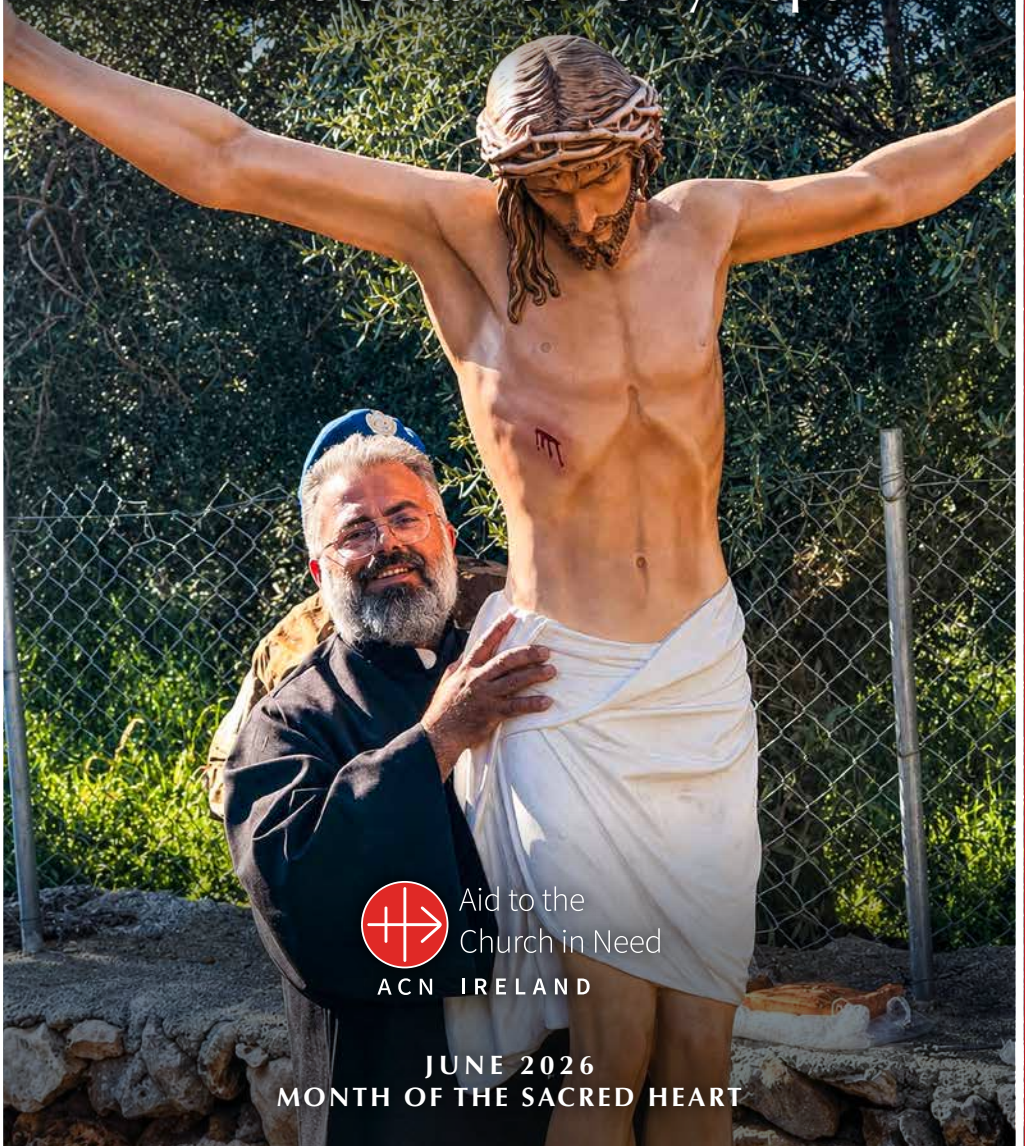


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Cover image: Fr Fadi Felefli, parish priest of St George Parish in Debel, Lebanon, holds a new statue of the crucified Jesus. Italian soldiers serving with the UN peacekeeping force brought the new statue to the village and helped install it to replace one damaged days earlier when an Israel Defence Forces soldier struck it with the blunt side of an axe, sparking international outrage over such a desecration. *Photo: Courtesy Debel alert.*

INTRODUCTION

The Sacred Heart of Jesus

Ireland's Enduring Devotion

MICHAEL KELLY,
DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS



Dear Friends,

When I was growing up, every time my parents re-decorated the main family room, the transformation was not complete until a priceless family heirloom was reaffixed to the wall: the faded and battered image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.



It had been a wedding gift to my parents in the early 1970s, was there as a sign of comfort when my mother died in that room in 2019 and is still there as both a memory and a challenge every time the family gathers together.

The image is not so common in homes nowadays, even for Catholic families. But in homes across Ireland – from whitewashed

cottages in the west to terraced houses in Dublin – the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus once occupied a place of honour.

A gentle, flame-encircled heart crowned with thorns and surmounted by a cross, often illuminated by a small red lamp, reminded families daily of Christ's burning love. This devotion, though universal in the Church, took deep root in Irish soil and became a hallmark of Catholic life here for more than two centuries.

Its history reveals both the tenderness of divine mercy, and the resilience of a people who turned to the heart of Christ amid persecution, famine and social upheaval.

The devotion's modern form traces to the seventeenth century and the revelations granted to **St Margaret Mary Alacoque**, a

Visitation nun in Paray-le-Monial, **France**. Between 1673 and 1675, Christ appeared to her, showing his Sacred Heart aflame with love for humanity and requesting acts of reparation, especially through Holy Communion on the First Fridays and Eucharistic adoration.

St Margaret Mary reported that the Lord promised extraordinary graces to those who honoured his Heart. While medieval saints had contemplated the wounded side of Christ, St Margaret Mary's mission, supported by her Jesuit confessor **St Claude de la Colombière**, spread the devotion worldwide.

In **Ireland**, the practice took hold early. The first known Confraternity of the Sacred Heart was established at St Patrick's College, Maynooth in 1812-13 by **Dr Daniel Murray**, with hundreds of students enrolled.

Another was founded at the Ursuline Convent in Waterford in 1820. By the 1830s, the devotion had spread sufficiently for the Irish bishops to petition Rome successfully for a proper Mass and Office. Vincentian fathers established a prominent Confraternity at St Peter's Church, Phibsboro, Dublin, which **Pope Leo XIII** later raised to an Archconfraternity, extending its spiritual benefits nationwide.

The decisive moment came on Passion Sunday, March 30, 1873. At the

request of the bishops, every parish in Ireland gathered for solemn ceremonies consecrating the entire nation to the Sacred Heart — the first country in the world to do so collectively.

This act of collective reparation was offered in a spirit of atonement for sins against Christ's love and in thanksgiving for Ireland's fidelity despite centuries of suffering. Families responded by enthroning the Sacred Heart in their homes, placing his image in a place of honour and promising to live under his kingship.

The red lamp became a beacon of faith, a visible pledge that Christ reigned in the domestic Church.



Painting by Gyaviira Luwaga depicting Christ appearing to St Margaret Mary Alacoque.

The nineteenth-century apostle of the devotion in Ireland was **Fr James Cullen SJ** (1841-1921). Appointed national director of the Apostleship of Prayer (League of the Sacred Heart) in 1887, he founded the Irish Messenger of the Sacred Heart the following year. This modest penny monthly became a spiritual lifeline, reaching a peak circulation of nearly 250,000 in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Through its pages, Irish Catholics learned the Morning Offering, the First Friday devotion and the practice of reparation. Fr Cullen also established the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association (PTAA) in 1898, linking personal temperance with reparation to the Sacred Heart.

Confraternities flourished in parishes and schools; by the 1930s an estimated one million Irish people had formally consecrated themselves or their families through the apostleship. The devotion nourished Irish Catholicism at its most vibrant. It taught that Christ's love is personal and particular — he knows every family's joys and sorrows. It fostered virtues of trust, gratitude and self-sacrifice.

In an era of emigration and economic hardship, the Sacred Heart promised, *"I will bless every place where an image of my heart is exposed and honoured."* Generations of Irish mothers lit the lamp each evening and taught their children the simple aspiration: *"O Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in Thee."*

Though the confraternities and the lamp declined after the 1960s, the devotion has never disappeared. In June 2025, **Archbishop Eamon Martin** led thousands to Knock Shrine to renew Ireland's consecration to the Sacred Heart — the first national renewal in over 150 years — during the Sacred Heart Crusade inspired by the 350th anniversary of St Margaret Mary's revelations. Four pilgrim statues, blessed by **Pope Francis**, had visited every diocese, calling families once more to enthrone Christ in their homes.

In an age of secularism and spiritual fatigue, the Sacred Heart speaks with undiminished power. It reminds Ireland that true renewal begins not in programmes or policies but in returning to the One who loved us first.

As the Messenger has testified for over a century, countless letters still arrive bearing witness to graces received through this devotion — peace in troubled families, courage in illness, conversions of heart.

The flame of the Sacred Heart has never been extinguished in Ireland. May it burn ever brighter, drawing us back to the source of all love and mercy.



MICHAEL KELLY

Director of Public Affairs,
ACN Ireland



Horror over attack on Jerusalem Nun



Bishop William Shomali of Jerusalem has described a recent Israeli extremist's assault on a French nun in the holy city *"extremely serious and despicable."*

A 36-year-old Israeli man was arrested after assaulting a nun in East Jerusalem, according to Israeli police, in an attack they called *"racially motivated."*

Bishop William Shomali said he was horrified as he watched video footage of the incident, describing it as *"painful, alarming and extremely serious."*

"The nun is physically frail. The attacker shoved her forcefully from behind, causing her to fall to the ground after her head struck a raised stone tile. He then returned and stepped on her. A young Israeli man of Russian origin intervened and pulled him away, though his identity is unknown," he added.

Bishop Shomali said *"the way the nun fell could have led to her death, especially as she was pushed violently from behind."*

The attack is only the latest in a string of anti-Christian incidents in Israel, with activists warning attacks are on the rise.

The Rossing Centre for Education and Dialogue recently reported 111 cases of attacks against Christians documented in 2024. Last year's inaugural report documented 89 cases, including 32 attacks on church properties, 30 formally reported cases of spitting, and seven violent attacks, most of them against multiple victims.

In the 2024 study, 111 episodes are reported, including 46 physical attacks, 35 attacks against church properties, and 13 cases of harassment.

Bishop Shomali stressed *"the need to re-educate those who hold racist ideologies."*

Church leaders in Jerusalem have repeatedly called on Israeli authorities to act decisively to stop such attacks.

The attack follows a video last month showing an Israeli soldier taking a sledgehammer to a statue of Jesus, in a widely condemned incident.

FEATURE

Priestly Courage and the Quest for Religious Freedom in 1798

HARRY CASEY, DIRECTOR OF ACN IRELAND

In the turbulent June of 1798, the Irish countryside echoed with cries for liberty as the United Irishmen rebellion challenged British rule. Among its most iconic figures was **Fr John Murphy**, the curate of Boolavogue in Co. Wexford. Fr Murphy's leadership at the rebel headquarters on Vinegar Hill came to symbolise the Catholic contribution to a cause that transcended sectarian lines.

His story illuminates not only personal bravery but the rebellion's deeper significance: a bold, if ultimately thwarted, attempt to secure religious equality and political freedom for all Irish people.

Born around 1753 in Tincurry, Co. Wexford, John Murphy was ordained in secret during the Penal Laws era and served as curate in the parish of Kilcormuck.

Initially unwilling to challenge the status quo, he recoiled from violence. That changed on May 26, when yeomanry and militia burned homes and terrorised Catholic communities near Boolavogue. Fr Murphy took up arms, rallying parishioners with the cry that defence of faith and hearth demanded action. On

May 27, he led a small force to a stunning victory at Oulart Hill, routing a larger detachment of the North Cork Militia.

This success swelled rebel ranks and helped establish a major camp on Vinegar Hill outside Enniscorthy. By mid-June the Wexford rebels, numbering up to 20,000, had concentrated at Vinegar Hill after setbacks at New Ross and Arklow. Fr Murphy returned to the hilltop encampment before the decisive clash, labouring to strengthen its makeshift defences — earthworks, pikes, and limited firearms — against an impending assault.

On June 21, 1798, **General Gerard Lake's** 13,000-strong government army, equipped with artillery, surrounded the position. The battle was brutal and one-sided. Rebel pikemen fought valiantly, but cannon fire and disciplined infantry overwhelmed them. Fr Murphy was present throughout the fighting, encouraging his men and attempting to coordinate resistance. Though the camp fell, poor coordination among Crown columns allowed thousands of rebels, including Fr Murphy, to break out and continue the campaign.

The defeat at Vinegar Hill marked the effective end of large-scale operations in Wexford, yet Fr Murphy refused to surrender. He led a column westward, hoping to ignite further risings in the midlands. Captured near Tullow, Co. Carlow, on July 2, he endured summary court-martial, torture, hanging, decapitation, and the burning of his body — a fate intended to terrorise.

His head was displayed on a spike. Yet his sacrifice endured in ballad and memory: Boolavogue still recalls the priest who *“lit the fire”* of freedom.

Beyond individual heroism, the 1798 Rebellion held profound importance for religious freedom. The Society of the United Irishmen, founded in 1791 by Presbyterians in Belfast and joined by Catholics and liberal Protestants, explicitly rejected the sectarian divisions fostered by the Penal Laws. Its manifesto called for *“a cordial union among all the people of Ireland”* under the common name of Irishmen, demanding an independent republic with equal rights regardless of creed.

Leaders such as **Theobald Wolfe Tone** and **Lord Edward Fitzgerald** envisioned a secular state where Catholics would enjoy full emancipation, Presbyterians would escape the disabilities of the established Anglican Church, and governance would rest on popular sovereignty rather than religious privilege.

In Wexford, where the rising assumed a more Catholic character due to local grievances, priests like Fr Murphy stood shoulder to shoulder with Protestant United Irishmen in earlier phases. The rebellion’s ideals — liberty, equality, fraternity — mirrored the French and American revolutions but were rooted in Ireland’s own grievances against discriminatory laws that barred Catholics from parliament, the professions, and land ownership.

Though the uprising was crushed, with perhaps 30,000 dead, its failure paradoxically advanced the cause. The Act of Union (1800) absorbed Ireland into the United Kingdom partly to prevent further republican experiments, yet the demand for Catholic rights could no longer be ignored. Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic Association drew directly on 1798’s legacy, culminating in the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829.

Two centuries later, Vinegar Hill stands as more than a military footnote. It represents a moment when Irishmen of different faiths glimpsed a shared future free from religious coercion. **Fr Murphy’s stand for religious liberty endures as a beacon of hope and a warning against division at a time when so many people served by ACN are still denied basic freedoms.**

SUCCESS STORY!

A Vehicle for a Vast Rural Parish



CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Over 70 small villages, widely scattered across the African bush, belong to the parish of St Michael, in Bozoum, in the northwest of the **Central African Republic**. A vast, underdeveloped area where most of the people live in great poverty. The Church is with them, supporting them in all their spiritual, psychological and material needs.

But the distances are extreme and the priests regularly have to face perilous adventures across rickety bridges and along dirt roads, transformed during the rainy season into a virtual sea of mud.

And essential supplies, such as medicines for the mission dispensary, likewise have to be fetched from far away, sometimes even involving journeys into neighbouring Cameroon.

Some time ago Italian Carmelite **Fr Marco Poggi** asked our help for an urgently needed all-terrain vehicle able to cope with the challenging conditions. The repair costs on his old vehicle were becoming an “unsustainable burden,” he told us.

The motor was worn out and the suspension ruined by the rough potholed

roads, and the constant breakdowns were crippling his parish ministry and frequently leaving the faithful waiting in vain for their priest.

Thanks to the generosity of our benefactors, we were able to find the €37,454 needed for the new all-terrain vehicle, which has now arrived – to the great rejoicing of all concerned. Fr Marco has written to thank you all:

“It is not simply a vehicle that you have provided us with; rather your help has made it possible for thousands of people to find new hope, receive the Sacraments, access vital medical supplies, receive an education and experience the concrete reality of our presence among them.

Every kilometre we can now drive, will likewise be the result of your generosity. We thank you not merely with our words but with our daily prayer. Every day we remember before the Lord all those who are helping to make our mission possible. May God bless you, protect you and fill you with all good things.”

PROJECT NEWS

The Training of 50 Seminarians in the Diocese of Tete **MOZAMBIQUE**



Africa is a continent of hope for the Catholic Church. Worldwide, one in every five Catholics now comes from the African continent, as does one in every seven priests and roughly one in every three seminarians.

Not surprisingly, therefore, vocations are also on the increase in the Diocese of Tete in north-west **Mozambique**. Right now, 34 young men from this diocese are currently studying in the various seminaries around the country, and another 16 are currently being trained at the propedeutic seminary in the diocese itself – the preliminary phase of their formation before they enter the full major seminary.

Certainly, no one would become a priest here for the sake of a comfortable life. With an area of over 94,300 km², Tete is larger than many entire European countries, including Portugal, the former colonial power.

Yet the diocese has just 26 parishes and its close-on 322,000 Catholics live widely scattered. **Bishop Diamantino Antunes** tells us that many of these settlements can only be reached on foot. Not even motorcycles can reach some areas. Frequently the priests simply have

to travel long distances on foot.

There is an urgent need for more priests in these remote areas in order to be able to minister more intensively to the Catholic faithful. But in this country, plagued as it is by poverty, natural disasters and continuing violent conflicts, the Church simply cannot afford the cost of training her future priests.

The young men themselves, overwhelmingly from the poorest families, are happy to offer themselves and their lives to God, but can scarcely contribute anything in the way of material or financial support for their training.

So we are proposing, once again this year, to support the training of these 50 seminarians, with a contribution of €24,600.



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Mass Stipends for the Carmelite Fathers in the Country **INDONESIA**



With a population of over 281 million, almost 80% of whom are Muslims, **Indonesia** is the most populous Muslim nation in the world. Nonetheless, for the Catholic Church in this Southeast Asian island nation there is also reason for rejoicing, since there is a wealth of vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

In fact, the Carmelites are experiencing a sustained boom in vocations today. The first Carmelites actually began preaching the Gospel here way back in the 17th century, but the first two Carmelite missionaries both suffered martyrdom in 1638.

It was not until 344 years later – in 1982 – that two Carmelite priests once again arrived there, both of them from Kerala in southern **India**. Just seven years after their arrival they were able to open their first

formation house and accept the first 26 young aspirants.

Today the Carmelite Friars have five formation houses across Indonesia and the order has 150 friars, 65 of whom are priests, plus another 85 young men in various stages of their formation.

The economic situation in the country is challenging, however, and it is a struggle for the friars to cover the many needs of their Carmelite family. Thankfully, the Mass stipends so generously offered by our benefactors, which we pass on to them, are a crucial and welcome support.

Their superior, **Fr Felix John Elavunkal**, has once again asked our support for this year. **He and his fellow Carmelites are only too happy to celebrate these Holy Masses for your intentions.**



© ACH

Evangelisation Courses on the Digital Media

SRI LANKA

SRI LANKA: Training programme for Youth to use new digital technology for evangelization.

Almost 70% of the approximately 22 million inhabitants of **Sri Lanka** are Buddhists, while Catholics number somewhere around 1.45 million – and roughly half of them live within the Archdiocese of Colombo. They include roughly 150,000 young people.

Like young people everywhere in the world, these youngsters are also fascinated by the world of social media and artificial intelligence. This is also increasingly becoming a topic that the Church has to and wishes to engage with, since it involves many ethical and moral problems as well, yet at the same time has great potential for evangelisation.

Fr Jude Chrysantha Fernando, a priest in the Archdiocese of Colombo

with responsibility for matters relating to social media, explains: *“The digital world is neither good nor bad in itself. It can be good so long as it is used for the benefit of society. Yet there is a danger that journalistic professionalism and the credibility of the information media can be undermined. And individuals can also be damaged in their human dignity and personal reputation as a result. At the same time the holiness of the Catholic Church can be tarnished as a result. Young people are easily fooled by these creative video clips, and so it is important that we train our young people and show them how to use these media in a positive and fruitful manner.”*

Moreover, the modern media can even be a valuable resource for evangelising people in the modern world, Fr Fernando explains,

“The Catholic Church has acted very wisely in being the first in history to make use of modern technologies such as the printed media and radio. Hence we must also make the best possible use of these digital technologies. Since most people in our society own a smartphone today, it is easy to spread the Gospel message via social media.”

However, in order to use these media in such a way that they truly serve evangelisation, young people need to be solidly grounded in this field and also made aware of the moral aspects involved.

The Archbishop of Colombo, **Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith**, has also written to us. *“Our young people need to be trained in order to become ethically conscious journalists who can employ the modern technologies on the basis of the Church’s teaching and in line with the Year of*

Renewal which we are currently celebrating in our parishes.”

The Archdiocese of Colombo is planning to offer 16-day courses for up to 400 young people as part of their training in ethical journalism. These courses will be run by Catholic journalists and university professors and the participants will subsequently work in the parishes of the archdiocese, passing on what they have learnt to other young people.

The overall aim is to train up a generation of Catholic media specialists who will exercise a positive influence on the media landscape of the country, and through it on, society as a whole.

We are planning to support this excellent project with a contribution of €7,500.



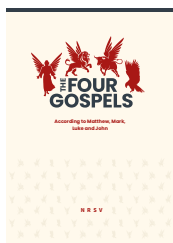
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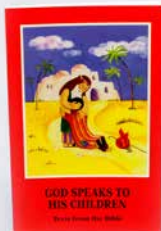
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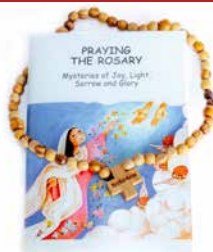
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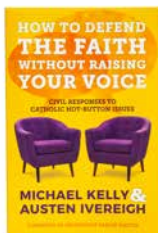
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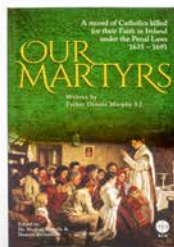
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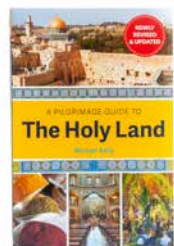
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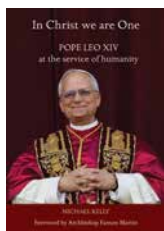
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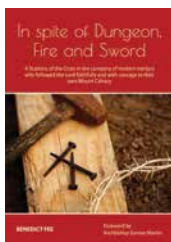
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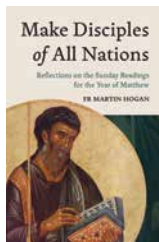
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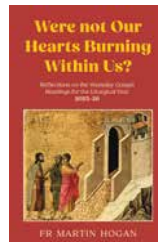
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SUCCESS STORY!

Support for 23 Religious Sisters in the Diocese of Odessa-Simferopol

UKRAINE

© Ismael Martínez Sánchez

The Latin-rite Diocese of Odessa and Simferopol in the south of **Ukraine** has been severely affected by the war. There are 23 religious sisters working in the parishes of the diocese, performing a heroic work of service for the suffering people.

But like the poor and needy they are caring for, they too are facing ever-growing problems on account of the soaring prices of basic essentials. Thanks to the generosity of our benefactors, we have once again helped them over the past year with a contribution of €1000 each to cover their basic living costs – and will continue to do so, just as we do for many other groups of religious sisters in the other dioceses of Ukraine.

Sr Maria Jonasza Bukowska of the congregation the Sisters of St Elizabeth, who are currently working in Chernomorsk, caring above all for the homeless, refugees and needy elderly people, has written to tell us about their work.

“At the beginning of the war we decided to stay on here in order to serve the local people and our own parishioners as best we could. Right from the start, God has shown us how to help. Every day more and more people came knocking on our door. Some of them had already been coming to us for years, and we never sent anyone away empty-handed. But the war has only made the problem of poverty and the terrible soaring prices more painful than ever.”

“We thank God every day for all our kind benefactors to whom we owe it that we can still offer these people something good and a little bit of normality. But we are thankful above all for the fact that He continues to protect us so well and holds all our concerns in his heart – for example the fact that our convent is still standing... and we thank Him for the fact that he still gives us each new day and with it the strength to overcome our fears and continue our work of service. For love is stronger than fear, and stronger than death.”

Sr Halina Gaura of the Sisters of St Vincent, who are working in Balta and also caring for the needy, adds: *“Above all in these so difficult times of war your support is of immense importance for*

us - for it gives a sense of your solidarity, brotherly friendship, and the hope and strength to continue our work of service in this place. May God reward your kind hearts a hundredfold!”

Please help us to continue supporting these brave religious sisters in Ukraine!

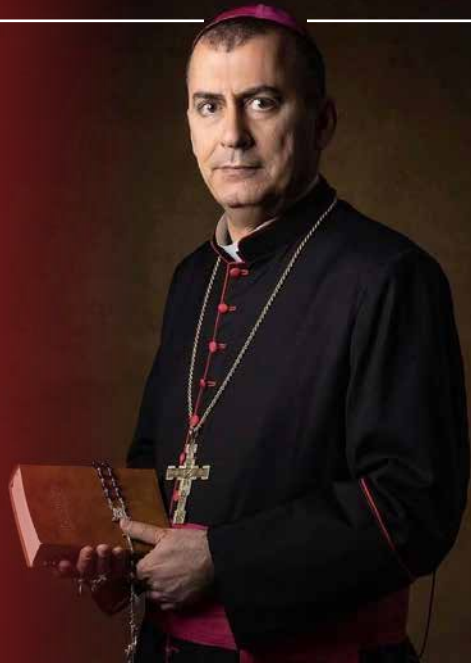


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UKRAINE: Support for 23 Religious Sisters in the Diocese of Odessa-Simferopol.

'Do not be afraid, just believe'

First interview with
new Chaldean Patriarch



In 2015, the then Archbishop of Mosul left for **Australia** after his entire flock was exiled following the rise of the Islamic State. One decade later, he returns to Iraq, now as the newly elected Patriarch of the Chaldean Church.

On 29 May, His Beatitude **Amel Shamon Nona** will be officially installed at St Joseph's Cathedral in Baghdad. Before returning to Iraq to lead the Chaldean Catholic Church, the newly elected Patriarch spoke with Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) about his journey from the frontlines of persecution in Mosul to the challenges of the global diaspora.

You were the Bishop of Mosul during one of the most painful periods in recent

history, the occupation by the Islamic State, and lived through the exodus of your people and the violence that forced so many to leave their homes. How does that experience of suffering shape your vision as Chaldean Patriarch?

It was a very difficult but defining time. Being a bishop in a city in constant danger, where every week or month someone was killed, left a deep mark on me. But it also taught me that the faith of our people is their true anchor. Despite everything, they kept their hope alive. To suffer for being a faithful believer certainly deepens your way of looking at life. That is the best contribution of our people: they suffered immensely, yet they have this deep, unshakable belief that their lives must be

full of faith and Christian principles. That is the hope I carry into this new mission.

As you prepare for your installation in Baghdad, what is your message to the young people who are torn between staying in Iraq or seeking a future elsewhere?

The land where we have lived for thousands of years is vital to our faith. I respect the personal choice of anyone who needs to live where they feel they can thrive, but I tell them: wherever you are, you have a mission. If you are in the Middle East, your way of achieving that mission is different from someone in the diaspora, but the goal is the same. Practice your faith, preach it through your actions, and live as the Lord wants. That is the basis of our life, regardless of our geography.

Looking ahead, how can organisations like ACN, who have stood by the Church in its darkest hours, support you in this new chapter?

I want to thank ACN from the bottom of my heart. When I was in Mosul between 2010 and 2014, in the midst of the most painful situations, ACN reached us when others could not. You helped us keep our community alive. For this new mission, I rely on your support, particularly for education and formation. If we have an educated generation that understands its faith, that is the best base for our people to stay and flourish. ACN has worked very well in the past, and I believe we will continue that vital work together to ensure that our people have a future and above all, that they have hope.



© Giovanni Portelli

AUSTRALIA: Bernard Toutounji (National director of ACN Australia) welcoming His Grace Amel Shamon Nona (Archbishop of Mossul) Red Wednesday 2018.

TRAINING OF PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS

Our aid has always focused on the theological training and qualification of seminarians. After all, future priests will ultimately be spiritual pillars and safeguard sacramental life.

Therefore, our educational assistance mainly flows into countries where the suitable and continuous training of future priests is endangered or not adequately ensured due to poverty, war, or persecution.

10,991 SEMINARIANS SUPPORTED

One in every ten candidates training for the priesthood was supported by ACN in 2023. Most of these were in Africa (5,793) where priestly vocations are the most numerous, followed by 2,103 in Latin America, 1,996 in Asia and 1,099 in Europe, including over 600 seminarians in Ukraine.

Your support is essential to continue this vital mission. By donating to Aid to the Church in Need, you can help ensure that future priests receive the training they need to become the spiritual leaders their communities desperately need.

Every contribution makes a significant difference. Please consider donating today to support the theological education of seminarians and strengthen the Church's presence in regions affected by poverty, war, and persecution.

Please donate what you can at
acnireland.org/donate

or call [RoI] +353 (0)1 837 7516
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PAPUA NEW GUINEA
Seminarians from
the Wabag Diocese.

When Nothing is Quite Sacred Anymore

FR DOMINIC MCGRATTAN

There is something both shocking and strangely familiar about recent images from southern **Lebanon**: an Israeli soldier, sledgehammer in hand, smashing a crucifix and striking the figure of Christ.

It invites outrage, and rightly so. Not simply because it targets a sacred image, but because it echoes – however faintly – the humiliation the image represents.

The crucifix is not decorative. It is the sign of a man publicly stripped, mocked, and killed. To desecrate it is, in a sense, to repeat the act.

In a very different register, recent weeks have also seen the circulation of AI-generated images of **Donald Trump**

depicted as Christ the healer – images that, while not violent, draw on the same readiness to appropriate what is sacred without any clear sense of its meaning or limits.

The two are not equivalent. But they are not unrelated. If one is physical desecration, the other points to a cultural one – less visible, but no less telling. It is in that light that the incident in Lebanon should be seen. Condemnation has been swift in some quarters. Yet, writing in *The Spectator*, **Melanie McDonagh** points to something more unsettling: such incidents rarely stand alone.

Her account of harassment of clergy, obstruction of worship, and hostility in and around the Holy Land suggests something

less accidental and more ambient. Not systemic in a formal sense, perhaps, but certainly not isolated.

Even so, perspective matters. As grotesque as the smashed crucifix is, it remains an attack on an image – symbolic violence set against a world in which the desecration of human life has become almost routine.

The *2025 ACN Religious Freedom in the World* report found that around 5.4 billion people – nearly two-thirds of the world’s population – live in countries where religious freedom is seriously violated. The figure applies across all faiths, but Christians remain among the most widely affected.

Other datasets, including those cited in Westminster briefings, estimate that several thousand Christians are killed each year for faith-related reasons, with over 4,400 deaths recorded in 2024, alongside thousands of attacks on churches and Christian communities.

Churches destroyed, clergy abducted, women targeted, entire populations displaced: this is not exaggeration but fact. The smashed crucifix must be set alongside these realities—not to diminish it, but to see it clearly.

And yet, to leave it there would be to miss something important.

What makes such incidents troubling

is not only their offensiveness, but what they reveal: a growing permission, in certain contexts, to treat Christian symbols – and Christian belief – with a contempt that would be unthinkable if directed elsewhere.

That was illustrated clearly in **Belgium**. A popular breakfast programme on the national broadcaster VRT aired a ‘*Blue Monday*’ sketch in which presenters smashed statues of Jesus and Mary for comic effect. The broadcaster later apologised, acknowledging it had “*misjudged*” the segment.

What proved more revealing came afterwards, when Irish journalist **Colm Flynn** – well known across both religious and mainstream media – pressed those involved on their reasoning. Why was it acceptable to treat Christian imagery in this way? Would the same be done with Jewish or Muslim sacred objects?

The response faltered. There were appeals to humour, context, and Christianity’s majority status. But when the comparison was pressed, the hesitation was unmistakable. What they would not do to Jewish or Muslim symbols, they felt free to do with Christian ones.

That, in turn, rests on a familiar premise: that Christianity is treated less as a living faith than as a cultural inheritance – something to draw on, reinterpret, or disregard.

The crucifix becomes not a sign of devotion, but a prop. Once that shift takes hold, a licence follows.

That licence is visible closer to home. A recent report by a Vienna-based research and advocacy group monitoring discrimination against Christians in Europe recorded over 2,400 anti-Christian hate incidents in a single year, including vandalism, arson, and physical assault. Britain features consistently among the countries where such incidents are documented.

Survey data also suggests that more than half of Christians in some studies report hostility or ridicule in public or professional life, with younger Christians particularly likely to self-censor.

This is not persecution in the sense experienced in parts of Africa, Asia, or the Middle East. No serious observer would claim equivalence. But neither is it negligible. It represents a different register of the same reality: a narrowing of the space in which Christian belief can be expressed without penalty, distortion, or dismissal.

The danger lies in normalisation.

When a crucifix is smashed in Lebanon, it is recognised – at least by some – as an outrage. When Christian belief is marginalised or caricatured in Western public life, it is more likely to be framed

as progress, or as the cost of pluralism. The language differs, but the underlying dynamic is not unrelated.

In both cases, there is a failure to recognise what is at stake as something that carries meaning for real people – something that deserves, at the very least, respect.

None of this requires a defensive posture. Christianity is not fragile. The figure on the cross is not diminished by the blows of a hammer, nor by the derision of a culture uneasy with its inheritance. If anything, the crucifix already anticipates such responses: a God who enters into humiliation rather than evading it.

But theological resilience should not be mistaken for cultural indifference. A society comfortable with disparaging one tradition while carefully insulating others from offence is not neutral. It is making a judgment – one that deserves to be named.

The more difficult task is to hold together two truths. The desecration of symbols matters, because symbols mediate meaning, memory, and identity. To attack them is, in a small but real way, to wound the communities for whom they carry weight.

But the desecration of human life matters more. Infinitely more. Any discussion of religious offence that loses sight of that hierarchy risks distortion.

The temptation is to choose between these truths: to fixate on symbolic slights, or to dismiss them in the face of greater horrors. The more honest position is to refuse that choice: to say the smashing of a crucifix is wrong while recognising that it is a sign, not the substance, of a deeper disorder.

A disorder in which reverence itself is becoming harder to sustain – seen not only in acts of vandalism or careless satire, but in the growing ease with which what is sacred is drawn into cultural or political projects and reshaped to fit them.

The recent images of Donald Trump depicted as Christ the healer belong to that same pattern: many were rightly appalled, yet others defended them, revealing how

readily the language and imagery of faith can be pressed into service for ends far removed from its own claims.

And that, perhaps, is where the desecration of Christian imagery in Lebanon, Belgium, Britain – and, in a different register, the United States – intersect. Not in a single narrative of persecution, but in a shared erosion of the instinct to treat what others hold sacred with care.

It is a small instinct, easily dismissed – but once lost, not easily regained.

Fr Dominic McGrattan is a priest of the Down and Connor Diocese and chaplain at Queen's University Belfast.



LEBANON: Desecration of a statue of Christ by an Israeli soldier.

Derry Priest Dedicates Homily Book to Persecuted Christians



For anyone who knows Derry, St Columba's Church, Long Tower is an iconic landmark in the Maiden City. It has been an area of Christian worship since the 12th Century. But the area dates to 546 when St Columba built his first monastery on the banks of the Foyle.

Derry was not spared the Reformation-era persecution and dispossession of Catholics. Catholics were forbidden from living within the walled city unless they converted to Anglicanism and supporter King Henry VIII's break with Rome.

It was fitting, therefore, that when the Long Tower-based **Fr Gerard Mongan** was convinced to write a book, that those who had suffered for their faith would be high on his agenda.

Fr Mongan, by his own admission a reluctant writer, only decided to put pen to paper after parishioners pleaded with him to give them something they could reflect on at home as an accompaniment to the Sunday homily.

Thus, his book of homilies was born, and demand was enormous.



Fr Gerard Mongan presenting a cheque to Michael Kelly of ACN Ireland.

Fr Mongan, a native of Omagh in Co. Tyrone, said that it was clear to him from the beginning that he wanted to donate proceeds of the book to the work of Aid to the Church in Need (ACN).

On behalf of those who suffer and are persecuted for their faith, ACN was delighted to receive Fr Mongan's generous donation.

ACN's **Michael Kelly** said that the thing that keeps persecuted Christians going, is knowing that they have not been forgotten. *"They always say, don't forget to pray for us – Fr Mongan's wonderfully generous donation is a concrete sign to the suffering Church that they are not forgotten."*



ACN Church Resources DAC



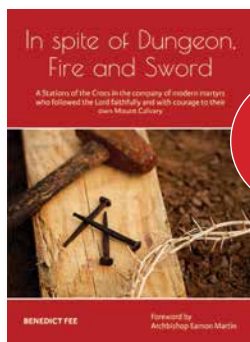
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Dilexi Te, Apostolic Exhortation to all Christians on Love for the Poor by Pope Leo XIV



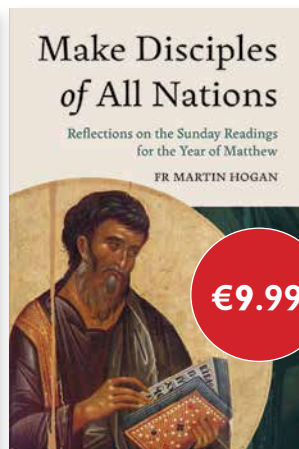
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Were not Our Hearts Burning Within Us? and *Make Disciples of All Nations* are two new titles from Fr Martin Hogan on weekday and Sunday reflections for the coming liturgical year.



€6.99

In spite of Dungeon, Fire and Sword, meditations on the Way of the Cross, reflecting on the 'martyrs of our times' by Benedict Fee.



€9.99

If you haven't already purchased your *Liturgical Calendar for Ireland 2026* (Ordo), it's not too late!!



€12.99

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JUNE CROSSWORD

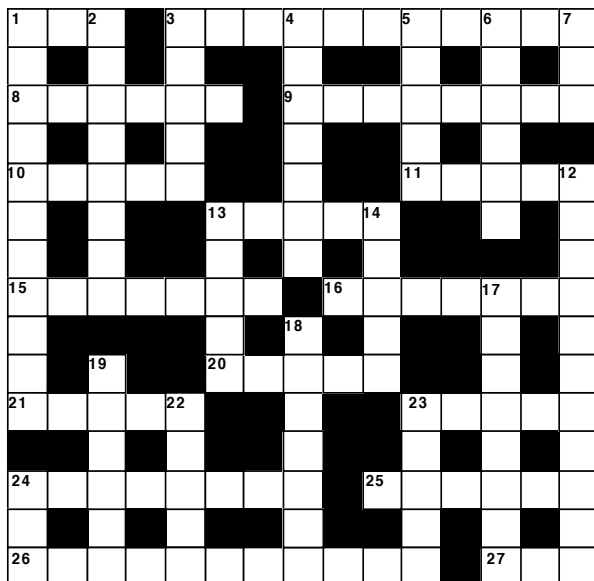
We are pleased to share with you our latest ACN crossword. We will print the answers in next month's edition.

Enjoy!

May Solution

Across 1 Arm, 3 Herculaneum, 8 Larynx, 9 Previous, 10 Agony, 11 Louth, 13 Joked, 15 Haddock, 16 I See His Blood Upon the Rose, 21 Trick, 23 Ochre, 24 Graceful, 25 Unwrap, 27 Our.

Down 1 A clean sheet, 2 Marooned, 3 Honey, 4 Cupcake, 5 Anvil, 6 Exodus, 7 Mrs, 12 Housekeeper, 13 Jacob, 14 Dosed, 17 Hitherto, 18 Toddler, 19 Mikado, 22 Knelt, 23 Ounce 24 Gnu.



ACROSS

- 1 Tart or pastry (3)
- 3 Predating written accounts (11)
- 8 White fur (6)
- 9 Memorial structure (8)
- 10 Had possession of (5)
- 11 Reject outright (5)
- 13 Held on desperately (5)
- 15 Centigrade temperature scale (7)
- 16 Pirate (7)
- 20 Executes by rope (5)
- 21 Jumped (5)
- 23 Collision (5)
- 24 Coming from the Land of the Rising Sun (8)
- 25 Relating to cattle (6)
- 26 Hymn of courage and trust (2,3,6)
- 27 Encountered (3)

DOWN

- 1 Winged dinosaur (11)
- 2 Variety of cheese (8)
- 3 Yearned (5)
- 4 The best hit you can achieve in Baseball (4,3)
- 5 Surname of Liz, British PM for less than two months in 2022 (5)
- 6 Sorry, filled with regret (6)
- 7 Feline creature (3)
- 12 The goodness of food (11)
- 13 Sofa (5)
- 14 Twelve dozen (5)
- 17 Fish tank (8)
- 18 Ambiguous, difficult to understand (7)
- 19 Occur (6)
- 22 Doctrine (5)
- 23 Harmonious combination of simultaneously played notes (5)
- 24 Sharp punch; injection (3)

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

‘Lord Hear Our Prayers...’

The *MIRROR* magazine, above all, belongs to the friends and benefactors of Aid to the Church in Need, Ireland. At ACN Ireland, we are a faith-filled and praying community. Every month, we invite you to send your prayers of petition, which will be placed on the altar at ACN and these intentions will be prayed for during that month.

We also invite readers, to pray for these intentions.



“I pray for more pro-life politicians who will speak courageously about the right to life.”

“I pray for more vocations to the priesthood so the younger generations of Catholics can always be close to their faith.”

“I pray that Ireland returns to gospel values and embraces the light of Christ again.”

“I pray for the Christians in Lebanon who are being terribly tested by the war in Iran. May God protect them and their faith amid the ordeal.”

“I pray for Aid to the Church in Need and their mission. May they continue to help the most vulnerable Christians in their time of need.”

“I pray that a close family member recovers from an aggressive bout of cancer.”

“I pray that families who are struggling to get by because of the cost of living are given the supports that they need to survive.”

“I pray for my local church, which is due to be closed. I can’t get transport to the second nearest church so I’m feeling very anxious.”

“I pray for a peaceful death of a very sick person in my family. Protect his dignity, Lord and comfort him when the time is right.”

Please send your intentions, in strictest confidence, to prayers@acnireland.org or write to 151, St Mobhi Road, Dublin 9 marking your envelope ‘*petitions*’.



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN IRELAND



Month of the Sacred Heart



‘O Sacred Heart of Jesus,
I have asked you for many favours,
but I earnestly implore this one.
Take it and place it in your open, broken Heart.
O Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in you.’

ST PIO OF PIETRELCINA

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