

NJPN North West Justice & Peace E-Bulletin December 2023

The e-bulletin for the North West, linked to the National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN), is produced jointly within the dioceses of Lancaster, Liverpool, Salford, Shrewsbury and Wrexham. Please send diary dates to anneoc980@hotmail.com

IMMIGRATION OR INEQUALITY?

30/11/2023 Ian Linden writes: The manipulation of public anxiety about immigration has become an important element in Party politics here in Britain. With the economy flat-lining, against a background of a million job vacancies, debilitating understaffing in the NHS and social care, hostility to immigration seems odd. But at a time of economic distress, an appeal to xenophobia, subtle or open, and the stoking of anger against urban elites, (sometimes merited) brings approval and votes - as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands has recently demonstrated.

Anti-immigration rhetoric offers a scapegoat for a plethora of ills including the failure of governments to provide hope, justice and a sense of wellbeing for their citizens. From an America further divided by Trump to Orban's authoritarian Hungary democracy looks in bad shape. The reasons are varied, the problems seemingly intractable but, as Donald Tusk's electoral victory in Poland over the Law & Justice Party (PiS) showed, the direction of travel is not always towards far-right extremism ((Denis McShane 'Geert Wilders: far-Right bogeyman or old Dutch cheese' 25 November 2023). And, yes, the far-Right can soften its position once in power.

Worldwide, political Parties believe that if they are to have a reasonable hope of electoral success they must promise to control immigration. In Britain the fear of 'them' taking our jobs, our housing, places in our schools, is an understandable consequence of growing impoverishment and the accelerating erosion of the welfare state with its universal public services. Voters' number one priority according to UK opinion polls is the cost of living. For growing numbers in the lowest income decile in the UK, the sixth largest economy in the world, this means the lack of basic material necessities, not being able to make ends meet. Some 4.2 million British children are growing up in poverty.

Peter Mandelson, Gordon Brown's Business Secretary, speaking in 1998, was "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich - as long as they paid their taxes". By 2012 he had retracted these sentiments and was worried about rising inequality and failure to increase middle class disposable incomes. By 2021, the top decile in the UK owned almost half our national wealth. The bottom decile received c. 3%. Or put even more starkly, the richest 1% of the population were worth £2.8 trillion, more than the £2.4 trillion owned by 70%, some 48 million people.

Mandelson warned against "business and bank bashing" yet banks make themselves targets. Money tucked away in tax havens is measured in billions while investment in the UK continues to stagnate and investment bankers get richer alongside the CEOs of public companies. The EU cap on bankers' bonuses has been scrapped by the Government. The salaries of CEOs in energy companies, and their shareholder dividends, are eye-watering while their customers struggle with bills.

You will not find the word 'inequality' in Chancellor Jeremy Hunt's recent Autumn Statement. Nor did he quote the words of King Lear "So distribution should undo excess, and each man have enough". Hunt's 'levelling up' measures mean an aspiration to equalise growth around the country; our geographical inequality is the worst in the OECD. His updating of benefits by 10% leaves them at the lowest level since 1990. He does mention 'poverty' but close to the end of his speech and then only in the context of measures 'to get people back to work'.

Britain has become one of the most unequal societies in Europe, more unequal than Romania and Latvia according to the EU inequality index. Does it matter? Yes. In a new Cost of Inequality Report, the Equality Trust, a public policy think-tank, asserts that such a level of inequality "has made the UK more unhealthy, unhappy and unsafe than our more equal peers" and puts its economic cost at over £100 billion.

The sense of injustice, of being ignored and looked down upon, can result in voters directing the contempt to which they feel subjected towards a political entity variously described as 'the swamp' 'the blob' 'the chattering classes' 'the metropolitan elite', and voting for the Party that best seems to express their anger.

How else to explain voters' enthusiasm for clever and dangerous, sometimes libertarian, clowns unsuited for high office who play the populist cards of immigration, Islamophobia, wresting control from the contemptuous elites: Wilders in Netherlands, Trump in the USA, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Milei in Argentina, Duterte in Philippines, Meloni in Italy, Braverman in UK. All march onto the political stage to the drumbeat of a dangerous form of nationalism.

The Indian academic Pankaj Mishra traces these developments back to the Enlightenment which he sees as creating the myth and expectation of progress. His *Age of Anger: A history of the Present*, Penguin 2017, tracks what he terms resentment, an amalgam of anger and resentment created by socio-economic structures experienced by people treated as 'superfluous'. The invention of the microchip in 1971 opened a new era in the history of resentment. The revolution in communications technology and social media, its virtual solidarities, have enabled both the spread and intensification of resentment, contributing to retrograde and tribalist forms of nationalism and generating violence – see the recent anti-foreigner riots in Dublin.

There can be no doubt that poverty, wars, and climate change will increase international migration. One of the great failures of Western leadership is the lack of any 'strategic plan' (the words used by the Archbishop of Canterbury during the debates on the Government's illegal Rwanda policy) to stabilise vulnerable economies in Africa and Asia enabling their populations to stay at home and make a living. This requires the provision of a level of aid commensurate to the financial flows into Europe after World War II, and means debt relief, a generous Loss and Compensation Fund and more. Just as Austerity in Britain since 2010 and indifference to inequality and poverty are a national economic choice, with consequences we can see, so is refusal to face the magnitude of the problems confronting vulnerable countries around the world.

This failure of vision and courage has deep roots. Mishra, a secular socialist, describes the Pope - remarkably - as the "most convincing and influential public intellectual today". He believes that Francis' moral stature rests on his critique of the "ostensibly autonomous and self-interested individual", a figure emerging during the Enlightenment and now confronting "an impasse". In the current phase of globalisation, Mishra writes, this figure has descended into 'either angry tribalism or equally bellicose forms of antinomian individualism', the denial of shared moral values. His is a provocative but compelling portrait of populist politics.

If we are to survive the 21st century as civilised, diverse, and democratic societies recognising our obligations under international law and preserving humanitarian values, voters must keep the clowns and extremists, the libertarians and newly minted 'anarcho-capitalists' and recycled fascists, out of high office. It is a political imperative in this age of anger to seek leaders with a moral core of honesty, empathy, solidarity and responsibility, capable of reducing inequality. This quest must not remain a form of utopian eccentricity.

<https://www.ianlinden.com/latest-blogs/immigration-or-inequality>

• **Professor Ian Linden** is Visiting Professor at St Mary's University, Strawberry Hill, London. A past director of the Catholic Institute for International Relations, he was awarded a CMG for his work for human rights in 2000. He has also been an adviser on Europe and Justice and Peace issues to the Department of International Affairs of the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales. Ian chairs a new charity for After-school schooling in Beirut for Syrian refugees and Lebanese kids in danger of dropping out partnering with CARITAS Lebanon and work on board of Las Casas Institute in Oxford with Richard Finn OP. His latest book was *Global Catholicism* published by Hurst in 2009.

PALESTINIAN PEACEMAKERS LEAD GAZA EMERGENCY APPEAL TOUR

Dr Philip Crispin 6/12/2023

The Amos Trust and their friends from Holy Land Trust and Gaza Sunbirds started their peace and emergency fund-raising tour with a harrowing but beautiful evening at St James's Piccadilly last Friday 1st December.

"Despair is a luxury. Hope is all that remains for those who don't have that luxury," said Karim Ali, co-founder of the Gaza Sunbirds.

His organisation - which takes its name from Palestine's beautiful national bird - comprises amputee cyclist-athletes who lost limbs to Israeli Defence Force bullets. In the past six weeks of Israel's assault on Gaza, the Sunbirds had helped distribute 36,000 tonnes of food, pedalling around on prosthetic limbs and dropping off essentials from door to door. Karim spoke on the day the ceasefire had failed, one of the heaviest days of bombing. "Every single day, we make a decision to keep going. Your support helps us to keep going."

Testimonies of destruction and terror came throughout the evening. A friend of Amos had lost his parents on the first day of bombing, and then a few weeks later a further twenty members of his family. Chris Rose, Director of Amos Trust, emphasised the power of marching in solidarity with Palestine: "To know they are not alone gives hope. It really, really matters."

Elias D'eis, Executive Director of Holy Land Trust, and Said Zarzar, its Programme Development Manager, had managed to travel together to England from the West Bank. It had been a protracted and difficult journey.

Said spoke of how hard the past weeks had been, the feelings of helplessness. He spoke of a spike in violence from both the settlers and the army, of Palestinian areas being cut off one from another. Of still more checkpoints. "Bethlehem depends on tourism but this is completely off," he said. "It won't be celebrating Christmas."

Elias added: "All the hotels were fully booked but all groups have been cancelled. People were hoping we would recover from the pandemic in this season but unfortunately it's worse." Elias, an Arab Palestinian Christian, had lived all his life under occupation, with "a lot of trauma, a lot of fears." He spoke of the healing process he had experienced since working with the Holy Land Trust for the past 16 years. The Trust had been set up in order to work for a lasting and just peace and equal rights for all.

He said there was a lot of trauma, a lot of fear. The Trust focuses on how it can transform the fear and negative energy that stems from trauma in a positive way. It provides art therapy for children and creates a 'beautiful resistance' with the annual international Bethlehem Live arts festival. It organises consciousness-raising educational tours of Palestine, all the while meeting injustice with the promotion of non-violence. "We rebuild homes demolished by the Israeli military in the same place in order to highlight the injustice," said Elias, adding, "It gives me hope that a lot of Israeli activists are fighting with us. We need to change the leaders, that's for sure. We need a grass roots movement in order to fight for our future."

Saied Silbak played beautiful songs of love and lament on his oud and the Soul Sanctuary Gospel Choir sang sweet festive harmonies.

A member of the Amos team read out the following: "Gaza's night is dark apart from the glow of rockets, quiet apart from the sound of the bombs, terrifying apart from the comfort of prayer, black apart from the light of the martyrs. Good night, Gaza." These words were translated from the final tweet in Arabic from the poet Heba Abu Nada, a beloved figure in the Palestinian literary community, who had been killed in her home by an Israeli airstrike. She was 32 years old.

Then came this prayer: "We pray for the people of Israel, Gaza and the West Bank. We long for peace and for an end to violence and destruction of every kind. We unite our hearts with all who are suffering, with those who have lost loved ones, and with all who cry out in anguish."

The words of Omar Barghouti resonated in the church: "The most profound ethical obligation in these times is to act to end complicity. Only thus can we truly hope to end oppression and violence. ... We aspire to live in a more just world, with no ranking of suffering, no hierarchy of human worth, and where everyone's rights and human dignity are cherished and upheld."

This was the final prayer:

May the peace of the Sunbird's song
Be heard once more
On the shores of Gaza.

Go in peace
As the makers of peace
As those who believe
That another world is still possible
And we shall hear her breathing again.

May the peace of the ney's lament
Wash over the hills of Bethlehem
And may justice flow like a river
Like a never-ending flood.

Peace to the whole earth
Peace to all peoples
Peace to one another
Peace within.

[A ney is a simple Arabic flute]

Please visit: www.amostrust.org/gaza-appeal to support the emergency appeal for Gaza. All money raised will support Amos's partners in Palestine. Every gift donated throughout December will be doubled.

Amos's Christmas tour with special guests continues every day until 11th December to the following destinations: Darlington, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Ashburton near Totnes & Cardiff. www.amostrust.org/christmas-2023

And you are warmly welcome to come to: **Voices from Gaza** - An evening of testimonies from Gaza with readings from Brian Eno and friends and live music from renowned Palestinian musicians on Friday 15 December at 7.30pm at St George the Martyr, Borough High Street, London SE1 1JA. All proceeds will go to the Amos Trust emergency Christmas appeal for Gaza. **See:** www.amostrust.org/voices-from-gaza
<https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/48647>

CAAT CONDEMNS RESUMPTION OF ISRAELI BOMBING OF GAZA AND CALLS FOR ARMS EMBARGO

Source: CAAT 3/12/2023

The Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) has condemned the resumption of Israel's brutal bombardment of the occupied Gaza Strip, and calls on the UK government to implement an immediate two-way arms embargo on Israel. They state: 'Israel has committed unlawful attacks including violations of international humanitarian law, at an unprecedented scale in retaliation for Hamas' horrific attack against Israeli civilians on 7th October. Despite these unlawful attacks the UK government has continued to issue licences for arms and arms components covering aircrafts, helicopters, drones, missiles, military technology, armoured vehicles, tanks, ammunition, and small arms.

It's reported that more than 14,000 Palestinians have been killed, thousands more have been injured, 80% of people in Gaza have been displaced, and 45% of homes have been destroyed or damaged. The humanitarian situation is catastrophic, and the levels of suffering faced by people in Gaza, particularly children, is beyond description.

Since 2015, the UK has licenced over £474m worth of arms to Israeli forces. This includes licences covering components for aircraft, helicopters, drones, bombs, missiles, military technology, armoured vehicles, tanks, ammunition, and small arms. The UK industry provides 15% of the components for the F35 stealth combat aircraft that is currently being used to bomb Gaza. The contract for the components is estimated by Campaign Against Arms Trade to be worth £336m since 2016.

The rear fuselage and "active interceptor system" of every F-35 fighter jet are made by BAE Systems. Many other British companies are also involved in the F-35 programme. Examples include Martin-Baker, who make the ejector seats, Dunlop Aircraft Tyres, who make the aircraft tyres, and Cobham Mission Systems, who make the refuelling probe. Leonardo - an Italian multinational company with eight main sites across the UK - makes the laser targeting system for the F-35.' **For more information, read CAAT's fact sheet on UK arms to Israel HERE:**

<https://caat.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/11/Fact-sheet-re-Gaza-2023-11-14.pdf>

Katie Fallon, Advocacy Manager at Campaign Against Arms Trade said: "The horror being inflicted on Gaza and on the Palestinian people by Israeli forces is an unprecedented escalation in violence. Collective punishment, a complete blockade, genocide; these crimes are being committed with impunity by Israel. The continued licensing and export of UK arms and components to Israel not only makes the UK government complicit in the most serious of human rights violations, but signals political support for perpetual occupation and war. We call on the government to immediately implement a two-way arms embargo, and do everything in their power to support a political solution to the conflict, and a peaceful and just future for Palestine and Israel." <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/48623>

Note: Since this press release was sent out on Saturday, another 700 people are known to have been killed in Gaza. Many hundreds more are missing under the rubble. **Read more HERE:** https://electronicintifada.net/content/horrors-we-could-never-imagine/42176?utm_source=El+readers&utm_campaign=6f009d389b-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e802a7602d-6f009d389b-299209661

PAX CHRISTI ADVENT SERVICE: CELEBRATING PEACEMAKING AND PEACEMAKERS

Ellen Teague 3/12/2023

Pax Christi England and Wales held its annual Advent Service at the Holy Apostles, Pimlico, London, on Saturday. As well as those in the church, participants joined online from around the world - including friends in Bethlehem. Ann Farr, Chair of Pax Christi England and Wales, welcomed them all. One said afterwards: "It was lovely to link up on-line with Pax Christi's inspirational Advent Service, loved it, thank you. It was so gentle and reflective as one so needs in the light of all that is happening in our world. May God bless all that fosters Peace."

Community musicians Catherine Pestano and Angela Reith on keyboard led the music. Sarah Metcalf of Westminster Deaf Service provided the signing. Former CEOs of Pax Christi, Valerie Flessati and Pat Gaffney, had decorated the altar and placed candles.

Reflections and prayers focused particularly on '*A Time of Watchful Waiting*,' '*Women Peacemakers*,' '*Seeking Asylum*' - which acknowledged that hundreds of thousands have fled their homes globally this year because of conflict - and '*Palestine and Israel*'. This section saw Micah 4 read out: '*Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore*,' followed by singing '*A Bethlehem Lament*'. Written by Angela Reith, the song questions the familiar narrative in the carol, '*O Little Town of Bethlehem*,' noting that it is a West Bank town that has known bombing and conflict in recent times. It ends: '*What happened to the dream of peace on earth?*'

While Taizé chants were sung, the congregation filed up to light candles on the altar rail.

Then under the section of the service '*Peacemaking in our world today*' one reading was from Pope Francis on the Feast of All Saints 1 November 2022:

"Let us take, for example, a very topical beatitude: '*Blessed are the peacemakers*', and we see how Jesus' peace is very different from what we imagine. We all long for peace, but often what we want is not really peace, it is to be at peace, to be left in peace, to have no problems but rather tranquillity. Jesus, instead, does not call the calm blessed, those who are in peace, but those who make peace and strive to make peace, the builders, the peacemakers. Indeed, peace must be built, and like any construction, it requires effort, collaboration, patience. We would like peace to rain down from above, but instead the Bible speaks of a "sowing of peace" (Zc 8:12), because it germinates from the soil of life, from the seed of our heart. It grows in silence, day after day, through works of justice and mercy, as the luminous witnesses we are celebrating today show us. Again, we are led to believe that peace comes by force and power: for Jesus it is the opposite. His life and that of the saints tell us that, in order to grow and bear fruit, the seed of peace must first die. Peace is not achieved by conquering or defeating someone, it is never violent, it is never armed."

Bernadette Farrell's '*Peace Child*' was one of the final hymns with its lines: '*... in the sleep of the night, in the dark before light, you come, you come in the silence of stars, in the violence of wars; Saviour your name.*'

And the Pax Christi Prayer was recited at the end:

Blessed are you peacemakers, who say no to war as a means of peace.

Blessed are you peacemakers, who offer hope and healing.

Blessed are you peacemakers, who care and comfort.

Blessed are you peacemakers, who help find answers.

Blessed are you peacemakers who see the good in others.

Blessed are you peacemakers, who never give up.

Blessed are you peacemakers, who give and give and give.

At the end of the service, the congregation processed out of the church down to the Christmas Market and social in the parish hall singing '*Soon and Very Soon*'. Nibbling on mince pies, they perused stalls offering Fair Trade goods, gifts from the Holy Land, 2024 calendars and other items from Columban missionaries, Jesuit Refugee Service, CAFOD, Archbishop Romero Trust and others.

Many people wrote messages to send to Pax Christi partners in Palestine and Israel. Pax Christi's '*Anthology for Advent and Christmas*' was available and copies of '*A British Christian response to the Kairos Palestine document*'.

Pax Christi has marked Advent since 1992 by organising an Advent Peace Service. The liturgy is chosen to speak to people who want peace and who are peacemakers. It is a valued opportunity to pray and sing about watchful waiting in hope as well as highlighting actions for peace and nonviolence.

<https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/48625>

Scroll down through the ICN Facebook page to see more pictures and a video:

www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064591363750

PAX CHRISTI EVENT: THE ELIMINATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS - WHERE NEXT?

Online webinar on zoom Monday 11th December - 7.00pm - 8.15pm (UK)

Last week at its headquarters in New York, the UN hosted the second meeting of the states parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. A total of 94 countries participated and at the end of five days of debate, adopted a declaration and programme of action to take the treaty forward towards the elimination of nuclear weapons.

To reflect on the meeting and how the outcomes might impact our campaigning and work as Pax Christi, we are holding an online webinar on zoom next Monday 11th December from 7.00pm - 8.15pm UK time.

We'll be joined by Matthew Maslan who attended the meeting as a Youth MSP Delegate with Youth for TPNW and others and we would love you to come and join the discussion. **To attend please register here:** tinyurl.com/2vkar3hc

IF CHRIST WERE TO ENTER OUR WORLD TODAY, WHERE WOULD HE CHOOSE TO BE BORN?

Reflection by Fr Rob Esdaile 24/12/2022

If Christ were to enter our world today, where would he choose to be born?

Bethlehem remains besieged, surrounded by watchtowers, and 'The Wall'. That would still be a fitting place for the birth of this strange Messiah, born in poverty on the edge of Empire in a borrowed stable. But maybe he would take his place instead among our age's refugees, with the millions driven from their homes by violence, climate change or sheer poverty. Perhaps the shattered frozen homes of Ukraine's towns might be a fitting site for our Silent Night Saviour's birth.

Would Mary and Joseph's journey now lead them to registration at a refugee reception centre far from their bombed-out home, rather than to a Roman census queue?

Might - God forbid - their transport of choice be not a donkey but an unseaworthy (and illegal) rubber boat? To whom might the angel chorus sing: to those gathered at a 'Warm Hub' because they cannot afford to heat their homes? And what of the Magi, setting out in search of the New-Born King? Who has the freedom of heart to undertake such a quest today?

These are not flippant thoughts. At Christmas we meet the One whom Pope Francis has called 'the God of the peripheries', the One who takes flesh among the overlooked and the undervalued, the One who embraces powerlessness as the ultimate sign of the power of divine love. Yes, God still seeks room at the inn, still seeks to enter into our human story - not just in Bethlehem or Ukraine or in refugee camps scattered around the globe but also at our own Christmas table, be we alone or surrounded by family.

As the Book of Revelation has it: "Look, I am standing at the door, knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share a meal with that person and that person with me." (Rev 3.20) At Christmas God comes close. Indeed, in Jesus, God is truly with us, Emmanuel. May you know that closeness in your keeping of the feast and may his nativity renew in us all the search for peace on earth and goodwill to all.

<https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/46184>

• Fr Rob is Parish Priest at St Dunstan's and St Hugh of Lincoln Catholic parishes in Woking. He has published several books of poetry including: '*A Word in Edgeways*' and '*An Invaded Life*'. For more information or to order copies, email: rob.esdaile@abdiocese.org.uk or write to: The Priests' House, St Paul's Road, Woking Surrey GU22,7DZ.

Note: This reflection was written last December. Sadly, it is still as relevant today – Editor.

SONG OF THE ANGELS



When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:

Howard Thurman,
Fellowship of Reconciliation, USA

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

WAVES

No-one's arriving in waves;
but on waves of terror and hope.
Who will they see if they land;
who might throw them a rope?
Old waves, so oil-black, so high,
so bitterly huge in the channel
offering waterlogged death
if you can't take the tunnel.
Fathom on fathom beneath
of sickening water to harm them,
waves freezing, queasy and deep;
and no saviour to calm them.
Fast flowing water at night
few scared and despaired people brave.
And if they should get to this land,
who will give them a wave?

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For more about this poem, and the issues
that it raises, visit
<https://jointpublicissues.org.uk/welcoming-environment-poetry>

OF COURSE THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN WOMEN THERE THAT NIGHT

20/12/2022 Jo McAndrews writes: *All those nativity scenes, all those plays, all my life, there have only been men apart from Mary. And I never really noticed how wrong that is until my friend Sue said this year, 'there would have been women at the birth of Christ'. It doesn't matter what your religious belief is about the story, it is culturally really powerful and of course at this time of year it is everywhere. So here is a story to offer a reclaiming of the missing part of the story:*

Of course there would have been women there in Bethlehem that night. There is rarely a baby born alone in the world when there is a free woman nearby. I imagine that the first was the inn keeper's wife, let's call her the other innkeeper. She would have been dashing from the stove to the bar when she heard her husband turning that couple away. Maybe he was a good man and disappointed them kindly, but she saw the huge belly, recognised the low-down posture of a baby about to drop into the world. She would have put down the plates she was carrying and laid her hand on the small of that poor tired woman's back. Warmth and understanding relieving the ache, in that tiny profound gesture.

It would have been that other innkeeper who led the couple to the barn, made a clear cosy refuge and brought blankets to make beds on the straw. Maybe she settled them, then went back to the inn and called the kitchen girls to make extra stew, it was going to be a long night. Then maybe she called on the old midwife, the woman who had caught nearly the whole town in her gentle hands as they had each arrived. The old woman would have summoned her daughter, called her away from her own children to come and help her greet this new baby, receive this new life into safety.

They would have made their calm and smoothly urgent way to the innkeepers' barn, wondering if there was time to move this young about-to-be mother to their own small house, or one of their neighbours'. They would have knocked on a few doors as they went, asking for blankets, sheets, water, lamps for when the darkness fell. There would have been bustling and excitement, laughing and calling as the women dropped their usual busy activity to turn towards the arrival of new life in their midst. At least one of them would have offered to make up a bed. Maybe they arrived at the barn and realised that none of them could offer anywhere more comfortable than this spacious shelter. Or maybe it was just too late to move this young woman already shouting with labour pains.

The old midwife would have looked into her eyes, that frightened traveller, and told her that everything was going to be fine, that she was there and would help her bring this baby safely to birth. She would have relaxed, Mary, the only one whose name we know, the only woman recorded to be at the birth of Christ. Even a miracle needs a mother in the story.

I imagine the women settling in for the long and busy wait, sending the older children on errands for more food and drink, another jug of water for the labouring mother. They would have shared their memories in the quieter moments, of the many babies they had birthed and helped to birth. The midwife would have reminded them of their own stories, the one who came out backwards, the one who arrived before she could even get there. Silent exchanges of looks and murmured blessings as they remembered the ones who arrived cold or whose mothers did not make it through. Only the cheerful stories out loud tonight to offer reassurance through fearful moments. Grief has its own time.

Maybe Joseph was there cradling his wife's head and humming tender sounds to soothe her. Or maybe he was passing the anxious time in the crowded bar of the inn, being treated to drinks and slapped on the back, or perhaps he was pacing backwards and forwards though the familiar town of his own birth, thinking about his mother and wishing she was there to see him become a father. Maybe she was there. She could have even been the midwife herself. How can we know except through our imagining of this bit of the story that was never written and has long disappeared?

Anyway, in the barn, I imagine the group of women growing in number as the word gets around town. A traveller, arrived tonight and about to give birth, needing company as her own family are far away. I can hear them singing quietly or raucously depending on the changing needs of the moment; gentling, encouraging, reviving her exhausted spirits. Our innkeeper would have brought the hot stew and warm cakes from the oven, in her element, caring for those far from home and needing hospitality. Her good husband would have taken on her other work for the night, calling on his brothers to help. Something special was happening and everyone wanted to be part of it.

I imagine that tiny and most welcome baby arriving just after dawn, as the sun rose high enough to send its rays through the gaps in the barn walls, illuminating the floating straw dust in a halo of shining light. The birth of the sun of life, the birth of the son of God, meeting in that holy moment of wonder. New healthy life, slippery and warm, squalling with surprise at the shock of air into his lungs for the first ever time. His first breath and the whole company sighing with relief. This ordinary, extraordinary miracle that accompanies every new child of God as we arrive in danger, blood, pain and amazement. Of course they wouldn't have put him in a manger, why would they when there were so many eager arms and Mary's warm breast waiting for his first suckling?

I can imagine the star that had shone surprisingly brightly through the night, still twinkling in the early morning sky, making the miracle visible for many hundreds of miles. We are told it summoned kings. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. Rich gifts indeed. But the gift of those women is beyond royal reach. Those women who dropped everything to bring company, practical care and love for a stranger who was not a stranger; a woman giving birth is known and held by all mothers. We each have a nativity story, even those of us who have never been recognised as sacred.

Of course there would have been women in Bethlehem that night. How would the world be if we had never forgotten that? Let us remember now.

• **Jo McAndrews** is a trainer and coach working with children and young people in mental health in difficult times. She loves writing, storytelling and singing in community choirs. Find more at <https://www.jomcandrews.com/>

POPE FRANCIS ASKS THEOLOGIAN TO 'DEMASCULINIZE' THE CHURCH

30/11/2023 Claire Giangravé Vatican City Religion News Service (RNS) reports:

Speaking to members of the International Theological Commission at the Vatican on Thursday (Nov. 30), Pope Francis asked theologians to “demasculinize” the church in an unscripted remark. “There is something I don’t like about you, if you excuse my honesty,” said Pope Francis, pointing out that there were only five women among the 30-plus theologians. “We need to move forward on this! Women have a way of reflecting on theology that is different from us men,” he added.

The International Theological Commission is part of the Roman Curia and advises the Vatican doctrinal department on theological issues. The pope appoints its members, and women have been allowed to become members since 2004.

The pope said he studied the Italian theologian Romano Guardini through the work of a woman, Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, who impacted his understanding of women in theology. Francis also noted that at the next meeting with the Council of Cardinals, a body that advises him on church matters, they “will reflect on the role of women in the church.” The general secretary of the commission, Monsignor Piero Coda, said Francis’ words were “an additional encouragement for something that is very dear to the pope but is also at the heart of the journey that the church is undergoing through the synodal process.”

Bishops and laypeople, including an unprecedented number of women, took part in October’s Synod on Synodality at the Vatican which in its final report demanded a theological reflection on the role of women in the church, as well as the possibility of allowing women to become deacons. Catholic deacons preach at Mass and perform marriages and baptisms but do not celebrate the Eucharist or hear confessions. Those who oppose allowing female deacons claim it would represent a first step toward opening the priesthood to women.

The pope’s words on Thursday underlined “the need to increase the space given to women in positions of authority and decision-making in the Christian community, in order to treasure the sensibility and intelligence that is typical of the feminine genius and experience,” Coda told RNS. Women have always been important in the church, the theologian said, but “it’s time for this to become part of the culture” to address modern challenges and the “male-dominated view that still exists in the church and in society.” The small number of female theologians in the church is related to the roles women are offered in the church today, Coda said. “It’s true that women and laypeople are still underrepresented in theology, because theology remains too centred on the formation of presbyters,” or priests, he explained.

“The church is woman,” Francis told the theologians, “and if we cannot understand what a woman is, what is the theology of women, we will never understand the church. One of the great sins we have witnessed is ‘masculinizing’ the church.” The pope charged those present with the task of reflecting on the role of women in the institution. “This is the job I ask of you, please: Demasculinize the church,” he said. Francis was not able to read his pre-written speech aloud due to an inflammation of the lungs that has hindered his ability to speak and forced him to cancel a papal visit to Dubai for the COP28 environmental summit. After his off-the-cuff remarks, he told those present that he “spoke too much and it hurt me.” Coda said he was struck by “the spiritual energy and limitless devotion to the church” that the pope showed during the meeting despite his “fragility.”

Francis urged theologians to be proponents of an “evangelizing theology.” “It’s essential for you theologians to do this in sync with the People of God, from ‘below,’ with a preferential eye toward the poor and the simple, and at the same time ‘on your knees,’ because theology is born kneeling in adoration to God,” Francis said. Coda said these qualities have always characterized Catholic theological tradition. “The great theologians weren’t people who were locked in ivory towers, they were immersed in the life of the people of God,” he said.

On Nov. 8, Francis issued a decree reforming the Pontifical Theological Academy, charged with forming theologians, asking it to embark on “a paradigm shift, a brave cultural revolution,” to promote synodality in the church. <https://religionnews.com/2023/11/30/pope-francis-asks-theologians-to-demasculinize-the-church/>

THE COVID ENQUIRY WILL GIVE US SOME ANSWERS, BUT WE MUST ALSO LEARN THE HUMAN LESSONS OF THE PANDEMIC

1/12/2023 Joseph Kelly writes: I suppose it comes as no surprise that the much-anticipated government Covid enquiry is starting to expose all sorts of deep flaws in how the great global pandemic was handled. Yesterday and today we've been hearing from former Health Secretary Matt Hancock, whom many have earmarked as one of the primary culprits in a bumbling decision-making process that resulted in the unnecessary deaths of so many family members, relatives and close friends.

Across this week there's been a queue of senior political figures giving evidence and their own personal assessment of the way in which the situation was handled. Without exception the message seems to be that things could have been handled far better, and many more lives might not have been lost, if only individuals and government departments had communicated better, and worked together to solve the problem rather than pursuing personal and strategic agendas.

According to a BBC data team that has analysed Covid statistics from all sources, just under 227,000 people died in the UK with Covid-19 listed as one of the causes on their death certificate. This covers the three years to May 2023, when the World Health Organisation finally declared an end to the virus as a 'global health emergency'. At the very least there were 208,000 deaths recorded above the expected number for the same period. In terms of percentages to population, the UK actually saw a smaller increase than the US, Poland and Italy, but fared worse than Spain, France and Germany. The overall death count in Norway, Sweden and New Zealand actually went down for the period, probably as a result of fast, hardline lockdowns reducing infectious contacts, accidents and other possible excess causes of death.

The UK Covid Enquiry, headed by the extremely capable and forensically focussed Baroness Hallett, will be hearing from expert witnesses and across the UK, as well as those most intimately involved in the decision-making processes. Relatives of the bereaved are also being given the opportunity to give testimony.

It's anticipated that the enquiry will continue to hear evidence up to the summer of 2026, with the final report and conclusions published sometime thereafter. As with any enquiry of this nature, no-one will be blamed or found 'guilty', and no-one is obliged to take heed of any advice given. Understandably campaigners – such as The Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice (BFJ) campaign group and the Runnymede think tank – have complained that the enquiry needs to go much further. In particular BFJ believes that ethnic communities need to be "placed firmly at the centre" of the inquiry, as the government's own research has shown that ethnic minorities were significantly more likely to die with Covid-19.

Other activists and experts have pointed to areas where there were significant discrepancies and contradictions in the decision-making process, not least the differences in Covid responses and actions from the devolved legislatures of Scotland and Wales.

I recall from my own vivid experience of the pandemic the confusing, distressing and incredibly difficult anomaly of living in Wales, and working just 40 miles away in Manchester. At the height of the pandemic Wales went into a very wise complete national lockdown, whilst England dithered and prevaricated as the situation declined rapidly. At the time this left me with a job where I was expected to be present for work in Manchester each morning, while my local government was threatening to arrest me if I left the house! Returning from a crowded city centre each day to confront the north Wales police who were quite literally patrolling the border stopping incomers, and wondering what manner of infection I might be bringing home to my family – knowing that thousands were dying from Covid – was not an experience that I'll forget in my lifetime.

Across the UK at time there were countless employees struggling with the same dilemma of balancing being-at-work demands versus concern for family and self. Who will ever forget Boris Johnson's "go to work, stay at home, go to work if you must, stay at home if you can, go to work if you must, stay at work, go home," etc and all that nonsense?

In Wales the advice was clear – this thing is dangerous, so stay in your house unless it's critical to go out. In England it was a literally fatal mish-mash of caveats, and in particular employees and employers were left to fight it out amongst themselves as to whether it was necessary for you to go physically in to work or not. Of course, what legislators knew only too well was that for the vast majority of the population, a shift to home-based working was more than possible, but to let that particular genie out of the bottle even briefly would be to shatter decades of commuter servility and the centrality of 'place' and 'subservience' in employment. Sadly, the rapidly climbing death toll made the change inevitable, and vast swathes of the working population made the change to what has become – as some legislators feared – the new world of home or hybrid working.

Some institutions railed at the threat to their established practices, typified by Goldman Sachs CEO David Solomon who was one of the most vocal proponents of 'return to the office or get sacked' threat. You might think that with the huge salaries and unimaginable career and wealth opportunities being offered by the likes of Goldman, employees would be the first ones back on the bus, but nothing of it. In a recent survey of 700 US finance executives working for the country's top four firms, an incredible 70% said they would quit their current job if they were ordered to return to the office five days a week. Of course, saying it is one thing, actually dumping a highly-paid career is another, but the survey is a good indicator of the mood of employees globally post-pandemic, and actually is borne out by the employment statistics, with most developed countries still looking for literally millions of previously employed tax payers who've 'inexplicably' dropped off the radar. By contrast, global finance firm Deloitte – which has always been far more of an innovator rather than a dinosaur – recognised the post-pandemic shift to home working as an opportunity on all sorts of levels – from huge savings on eye-wateringly expensive city centre offices, to increased and more flexible employee commitments.

Over in Wales, where the economic infrastructure has long been predominantly rural, dispersed and diverse, the pandemic and a hard lockdown had a far lesser impact on businesses, and people's daily lives. In England, where the economy has always been predominantly urban and concentrated, the centrality of the Covid problem – which should have been healthcare and the protection of the most vulnerable – became fatally skewed by fears for the established economic model, the possible consequences and ramifications of the establishment losing its grip over the workforce and even some legislators jumping on the commercial opportunities of the pandemic when the full force of their efforts and ingenuity ought to have been expended on saving lives.

Come the end of the enquiry, no doubt ministers and politicians will name their scapegoats, make their apologies, promise to do much better next time round – and carry on. A few lobby groups may have their say, but the real human stories of the Covid pandemic – and the way it has changed the world forever – will need to be compiled and preserved by other means, and most critically by those who of us who went through the experiences.

Why is this important? Because, for all that happened, the model of governance in this country in particular has been fundamentally unchanged by the pandemic, and old hierarchies are frantically but discretely trying to re-establish and re-assert themselves. Truth is, we cannot go back to the way things were before the pandemic, and neither should we. Covid came after 13 years of fiscal austerity and the systematic dismantling of the moral and spiritual fabric of the country. It's dreadful impact will stay with most citizens for several generations to come, but the positive we ought to take is that it was a rare moment in time when everyone was forced to step back and 'reset' their view of life, and to think about what is or isn't really important for the future.

As we navigate our way through the 'new' crises now emerging in society – such as climate change, immigration, poverty, marginalisation and exploitation – I pray that sooner rather than later we will come to learn that lasting solutions to even the most profound and complex of problems are to be found in the dignity and worth people, and not in the transience of material things.

<https://www.thecatholicnetwork.co.uk/the-covid-enquiry-will-give-us-some-answers-but-we-must-also-learn-the-human-lessons-of-the-pandemic/>

- **Joseph Kelly** is a Catholic writer and theologian

CHRISTIAN AID WARNS AGAINST 'DELETING TEXT' ON FOSSIL FUEL PHASE OUT

Source: Christian Aid, COP28 5/12/2023

Speaking in response to the publication of the 'Global Stocktake' at COP28 - a comprehensive assessment of countries' progress on the Paris Agreement goals and what needs to be done - Christian Aid's Global Advocacy Lead Mariana Paoli warns against important information being left out of the final document. She said: "Moves to delete text that would commit countries to a phase out of fossil fuels would amount to deleting the life chances of the worlds' most climate vulnerable communities."

This moment is vital and will be the litmus test of COP28. We must accelerate plans to end fossil fuels, invest rapidly in renewable energy, and support a just transition that decarbonises the global economy. It has also been reported that at least 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists have been granted access to the COP28 negotiations, a near 400% increase on last year.

Mariana Paoli commented: "You wouldn't let the tobacco lobby influence a health conference or arms dealers through the doors at a peace conference. So why let the fossil fuel lobby try to commandeer a climate conference? It must stop; people and the planet deserve better."

<https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/48643>

POPE URGES COP28: 'CHOOSE LIFE, CHOOSE THE FUTURE!'

Source: Vatican News 2/12/2023

Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin delivered Pope Francis' hard-hitting speech to delegates at the UN Climate Change Summit in Dubai today, urging world leaders not to postpone action any longer but to deliver concrete and cohesive responses for the well-being of our common home and future generations.

The full text of the Pope's address follows:

Mr President, Mr Secretary-General of the United Nations, Distinguished Heads of State and Government, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sadly, I am unable to be present with you, as I had greatly desired. Even so, I am with you, because time is short. I am with you because now more than ever, the future of us all depends on the present that we now choose. I am with you because the destruction of the environment is an offence against God, a sin that is not only personal but also structural, one that greatly endangers all human beings, especially the most vulnerable in our midst and threatens to unleash a conflict between generations. I am with you because climate change is "a global social issue and one intimately related to the dignity of human life" (Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum*, 3). I am with you to raise the question which we must answer now: Are we working for a culture of life or a culture of death?

To all of you I make this heartfelt appeal: Let us choose life! Let us choose the future! May we be attentive to the cry of the earth, may we hear the plea of the poor, may we be sensitive to the hopes of the young and the dreams of children! We have a grave responsibility: to ensure that they not be denied their future.

It has now become clear that the climate change presently taking place stems from the overheating of the planet, caused chiefly by the increase of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere due to human activity, which in recent decades has proved unsustainable for the ecosystem.

The drive to produce and possess has become an obsession, resulting in an inordinate greed that has made the environment the object of unbridled exploitation. The climate, run amok, is crying out to us to halt this illusion of omnipotence. Let us once more recognize our limits, with humility and courage, as the sole path to a life of authentic fulfilment. What stands in the way of this? The divisions that presently exist among us. Yet a world completely connected, like ours today, should not be un-connected by those who govern it, with international negotiations that "cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good" (Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 169). We find ourselves facing firm and even inflexible positions calculated to protect income and business interests, at times justifying this on the basis of what was done in the past, and periodically shifting the responsibility to others. Yet the task to which we are called today is not about yesterday, but about tomorrow: a tomorrow that, whether we like it or not, will belong to everyone or else to no one.

Particularly striking in this regard are the attempts made to shift the blame onto the poor and high birth rates. These are falsities that must be firmly dispelled. It is not the fault of the poor, since the almost half of our world that is more needy is responsible for scarcely 10% of toxic emissions, while the gap between the opulent few and the masses of the poor has never been so abysmal.

The poor are the real victims of what is happening: we need think only of the plight of indigenous peoples, deforestation, the tragedies of hunger, water and food insecurity, and forced migration. Births are not a problem, but a resource: they are not opposed to life, but for life, whereas certain ideological and utilitarian models now being imposed with a velvet glove on families and peoples constitute real forms of colonization. The development of many countries, already burdened by grave economic debt, should not be penalized; instead, we should consider the footprint of a few nations responsible for a deeply troubling "ecological debt" towards many others (cf. *ibid.*, 51-52). It would only be fair to find suitable means of remitting the financial debts that burden different peoples, not least in light of the ecological debt that they are owed.

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to speak to you, as brothers and sisters, in the name of the common home in which we live, and to ask this question: What is the way out of this? It is the one that you are pursuing in these days: the way of togetherness, multilateralism. Indeed, "our world has become so multipolar and at the same time so complex that a different framework for effective cooperation is required. It is not enough to think only of balances of power... It is a matter of establishing global and effective rules (*Laudate Deum*, 42). In this regard, it is disturbing that global warming has been accompanied by a general cooling of multilateralism, a growing lack of trust within the international community, and a loss of the "shared awareness of being... a family of nations" (Saint John Paul II, Address to the United Nations Organization for the Fiftieth Anniversary of its Establishment, New York, 5 October 1995, 14). It is essential to rebuild trust, which is the foundation of multilateralism.

This is true in the case of care for creation, but also that of peace. These are the most urgent issues and they are closely linked. How much energy is humanity wasting on the numerous wars presently in course, such as those in Israel and Palestine, in Ukraine and in many parts of the world: conflicts that will not solve problems but only increase them!

How many resources are being squandered on weaponry that destroys lives and devastates our common home! Once more I present this proposal: "With the money spent on weapons and other military expenditures, let us establish a global fund that can finally put an end to hunger" (Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti, 262; cf. Saint Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, 51) and carry out works for the sustainable development of the poorer countries and for combating climate change.

It is up to this generation to heed the cry of peoples, the young and children, and to lay the foundations of a new multilateralism. Why not begin precisely from our common home? Climate change signals the need for political change. Let us emerge from the narrowness of self-interest and nationalism; these are approaches belonging to the past.

Let us join in embracing an alternative vision: this will help to bring about an ecological conversion, for "there are no lasting changes without cultural changes" (*Laudate Deum*, 70). In this regard, I would assure you of the commitment and support of the Catholic Church, which is deeply engaged in the work of education and of encouraging participation by all, as well as in promoting sound lifestyles, since all are responsible and the contribution of each is fundamental.

Brothers and sisters, it is essential that there be a breakthrough that is not a partial change of course, but rather a new way of making progress together. The fight against climate change began in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and the 2015 Paris Agreement represented "a new beginning" (*ibid.*, 47). Now there is a need to set out anew. May this COP prove to be a turning point, demonstrating a clear and tangible political will that can lead to a decisive acceleration of ecological transition through means that meet three requirements: they must be "efficient, obligatory and readily monitored" (*ibid.*, 59). And achieved in four sectors: energy efficiency; renewable sources; the elimination of fossil fuels; and education in lifestyles that are less dependent on the latter.

Please, let us move forward and not turn back. It is well-known that various agreements and commitments "have been poorly implemented, due to the lack of suitable mechanisms for oversight, periodic review and penalties in cases of non-compliance" (*Laudato Si'*, 167).

Now is the time no longer to postpone, but to ensure, and not merely to talk about the welfare of your children, your citizens, your countries and our world. You are responsible for crafting policies that can provide concrete and cohesive responses, and in this way demonstrate the nobility of your role and the dignity of the service that you carry out.

In the end, the purpose of power is to serve. It is useless to cling to an authority that will one day be remembered for its inability to take action when it was urgent and necessary to do so (*cf. ibid.*, 57). History will be grateful to you. As will the societies in which you live, which are sadly divided into "fan bases", between prophets of doom and indifferent bystanders, radical environmentalists and climate change deniers... It is useless to join the fray; in this case, as in the case of peace, it does not help to remedy the situation. The remedy is good politics: if an example of concreteness and cohesiveness comes from the top, this will benefit the base, where many people, especially the young, are already dedicated to caring for our common home.

May the year 2024 mark this breakthrough. I like to think that a good omen can be found in an event that took place in 1224. In that year, Francis of Assisi composed his '*Canticle of the Creatures*'. By then Francis was completely blind, and after a night of physical suffering, his spirits were elevated by a mystical experience. He then turned to praise the Most High for all those creatures that he could no longer see, but knew that they were his brothers and sisters, since they came forth from the same Father and were shared with other men and women. An inspired sense of fraternity thus led him to turn his pain into praise and his weariness into renewed commitment.

Shortly thereafter, Francis added a stanza in which he praised God for those who forgive; he did this in order to settle - successfully - an unbecoming conflict between the civil authorities and the local bishop.

I too, who bear the name Francis, with the heartfelt urgency of a prayer, want to leave you with this message: Let us leave behind our divisions and unite our forces! And with God's help, let us emerge from the dark night of wars and environmental devastation in order to turn our common future into the dawn of a new and radiant day. Thank you.

<https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/48616>

PEACE SUNDAY -14 JANUARY 2024

Peace Sunday 2024 will be celebrated on Sunday 14 January. The theme chosen by Pope Francis is 'Artificial Intelligence and Peace'. You can read his message here: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-08/message-world-day-peace-artificial-intelligence-pope-francis.html>

Every year, with the support of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, England and Wales, **Pax Christi** promotes Peace Sunday as a way of observing the World Day of Peace. Pax Christi has produced a number of resources to help churches and groups mark the day, all of which you can download by clicking on the links below. There is also a prayer card specifically for the day which you can order here: <https://paxchristi.org.uk/product/peace-sunday-2024-prayer-card/>

For further info on Peace Sunday or any of our resources, please contact us on info@paxchristi.org.uk

RESOURCES

Peace Sunday 2024 – Liturgy Booklet https://paxchristi.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/137869-x1200-liturgy-A4_4PP.pdf

Peace Sunday 2024 – Alternative Homily https://paxchristi.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Alternative-Homily-for-Website_Peace-Sunday-2024.pdf

Peace Sunday 2024 – Resources for Children https://paxchristi.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/137869-x1200-Childrens-A4_2PP-P.pdf

Peace Sunday 2024 – Resource Leaflet https://paxchristi.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/137869-x3500-Resource-Flyer-A5_2PP_P.pdf

Peace Sunday 2024 – Justpeace and Poster https://paxchristi.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/138005-A4_2PP-P_Justpeace-and-poster.pdf

Peace Sunday 2024 – Letter to Parishes from Archbishop Malcolm McMahon

Dear Father,

Peace Sunday 2024

When I wrote to promote Peace Sunday 2023, I said that 2022 had been a year of war and rumours of war. As we approach the end of 2023, the last twelve months have been no different. The war between Russia and Ukraine continues, as do conflicts around the globe. As I write this, the conflict in Palestine and Israel has erupted once more into terrible violence and suffering with thousands dying, injured and displaced.

Advocating for a just peace in Palestine and Israel is a part of the ongoing work of Pax Christi, alongside building a culture of nonviolence, campaigning against war, nuclear weapons and the arms trade. Supporting its members and the church, Pax Christi produces resources on peace and nonviolence issues, organises events and vigils, represents the Catholic church in the peace movement and works with young people in both schools and churches.

Each year Pax Christi makes resources available for churches and groups to mark Peace Sunday which, in 2024, will take place on Sunday 14th January. With this letter you will find some of the resources that have been produced for 2024 which I hope you will be able to use as you plan for mass that Sunday.

The theme for Peace Sunday is Pope Francis' theme for the World Day of Peace - 'Artificial Intelligence and Peace'. I am sure you will agree that it is a highly relevant theme as Governments across the world, including our own, wrestle with the ethics and consequences of significant and potentially dangerous developments in technology. Pope Francis' overriding concern is that artificial intelligence should be used in the service of humanity and the protection of our common home and not to further injustice and inequality or to fuel division and violent conflict.

Finally, Peace Sunday is an important opportunity for Pax Christi to raise funds. Our small team of staff and volunteers are highly dedicated and work hard to support and encourage us all in working for peace. I greatly appreciate the support our parish communities give through collections and donations and would ask that you take this opportunity to support us this year.

With every blessing,

Most Rev Malcolm McMahon OP, National President of Pax Christi England and Wales

https://paxchristi.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/137869-x1200-Malcolm-A4_2PP-P.pdf

FILM FESTIVAL AWARD FOR FILM STARRING LIVERPOOL HOPE MUSICAL THEATRE LECTURER

Source: Liverpool Hope University 1/12/2023

A film starring a lecturer at Liverpool Hope University has been recognised with an award at an international film festival hosted in the UK. *Our Kid*, which features Musical Theatre Course Leader, Sharon Byatt, won Best Film at the 2023 Birmingham Film Festival. Launched in 2016, the annual festival showcases professional and independent films from around the world, with the best nominated for a range of awards, which are judged by a grand jury comprising four BAFTA winners. Based on the multi-award-winning short film, *Thomas*, *Our Kid* tells the powerful story of the Liverpool-based Reilly family, who learn to deal with adversity through humour after being struck with devastating news which forces them to adapt their lives.

Byatt plays the role of Reilly family matriarch, Tracey, as part of an all-star British cast which also includes BAFTA-nominated Ricky Tomlinson and Connor McIntyre, who is best known for his portrayal of Coronation Street villain, Pat Phelan. The film follows her on-screen daughter, Laura, a football-mad 12-year-old, who dreams of playing for Liverpool. Laura has her football heroes, but her idol is her older brother, Thomas, portrayed by the film's writer, Daniel P. Lewis, who also won Best Actor at the Birmingham Film Festival. Despite having cerebral palsy, Thomas embarks on an inspirational quest to raise money for charity through a sponsored bike ride, showing Laura and the rest of his community what determination and perseverance can achieve.

Reflecting on the award, Byatt said: "I'm incredibly proud of every single person who contributed to the making of this film. To have an independent Liverpool film recognised in this way is a testament to all involved. I have to mention Daniel Lewis whose tenacity and drive made it all happen."

Byatt has enjoyed a 30-year acting career which has seen her star on stage as well as screen. She played Irene in 90s sitcom *Bread*, as well as Sue Freeman in Sky soap opera, *Springhill* with appearances in *Coronation Street* and *Moving On* also. She also has the honour of being the only actress to have played Mrs Johnstone, Linda and Mrs Lyons in *Willy Russell's Blood Brothers* both on the West End and touring stages.

Based in the School of Creative and Performing Arts, she is now responsible for training the next generation of aspiring actors and actresses, who benefit from her continued work as a director, producer and performer.

<https://www.hope.ac.uk/>

<https://www.thecatholicnetwork.co.uk/award-for-film-starring-liverpool-hope-musical-theatre-lecturer/>

THINKING FAITH AT BOARBANK HALL: TIME OUT FOR WORKING CATHOLICS - 2023-2024

25/10/2023: We are a group of professional Catholics who meet together on zoom and live retreats hosted by Sr Margaret Atkins, and Augustinian Sister at Boarbank Hall, Cumbria and Fr Richard Finn, a Dominican at Blackfriars, Oxford (and at times other Dominicans).

Our Thinking Faith summer weeks began for Catholic students and young professionals nearly 20 years ago. They have grown and developed into something that provides for that 'post-youth' group who are trying to live out their Catholic faith in responsible positions at work and also perhaps in their families. At the same time, a regular core of participants has developed, who meet at Boarbank for the residential summer week and keep in touch with zoom retreats in between.

We warmly welcome anyone who might enjoy either the zoom or the residential week to get in touch. You can just dip your toe in by joining either our Advent or our Lent retreat. If you are looking for friendly, fun but also serious and thoughtful support from fellow-Catholics in living out your faith in daily life, this could be for you. And you might get a week's break in Cumbria into the bargain!

For more information, contact Sr Margaret on margaret@boarbankhall.org.uk, or visit our website:

www.boarbankhall.org.uk

THIS YEAR'S PROGRAMME:

Advent Zoom Retreat: 15-17 December 2023. Evening sessions only. Theme: *Comfort and Joy*

Lent Zoom Retreat: 8-10 March 2024. Evening sessions only. Theme: *Fasting and Feasting*

Summer Residential: Date 27th July - 3rd August 2024. Theme: *What Catholics Really Believe*

A week of prayer, study, conversation, walks and fun, exploring the basics of Catholic faith with the help of books by GK Chesterton and Fr Richard Conrad OP.

<https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/48326>

COLUMBANS SCHOOLS MEDIA COMPETITION: 'BIODIVERSITY MATTERS'

Closing date 17 February 2024. Winners will be announced on Columban media on 21 March 2024, the International Day of Forests. Two separate competitions will be judged, one for students in Ireland and one for students in Britain with cash prizes for the winning entrants and the first prize is an impressive £500 or 500 euros! High-profile judges from the world of journalism have been secured, who write for the Irish News, The Irish Times, The Tablet and Independent Catholic News. Also, Catholic experts on environmental protection and education, including Columban eco-theologian Fr Sean McDonagh, Mary Colwell and Jane Mellett. Winning entries will be published in the Columbans' Far East magazine, Vocation for Justice newsletter, Columban websites in Ireland and Britain, Columban social media and in other Catholic media.

See more info here: www.columbancompetition.com/

ADVENT RESOURCES

A series of reflections for Advent based on the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love for individual or group use:

Download here: <https://jpshrewsbury.files.wordpress.com/2023/11/advent-reflection-sheet-2023-a4-5-2.pdf>

or here: <https://www.justice-and-peace.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/12/ADVENT-REFLECTION-SHEET-2023-A4-5.pdf>

DIARY

DECEMBER

15-17 Thinking Faith Advent Zoom Retreat: Evening sessions only. Theme: *Comfort and Joy* For more information, contact Sr Margaret on margaret@boarbankhall.org.uk, or visit our website: www.boarbankhall.org.uk (see page 14)

27 CAFOD CHRISTMAS FUN RUN in **Liverpool** and **Bollington** (near Macclesfield), as well as an opportunity to take part wherever you are! More info and sponsor forms here: <https://cafod.org.uk/fundraise/sponsored-challenge-events/run-for-cafod/christmas-fun-run>

Liverpool: Wavertree Sports Park, Wellington Road, Liverpool, L15 4LE Email events@cafod.org.uk 07779 804242

Bollington Middlewood Way (viaduct next to St Gregory's Church), Bollington, Macclesfield, SK10 5JR Email shrewsbury@cafod.org.uk

JANUARY

14 PEACE SUNDAY Theme Artificial Intelligence and Peace info@paxchristi.org.uk (see page 13)

18 – 25 WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY Theme 'Go and do likewise' <https://ctbi.org.uk/week-of-prayer-for-christianunity-2024/>

19 CAFOD QUIZ NIGHT at Our Lady's Parish Centre, Ellesmere Port Town Centre at 7.30 pm. Entrance is £3 for adults and £1 for children and the usual raffle will take place with good prizes. Refreshments will be available at the interval. All proceeds will go towards CAFOD's latest development project. Contact Tony Walsh on 0151 355 6419

DON'T MISS THE LATEST NJPN E BULLETIN WITH A WEALTH OF ARTICLES AND INFO: Download here:

<https://www.justice-and-peace.org.uk/campaigns/njpn-e-bulletin-3rd-december-2023/>

- Sign up for regular news and information from NJPN including a new fortnightly e-bulletin with a comprehensive round-up of current events, campaigns, e-petitions and resources (plus copies of this newsletter & back issues for NJPN North West) at www.justice-and-peace.org.uk or contact ebulletin@justice-and-peace.org or admin@justice-and-peace.org.uk 020 7901 4864

- Read the WINTER issue of *MOUTHPEACE* the quarterly online newsletter for Shrewsbury, Liverpool and Lancaster dioceses <https://www.justice-and-peace.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/11/Winter-Mouthpeace-2023-4.pdf>

- Many items taken from the daily e-bulletin Independent Catholic News www.indcatholicnews.com an invaluable free resource for up-to-date J&P news, events and in-depth articles.

The views expressed in this bulletin are not necessarily those of NJPN