes from when the water boils)

**150g** butter  
**1** onion, finely diced  
**1 tbsp** grated fresh ginger  
**4** small shallots – sliced  
**300ml** whipping cream  
**2-4 tsp** ground garam masala spice mix

**For the fresh green chutney:** blend together **4 tbsp** thick yoghurt, **1** chopped green chilli (no seeds), **a small bunch** of coriander and mint, **1 tsp** cumin seeds, **1** garlic clove, **½ tsp** salt.

**Preheat the oven to 180C, put the fish in an oven-proof dish then cover with the milk. Bake in the oven until the fish is just cooked – about 15 minutes. Turn off the oven. Strain the milk into a jug then separate the fish flakes from the skin, removing any bones.**

**Put the rice in a pan and cover with the water. Bring to the boil then simmer for five minutes, cover and simmer for another five minutes then take off the heat and leave for five minutes with the lid on. Spread the rice on to a serving dish, add the fish, cover with foil and put in the warm oven.**

**Peel and halve the eggs. Fry the onion in the butter for 10 minutes, add the spices, ginger and shallot then add the cream. Bring to the boil. Pour the spiced cream over the rice and fish then mix carefully. If it is too dry, add milk.**

**Put the egg halves on top then serve with the green chutney.**

## Glimpses of Eden

JONATHAN TULLOCH

**STARLINGS AREN'T** early risers. I know because a few are lodging in our eaves, and they're still ensconced there at 9.30 a.m. when I drag myself to my desk. For another half-hour or so I'll hear them preparing for the winter day by whistling, clicking beaks, and flapping wings. Once they've left the house, though, they work hard. Joining the other village starlings, they toil all day in the fields – you can see them at it.

Vibrotactile feet allow them to detect tiny vibrations in the ground, so they spend a lot of time walking around, searching for the



movements of worms or leatherjackets. Once the presence of food is detected, their specially designed beaks come into play. Long and sharp, they're ideal for probing

mud, while specialist nerve endings can find and grip prey. In the dead of winter, all this field work is finished by around three o'clock, at which time our starlings return.

For the next few hours, these most remarkable of all birds will practise their singing. This is the time I really love. Great mimics, starlings' songs are improvisations on what they hear. Pen and paper to hand, I note down what I recognise: curlews, oystercatchers, owls, thrushes, sparrows, shouts from the football field, delivery van reversing tones, myself sneezing ...

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