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Cover image: Sr Anabel with some of the children from the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart School, Lebanon.

INTRODUCTION

Facing Trials with the Hope that Does Not Disappoint

MICHAEL KELLY, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Dear Friends,

The dawn of a new year is always a turning point. There is time, of course, to look back on the last year: joys, sorrows, quiet satisfaction and inevitable disappointments.



On the global stage, our world is a dangerous place. While our minds have focused on the Holy Land and **Ukraine**, there are sadly many active conflicts globally. As we begin 2026, there are 59 ongoing conflicts, marking the highest level since World War II.

And yet, in the midst of this, the challenge for Christians is to witness to the light of Christ – the light that cannot be overcome by the darkness. Even when it seems difficult to be cheerful or optimistic, we can be people of hope.

In a Christian sense, optimism is a worldly expectation that things will get better based on circumstances, while hope is a confident, divinely rooted trust in God's faithfulness and promises, even

when current reality looks bleak, serving as an anchor for the soul towards eternal fulfilment in Christ.

Hope isn't about circumstances improving, but about God's character remaining steadfast, offering strength and purpose beyond what is seen. Hope is also about faith in trust: our belief in God's faithfulness, and the fact that he can see a way even when we can't.

This should not be seen as a call to a bland fatalism, or a meek acceptance of the world as it is. No, in every generation God has raised up courageous men and women who have given their all to improve the world, particularly for those who are most in need.

In Aid to the Church in Need, we are blessed to encounter such people all the time. Dear friends, you encounter them yourselves in the pages of this little *Mirror* which reflects so much of the light of the Gospel that so many of the missionaries that ACN supports radiate even in the most difficult of circumstances.

We know that the situation for Christians in many countries remains a difficult one. Our most recent **Religious Freedom in the World Report** (which is available on www.acnireland.org) shows that some 413 million Christians live in countries where religious freedom is severely violated — of these, approximately 220 million live in countries where they are directly exposed to persecution. About one in ten Christians today are directly exposed to persecution.

In **Pakistan** last year, I felt privileged to be invited by so many Christian families to share something of their lives. They are people who face immense persecution for their faith, and yet they are people of hope.

Speaking with one woman whose son had been killed for his faith in an attack on a Church, I asked how her faith remained so strong. She answered without hesitation: ***“Because Jesus is alive, and my son is with him. The grave could not hold my Lord, and it will not hold us forever.”***

In that moment, this woman taught me more about faith than years of sitting in theology lecture halls, and I thank God for her witness.

In the face of such darkness, where do people like this find hope? First, they anchor their hope in the resurrection of Jesus. Not as a comforting doctrine recited on Easter, but as historical bedrock that changes everything.

Second, persecuted believers drink deeply from the theology of the Cross. Western Christianity often presents the Cross as something Jesus endured so we would not have to. Many suffering believers see it differently: the Cross is the pattern, not merely the price.

When they are mocked, they remember Jesus was mocked. When they lose everything, they remember he became poor so they might become rich in God. This identification with Christ’s sufferings transforms pain from meaningless cruelty into purposeful fellowship.

Above all, they live inside an ancient story whose ending has already been written. The Bible they risk everything to read does not promise exemption from suffering; it promises vindication after it.

Finally, many discover a strange joy that defies circumstance. This is not denial or emotional dissociation; it is the stubborn miracle Jesus promised when He said, *“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33).

Thank you for all that you do for them.



MICHAEL KELLY
Director of Public Affairs,
ACN Ireland



FEATURE

God Gives Us the Grace We Need

FR ANTON LÄSSER CP

TANZANIA: Seminarians praying after the Mass at St Augustine's Major Seminary in Peramiho.

© Ismael Martínez Sánchez

"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

Dear Friends,

The son of God became man so that he might lead us into the fullness of life with the Eternal Father.

On the Cross he paid the price of all the sins that separated us from God and opened the gateway to heaven, so that our lives might find fulfilment there in the perfect happiness for which we were created.

Here on earth, we are privileged to believe this; in the future we will see it. This new life is so important that the Lord instructed his apostles: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold,*



I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Baptism carries within it the grace of new life. In the waters of regeneration, we become children of the Eternal Father, members of the Body of Christ, temples of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, St Paul writes: *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come"* (II Corinthians 5:17).

So that the grace of baptism can be fully effective, God grants special spiritual graces proper to each vocation. Religious men and women, who feel called to live this baptismal grace in a unique and special way follow the 'evangelical counsels' of poverty, chastity and obedience – and are strengthened accordingly.

In the sacrament of Matrimony, married couples are given the spiritual armoury they need for a life lived in love, fidelity, mutual affection and forgiveness – so that they can imitate Christ in this way and be the living embodiment of the love of Christ for his Church (cf *Ephesians* 5:32).

In the sacrament of Holy Orders we priests receive a spiritual grace that makes us like Christ – as shepherd and head – and helps us to watch vigilantly over his flock and sustain it in faith and to lead it to good pastures (cf *Pastores Dabo Vobis* 15).

These specific graces can become living and fruitful – if they are believed in, embraced and nurtured. Otherwise, they remain sterile.

One of my seminarians, a late vocation who was originally a nurse, and then a mountaineer, and had even been engaged,

explained his decision to pursue a priestly vocation with the following image: *“You know, the decision between marriage and family and the priesthood is not like deciding between a rusty bicycle and a Ferrari, it’s like deciding between a Ferrari and a Lamborghini. Both vocations are splendid and wonderfully beautiful.”*

Can there be anything more important and more beautiful than to guide others to the fullness of life in God, by following your vocation and relying on the power of Jesus Christ?

My grateful thanks to you for helping us in this mission, and with my warmest good wishes and blessings for this New Year.

F. Anton Lässer CP

FATHER ANTON LÄSSER CP
Ecclesiastical Assistant, ACN International



UKRAINE: Seminarians at St Josaphat Seminary in Ivano-Frankivsk.

FEATURE

Religious Freedom is Disappearing in Many Countries, warns ACN Ireland

Michael Kelly, Director of Public Affairs for ACN Ireland, speaking during the launch of ACN's Religious Freedom Report.



Aid to the Church in Need has warned that religious freedom is under threat in many countries across the globe. ACN launched its biennial *Religious Freedom in the World Report* in Dublin on November 20, offering a global overview of the state of this fundamental right.

“The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion — protected under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — is not only under pressure, in many countries it is disappearing,” warned **Brandon Scott**, Advocacy Officer with ACN Ireland.

The study, covering the period from January 2023 to December 2024, warns of a worrying decline with two-thirds of humanity — more than 5.4 billion people — living in countries without full religious freedom.

Some 413 million Christians live in countries where religious freedom is severely violated — of these, approximately 220 million live in countries where they are directly exposed to persecution.

The report analyses the situation in 196 countries and documents serious violations of this right in 62 of them. Of these, 24 are classified as countries of ‘persecution’ and 38 as ‘discrimination’. Only two nations, **Kazakhstan** and **Sri Lanka**, showed improvements compared with the previous edition.

AUTHORITARIANISM THE GREATEST GLOBAL THREAT

The report identifies authoritarianism as the principal driver of religious repression. In 19 of the 24 countries in the persecution category, and in 33 of

the 38 countries with discrimination, governments apply systematic strategies to control or silence religious life.

THE ADVANCE OF JIHADISM AND RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

The report warns that Islamist extremism continues to expand, particularly across **Africa** and **Asia**. In 15 countries, it is the main cause of persecution, and in another ten, it contributes to discrimination.

The Sahel has become the epicentre of jihadist violence with groups such as Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP) and JNIM causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands, the displacement of millions and the destruction of hundreds of Christian churches and schools.

WAR, FORCED MIGRATION AND ORGANISED CRIME

Wars and religious-based violence have triggered a silent displacement crisis.

In **Nigeria**, attacks by armed groups linked to radicalised Fulani herders have left thousands dead and entire communities uprooted.

In the Sahel — especially in **Burkina Faso**, **Niger** and **Mali** — whole villages have been destroyed by Islamist militias. In **Sudan**, civil war has wiped centuries-old Christian communities off the map.

THE WEST IS NOT IMMUNE

The erosion of religious freedom also extends to **Europe** and **North America**. In 2023, **France** recorded nearly 1,000 attacks on churches; in **Greece**, there were more than 600 acts of vandalism; and similar spikes were observed in **Spain**, **Italy**, and the **United States** including desecrations of places of worship, physical assaults on clergy, and disruptions of religious services. According to ACN, these acts reflect a growing climate of ideological hostility towards religion.



Members of ACN Ireland with Bishop Paul Dempsey at the launch of ACN's *Religious Freedom Report*.

FEATURE

ACN raises Religious Freedom Concerns at European Parliament's 'Human Dignity' event

ACN's Marcela Szymanski speaks at the European Parliament's 'Human Dignity' event.

Aid to the Church in Need recently took part in the 'Human Dignity' event, part of the yearly 'European Prayer Breakfast,' which was held in December. The conference was held at the European Parliament and hosted by MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) **Bert-Jan Ruissen** (Netherlands, European Conservatives and Reformists – ECR) and **Davor Stier** (Croatia, European Popular Party – PPE), both of whom are committed to the defence of fundamental rights and religious freedom at the European Parliament.

Political figures and international experts packed the conference room to reflect on human dignity, religious liberty and the persecution of minorities in different parts of the world.

HUMAN DIGNITY AS A CORNERSTONE OF THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

Bert-Jan Ruissen highlighted the centrality of human dignity in the European project, present since its origins. "*Human dignity is Europe's most noble achievement, and freedom is its true strength,*" he stated, evoking the spirit of the European Union's founding fathers following the Second World War.

Mr Ruissen also pointed out that this principle is specifically enshrined in EU law. "*Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected,*" he stressed, in a nod to the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights.

ACN PRESENTS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WORLD REPORT

ACN International's head of International Advocacy, **Marcela Szymanski**, presented the main findings of the *Religious Freedom in the World Report (RFR)*, and explained that religious persecution continues to increase in several regions of the world, with millions of people deprived of the right to live their faith freely.

Violations of this right are not diminishing, mainly due to the fact that aggressors, their ideologies and sources of income do not recognise borders, which gives them increasing impunity.

Ms Szymanski explained that ACN's RFR report includes a thorough legal and political account of attacks, discrimination

and restrictions against believers of different faiths in more than 190 countries, and that the most serious cases are in **Africa**, the **Middle East** and **Asia**.

WARNING CALL FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION

Among the closing interventions, special attention went to Slovakia's **Jan Figel**, who was the EU's first Special Envoy for Religious Freedom. Figel issued a strong warning call to European institutions, saying that the role has been vacant for too long and reminded member states of their obligation to protect fundamental rights.

Mr Figel called for the urgent nomination of a new special envoy, saying that the delay is a worrying sign of how the defence of religious freedom is not a priority in the European Union's foreign policy.



ACN's Marcela Szymanski and Maria Lozano at the European Parliament's 'Human Dignity' event.

Building the Future of the Church

IRAQ

© ACN

For young Christians in **Iraq** the inevitable question is this: Is it really worthwhile staying on in my homeland? Many have already emigrated and the number of Christians continues to decline, because so many families and young people can no longer see any future for themselves in their home country.

But at least, since 2015, the Catholic University in Erbil has been something of a “*beacon and symbol of hope*” as **Archbishop Bashar Warda** puts it. They started with just 11 students. Today there are almost 800.

This Catholic University has been established with the help of ACN, which

for example funded the construction of one wing of the building, furnished the lecture halls and medical laboratories and supplied computers for the library. ACN also helped cover the running costs while the university was becoming established.

To this day – and thanks to your help – students from poorer backgrounds are helped with scholarships and study grants. The many different courses offered include such subjects as pharmacy, laboratory medicine, English, computers and IT, economics and architecture. The students – the majority of whom, but by no means all, are Christians – are able to gain an excellent academic formation, which also includes Christian social teaching.

In this way it is hoped not only to provide a future in Iraq for the young people themselves, but at the same time to promote a spirit of social cohesion in a nation that for so many years has been marked by violence and where thousands of Christians were ethnically cleansed by ISIS.

George is studying IT and, thanks to your help, already benefiting from a scholarship. He observes, *“A good education is important everywhere and not only in Iraq, but here it can help contribute to a better and brighter future. My experience has been very positive and my goal is to achieve something, however little. Thanks to your help, I no longer*

need to worry about how to pay my university fees.”

For the next four years we are hoping to support another 50 young Christians from poorer families, most of them from the Niniveh plains region, that were expelled from their homes by the terrorists of Islamic State.

This will cost some €128,380 per year – a little over €2570 per student for a full academic year. **Please help us to give these young Christians in Iraq a future, so that they can become heralds of hope and peace in their own homeland!**



IRAQ: Pope Francis scholarship students during English enhancement courses.

PROJECT NEWS

Will you Help with the Training of 20 Seminarians in a Bolivian Seminary?

BOLIVIA

BOLIVIA: Mass celebration during the bishops' conference in Cochabamba.

At present there are 20 young men training in the major seminary of Cochabamba. They come from various different parts of the country but are united in their wish to serve God and their brothers and sisters one day as priests.

They represent a great hope for the Church in **Bolivia**, since the country urgently needs more priests in order to minister to the growing number of Catholic faithful.

The seminarians come from very different backgrounds. Some of them have already had a profession before and have given it up to follow their vocation, while others, like **Juan Gabriel**, have always had

to work hard ever since their childhood. "I grew up in a very simple home. My father is a farmer and my mother a housewife and I have five brothers and sisters whom I love greatly," he tells us.

"Our family lives in a small village by the name of Chaguaya, where we honour the Virgin Mary as our patron saint and protector of the village. In my family I have learned to treasure the simple things."

"During my childhood I maybe didn't have the same opportunities as other children, because even as a little boy I had to help my father working in the fields and support him in his daily duties. Because of our work, we sometimes didn't even have time to eat, because we had so much to do.

“But I’m very grateful to my father, from whom I learned so many things that are useful to me today. When I was 14 I started to go to school, which was an hour’s walk away. In the centre of Chaguaya my family had a stall where we prepared various traditional food and sold it to the pilgrims who came to visit Our Lady, especially on Saturdays and Sundays. I used to help my family with the washing up and with other little jobs.”

Nevertheless, he always got very good marks in school. His parents would have been very happy if he had married a girl from the village, and in fact he did make friends with a young local woman. Through this friendship he joined the youth group at Our Lady’s shrine and became more and more involved with the Church.

Finally, after a meeting with two seminarians, everything changed and Juan himself began to feel called to the priesthood. Initially, his parents were pretty upset about this. But Juan would not be deterred, and now he is on his way to the priesthood. *“I thank God for all the kind people and friends whom God has placed on my path and brought me closer to Him, and I thank Our Lady of Chaguaya for always being by my side.”*

His fellow seminarian, Christian, summarises what he and all the other seminarians have in common. *“Your vocation comes when you’re not expecting it. Often, we don’t really know where we’re*

going, but Jesus shows us the way. In the seminary I’ve learned to be ready for the unexpected, to trust in God and allow myself to be surprised by Him. I’d like to pass this on to any young man who is wondering what to do with his life: God is always surprising us, and if we let him take over, he can change everything. The seminary is not the end, but only the beginning of a journey with Jesus, who gives meaning and joy to our lives.”

The seminary needs our support if these 20 young men are to continue their journey. They have asked us for a contribution of €9200.

Will you help us to give the gift of new priests to the Church in Bolivia?

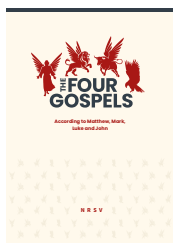


BOLIVIA: Management of the St Lorenz Seminary.

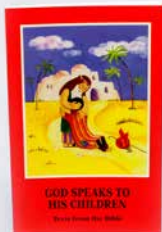


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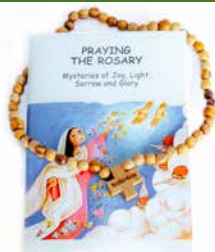
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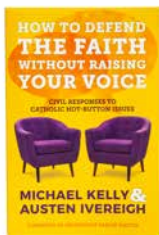
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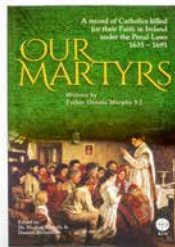
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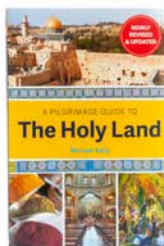


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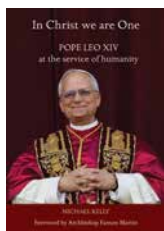
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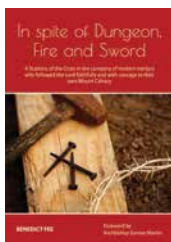
**Olive Wood Crucifix on stand
or Olive Wood Crucifix
for wall** – €20



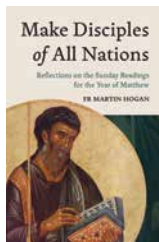
**Olive Wood Jerusalem
Rosary Beads**
– €10



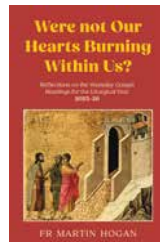
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– €5.99



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Burning Within Us?**
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SUCCESS STORY!

Bringing Christ to the Margins

VENEZUELA



For many years now **Venezuela** has been going through an unparalleled crisis. Around 80% of its people are living in poverty today. And the less fortunate ones, who don't have relatives abroad to send money home from time to time, sometimes struggle even to eat.

In the Diocese of Carora the sisters of the Missionary Association of Jesus and Mary are bringing help and hope to the poorest. They have given a new home to 30 girls who have been orphaned or abandoned by their parents. Many of them have already experienced domestic violence.

The sisters also run a preschool where 80 children are not only brought up and educated in a Christian spirit but provided with meals as well. Coming back to school

after the weekend at home, many of these children are simply consumed with hunger, the sisters tell us.

For their families often cannot even provide the most basic necessities. But during the week at least, the children can eat as much as they need.

The sisters also care for the sick and elderly, the homeless and the poorest families. **Bishop Carlos Enrique Curiel Herrera** is most grateful for their precious service. *"The sisters have been here for over 50 years now. They do so much good, asking nothing in return and caring for all the needy,"* he writes.

But in order to help the people materially – with food, clothing and medicines – the

sisters have to drive all the way to the Colombian border, some 460 km (290 miles) away, where they can still obtain these things.

For given the disastrous economic situation in Venezuela, it is all but impossible to find such necessities locally, at least in sufficient quantities. And in addition to all this, the sisters travel out to the remote and distant villages in their area, bringing comfort and consolation and the love of Christ.

This often involves ferrying the sick in their vehicle. But this old and worn-out car was increasingly running into trouble and causing problems. **And so they turned to us, asking our help and – thanks to our generous benefactors – we were able to give the €30,500 they needed to buy a robust all-terrain vehicle for their work.**

Sr Yamile has written to thank us.

“With all our hearts we want to thank you for your prompt and generous support! May God continue to bless all those who are hoping to make your wonderful work of mercy possible.

Our special charism is “to imitate the active life of Jesus on earth through works of mercy,” and thanks to your help we can truly fulfil the Lord’s words in our lives. Thank you for helping the missionaries of Jesus and Mary and for supporting our work of evangelisation, so that the Kingdom of God can be spread throughout the world. May the Lord and the Blessed Virgin abundantly bless all the staff and benefactors of ACN so that, together, we can at least help to ease the sufferings of the people in Venezuela.”



VENEZUELA : Many young people benefit from the missionary outreach.

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 **01 837 7516**





TANZANIA
A seminarian walks
down a corridor of
St Augustine's Major
Seminary in Peramiho.



Vital Ministry to Isolated Rural Communities

ANGOLA



In January 2025 the Diocese Lwena in the east of **Angola** suffered a devastating blow. The rector of the propaedeutic seminary was travelling with two of the young students to the capital Luanda, around 750 miles (1200 km) away. Having already covered around 450 miles (700 km), their vehicle lost a front wheel, came off the road and crashed headlong into a tree. Both the rector and the two young students were killed on the spot.

Bishop Martín Lasarte is still shaken to the core by this disaster. He writes, *“As soon as I heard, I drove directly to the site of the accident and brought back the bodies of the victims to their families. It was terribly painful.”*

At present there are 48 young men studying in the propaedeutic, or pre-seminary – a preliminary stage before the full major seminary. The tragic death of the rector has been a terrible loss, as their bishop explains: *“No project and no money in the world can ever replace such an outstanding priest as Fr Loureiro. He was a radiant witness of joyful fidelity and total devotion.”*

And he adds, *“Needless to say, I can’t ask you for a new rector, outstanding priest that he was. But at least I can ask you to support us with a new vehicle.”*

This is urgently needed, of course, since the seminary’s one and only vehicle was

a total write-off in the accident. And a vehicle is also important for pastoral work in the parish of Our Lady of Fatima, which the priests at the seminary are helping to run and which is situated in a remote rural region, where the distances are considerable and the road conditions poor.

How could we possibly refuse this appeal from Bishop Lasarte?

We have already sent him €30,000 so that he can purchase a new and sturdy vehicle, suited to the difficult road conditions. For the training of these young men, which **Fr Loureiro** began with such dedication, must continue, so that some of them can

one day themselves become worthy priests and bring Jesus Christ to others. And the Catholic faithful of the parish of Our Lady of Fatima are likewise waiting for a visit from the priest.

Will you help us to cover the cost of this new vehicle?

Bishop Lasarte has written to say, *“I am so grateful for everything that ACN has done for our diocese. And may the Lord send us many holy priests!”*



ANGOLA: The children look forward to seeing the missionaries.

SUPPORT RELIGIOUS SISTERS

Help nuns like **Sr Faustina**
in Ukraine deliver vital
humanitarian aid to the
neediest of Christians
around the world.

Your donation can provide education
and nurture the vocations of
dedicated religious sisters so that
people can be guided to Christ,
whatever the circumstance.

Please donate today.



Please donate what you can at
acnireland.org/donate
or call **01 837 7516**

SUCCESS STORY!

Ensuring God's People Receive the Bread of Life **KENYA**



Since the year 1999 there has been a Carmelite convent in the diocese of Machakos, in southern **Kenya**, and over the years it has been blessed with numerous vocations. It has 26 sisters today, not only from Kenya but from many other countries, including **Spain, Burkina Faso, Cameroon** and **Tanzania**.

The principal vocation of the contemplative religious is prayer. At the same time they strive to support themselves by the work of their own hands, including through the baking of hosts and making liturgical items and vestments. At the same time these activities represent a precious service for the local Church. But this work is never allowed to interrupt their rhythm of daily prayer.

Until recently the host-baking equipment they were using was very antiquated, subject to frequent breakdowns and in constant need of repairs, which made their work difficult and painstaking as a result.

At the same time however, the need for hosts has increased, as their Prioress, **Sr Mary Therese Ndinda** explains: *"The experience of the pandemic has led many people to come back to church."* As a result the Carmelite sisters struggled to cope with

the increased demand, and they simply could not afford new equipment, since their earnings barely cover their own very modest needs.

And so they turned to ACN. Thanks to the unfailing generosity of our benefactors, we did not disappoint them but were able to provide the €18,000 they needed to buy the specialised new host-baking equipment they required. This is now up and running, and the sisters are able to produce the hosts far more easily and efficiently.

Sr Mary Therese has written to thank us, on behalf of all her sisters. *"We want to express our gratitude for your generous support",* she writes. *"May the Lord, who is never outdone in generosity, richly reward you all!"*



SPIRITUAL
REFLECTIONS

Relics of a Distant Past

CONN MCNALLY

In the 1990s, an Irish academic called **Eamon Duffy** published *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580*. The book dealt with the popular religious landscape in England from the Late Middle Ages up until the late Tudor period.

Duffy paints a lively picture of a healthy Catholicism in late medieval England, before it went through change with the implementation of the Protestant reformation.

It is sometimes hard to fully grasp the religious change that happened in the past. We often lack details in our own minds or are moved to sentimental romanticism. I often find dealing with the small and local is the best way to gather an impression of the transformation that occurred.

This was something that was recently reinforced to me when I visited Winchester. The city has one of the most impressive medieval cathedrals in all of Europe. The original construction was Romanesque, but the cathedral was later mostly remodelled in the Gothic style.

In some ways the religious turmoil in 16th century England can be seen in the cathedral. During the Middle Ages, Winchester was the second most popular pilgrimage destination in England, only after the shrine of **St Thomas Beckett** in Canterbury.

Winchester once housed the relics of **St Swithun**, the ninth-century Anglo-Saxon Bishop of Winchester. A pious and holy man, millions upon millions of pilgrims visited Winchester to venerate the bishop's relics.

This all came abruptly to an end in 1538. One day, early in the morning at 3AM, Henry VIII's agents broke into Winchester Cathedral and destroyed the shrine to St Swithun and sent gold any they had looted to the royal treasury. They carried out this act of sacrilege in the early hours to avoid any trouble from the local population, who would have been outraged by this act. Today, a memorial display sits on where the saint once rested.

Also buried in the cathedral is **Bishop Stephen Gardiner**. To me, Gardiner is a figure that shows some of the confusion of the time. He was bishop when St Swithun's shrine was destroyed (although I do not believe he was involved in this act).

He also worked on Henry's attempted divorce of **Catherine of Aragon** and recognised Henry as the Supreme Head of the Church of England. However, he emerged as an opponent of Protestant reforms and was removed from office and jailed by Henry's reformist son, **Edward VI**.

When the Catholic **Mary Tudor** became queen, Gardiner was reappointed Bishop of Winchester and even married Mary to **Philip II of Spain** in the cathedral. Gardiner died in 1555 during Mary's reign.

When, Gardiner was bishop, the high altar at Winchester cathedral had a magnificent altar screen, that contained over fifty sculpted figures. This altar screen was sculpted in the second half of the 15th

century. The screen survived the early days of the reformation until Gardiner died, however it was systematically destroyed under the reformist **Bishop Robert Horne** in the 1560s. Only fragments of a few figures survive today.

In the 1860s, the theological tides in the Church of England had shifted. New statues were added to the altar screen that are there today. The altar screen of today is quite a magnificent work of sacred art.

The iconoclasm in the 16th century was destructive, but it mostly limited itself to statues. The cathedral's stained-glass windows were left untouched as were some decorative friezes of Biblical scenes in the choir. This however changed during the English Civil War.



Bishop Stephen Gardiner – portrait by Quentin Matsys.

In 1642, Winchester and its cathedral was occupied by parliamentary troops. Prominent amongst the parliamentarians were puritans and other radical Protestants who were completely opposed to religious images.

The parliamentary troops destroyed the Biblical friezes but interestingly left alone some of the non-religious images from the Middle Ages also present in the choir, such as monkeys and knights. They also smashed almost all the stained-glass windows in the cathedral.

All of this smashed glass was left lying on the cathedral floor. After the English monarchy was restored in 1660, the iconoclasts left power. The people of Winchester were able to recover parts of the cathedral.

They gathered up all the smashed medieval stained glass and created a mosaic window over the main entrance to the cathedral on the west end. There is no particular design or message to the window, it's a random combination of smashed glass. Any figures that seem to appear are just mismatched pieces from different figures.

For me the west window represents Winchester Cathedral and indeed many medieval cathedrals in England. We can see a glimpse of our shared Catholic heritage, but a past that is marked by persecution, destruction and vandalism that is sometimes hard to credit.



Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire, England.

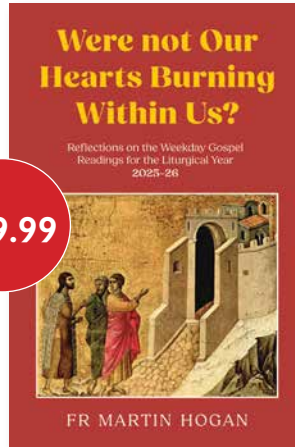


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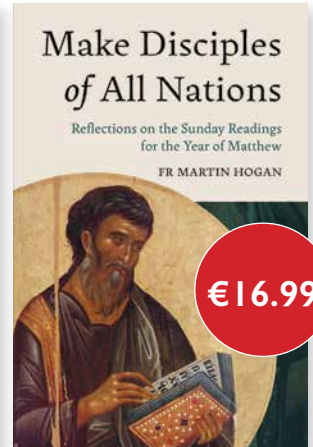
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Dilexi Te, Apostolic Exhortation to all Christians on Love for the Poor by Pope Leo XIV

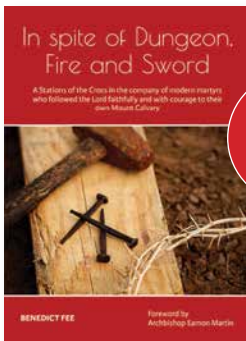


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Were not Our Hearts Burning Within Us? and *Make Disciples of All Nations* are two new titles from Fr Martin Hogan on weekday and Sunday reflections for the coming liturgical year.



€16.99



€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.

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



€12.99

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JANUARY CROSSWORD

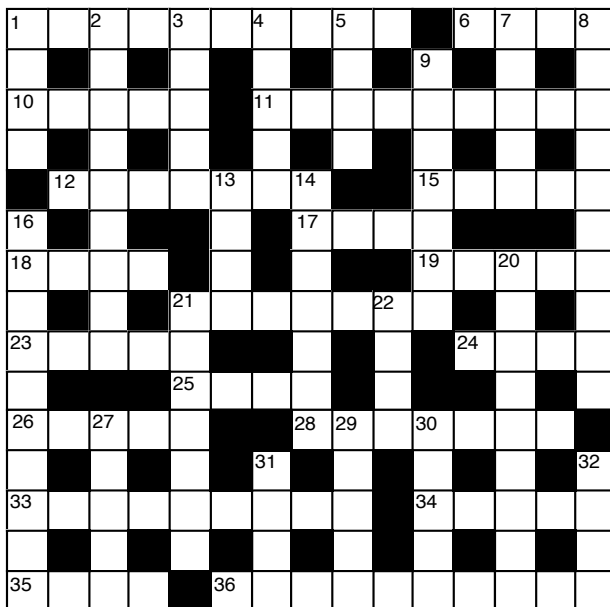
We are pleased to share with you our latest ACN crossword. We will print the answers in next month's edition.

Enjoy!

December Solution

Across 1 Immaculate Conception, 6 Bolt, 10 Wince, 11 Tall order, 12 Leopard, 15 Barge, 17 Iona, 18 Oboe, 19 Divot, 21 Tadpole, 23 Cater, 24 Grin, 25 Ache, 26 Panic, 28 Scythes, 33 Ice-hockey, 34 Turin, 35 Nest, 36 Last orders.

Down 1 Iowa, 2 Mangetout, 3 Cheap, 4 Later, 5 Tilt, 7 Older, 8 Turpentine, 9 Forbade, 13 Aura, 14 Dimples, 20 Vertebrae, 21 Tractor, 22 Lazy, 27 Needs, 29 Crypt, 30 Tutor, 31 Skua, 32 Ants.



ACROSS

- 1 Scandinavian award established by the inventor of dynamite (5,5)
- 6 Crust formed over a sore (4)
- 10 Wood projection which is inserted into a mortise (5)
- 11 Blessed with rude good health (2,3,4)
- 12 Shade of red (7)
- 15 Emburdened (5)
- 17 Warmth (4)
- 18 The holm oak tree (4)
- 19 Aspirations (5)
- 21 Thy narc is wandering in a chapel within a church (7)
- 23 Countryside walker (5)
- 24 Informal potato (4)
- 25 Confidential assistant (4)
- 26 Character from children's fiction, created by Enid Blyton (5)
- 28 Strips of bacon (7)
- 33 From the French, an entertaining teller of stories (9)
- 34 Location (5)
- 35 School bench or office equipment (4)
- 36 Ensnarled in the ultimate in traffic congestion (10)

DOWN

- 1 Item of paper money (4)
- 2 Teller (4,5)
- 3 Relating to the moon (5)
- 4 Major European river (5)
- 5 Catherine ____-Jones won an oscar for 'Chicago' (4)
- 7 Youngster (5)
- 8 It gives lift and flavour to bread, for example (6,4)
- 9 Rich (7)
- 13 Christian name of Mr Walesa, president of Poland from 1990 to 1995 (4)
- 14 Stormy sound (7)
- 16 Number written as DC in Roman numerals (3,7)
- 20 Book with a soft cover (9)
- 21 Waxy colouring sticks (7)
- 22 Bones that form a cage in the body (4)
- 27 Mallards, for example (5)
- 29 Mooted (5)
- 30 Nickname of the animal whose name means "River Horse" (5)
- 31 Stag or doe (4)
- 32 Repair (4)

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.



“For the clearance of recent troubles and the ability to forget and get on with life to help it all go away. For no more treatment and good health for Martin.”

“For justice for my son and a breakthrough in a difficult marital situation.”

“For a restless mind that has suffered so greatly over the last number of years. I pray 2026 brings her peace.”

“That Christ’s light shines on those who haven’t answered his call yet in 2026.”

“I pray that Mother Mary intercedes for my grandson who is struggling to find purpose in life.”

“That Pope Leo remains a model of faith and serenity in 2026.”

“For friends and family that died in 2025. I pray that they’re guiding me in my decisions.”

“For the continued success of Aid to the Church in Need and the growth of their mission.”

“That the plight of Christians becomes less stark in 2026.”

“That politicians respect people of faith and their beliefs in 2026.”

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

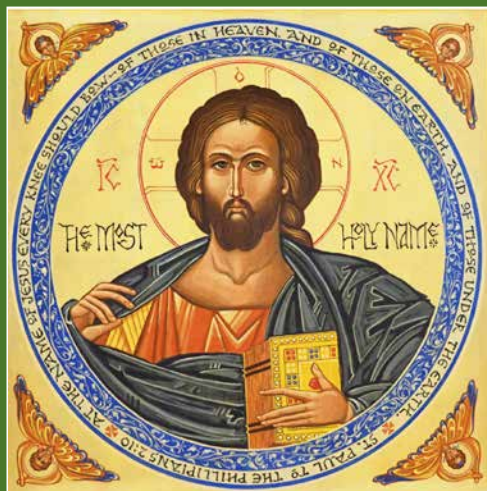


Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN IRELAND



Month of the Holy Name of Jesus



O Lord Jesus Christ, teach us to love your
holy name, to hold it in awe and pronounce
it with reverence. Deliver us from the sin
of blasphemy. May the holy name of
Jesus be infinitely blessed!

AMEN

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Registered Charity No:
CRA in RoI: 20023768
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