

HERALD

The Catholic Weekly

Mission Statement

The HERALD is a Catholic Weekly of the Malaysian Church. It endeavours to communicate up-to-date news and Christian values and strives to dialogue with all sectors of society in order to build a harmonious community of believers in God. We support the formation of a participatory Church and encourage the laity and religious to make moral decisions in the marketplace.

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The Publisher, Editor and Staff of *HERALD* wish all our readers a Blessed Christmas & a Happy New Year. There will be no issue on December 31, 2023. Our next issue will be on January 7, 2024.



Christmas parades and celebrations ■ P4



Advent outreach in Penang island ■ P7

Embrace the true meaning of Christmas

KENINGAU: In a moving Christmas message delivered for 2023, Bishop Cornelius Piong of Keningau articulated the profound significance of Christmas, highlighting the essence of God's boundless love for humanity through the birth of Jesus.

Reflecting on the biblical passage from John 3:16, the prelate emphasised, "as the demonstration of God's infinite love, Christmas stands at the pinnacle, symbolising the celebration of love itself."

Addressing the Malaysian Catholic community, Bishop Cornelius said that our celebration should reverberate with the spirit of love, marking God's divine intervention to redeem mankind from the clutches of sin by sending His Son, Jesus Christ.

However, he expressed concern about the disparity between the world's perception of Christmas as a holiday and its genuine essence. While acknowledging the universal acceptance of Christmas celebrations, the prelate



Nativity Scene at the Church of St Francis of Assisi, Cheras, 2020.

highlighted the prevalent misunderstanding of its core significance among global communities.

"For Christians, Christmas signifies an expression of our gratitude towards God for His profound love, as demonstrated through Jesus Christ."

The bishop outlined three pivotal points for

Christians to reflect upon during the festive season:

- The historical arrival of Christ as the Son of God.
- The perpetual presence of Christ among believers, echoing Matthew 1:23: "The Son of God is called Emmanuel; God is with us."
- The anticipation of God's glorious return,

urging vigilance and steadfast faithfulness.

"By embracing these truths, we align ourselves with the authentic essence and purpose of Christmas," the prelate asserted.

Additionally, the bishop urged fellow Christians to engage in activities that contribute to the welfare of their communities, remain empathetic towards global concerns, and steadfastly testify for Christ, irrespective of challenges encountered.

Amidst the festive season, the prelate also called for prayers for peace in strife-ridden nations. "As we rejoice in the Christmas festivities, let us also fervently pray for peace in countries marred by conflicts, including Palestine, Ukraine, and Myanmar."

Bishop Cornelius concluded his message by extending heartfelt wishes for a Merry Christmas 2023 and a blessed New Year 2024, encouraging all to embrace the true essence of the season and embrace God's plan of salvation through His immeasurable love.

57th World Day of Peace Message

Use AI for peace and common good

VATICAN: All forms of artificial intelligence (AI) should be used to alleviate human suffering, promote integral development and help end wars and conflicts, not increase inequality and injustice in the world, Pope Francis said in his message for World Day of Peace 2024.

"Artificial intelligence ought to serve our best human potential and our highest aspirations, not compete with them," the Pope said in his message for the January 1 commemoration.

The message, *Artificial Intelligence and Peace*, was addressed to all men and women in the world, and in particular to heads of state and government and the leaders of the different religions and civil society.

The Pope urged a conscious direction of AI towards uplifting human potential and noble aspirations rather than conflicting with them. He called for a collective effort involving leaders across various spheres to address ethical considerations and safeguard the rights of those impacted by AI.

Emphasising the importance of fundamental values such as inclusion, transparency, and privacy, Pope Francis acknowledged the dual nature of technological advancements, present-

ing both opportunities and risks. He urged a thorough examination of the long-term implications on individuals, societies, and global stability.

Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, echoing the Pope's sentiments, emphasised the acceptability of AI when serving the common good and upholding human dignity. He underscored the necessity for vigilance, informed dialogue, and responsible action in the face of AI's increasing influence across politics, culture, and the environment.

The Pope called upon nations to take responsibility in regulating AI within their borders, while stressing the pivotal role of international cooperation in forming binding agreements for AI development and use. He emphasised the need for regulations not only to prevent harmful practices but also to promote ethical standards.

Expressing hope that his message would inspire collective efforts, Pope Francis urged the entire human family to ensure that AI advancements align with the values of peace and human solidarity. He emphasised that this responsibility transcends a select few and rests upon the shoulders of the global community. — Agencies

To read the full text, go to: <https://rb.gy/ptl56c>

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND PEACE

The Message of Pope Francis



The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development published this graphic Dec. 14, 2023, marking the release of Pope Francis' message for World Peace Day, Jan 1, 2024. (CNS photo/Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development)

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A street side Christmas musing on synodality

Yes, that's him, Kuppusamy, the street side beggar.

Just call me Kuppu, he tells this scribe, but many perceive him as "Kuppeh" which means garbage in Tamil.

Now you see him, sometimes you don't, but most people never "notice" him, though he shows up like a sore thumb daily.

People either have trained their eyes not to see him or they are short-sighted, callously blind, even to cast a fleeting glance at him.

So what if he is there, so strikingly present? Kuppu's pangs of hunger, sparkling in his dewy eyes matter not to the one and many who pass him by.

After all, who the heck is Kuppu? Am I my brother's keeper?

Kuppu is part of that invisible Chow Kit Road story.

His past is a stranger.

When it rains, he retreats to a shopping mall where the Yuletide mood puts him in a fit of loss and loneliness.

He nods his head in timely cadence to the poor drummer's song rolling out from a speaker.

Ra-pa-pam-pam ... ra-pa-pam-pam ... the chorus echoes, and Kuppu keeps time, as did Mary, the ox and lamb on Holy Night.

At night when the stars come out, Kuppu

shelters in an abandoned public phone booth refurbished with discarded card box.

Nobody troubles him in his phone booth house, as public phones are as bygone as Kuppu's antique dotage.

No one can ever remember Kuppu washed and clean.

Old, gnarled, and bearded, he seems like he has stepped out of the past — a Depression-era ghost of 1929 in the modern streets of Kuala Lumpur.

Kuppu's face graphically exposes a social stigma that dumps the mentally ill on our city's streets.

A human derelict of yore, Kuppu squints up to take a peek at the Twin Towers just as a deep rumble from his famished tummy towers to a crescendo.

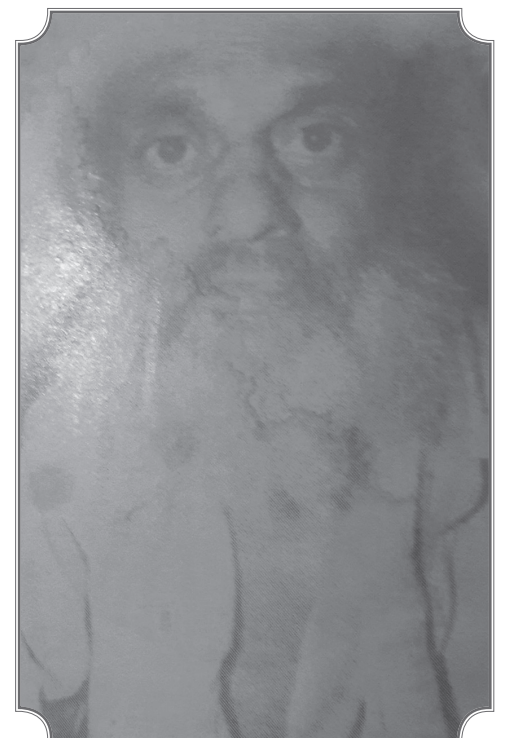
Oh what clarion signal this ... mitigating for a theology called liberation.

The Twin Towers, a grand symbolism of one man's Vision for 2020.

But now its 2023 and Kuppu has very scant vision of a future for himself, as his eyesight at 20/400 is failing him.

I wonder why, a story like Kuppu's never made it as the scoop of the day?

Are journalists too turning blind like Kuppu, leaving human interest narratives to the poet and the artist?



Synodality!

Coming together? Sharing? And listening?

The Gospels have spoken through Rome's citadels.

And so has Kuppu, through this scribe.

But is anyone listening?

Merry Christmas!

● *This literary reverie is written by Joseph Masilamany in memory of the late Fr Jestus Pereira (1955-2023), who had a special place in his heart for the poor in his neighbourhood.*



Celebrate with the peace of Christ

As we come to the end of Advent, the Gospel focuses on Mary's *fiat*, her "yes" to God. It was only through the cooperation of the Blessed Virgin Mary that God's plan for the redemption of humanity could take place. Notice, however, that, even though Mary asked the question of "how could this be?", this was not a sign of doubt or fear. It was asked out of her need to clarify the situation. There was never a hesitancy or doubt because after the angel's reply, she immediately proclaimed her "yes". For many of us, doubts and fears are something that we face almost on a daily basis. This leads us to the Gospel reading from the Midnight Mass.

The first thing that the angel tells us is to not be afraid. Fear is something that we are all familiar with. From the moment we are born until the day we depart from this life, we face all kinds of fear, albeit to different degrees and forms. We fear of losing our loved ones, we fear to fail in our exams, we fear to lose our sense of security and the fear of uncertainty. Fear cripples us and prevents us from living life to our full potential. With the birth of Christ, we are told not to fear because Jesus has been born to redeem us and bring us back to God. Whatever fears and trials that we experience in this life pales in comparison to the life that awaits us when we reach our final union with God. The fall of



Adam and Eve closed the gates of heaven but Christ has reopened it for us.

The final message of the angel is the peace to all who enjoy God's favour.

There are three levels of peace involved here. The first and most important one is our peace with God. God bestows his peace on us but it is up to us whether we want to receive this or not. We all know that the peace that God gives is one that is different from what the peace of the world. The peace that God grants us is one that is so deep that even the darkest fears and toughest challenges in life will not be able to shake us from that peace. This does not mean that we are free from the trials of life. We still live in a world full of temptation and trials but the peace of God gives us the grace to face all these challenges with complete trust in God's providence.

The second level of peace is to be at peace with ourselves. All of us at some point in our life will struggle with ourselves internally. Some of us may struggle our whole lives. The angel tells us to be at peace with ourselves and to stretch out our hand to Christ and allow him to lead us to restful waters. When we are not at peace with ourselves, we will not be able to live a life that has been given to us by God. The final level of peace is the peace between one another. The birth of Christ brings with it healing and reconciliation. Whatever differences that we have with one another, let us put it aside this Christmas season and be at peace with each other. I'm not saying that

Reflecting on our Sunday Readings with Fr Philip Tay, OCD

4th Sunday of Advent (B)

Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16;

Romans 16:25-27;

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

we should just put our differences aside and pretend it's not there; we should make peace with one another and find ways to resolve our differences. It is not easy but I believe with the peace that God has given us, we can be at peace with each other.

Let us celebrate the birth of Christ with a true and heartfelt joy, greeting each other with the peace that Christ brings us and truly praise God with our lives and bring this joy to the whole world. As our year draws to a close, today's scripture brings us back to the beginning of all time. As we stand on the threshold of another year, we take time to recall the greatest event of all: God has entered our world, not just for a day's visit, but has made it his permanent dwelling. And this is news of great joy indeed. Let us reflect on how the light of God's presence has impacted our life during this past year. Let us truly be thankful for the gift of Christ in our lives and share this light and hope to all whom we meet.

Re-dedication of Christ the Light chapel

By Moses Sinappan & Lydia Loshini

KEPONG: The Chapel of Christ the Light, once a humble shop lot ministering to a mere 12 families in the 1980s, has today flourished into a vibrant sanctuary embracing over 4000 parishioners.

The chapel marked a historical milestone on December 8, with a re-dedication Mass presided over by Archbishop Julian Leow. Concelebrating with the archbishop were chapel administrator, Fr Peter Anthony, Fr George Harrison and Fr Edwin Peter.

The celebration commenced with a procession led by 26 BEC leaders and various ministry leaders, showcasing the diverse tapestry of the chapel's ministries.

In his homily, Archbishop Julian urged

the congregation to emulate the path of Jesus, emphasising a life free from sin and the significance of recognising our bodies as temples of God. His message instilled a profound sense of spiritual renewal within the congregation.

Symbolic rituals marked the Rite of Re-dedication, each carrying deep significance. The blessing and sprinkling of water symbolised purification, followed by the Liturgy of the Word, grounding the ceremony in spiritual essence. The Prayer of Dedication and Anointing consecrated the chapel's altar and walls, while the deposition of the relics connected the chapel to its rich history. The incensing and lighting of the altar and chapel filled the air with fragrant offerings of prayer and thanksgiving, culminating in the illumination of the altar and chapel with newfound

spiritual energy.

Expressing gratitude, Archbishop Julian commended Fr Peter as the tireless shepherd in overseeing the successful renovation project and addressing longstanding issues. Acknowledging the generosity of benefactors, donors, and parishioners, the prelate envisioned the chapel's imminent elevation to the status of a church, eliciting joyous cheers from the congregation.

In his closing address, Fr Peter thanked Archbishop Julian for presiding over the Re-dedication Mass and the two concelebrants, Frs George and Edwin. He also acknowledged the collaborative efforts that made the renovation a success. He invited parishioners to pray for the forthcoming construction of Christ the King Chapel in Selayang Baru.



Fr Peter Anthony anointing the walls of the Chapel of Christ the Light.



KUALA LUMPUR ARCHDIOCESE

Diary of Archbishop Julian Leow

January 2024

- 8-12 Meeting – Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei at Minor Basilica of St Anne, Bukit Mertajam**



PENANG DIOCESE

Diary of Cardinal Sebastian Francis

December & January 2024

- Dec 25 Mass – Christmas Day at Minor Basilica of St Anne, Bukit Mertajam**
- Jan 8 Thanksgiving Mass – Minor Basilica of St Anne, Bukit Mertajam**
- Jan 8 - 12 Meeting – Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei at Minor Basilica of St Anne, Bukit Mertajam**



MALACCA JOHORE DIOCESE

Diary of Bishop Bernard Paul

January 2024

- 3 Meeting – South Johor Vicariate Clergy at Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, JB**
- 8-12 Meeting – Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei at Minor Basilica of St Anne, Bukit Mertajam**



Malacca Johore Diocese News Update #158

F12 NEWS MJD UPDATES

Greetings to you, dear friends and faithful. The Pope prays for peace on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Gaza death toll nears 18,000. The first World Day of Children will be celebrated by the Catholic Church in May 2024. More Rohingya boats are landing in Indonesia. The fastest supercomputers are coming to Malaysia. "Revive HSR project. Revive the Forest City" says the news. Pray for the new Cabinet to serve without fear or favour.

Contrasting Times: The Vatican unveiled the Nativity scene, depicting not only Mary and Joseph at the manger but also St Francis of Assisi. It was the 800th anniversary of this tradition. In contrast, the churches in Bethlehem and Palestine have opted for a Christmas without festivities. Their crib features the baby Jesus born among rubble and ruined homes, and even partially buried. A Christmas filled with anxiety, uncertainty and fragility. Wars and their effects are evil. Yet, there is glitter and gaiety galore in many cities.

"We live in a world where funerals are more important than the dead, marriage is more important than love and looks are more important than the soul. We live in a *packaging culture that despises content*." - Jodie Foster

A Thought for the Week: Big Fish, Small Frying Pan

Two men went fishing. One man was an experienced fisherman, the other wasn't. Every time the inexperienced fisherman caught a big fish, he threw it back.

The experienced fisherman watched this go on all day and finally got tired of seeing this man waste good fish. "Why do you keep throwing back all the big fish you catch?" he asked.

The inexperienced fisherman replied, "I only have a small frying pan."

Lesson from big fish: Sometimes, like that fisherman, we throw back the big

plans, big dreams, big jobs, big opportunities that God gives us. Our faith is too small or we are small minded or say: we are not ready. We laugh at that fisherman who didn't figure out that all he needed was a bigger frying pan; yet how ready are we to handle the big fish that comes to us? Are you the one who rejects, vetoes or discards opportunities because you are not ready nor properly equipped? Do not reject the big things that come your way because of your small mindedness.

Announcements for this Week

1. The **YMCA JOHOR** invites you to a **Christmas and Year-end Fellowship** on December 28, 2023 at 7.00pm at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Johor Bahru. In the spirit of ecumenism, all South Johore Catholics, parishes and participants are encouraged to join in. Get your tickets.

2. Remember the **KASIH INITIATIVE**, an Advent Fundraising Drive organised by the Catholic Bishops Malaysia to move the social mission agenda — the care for creation, our second home; the migrants and refugees; and the poor and new poor. If you have missed the chance to donate, contribute at your parish office and say: For **KASIH** Collection.

3. Be reminded that the Mass on December 24 is still the Mass of the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Christmas Vigil Masses begin with the Masses on December 24 night.

QnQ: Q asks? What type of leadership do we need for today's culture?

A New Leader who champions a New Way of Leading in today's culture. He is committed to three fundamentals:

I. Know Yourself Deeply, But Live to Serve Others. The New Leader cannot lead others unless he can lead himself, so leaders *dig deeply into themselves, confront their flaws, and, ultimately, achieve peaceful acceptance of them-*

selfs and the unique role they can play in the world. But, after that introspective deep dive within, leaders turn outward. They do not live for themselves alone but transcend themselves to serve others. The wisdom and energy generated from their self-knowledge isn't bottled up but radiates outward.

II. Immerse yourself in the World, But Withdraw from the World Daily. The New Leader immerses himself in the world with eyes open to its joys and sufferings and with hands calloused from sharing the everyday struggles of those around him. He is not apart or aloof but "In Touch" and accountable. He cultivates solidarity, especially with those who are neglected and marginalised. Yet, while immersed in the world, he is not fully "of" the world. He does not drift on the tide of texts, media simulation, and phone calls, but withdraws daily to reflect, to feel gratitude for all he has, to take in the big picture, and to remind himself of his values and beliefs.

III. Lives in the Present and Reverses Tradition, But Creates the Future. The New Leader seizes today's opportunities fully because it's the only opportunity he is certain of having. He stands for something, honouring the beliefs and values bequeathed by tradition. But deeply rooted in tradition does not mean stuck. He is not enslaved by the past. He does not shrink from change fearfully but drives change with Hope and Optimism. He runs to the Future, not from it. — **Chris Lowney: Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads (2014)**

Continue to pray for peace within and peace in the world. The Prince of Peace is here. Prepare a way for the Lord. May your Christmas be a Christmas with Christ.

Bishop Bernard Paul

Large turnout at Miri Christmas parade

MIRI: Despite the persistent rain, an enthusiastic crowd of more than 40,000, armed with umbrellas and raincoats, congregated on December 2 for the 14th Miri Christmas Parade at Dataran Kipas.

The event was graced by the presence of Sarawak Transport Minister and Senadin assemblyman, Dato Sri Lee Kim Shin, representing Premier Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Abang Johari Tun Openg, who officiated the proceedings.

Lee delivered a speech on behalf of Premier Abang Johari, affirming the Sarawak government's unwavering commitment to nurturing strong religious beliefs, education, and related activities. Abang Johari's message highlighted confidence in the Unit for Other Religions (Unifor) and the government's policies, emphasising their role in showcasing progress, prosperity, and peace within Malaysia

and the broader region.

"Christmas embodies peace, a reminder that we must not be complacent but strive to maintain, safeguard, and enrich harmony among our diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious communities," remarked Abang Johari. He explicitly denounced extremist ideologies targeting those perceived as 'different.'

This year's theme, *Jesus Christ, Our True Peace*, saw participation from 14 churches in Miri, including the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Borneo Evangelical Mission, Methodist Church, Baptist Church, Calvary Charismatic Centre, Seventh Day Adventist, Agape Kingdom Church, Open Heaven 611 Bread of Life, Persatuan Penganut Kristian Injil Malaysia, Cornerstone Community Church, New Generation Church, and Bethany Church of Malaysia.



Miri Mayor, Adam Yui (3rd from left) presenting a token of appreciation to a representative of Abang Johari at the parade.

The parade commenced at 7.30pm, traversing through Jalan Sylvia to Jalan Brooke, Jalan Kingsway, Jalan Puchong, Jalan Padang, Jalan Melayu, Jalan Nakhoda Gampar, Jalan Cina, Jalan Bendahara, Jalan North Yu Seng, Jalan South Yu Seng, Jalan

Merpati, Jalan Kipas, and returning to Dataran Kipas. A total of twelve floats accompanied the contingents along the route, complemented by diverse Christmas concerts organised by the participating churches.

Among the dignitaries present

were deputy minister for Local Government Sarawak Datu Dr Penguang Manggil, deputy minister in the premier's department Datuk Gerawat Gala, Pujut assemblyman cum Miri Mayor Adam Yui Siew Sang, and organising chairman Pastor Lim Thien Leong.

A public proclamation of faith in Sibü

SIBU: Over 10,000 Christians congregated at Dataran Tun Tunku Bujang for the annual Sibü Christmas parade on December 5.

Organised by the Association

of Churches in Sarawak (ACS) Sibü Branch, this year's event was hosted by the St John Sibü Anglican Church under the theme *Emmanuel, God Is with Us*.

The festivities commenced with enthusiastic participants assembling for the parade that traversed several significant routes. Commencing from Jalan Bujang Sun-

tong to Rosli Dhobi Roundabout, the parade continued through Jalan Pulau, Jalan Channel, Jalan Bengkel, Jalan Mission, Pintu Gerbang Sibü, Jalan Kampung Nyabor, Jalan Ramin, Jalan Morshidi Sidek, Jalan Sanyan, and finally concluding at Jalan Bujang Suntong.

The parade showcased the collective participation of more than 30 contingents representing various churches, including the Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Chinese Methodist Church (SCAC), the Iban Methodist Church (SIAC), and the Borneo Evangelical Mission (BEM).

Prior to the procession, ACS Sibü branch chairman, Venerable Archdeacon Joseph Dusit Tjau, led the opening prayer on the square

stage. The event featured captivating stage performances and the melodious rendition of Christmas carols by diverse church groups. Representatives from the BEM, SIAC, and SCAC churches also took part in the Gospel reading.

The Christmas message was delivered by ACS chairman and Bishop of the Anglican Church in Sarawak and Brunei, Rt Rev Datuk Danald Jute. In his address, Bishop Danald emphasised the significance of Christmas as a celebration of the birth of Jesus, resonating with the spirit of the event.

The closing prayer was led by Sibü diocese bishop, Rt Rev Joseph Hii, culminating the festivities with a sense of spiritual unity and communal joy.



Thousands of Christians participated in the Christmas parade on December 9, 2023.

Welcoming the birth of Christ with lights and carols

GEORGE TOWN: There were moments of cheer, applause and thanksgiving at the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows (City Parish) as the grounds were brightly lit in anticipation of the celebration of Christmas.

More than 200 parishioners gathered for *Emmanuel – A Night of Carols* held on December 10 to launch the Christmas celebrations in the parish.

Several Christmas trees with LED lighting were put up throughout the church compound, with the highlight being an outdoor Christmas crib set up at the church gates facing Macalister Road in the city.

Parish priest Fr Edmund Woon, accompanied by assistant parish priest Fr Desmond Jansen and Deacon Paul Kang, exclaimed "Christ be our light" in officiating the lighting-up ceremony.

The evening then continued

with eight parish groups belting out classic Christmas carols which rang throughout the church, delivering the message of peace and hope during this festive season.

The different groups, from car-

ollers from the Catechism, Mandarin and Tamil youths to church choirs from Our Lady of Sorrows and Assumption Church, as well as the East Malaysian and Filipino groups all showcased the diversity of the parish.

In expressing his appreciation to all for making the evening a reality, Fr Desmond also invited all to become bearers of light in the world in the true spirit of this joyous season.

"As we enjoy the lighted deco-

rations around us and immerse ourselves in the carols that are sung, let us also be the light that brings hope to others," he said.

The programme coordinator Patrick Nathan said that the event allowed all to embrace and celebrate the coming of the Lord through the spirit of oneness within the parish.

"The carols which were sung in different languages added meaning as the Christmas spirit is being celebrated in a multi-cultural manner," he said.

In highlighting the importance of having a shared experience of joy, Hazeel Ann from the Tamil Youth felt the event was a memorable and uplifting occasion.

"The harmonious blend of voices and talents brings us a sense of community, reinforcing the values of peace and unity during this festive season," she said. — **By Aaron Lim**



Pic left: The lit-up outdoor Christmas crib at the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows.



Pic right: Carollers entertaining the parishioners.

Honouring service and humanity

PETALING JAYA: The inaugural AOHD Legacy Night was a testament to the impactful contributions of individuals across the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur. The event served as a celebratory tribute and recognition of the dedication of those who have served and continue to enrich their communities.

Held at the Crystal Crown Hotel on December 10, the legacy night was attended by 270 guests, including dignitaries, religious leaders, and dedicated individuals from various parishes, NGOs, and communities affiliated with the Archdiocesan Office for Human Development (AOHD). Themed *To Appreciate and Celebrate* the event highlighted the selfless efforts of individuals who have gone above and beyond in serving their communities and the Archdiocese.

It was an evening filled with activities where guests engaged with a photo booth, a 360-degree video setup, and a 'Christmas wish tree' designed to fulfil the wishes of children in need. Additionally, a booth by the Creation Justice Ministry sold upcycled Christmas ornaments made by the B40, contributing 30 per cent of profits to aid the National Cancer Society of Malaysia.

The evening began with a prayer led by Fr Albet Arockiasamy, the ecclesiastical assistant for AOHD, followed by Archbishop Julian Leow's opening address. In a moment of reverence, the archbishop called for a minute of silence to honour those who have passed away, in particular the late Fr Jestus Pereira who had passed away four days earlier.

The ceremony featured several awards, including the *Long Service Award* presented by Archbishop Julian to exemplary individuals who had served in the archdiocese in various capacities. Recognitions were given to Helen Patricia Martin, Philomena



Brother Anthony Rogers FSC receiving the Soter Fernandez Humanitarian Award.

Gnanapragasam, Augustine Retnasamy, Gloria Bon, Paul Anthony, Christina Chew, Augustine Mahalingam, Filvah Savarimuthu and Francis Fernandez.

The *Outstanding Individual Award* honoured those unsung heroes who made an impact in their respective communities. Nominations for this category were made by the parishes. Awards were presented to Rachel Sally, Mildred Lopez, Catherine Maria Ambrose and Dr Mary Rayappan.

Special recognition was extended to organisations collaborating with the Archdiocese during the pandemic. CREST Malaysia, Taiwan Buddhist Tzu-Chi Foundation, Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism & Taoism (MCCBCHST), and Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN) received the *Exceptional Organisation Award*.

Bro Anthony Rogers, FSC, who was the first director of the National Office for Human Development, honoured the memory of everyday saints who have served the Archdiocese, and in tribute to the late Cardinal Soter Fernandez, an award titled *The*

Soter Fernandez Humanitarian Award was bestowed upon Bro Rogers for his exceptional service in human development.

Another inaugural award, *The Murphy Pakiam Human Fraternity Award*, dedicated to Archbishop Emeritus Murphy Pakiam, recognised Sr Loh Pai Ling for fostering interreligious dialogue and building bridges between communities. Sr Loh is the first lady president of the Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia. The award was presented by Archbishop Emeritus Pakiam himself.

The event marked additional milestones with the unveiling of the *Integral Human Development* book by Fr Paul Dass, SJ and the launch of AOHD's revamped website, www.aohd.org.

A poignant In Memoriam segment showcased photographs of departed individuals, evoking emotions and paying homage to their enduring legacies.

AOHD director Dr Gary Liew concluded the night with a closing speech, expressing gratitude to attendees, congratulating awardees, and expressing hope for continued inspiration in carrying forth the legacy.

Receiving Jesus for the first time

KUALA LUMPUR: Twenty-seven children from the Church of Our Lady of Fatima received their First Holy Communion on November 26.

Over the past year, the catechists played a crucial role in preparing and supporting these children on their spiritual journey. Fr Andrew Manickam OFM expressed his delight at the children's preparedness and sincere commitment during their initial confessions, conducted the day before.

In his reflections on the Gospel reading, Fr Andrew underscored the universal aspiration to be remembered, drawing parallels to the poignant request of the criminal on the cross who asked Jesus to remember him upon entering His kingdom. When addressing the communicants, Fr Andrew conveyed the profound significance of the special day, highlighting that the children were not only receiving the Eucharist but also embracing Jesus' body, blood, soul, and divinity.

The children had earlier attended a day camp at Dewan Fatima.

At the end of the Mass, each communicant received a certificate and blessing from Fr Andrew. — *By Elvina Lucia*



Children at the day camp.

Making the sacraments available to special needs children

KULAI, Johor: Four families recently witnessed a remarkable milestone in the lives of their high-spectrum autism, non-verbal teenage sons. Dass and Veronica, Melvin and Aderia, Daniel Buda and Agnes Jamaliah, Jeffrey and Guia Vaz, parents of Nicholas Abraham, Aubrey Nicholeas, Leo Dexter, and Edward Joseph respectively, stood as testaments to what they described as the mighty works of God Almighty, reflecting His glory and presence.

This day marked an event they had never anticipated — their special needs sons were now able to partake in the Holy Eucharist on a weekly basis, embracing the ability to receive Jesus and fully engage in the Eucharistic celebration. For the parents, it signified a newfound sense of inclusivity and unity, eradicating any feelings of shame or embarrassment.

These families were part of a Special

Needs Children Parents Support Group established in 2018 under the Malacca Johore Diocesan Commission Family, Laity & Life (DCFL). The group aimed to provide a safe space for parents who faced difficulties attending weekly church services, fostering mutual support and sharing. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic halted their activities until a resurgence in December 2022, when several parents returned with news of their sons' impending First Holy Communion.

In the parish of Christ the King, Fr Matthew Bun had been preparing Nicholas Abraham's parents for this momentous occasion for several years. Upon request by the DCFL, Fr Matthew graciously accepted to work with the group, offering guidance, criteria, and expectations for preparing both the children and parents.

The journey began with uncertainties, giv-

en the lack of prior experience or structured programmes within the diocese for preparing children with special needs. However, guided by faith and the Holy Spirit, they found their way. From March to December, the boys and parents attended sessions practising movements and gestures during Mass and learning how to reverently receive the hosts. Online Zoom sessions on Eucharistic catechesis, Mary's role, prayer, Scripture, music, songs, and discussions about future employment opportunities for special needs children were conducted on the first and third Wednesdays of each month.

These sessions became a platform to gather expertise from various sources outside the diocese, offering hope and encouragement to the parents while instilling confidence and trust in God. The preparation, though focused on the boys, profoundly impacted the parents, emphasising the necessity of tailored pastoral care for families with special needs children.

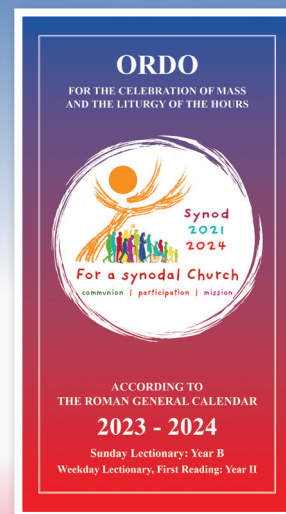
The four young boys received their First Holy Communion on December 9 at the Church of Christ the King, which was attended by their parents and immediate family members. Fr Matthew celebrated the Mass culminating in a unique and powerful testimony to God's redeeming work through these four autistic teenagers, revealing His glory and presence.

A fellowship was held after the Mass, where the parents expressed their deep gratitude to Fr Matthew for his instrumental role in making this receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion a reality for their children. — *By Deacon Leslie Petrus*



The children with their families, Fr Matthew Bun and Deacon Leslie Petrus.

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Confronting fear with faith

KLANG: The Church of the Holy Redeemer organised an Advent retreat themed, *An Adventure of Love* on December 9. Led by retreat master Martin Jalleh, the session centred around the topic of 'Fear' and its juxtaposition with faith, drawing insights from biblical figures and contemporary life.

Martin captivated the audience with his insights into fear as a prevalent force in our lives. He emphasised the impact of fear on significant figures in both the Old and New Testament and highlighted how, often, it infiltrates our daily existence. Participants were urged to embrace the fear of God, recognising its ability to deliver, while acknowledging that fear, when viewed through the human lense, is merely 'false evidence appearing real.'

Participants Joan and Nicholas Boey ex-



The parishioners of the Church of the Holy Redeemer with Martin Jalleh.

pressed their appreciation for the reminder that God's love precedes our own, emphasising the need for unwavering trust in His protection and guidance throughout life.

Cecilia Lilian Anak Nyotik expressed

gratitude for the opportunity to engage in the retreat, praising Martin's insights on fear as the antithesis of faith. Encouragement was drawn from the teachings of Jesus Christ, advocating trust in His reassurance: "Fear not,

for I am with you always," fostering strength and courage in facing life's fears.

Anitha shared a personal revelation, acknowledging the multitude of fears ingrained within oneself, emphasising the need to release past fears and seek guidance from Mother Mary. Her message resonated with the essence of embracing joy in anticipation of the Saviour's arrival, relinquishing fear in the presence of Jesus.

Jenny Sororajah reflected on the retreat's theme, *An Adventure of Love*, which provided insights into the journey of Mary as the Mother of God. She highlighted the profound connection between God's perfect love and the liberation it brings by dispelling fear, ultimately leading to a deeper faith and an open embrace of Christ's imminent return.



Fr Lourdu Gnanaprakasam giving formation.

Repent and return to the Lord

RAWANG: The Word of God, Eucharist and prayer are important tools to counteract against Satan's temptations.

Fr Lourdu Gnanaprakasam spoke about evil and the way it comes to tempt us during an advent formation at the Church of St Jude, December 13. He said evil (Satan) knows all our weaknesses and uses them to tempt us and chooses the weakest to fulfil its mission.

Fr Lourdu, from Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India, said a challenge to us was whether we would remain weak and allow Satan to tempt us. He said Satan would want us to fulfil our plans in our own ways, but he has cleverly removed God from the equation. We, at times, have foolishly listened to the evil one and strayed. If we fall into his trap, then we become self-centred and preoccupied with our own needs.

Fr Lourdu explained that when we set our own rules, we would slowly but surely forget who God is. We would become complacent living life that way and God would become a stranger to us.

He said being sinful is not only committing something against God. He stressed that we also sin when we do not do what we are supposed to do. This is the sin of omission.

"There are no shortcuts in our lives. We need to look up to Jesus to redeem us and set us free. If we want to return to Him, we need to acknowledge our mistakes, repent and return to the Lord.

Fr Lourdu added that to counterattack the evil, we need:

Word of God (WOG) — Jesus used Scripture to counterattack Satan. The WOG transforms life just as how it transformed the life

of St Augustine. How much do we actually value the WOG? The treasure that we have in our lives is indeed the WOG. It is through reading Scripture that we come to know Christ.

Eucharist — It is only through the Eucharist that we are able to re-establish our relationship with God. It is only through the Eucharist that we can nourish ourselves and see His presence. It is through the Eucharist that we can find ultimate happiness and peace. Christ, through the Eucharist, re-energises us to experience him.

Prayer — The charger is God while the power is prayer. Be charged as it is only through the power of prayer that we can counterattack the evil. Only with the power of prayer can we defeat Satan. — **By Mercy Almeida Stellus**

Year-end pilgrimage to Bentong parish

CHERAS: The Silver Liners Ministry for the Elderly of the Church of St Francis of Assisi (SFA), concluded their 2023 activities with a pilgrimage to the Church of the Sacred Heart in Bentong, Pahang. Among the 43 members who made the December 7 trip were Frs Paul Cheong and Michael Teng, OFM Cap.

After breakfast at SFA and boarding the bus, Fr Michael led everyone in prayer and recitation of the Rosary. After a scenic journey of about an hour and a half, we arrived at the Church of the Sacred Heart, Bentong at 10.00am and were warmly welcomed by Fr Clement Lim.

The Church of the Sacred Heart stands as one of the prominent Roman Catholic churches in Pahang, nestled in the developing town of Bentong, 60 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur. Fr Clement shared insights

about its rich history dating back to 1936, highlighting the predominantly Chinese Catholic residents. The church which emanates beauty and warmth is adjacent to the Secondary Chinese Catholic High School.

For Mass, Fr Clement was the main presider with Frs Paul and Michael concelebrating. After Mass, Fr Clement shared on the significance of the Advent wreath and elucidating the themes associated with each week of Advent. Emphasising the essence of spiritual preparation, he encouraged participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, readily available during the Advent penitential services.

After a group photo, they went for lunch and indulged in some shopping before bidding farewell to Fr Clement. — **By Julian Philips**



The Silver Liners at the Church of the Sacred Heart, Bentong.

Fellowship for Visitation seniors

SEREMBAN: The Visitation Senior Parishioners Fellowship (VSPF) hosted its Christmas gathering on December 10, drawing a crowd of 60 parishioners. The presence of Fr Kenneth Gopal, OCD, assistant parish priest of the Church of the Visitation, added a special significance to the event.

The agenda was meticulously arranged, commencing with an opening prayer followed by announcements. Introducing Western cuisine for the first time turned out to be a hit, amplifying the festive ambiance and pleasing the palates of the guests.

The fellowship provided an excellent opportunity for everyone to connect over the shared

meal. The inclusion of a Bible quiz with prizes for winners injected an engaging and competitive spirit into the gathering. The 'Secret Santa' gift exchange brought excitement and an air of mystery, elevating the celebratory mood.

Concluding the event with the Angelus at 6.00pm, followed by a tea dance, smoothly transitioned from the spiritual aspect to a more joyous and festive atmosphere.

The gathering harmoniously blended elements of spiritual reflection, enjoyable activities, delectable cuisine, and joyful companionship, setting a delightful tone for the forthcoming Christmas celebrations within the parish community. — **By Sabrina Smith**



The Church of the Visitation seniors at their Christmas party.



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Advent outreach by Penang Island parishes

By Aaron Lim

PENANG: Parishes within the Penang Island Deanery responded to the call to prepare for the birth of Christ during Advent, through the sharing of hope and love with those in need within the community.

Advent outreach programmes were held in several parishes with the aim of providing assistance to needy families and bringing joy to them for the celebration of Christmas.

Cathedral of the Holy Spirit

With the Advent theme entitled *En-*

large the Space of Your Tent taken from the Book of Isaiah, parishioners of the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit were invited to *Bless a Family This Christmas* through their outreach initiatives.

The parish has reached out to a total of 70 families together with Mercy Home, and donors were invited to bless these families through personal visits to handover their contribution of daily household items.

The families that the project supports are the elderly who can no longer work, families with parents affected by illness, as well as per-

sons with special needs and the differently-abled.

In addition to the outreach programme, parish priest Fr Joachim Robert, together with Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, made visits to home-bound parishioners throughout the season of Advent.

City Parish

Three organisations, namely the Fr Julien Agape Centre, Penang Family Health Development Association and the adoptees of the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SSVP) within the parish are beneficiaries of the Giv-



Church of the Divine Mercy parishioners with the children of Mercy home.

ers of Joy Advent outreach project.

This project, which was initiated by the youth and SSVP of the parish, had mobilised parishioners to donate generously towards providing rations for needy families and the purchase of school uniforms and shoes for school-going children.

A hand-over ceremony will be organised on January 6, 2024; where the clergy of the parish, Fr Edmund Woon and Fr Desmond Jansen, will be joined by parish leaders and the youth to visit the beneficiaries to share the joy with them.

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"Givers of Joy"
City Parish Advent Outreach 2023

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SSVP adoptees of the parish

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Aaron Lim (019-4589198)
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Stella Maris International School revives Catholic identity with daily Masses

KUALA LUMPUR: In response to the evolving landscape of Christian Mission Schools, Stella Maris International School in Damansara has undertaken a deliberate effort to reaffirm its Catholic identity. In a time where educational priorities often overshadow religious observances, the school has initiated a significant change to embed its Catholic character more prominently within its ethos.

The cornerstone of this revitalisation has been the introduction of daily Masses at the school's chapel throughout the school week. These morning Masses aim to nurture the spiritual well-being of students and uphold the school's Catholic identity amidst the contemporary emphasis on global education and academic excellence.

To further reinforce this commitment, Fr Alvin Ho, SJ, assumed the role of the school's chaplain as of August 1, 2023. Fr Alvin's primary focus involves fostering the spiritual health and pastoral care of every member of the school community, irrespective of their religious beliefs.

Since the introduction of these daily Masses, the Catholic students, faculty, and staff have been granted the opportunity to participate in the sacred ritual within the tranquil confines of the school's chapel. The Masses, scheduled for half an hour starting at 7.30am, does not interfere with the school's regular



Students receiving communion from Fr Alvin Ho SJ.

academic timetable. Special votive Masses commemorate significant occasions like Children's Day and Teachers' Day in lieu of the regular feria.

Tyler Zachary Kasavan, a Primary Year 4 student, consistently volunteers as an altar server for these Masses. His commitment to arriving early illustrates his profound connection with the spiritual essence of the Mass. For Tyler, standing by the altar during the Eucharistic consecration evokes a profound sense of closeness to God.

Another Primary Year 4 student, Hailey Toh, has embraced the opportunity to serve as the only female altar server. Alongside Tyler, she alternates between carrying the cross and the processional candle during the Mass, embracing the privilege with grace and honour.

The chapel is full on Fridays when the Secondary students fol-

low up with their society meetings after Mass, otherwise it could be about 35 students, teachers and staff on any normal day. Sr Nora Gomez FMM, who is the Catholic Student Affairs officer, said that it would take time to get the students' engagement at Mass but was happy to note the number of increasing attendees.

Margaret Soo, President of Stella Maris International School, affirms the significance of these daily Masses, which she says is a testament to the school's dedication to its ethos. "The Mass is the central aspect of Catholic lives and the primary way in which Catholics worship God as a community."

In his brief homilies, Fr Alvin imparts essential lessons, particularly directed at the Primary pupils, focusing on two fundamental aspects of God's nature: love and the sending of His Son for humanity's salvation.

Finding solace in sisterhood

PETALING JAYA: The air at the Church of St Francis Xavier (SFX) hummed with quiet hope as widows from all walks of life gathered for a unique workshop: *Surviving the Holiday Season*. Organised by the Widow to Widow ministry of SFX parish, the day offered much more than just practical tips. It offered a sanctuary of understanding, acceptance and, most importantly, sisterhood. In a world that often views widows as "invisible" or "broken," sisterhood allows them to reclaim their identities and find strength in their shared experiences. Through the stories and support of other widows, they learn to navigate the challenges of grief and build new lives for themselves.

"It's such a blessing to join [this] widow's group. I feel cared for and able to relate to the ladies there... It's so natural that my inner self wants to reach out to those who share the same fate as me," shared Pei Venh, one of the participants.

Spearheaded by certified grief educator Christina Goh-Leong, the workshop gently guided participants through the emotional rollercoaster of the holidays. From acknowledging the space for grief to embracing

conflicting emotions of joy and sadness, Christina's message resonated deeply with the participants. It gave them permission to be human, to feel the weight of loss while still finding moments of light.

But the true magic unfolded in the intimate group sharing sessions. Walls crumbled as women, both newly bereaved and veterans of grief, poured out their hearts. Stories of laughter and tears intertwined, weaving a tapestry of shared experiences that transcended age, background, and the years separating their losses. "This workshop makes me feel so welcome, and since every one of us has gone through the same experience, we help and encourage each other and it makes me feel I'm not alone in this journey," shared Patricia, another participant.

As the day concluded over fellowship meal, one thing was clear: *Widow to Widow* is more than a support group; it's a lifeline. It's a haven where widows can shed their masks, be heard without judgment, and find solace in the company of those who truly understand.

For more info, reach out to Caroline Tay, Coordinator, *Widow to Widow* at: 012-7018185



The ladies with Fr Norris Seenivasan SJ.

Cardinal draws parallels between faith and football

LONDON: Cardinal Vincent Nichols gave the welcome address at a special seasonal gathering at Wembley Stadium, December 10, to mark the contribution Christians make to the beautiful game.

Sporting a 1977 Liverpool FC shirt to celebrate the club's first European Cup win, the Cardinal allowed his passion for his home-city Reds to come through as he drew comparisons between the life of faith and the life of a football fan.

"One of my childhood memories is of 1962, being at Anfield when Liverpool won promotion to the First Division.

"Now that's going back a bit, and it just points to the fact that two of the qualities that football can engender are loyalty and fidelity. We don't follow a team because it's successful. We follow a team because that's where we belong, where we have that sense of belonging. And that is one of the virtues that belongs to the football supporter and to the person of faith," said the cardinal.

Part of the Football Association's 'Faith and Football' series, the Christian celebration took place in the Bobby Moore Suite on Dec 3, the First Sunday of Advent.

The afternoon got off to a particularly Catholic start as Cardinal Vincent was introduced by broadcaster and compere for the day, Adrian Chiles, who converted to Ca-



Cardinal Vincent Nichols in Liverpool FC colours at the event in Wembley. (Mazur/CBCEW.org.uk)

tholicism in his late thirties.

He began with an amusing story of how, when covering an international tournament for ITV, he invited long-term rivals and mid-field hardmen Roy Keane and Patrick Viera to Mass at the local Catholic Church. In full knowledge of the on-pitch animosity between the Man United and Arsenal legends, he admitted to a degree of nervous trepidation as the *Sign of Peace* approached. Fortunately, there was a cordial 'peace be with you' from all parties. The postscript was that Liverpool

defender of the same era, Jamie Carragher, another pundit and Catholic, didn't turn up as he was convinced that Chiles was pulling his leg, presuming that particular triumvirate would never attend Mass together.

The afternoon provided many inspiring and humorous moments with keynote addresses, panel discussions and a time of pitch-side worship testament to how Christianity has impacted the game at all levels. Ex-Cambridge United footballer Graham Daniels, now general director of Christians in Sport, gave an entertaining address charting the quiet take-up of Christianity amongst pros 30 years ago, to the more emboldened players we see today. Notts County's John Bostock, Wycombe Wanderers' Jason McCarthy, and 129-cap England Lioness Rachel Yankey are testament to this, as are the trailblazers like Graham himself, and Bruce Dyer, who in 1994 became Britain's first teenage millionaire footballer when he joined Crystal Palace.

Sky Sports Soccer Saturday presenter Simon Thomas, son of a Kings Lynn vicar, talked poignantly with Adrian Chiles about his Christian upbringing and how his faith helped him cope with the death of his first wife aged just 40, and then to recover and look forwards to embrace the future.

The event was supported by Christians in

Sport, Sports Chaplaincy UK, the Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Methodist Church, Evangelical Alliance, the Baptist Church, the United Reformed Church, Salvation Army, and Premier Radio.

Cardinal Vincent said: "Thank you very much for those words of welcome. I'm really delighted to be here this afternoon, at least to show off the right colours! It's a 1977 shirt from the European Cup Final in Rome, when Liverpool won the European Cup for the first time. The first of many times, I might add. Actually, just to go on a little bit more about Liverpool; a minute ago, they were winning 1-0, with Trent Alexander Arnold having scored. He went to the same school as me. Anyway, Fulham have drawn level, so it's 1-1.

"As football supporters, we have our low moments and our high moments, and we live with them both. We are in the depths sometimes, but we're constantly seeking glory. That's a very close parallel with the life of faith. You remember, from the *Book of Genesis*, we're told that we're made of dust, but dust destined for glory: for the glory of God and the glory of heaven. The glory that we seek, as footballers and supporters, is a little reflection of that deeper glory that faith gives to us and is our hope for eternity," said the prelate. — ICN

World's 'largest living Nativity scene'



(elpesebrenasgrandedelmundo.com)

BOGOTA: Since December 2, the faithful in Barranquilla, Colombia, have been able to visit the staging of "the largest Nativity scene in the world" where 90 actors interpret the moments before and after the birth of Jesus.

The Nativity scene is set up on an 18,000-square-meter park (about 4.5 acres) that in previous years has been installed in other Colombian cities such as Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali. The initiative began in 2010, promoted by Colombian Fabián Rojas, manager of Nativity World, the company in charge of the tours billed "the largest Nativity scene in the world."

The company's website notes it has been recognised four times by Guinness World Records: for being "the largest Nativity scene in the world" and for the "greatest number of figures in a Nativity scene" (Colombia 2010-2011), as well as for the "greatest number of good wishes" written by attendees on a "wailing wall" and the "greatest number of human replicas that

move in a Nativity scene" (Mexico 2011-2012).

Nativity World invites families to visit and "recapture the essence of Christmas in a place that gives us the opportunity to travel back in time, to experience a different Christmas for adults and children, interacting in an extraordinary way on the birthday of the baby Jesus, on a life-size scale, in this new century."

To accomplish this, structures have been built that represent places such as St Joseph's carpenter shop, King Herod's palace, and the manger where Christ was born, among other scenes.

This allows visitors to appreciate biblical passages such as the annunciation of the archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, Herod's actions, the birth of Jesus, and the visit of the three Wise Men. Beginning Dec 16, the traditional Christmas novena will be recited with those attending.

"The largest Nativity scene in the world" will be in Barranquilla until January 8, 2024. — By Eduardo Berdejo, CNA

Rosary for Spain prayed in more than 100 cities

SPAIN: More than 100 cities joined in praying the rosary for Spain on December 8, the feast of the country's patroness, the Immaculate Conception, asking for her intercession due to the political, social, and moral crisis in the nation and in response to attempts to suppress religious freedom. In response to a call for a nationwide public rosary, groups large and small gathered on the streets and squares of Spain, although the gathering in Madrid was especially large, as close to 500 people attended. — By Nicolás de Cárdenas, CNA



An image of the Virgin Mary presides over the prayer of the rosary for the unity of Spain on Dec 8, 2023. (ACI Prensa)

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Preparing for Synod 2024

ROME: The next phase of the “Synod on the Future of the Church” is officially underway. The general secretariat of the Synod on December 12 sent bishops around the world a new document that outlines the next steps leading up to the second session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will take place in October 2024 at the Vatican.

The Synod office in Rome points out how the initial phases of listening and consultation have enabled “a concrete experience of a Church that is plural and able to live with differences as a richness in communion”.

It says this is why the synodal process must continue along the same lines, namely at the level of each local Church, then of the groupings of Churches (national, regional and continental), and finally at that of the universal Church.

“As the Holy Father recalled in approving these lines of work, ‘the Synod is about synodality and not about this or that theme....



Participants in the 2023 Synod of Bishops on synodality in the Paul VI Hall. (Vatican Media)

The important thing is how the reflection is done, that is, in a synodal way,” says the Synod secretariat’s new text.

It urges local Churches to organise a new consultation with their Catholic people, in order to deepen certain aspects of the syn-

thesis report that emerged from the first session of the Synod Assembly on synodality.

These consultations are to be guided by this question: “How can we be a synodal Church in mission?” In practice, it would be more realistic for each local diocese “to

focus on those aspects that enable it to make a contribution in the light of its own situation, character and experience”, the new document says.

“This work is not a question of starting the synodal process from scratch or repeating the process of listening and consultation undertaken during the first stage,” the Synod office notes. Rather, it says the idea is to involve people “whose point of view is of particular help in focusing on the ‘how’”, the document points out, such as ordained ministers, pastoral leaders, consecrated persons, leaders of ecclesial movements and new communities, etc.

The Synod secretariat is urging each national bishops’ conference to collect the various contributions and put them into a summary document consisting of no more than eight pages. These should be sent to the secretariat’s office in Rome by May 15, 2024. — By Alice d’Oléon, LCI (<https://international.la-croix.com/>)

Laudato Si’ Movement appoints new executive director

LISBON: *Laudato Si’* Movement, a Catholic environmental organisation, has introduced Susana Réfega (pic) as its new Executive Director.

Réfega, the former head of the Portuguese Bishops’ Fundação Fé e Cooperação (Faith and Cooperation Foundation), brings 12 years of leadership experience to her new role.

Having led the Fundação Fé e Cooperação, an organisation founded by the Portuguese Bishops’ conference in 1990, Réfega has a background rich in experience.

She has also contributed to the board of CIDSE, an umbrella organization for Catholic development agencies, and served as the Board President for the Portuguese National



NGO platform.

Fluent in Portuguese, English, French, Italian, and Spanish, Réfega holds a Ph.D. in Biology.

In a press release, the *Laudato Si’* Movement described Réfega’s appointment as a “significant milestone,” marking the conclusion of Tomás Insua’s term as the founding Executive Director.

Launched eight years ago, the *Laudato Si’* Movement derives its name from Pope Francis’ encyclical on caring for our common home.

Over the years, it has evolved into an international network, providing training programmes, organizing annual *Laudato Si’* weeks, and promoting grassroots activism.

— LiCAS News

Pope announces first World Day of Children



Afile photo of Pope Francis with the children at Vatican in 2018. (Vatican Media)

VATICAN: Pope Francis announced that the Catholic Church will celebrate its first World Day of Children in May 2024.

Speaking in his *Angelus* address on December 8 to mark the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the pope shared that the Church’s first children’s day will be celebrated in Rome on the weekend of May 25-26.

“And now I have the joy of announcing that on May 25 and 26 next year, we will celebrate the first World Day of Children in Rome,” Pope Francis said from the window of the Apostolic Palace overlooking St Peter’s Square.

“Like Jesus, we want to put children at the centre and care for them,” he added.

The Pope explained that the day, organised by the Vatican’s Dicastery for Culture and

Education, will seek to answer the question “What kind of world do we wish to pass on to the children who are growing up?”

The event was inspired by a nine-year-old boy named Alessandro, who proposed the idea to the Pope to have an international event like World Youth Day (an international gathering for young people ages 16 to 35) for younger children.

The Vatican is expecting thousands of girls and boys from all over the world to travel to Rome for the event with the Pope.

In November, the Vatican hosted an event with 7,500 children from five continents in the Paul VI Hall as a prelude to next year’s World Day of Children.

Pope Francis previously established the Catholic Church’s annual World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly in 2021.

Pope Francis wants to be buried at St Mary Major

VATICAN: Pope Francis stated in an interview broadcast by Mexican television, *N+*, on December 13, that he wants to be buried in the Roman Basilica of St Mary Major, due to his particular devotion to the Virgin Mary.

“The place is ready. I want to be buried at St Mary Major,” Francis explains. “It is my great devotion,” he continues. “My great devotion. And before, when I used to come here (to Rome), I always went there on Sunday mornings.” Francis also has a habit of visiting the basilica before and after each trip to pray before the icon *Salus populi romani* (Protector of the Roman people).

This decision by Francis is unusual, as no pope has been buried in this basilica since 1669, when the body of Clement IX was laid to rest there. Nevertheless, the apostolic constitution of John Paul II, *Universi Dominici Gregis*, on the vacancy of the Apostolic See, did indeed open up the possibility of a pope being buried somewhere other than St Peter’s Basilica inside the Vatican.

Francis, who also states that he has “not thought about” resigning, despite the health problems he has been experiencing for several weeks, also specifies having worked on



The statue of Our Lady, Queen of Peace in the Basilica of St. Mary Major. (CNA photo/Jonah McKeown)

a new ritual for the burial of popes. “I was with the master of ceremonies who was preparing the rite for the pope’s funeral. We have greatly simplified it,” reveals Francis.

“Old age cannot be disguised; it is what it is, and it presents itself as it is,” the Pope elaborates, when asked about his birthday. Francis turned 87 years old on December 17. One must, adds the Pope, “know how to accept the gifts of old age. We must accept that we can do a lot of good from a different perspective.”

— By Loup Besmond de Senneville, LCI (<https://international.la-croix.com/>)

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REST IN PEACE

Beware the bishops seeking fame

A few months ago, sitting in a restaurant with a bishop, sharing an appetizer as we waited for our meals, I asked my friend what he thought was the greatest challenge facing the episcopacy at this moment.

He didn't hesitate with his answer. "Too many of us want to be famous."

"Famous? Who would want that...?"

And he replied quickly again. "Those who want more power. When you're well known, you can influence and control more."

Our conversation shifted after that, back to lighter fare, catching up about life, our families, the busy schedules we both had for the coming months.

His answer struck me then, and has been bouncing in my head for weeks.

"Too many of us want to be famous." That's a pretty striking claim to make about the American episcopacy. But, perhaps, a very correct accusation to level against the bishops of the United States at the end of this very odd and dramatic year.

Infecting hearts and clouding minds

Some bishops take to social media to find that fame. Others, YouTube. Still others, podcasts and radio. Some bishops write their articles, posting them on diocesan websites and publishing columns in the quickly dying diocesan newspapers. I'm sure they wonder if anyone is reading what they have to say. They issue statements, and when they meet twice a year, the bishops make clear their stance on certain key issues, and the press releases are reported upon, the think pieces posted online, and then back to their chanceries they return, the minutiae of the job awaiting them.

Maybe it's that minutiae that some of our shepherds are running from, hoping their name recognition will save them from the often quite boring, boilerplate, ordinary work of managing parishes, priests, and people in a territorial area they oversee.



In the brave new world of online communication, are some bishops distracted from their pastoral duties and the needs of their flocks by the desire for online fame?

Maybe it's the hope that fame will allow them to wield greater influence on culture, shaping the conversations happening in the public square.

Maybe the desire to be known well is a true call they feel within their hearts. Bishops are teachers after all, their job is to clearly proclaim and articulate the faith for all to hear, and having a public platform could only help with that work.

But here was a bishop, telling me he saw this "desire for fame" to be a challenge for his brother bishops, a sickness that was infecting hearts and clouding minds, distracting these shepherds from the flock right in front of them as they seek crowds of sheep far beyond their jurisdiction or reach.

And the sickness, it seems, is contagious. Because as some shepherds in our Church

have sought the trappings and influence of fame and the popularity of clicks and views happily doled out in online spaces, we common lay folk have happily lapped it up.

As the bishop becomes famous, he has only been able to do so because of adoring fans (often not even within his own diocese) who have given him the illusion of this popularity and reach. It can make one drunk with power, as they watch crowds in person and online fall over themselves to watch, listen, see, and fawn over the good bishop who has put himself in front of the camera and behind the microphone.

The brave new world of digital communication

This isn't to say bishops should not pub-

licly speak or use the digital means widely available to instruct the faithful or invite people to love Jesus. In this brave new world of digital communication and online content, we need our bishops in these spaces. But when a bishop becomes consumed by that digital space, and seemingly only works within it, he has lost the plot, and fallen prey to the enticing tendrils of fame and influence. When he cares more about the retweets and less about the paperwork on his desk, he's ignoring his responsibility to lead his diocese. When he wants people to know his name more than he cares to know the names of his own people, he has drifted from his duty. And this, as my bishop friend pointed out as we shared an appetizer of fried green tomatoes, is their greatest challenge.

Why might that be?

Because a bishop who thinks more about his name recognition and less about the names of his sheep is a bishop who is far from Jesus. Plain and simple.

Jesus spoke to the large crowds, but then sought out the one who was hurting within it. Jesus wielded influence over the public, but then eschewed the trappings of power dangled before Him by those who held it. Jesus saw what was at hand, and focused on it. And the bishops in our Church, who have too frequently become distracted by the invitations to fame and the enticing power that comes with it, are becoming unfocused when they live online and caring for digital followers rather than real people.

Perhaps at the end of the year, when it seems bishops are in the headlines for their hot takes and their latest digital offering and their seeming punishments coming from Rome, we could pray for them, to be reminded of the work they've been ordained to do: care for the flock they've been handed, and focus on them first. —

By Katie Prejean McGrady, LCI (<https://international.la-croix.com/>)

Demasculinise theology? The women are already here!

The neologism is hardly elegant: "to demasculinise" (*demaschilizzare* in Italian). Pope Francis used this newly coined word in a recent meeting with the International Theological Commission (ITC). After counting aloud the number of women in the group, only five out of the 28 members, he said it was time to "demasculinise" theology. Then he launched into an improvisation on the contribution of women theologians, confiding that he himself had learned a great deal from one of them.

The Catholic Church does not have enough women theologians? Actually, there is no shortage — at least in the West. The real problem is that the institutional Church makes little room for them.

In the days since the Pope called for theology to be "demasculinised", a French woman religious and theologian named Régine du Charlat left this world after a lengthy illness. As a colleague wrote to me, she was not only "a great woman", but also a beautiful theologian. But, like many religious sisters, she was ignored by the institution for too long. Du Charlat taught at the Institut Catholique of Paris at a time when women were not so numerous. She remained discreet. Perhaps she was simply not being put forward.

Today there are women religious in France — such as Véronique Margron of the Dominicans and Nathalie Becquart of the Congregation of Xavières — who are breaking through the glass ceiling of recognition. But again, is it because they have chosen areas (Church-related abuse for Margron and the Synod for Becquart) where few male theologians venture?

Régine du Charlat, who belonged to an earlier generation, remained in the shadows. Yet she maintained relationships with a host of Church celebrities — male theologians, priests, and bishops — whom she often invited to her table, which featured delicious cuisine and thoughtful discussion. Was it because she was a woman?

The newness of the Gospel

Her perception of theology was not doctrinal or top-down, but conversational. Theology was not just knowledge for her, but an art for living, marked by fraternity (sisterhood?) and hospitality. The one who writes these lines has benefited so much from du Charlat and is indebted to her.

On the other hand, contrary to the male theologians, these women had little expectation of gaining recognition from the Church. Since they could not become



Pope Francis with two women participants during the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on synodality. (Vatican Media)

priests, bishops or cardinals, they had no ambitions in these matters, which helps explain their great inner freedom. It also sheds light on their lucidity about the Church, with its dysfunctions and weaknesses.

I recall a text Régine du Charlat published in November 2004, which is particularly resonant today. Observing the crisis in religious practice, she noted that perhaps we should not try to keep everything, but that "we could be asked to consent to losing what was good, in order to open up to what we do not know, but which can be said best if it springs from the newness of the Gospel".

Her bottom line was this: "And what if this were the condition we needed to hear

the Gospel — the only true foundation — afresh?"

Some will see these words from 20 years ago as akin to admitting defeat and throwing in the towel. But it is clear today, with our Church deeply in crisis, that they express the only possible spiritual attitude. As St Paul says in a scriptural verse Régine du Charlat loved, it means offering ourselves "to God as those who have been brought from death to life" (Romans 6, 13). And Régine noted that we need to make this passage from death to life so we can "welcome what God, who is constantly at work, wants and is therefore able to bring forth anew in our world". — By Isabelle de Gaulmyn, LCI, (<https://international.la-croix.com/>)

New Christmas song, a heartfelt plea for unity and compassion

A song by a Bethlehem resident made in connection with a London-based band, has been praised by Pope Francis as Christmas approaches.

Youstina Safar, a student at Bethlehem University, has collaborated with the band Ooberfuse on the song *Hear Angels Cry*. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales issued a statement saying the song "resonates with the belief that hope for a better future, born in the hearts of humanity."

In a message to Cardinal Vincent Nichols, the archbishop of Westminster, the Vatican said Pope Francis "was pleased to learn of the Bethlehem Song Project."

The document, signed by Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin, said the Pope feels the project, for this year's Christmas seeks to draw attention to the "sublime significance" of the birthplace of Jesus Christ.

"Indeed, the land which was home to the Prince of Peace is called to be a place of encounter, dialogue and hope for all, and His Holiness trusts that this musical initiative will inspire many people this Christmas to pray for a new flourish of fraternal solidarity, reconciliation and peace in the Holy Land," the document said.

The bishops' conference noted there will be



'Hear Angels Cry' title page. (Crux/RJ Music)

no Christmas tree or traditional festivities in Bethlehem this year in response to the thousands killed in the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Holy Land. Instead, the focus in the Church of the Nativity and Manger Square in Bethlehem will be on praying for peace.

"In the midst of despair, our song *Hear Angels Cry* stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of hope in Bethlehem," Safar said.

"While the traditional Christmas displays may dim this year in remembrance of lives lost in Gaza, our voices unite to affirm that hope will never succumb to darkness," she added.

Cherrie Anderson, from the band Ooberfuse,

said as they embarked on the music project in June, they never anticipated the cancellation of Christmas displays in Bethlehem.

"The dimming lights in Manger Square honour those who tragically lost their lives in the Holy Land. *Hear Angels Cry* embodies Jesus's message of love, prevailing even in the face of hopelessness," she said.

Anderson also said proceeds from the song will directly benefit those suffering in Gaza, "particularly the children reconstructing the fragments of their lives."

As a partner in this project, John Handal, a music producer from Bethlehem and owner of

RJ Music, has played a crucial role in bringing this collaboration to life. His commitment to the project reflects a shared vision of using music as a beacon of hope and healing in the region.

"It's an honour to be part of a project that transcends borders and brings together artists from Bethlehem and London," he said. "*Hear Angels Cry* is a testament to the enduring power of music to convey messages of peace and resilience. Through our collaboration, we aim to shine a light on the indomitable spirit of Bethlehem and support those affected by the conflicts in the Holy Land."

The company says *Hear Angels Cry* is not just a song but a heartfelt plea for unity, compassion, and the enduring power of hope, even in the most challenging circumstances.

"This Christmas, the world is invited to join in this message of solidarity and support for those affected by the ongoing struggles in the Holy Land," it says.

Funds raised from the sale of the song will be donated to *Friends of the Holy Land*, a non-political Christian charity registered in the UK. Its mission is to secure a resilient and enduring Christian community in the West Bank, Gaza, Israel and Jordan — the part of the world that Christians call the Holy Land. — **By Charles Collins, Crux**

How Charlie Brown's Christmas tree brings us back to earth

There is something profoundly "right" about "A Charlie Brown Christmas." The animated Christmas special casts a perfect tone in its music, in the simple innocence of the story, in its voices, and maybe, most of all, in its silence.

In "A Charlie Brown Christmas," silence is not emptiness. It's an important part of the soundtrack, cushioning the soft piano notes of Vince Guaraldi's classic music, producing a meditative, almost trance-inducing liturgy. Moments of silence envelop the whining voices of the children in conflict, showing them to be but passing ripples on a much deeper presence.

The silence "speaks" in Linus' long walk off the stage after reciting the Christmas story, in the slight pause after Charlie Brown "kills" the tree, and most powerfully, when Charlie Brown sees the resurrected tree — a pause, a hop of surprise, another long pause — in TV time, the equivalent of Linus' speech.

Watching the movie for decades and writing about it for the last few years, it has only now hit me: The silence is the voice of the Earth. And the Earth is the destination of the passion play.

Unlike in most cartoons, the landscapes of "A Charlie Brown Christmas" are not just the setting. Along with the scrawny Christmas tree, the Earth is one of the most important characters.

We meet the Earth in the opening scene: falling snow, bare trees and snow banks around the frozen pond. The Earth appears throughout, most notably at the end, when Charlie Brown dances down the road under the stars to the renewal of all the Peanuts around the resurrected tree.

Charlie Brown's discernment of his depression occurs outside, the Earth juxtaposed to the antagonist, commercialism. Other than the aluminium tree lot, the real effects of commercialism remain largely unseen in the show, like an evil spirit lurking in the shadows — open pit aluminium mines, toxic smoke and poisoned waters from factories, box store parking lots and landfills growing fat with the discarded wrapping paper and all-too-soon broken or unwanted gifts.

The relative absence of any portrayals of commercialism's ugly face heightens the power of Earth in the Christmas special. So does the fact that the Earth and sky are the most artistically complex. Michael Keane, in his book *Charlie Brown's Christmas Miracle*, explains how the Peanuts characters are so simple that animation posed significant challenges: How do you make them walk with such stubby legs? How do you make their large round heads turn?

In contrast, the landscapes are bold, dynamic, perhaps even more alive than the human characters. The artists channelled their talent into the landscapes, framing scenes that look like they "could be hung in a museum's exhibition of Impressionist art," says Keane.

Compare this to the flat, empty human spaces, such as the school auditorium. Notably, the conflict occurs indoors. The Peanuts are locked both inside and in inexplicable discord within a nondescript human made cavern, empty other than their own selfishness.

The tree appears in the one commercial setting and comes to the Peanuts in their indoor exile, is put on trial and takes upon itself their derision and brokenness.

After Linus recites the birth narrative from the *Gospel of Luke*, what Keane beautifully calls a "thunderbolt of clarity," Charlie Brown picks up the tree and walks outside. The rest of the Peanuts follow into the silence.



Screenshot from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

The tree leads the Peanuts back to the Earth, the communion of trees and dancing stars.

Is this some sort of intentional ecological message on the part of the film's creators, Charles M. Schultz, Bill Melendez and Lee Mendelson, like Schultz's insistence on including the Gospel passage? Not in the same way. While Schultz began infusing his comic strip with concepts from the growing environmental movement in the '70s, the arc of "A Charlie Brown Christmas" didn't emerge from an activism bent on policy outcomes. Rather, Earth as a character in "A Charlie Brown Christmas" flowed out of deep human and spiritual instincts.

Despite our tendency to modify the Earth for our own short-sighted ends — and often deface and destroy it — our romanticisation of beautiful landscapes remains constant. They are a sign of health and flourishing, of life fully actualised. We yearn not to dominate, but to be part of a flourishing whole.

Our love of beautiful landscapes is not just representative of natural human settings, but also a prominent tenet of Christian faith. The Book of Revelation ends with the New Heaven and New Earth. The healing of humanity is integrally linked to the healing of creation.

I think this is explicitly linked with Christmas. Northern latitudes offer an added bonus: Every winter, the Earth is renewed. The heal-

ing power of winter is well-demonstrated by our cultural obsession with a white Christmas, even though only a small percentage of the US typically has one. Snow covers the brokenness inflicted by humans, smooths over and rounds out the human-imposed angles, muffles the clanks and growls of our machine-driven culture, and weaves a mystical shroud of darkness with glinting ice and stars.

The Earth and sky remind us that they don't come from us, but we from them.

That is the conclusion of "A Charlie Brown Christmas." With the tree, the Peanuts are taken up into the heavens and merge with the land. Not erased, but transformed, and beautifully integrated into the Earth and sky.

Schultz's "A Charlie Brown Christmas" isn't concerned with "fixing" the Earth. Its concern is with fixing us. And it turns out that our fixing is dependent on returning to a right relationship with the Earth, not because of New Age eco-spirituality, but because of Christian instincts.

One of the many paradoxes is that in "A Charlie Brown Christmas," the Christian traditions that gave birth to the Christmas season are integrally connected with this return to the Earth, not in an overhanded dogmatic way, and not even through the subtle invitation that Schultz consistently wove into his art. Amazingly, "A Charlie Brown Christmas" does so by revealing the hidden drama with the Earth within what most of us do and feel every year, regardless of what we think it means.

Why is the holiday season so heart achingly beautiful and heartbreakingly melancholy at the same time? Why do we sacrifice living trees and bring them into our homes, gather round them as families and communities — a beautiful ceremony — yet drown ourselves in a flood of consumer goods and ideology?

There is enduring communal meaning at its heart, and its heart is in the Earth and in the spiritual mysteries that infuse and sustain her. Through Christmas, healing comes not only from a change of human hearts, but also a return to the heart of the world.

That is, after all, what the Incarnation is all about. And "A Charlie Brown Christmas," as well. — **By Damian Costello, NCR**

87-year-old archbishop receives World Peace Award

Archbishop Emeritus Thomas Menampampil of Guwahati has received Dr APJ Abdul Kalam World Peace Award-2023 on the occasion of the United Nations International Human Rights Day.

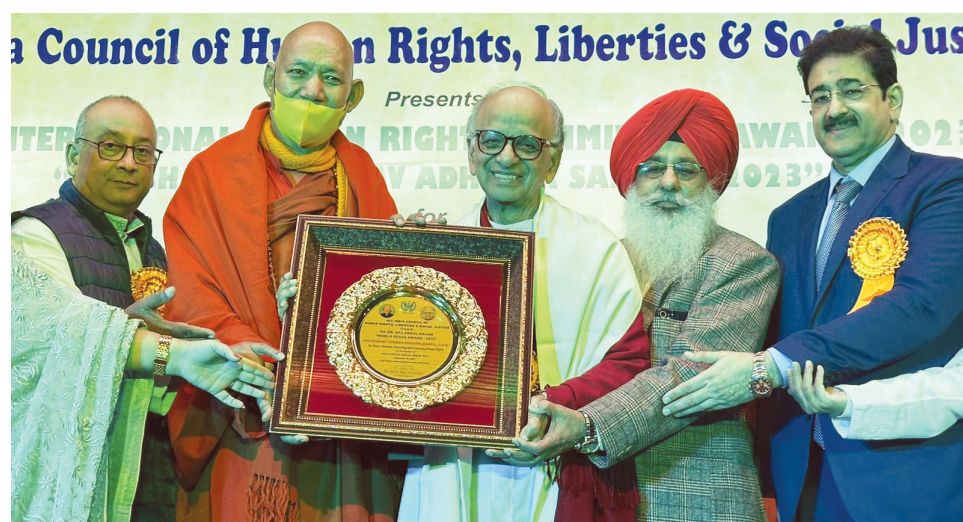
The award was given December 10 by All India Council of Human Rights, Liberties and Social Justice at a function in the Indian Islamic Cultural Centre, New Delhi.

Responding to the award, the 87-year-old Salesian archbishop said, "I do not know if I deserve this recognition. In this age and time when there is a steady spread of divisive agenda, hatred, polarisation, religious discrimination, violence and war, the place of peace has lost its relevance. If this award helps stop this trend, so be it."

He also thanked his peace team and his co-workers in north-eastern India for their shared effort for common good and invited all sections of people to join hands together in the cause of common good and for the strengthening of human values.

The award document reads: "After perusing your credentials, it remains our considered opinion that you have worked tirelessly and selflessly to promote Human Rights, Peace with kindness and compassion into action through multifarious humanitarian services, and above all, you believe in justice for all, peacefulness, meekness and innocence as the natural way of life, and your worthy example does inspire others, especially the young generation, towards certain remarkable achievements."

And it concludes: "Your inspiring and visionary leadership is greatly appreciated."



Archbishop Emeritus Thomas Menampampil of Guwahati (centre) receiving the Dr APJ Abdul Kalam World Peace Award-2023. (Matters India photo)

Archbishop John Moolachira of Guwahati and the president of the North East India Regional Bishops' Council, congratulated Archbishop Menampampil on this recognition. "The award is a well-deserved recognition for all his peace initiatives. He is a die-hard peace activist, civil rights champion and a great writer who always appeals for peace in the community. We need more such leaders in the Church," he added.

Archbishop Menampampil's peace initiative began in 1996 when a major clash in the Kokrajhar district of Assam put the lives of hundreds of people in danger and threw thousands of refugees into relief camps. His peace team managed to assist, at the first stage in relief work, and later in

the dialogue between the two communities in conflict.

The peace team also managed to help several other communities in the region in tense relationships during the past three decades.

Congratulating Archbishop Menampampil on the peace award, Salesian Sr Elizabeth, who has been part of the peace team since 1996, said, "I have worked closely with him. He takes all effort possible to bring about peace, even at times putting his life in risk. For his contribution to the cause of peace, he is truly deserving of this recognition."

Youth leaders from north-eastern India too congratulated the archbishop. "It is a proud moment for the people of the North East Region and he is truly an inspiration to all of us, especially to the youth," said

Becare Me O Nongtdu from Shillong, who works as an adviser to the Indian Catholic Youth Movement.

Archbishop Menampampil has, in the recent past, written many thought-provoking articles for some leading national and international publications, all appealing for peace and religious harmony, in the context of the ongoing ethnic and religious conflict in Manipur.

The archbishop described the situation in Manipur as "extremely difficult" but saw reason to believe that the communities concerned will take the cause of peace forward.

Apart from these peace initiatives, Archbishop Menampampil has spent more than half a century in north-eastern India promoting health and education, giving special attention to marginal communities.

They include six hospitals, dozens of schools, boarding houses, colleges, and development centres for the differently abled. He insists more on the collaborative relationship between communities and equal concern for all sections of people, tribes, and cultures.

He is credited with showing special interest in the cultural uniqueness of the regional communities. He says he believes that the value-systems prevailing among the region's various ethnic groups have something to contribute to the national character of India and even to world heritage.

Archbishop Menampampil had earlier won the Maschio Award, Careno Award, and Ambassador for Peace Award for his huge contribution to the cause of peace. — **By Felix Anthony, Matters India**

Puerto Rico prelate honoured for leadership after disasters

Archbishop Roberto González Nieves of San Juan, Puerto Rico, has received an award for his leadership in guiding Puerto Rico through rebuilding efforts after the nation was decimated by Hurricane Maria in 2017, and a series of earthquakes in the years since.

Catholic Extension, an organisation that since 1905 has worked to support the Church in some of the poorest regions of the country, awarded Archbishop González its "Spirit of Francis Award" at a recent ceremony in New York City. The annual award recognises an individual or group who has made a significant impact on the mission of the Church through service or philanthropy.

Fr Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension, described the archbishop as someone "who possesses a passionate heart, that beats with a pastor's love for his people, for the people's growth and well-being, and for the future of the people of God in Puerto Rico."

"Archbishop Roberto González is truly a good shepherd leading, nurturing, strengthening, and giving his very life every day so that God's people in Puerto Rico may continue to build up vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities, especially among the poorest of the poor on the island," Fr Wall said.

Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago, the chancellor of Catholic Extension, said González "is steeped in the tradition of St Francis."

"He's one who has wanted to serve the

poor, to preach the Gospel in a way that allowed the faith of others to be nourished, and his genuine love of people," Cardinal Cupich said. "He really cares about human beings so that they flourish in every way possible. Archbishop Roberto is a great human being."

In addition to González and Cupich, other prelates present at the ceremony were Cardinal Wilton Gregory of Washington, Cardinal Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, and Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston. Bishop Luis Miranda Rivera of Fajardo-Humacao, Puerto Rico, and Bishop Angel Luis Rios Matos of Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, were also in attendance.

In his remarks, Archbishop Gonzalez said it is an honour he is "unworthy to receive" and that he accepts it "as a call and a grace to renew my vowed service to the Lord, His people and His Church."

"Thank you, Catholic Extension, for financially and spiritually supporting the Church in Puerto Rico since 1905 to the present time. Extension has helped repair and rebuild damaged church structures, and helped us secure necessary funding, which we otherwise would not have been able to secure. This is an extraordinary expression of ecclesial and missionary solidarity and love," said the prelate.

Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, killing thousands, and severely damaging the island's infrastructure. Combined with a series of earthquakes



Archbishop Roberto González Nieves of San Juan, Puerto Rico (center-left) pictured receiving the 2023 Catholic Extension Spirit of Francis Award for his efforts rebuilding Puerto Rico. (Crux/ Catholic Extension)

and Hurricane Fiona last year, more than 600 facilities, which include Catholic churches, chapels, schools and missions were damaged.

Many of the churches and schools are located in San Juan, the nation's capital. González said that it's important to rebuild these places because Catholics need places to come together and worship.

"When a place is destroyed, we must rebuild and begin again," Archbishop González said.

Catholic Extension, working with González, have organised and led a disaster recovery programme for Puerto Rico's five dioceses who all seek to rebuild facilities. In a news release, Catholic Extension said it is optimistic that the goal of rebuilding the island is within reach.

According to the organisation, \$332.2 million (RM1.5 billion) of the estimated \$400 million (RM1.8 billion) in damages have

been obligated by FEMA to the Puerto Rican dioceses, and construction projects are underway. Currently, 15 projects, consisting of 58 facilities, are in process with architectural contracts being signed.

Speaking on the award, Cardinal Dolan highlighted the connection between the United States and Puerto Rico.

"Tonight, as we celebrate the life and ministry of Archbishop González and Catholic Extension Society's work of rebuilding the Church in Puerto Rico, we are reminded of the deep-rooted connections that bind us together as one human family and as a people of faith," Cardinal Dolan said.

"We gather in this spirit of friendship, reaffirming our commitment to stand in solidarity with one another, even as we care for the poor, the downtrodden, and the vulnerable of our society," he added. — **By John Lavenburg, Crux**

When Christmas celebrations are cancelled in Bethlehem

What? No Christmas celebrations at the birthplace of Jesus this year?

Bethlehem, like other Palestinian cities and towns, is in mourning over the ethnic cleansing and genocide taking place in Gaza. The town's outgoing mayor said, "We cannot celebrate while we are in this situation."

Instead, it will follow the approach that Christian churches in the Holy Land have taken. It will put the focus on prayer in solidarity with the suffering people of the land.

"We'll pray to God to have peace in the land of peace."

This dark time for Christians in Bethlehem puts mainstream Christianity in a major dilemma.

One big problem that Christians and others in occupied Palestine face is the support given to their oppressors by Christian Zionists abroad, especially in the US.

Christian Zionism is a political movement that continues to see the Jews as the "chosen people" and the formation of the modern state of Israel as the fulfilment of biblical prophecy, especially as the precursor to the second coming of Christ.

Now, this poses a problem. God is not a real estate agent focused on a prime patch of land in the Middle East, even if many events in the Scriptures took place there and are especially close to the hearts of those from the Abrahamic faiths.

Jesus Himself did not confine His mission to a specific geographical region but told His disciples to go to the ends of the Earth to preach the Good News.

Many Christian Zionists, however, are



SUNDAY OBSERVER

Anil Netto

obsessed with interpreting the "End Times" from the scriptures in the light of ongoing events. They see the state of Israel as playing a key role in the End Times, even hastening those times.

But before that, they believe the faithful Christians, alive and dead, will be zapped up in the clouds during "the Rapture" to be in God's (heavenly) kingdom. Apparently, this would be just before a seven-year Great Tribulation, which would culminate with the second coming of Christ and the mother of all wars at Armageddon.

Such Christian Zionism thinking from over a hundred years ago is an exclusive, dismissive imperial theology that seeks the domination of one group of people over others, especially in the Middle East.

What about the Christian Palestinians and those of other faiths as well? Where do they figure in all this? Don't they have a place in the "promised land"?

We need to keep asking this question because all too often the voice of the churches in the Palestinian territories — as well as those of other faiths — are drowned out.

The Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem has put up a thought-provoking nativity scene depicting an infant Jesus,

swaddled in a Palestinian scarf, the *kaffiyeh*, amid rubble. This is a symbol of solidarity with all those who have perished or are suffering due to the devastating bombardment and genocide in Gaza.

Let's be crystal clear. The kingdom that Jesus heralded is also on Earth — "thy kingdom come on Earth as in heaven". So it is not just a kingdom up in the sky at the end of time or in our hearts, but one very much rooted in this world.

In this kingdom, Jesus outlined the values and the people that would inherit the world — the poor, the meek, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted.

Unlike the exclusivist world of the Christian Zionists, the kingdom of God is inclusive — all are invited, no matter who they are, no matter where they are.

But the Christian Zionists' obsession with the End Times consumes their thinking and distracts from the calling to build the kingdom of God on Earth.

The other problem with Christian Zionism is that many of its adherents think they are following God's desire by supporting — financially or morally — a state that is involved in settler colonialism, occupation, apartheid and the ongoing genocide and ethnic cleansing of Gaza. In doing so, they have turned the Gospel message upside down.

Unfortunately, many Christians from mainstream denominations have been influenced by such Christian Zionist interpretations of the Scriptures.

Let's remember that the New Covenant has replaced the Old Covenant, even if the Jews

are regarded as the spiritual "elder brothers and sisters" of the faith and Jesus Himself was brought up in the Jewish tradition.

But Jesus also radically transformed the people around Him and put forward a more inclusive, universalist vision of the kingdom.

In this blossoming kingdom, new shoots are constantly being grafted into the Vine (Jesus) while some old branches, which refuse to bear fruit, are cut off.

The chosen today are those who follow the Word of God and His Way of truth, justice, compassion and suffering in order to build His kingdom. Meanwhile, the entire Creation itself is groaning in the pains of birth that will give rise to a new world that upholds all the values that God holds dear.

This Christmas, let us do our part to express solidarity with all those suffering from atrocities, violence and injustice. Let's call for an end to genocide, settler colonialism, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, war, discrimination and all forms of injustice. Let us reject terrorism — whether state-sponsored or individually inspired. But let us recognise that people have the right to struggle for their freedom and speak out against oppression.

Let us pray — and collaborate in creating a new world where peace and justice will reign. Our rededication to this kingdom project will be the most appropriate way to celebrate the coming of the Light to the world.

Come, Lord Jesus.

● **Anil Netto** is a freelance writer and activist based in Penang. He believes we are all called to build the kingdom of God in this world.



WORD MADE FRESH

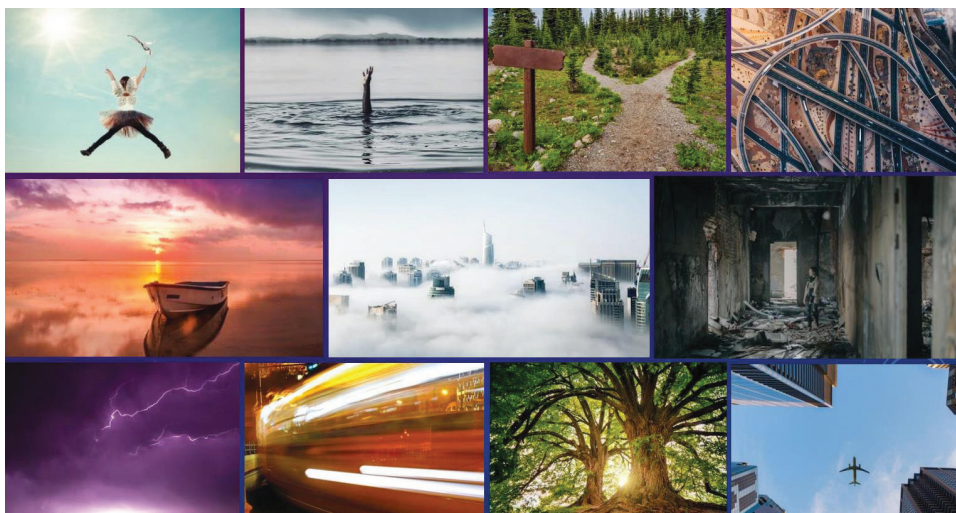
Nicholas Lye

Before religious painters or commercial card makers started portraying the nativity scene as one of awe and beauty, glitz and glamour, the actual scene where Christ was first born was far from picture perfect. In modern-day terms, having your child born in a run-down garage or tool shed, surrounded with dog poop and animal feed would not be the kind of picture you would put on a postcard and send it to family and friends. Yet, such a picture would actually be a more accurate representation of how our lives often feel like or look like, far from the picture perfect ideal that many of us long for.

"They were in Bethlehem when the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in the manger; because there was no place for them in the living room." (Luke 2:6-7)

Some weeks back, it was definitely not an ideal nor convenient time for me to get tested positive for COVID, especially just one day before an event where I was invited to run a few live workshops that were meant to evangelise and share the meaning of Christmas to Mandarin-speaking guests. I was quite upset at the unfortunate timing of the illness (then again, there never really is a good time for illnesses to happen). Still, not wanting to disappoint the guests, and with what energy I could muster, I decided to still conduct some workshops over Zoom, where I could still be present to the guests through a screen, despite the less-than-ideal condition that I was in.

Picture not so perfect



That was when it occurred to me how much Jesus wanted to be there for us as well, despite being born in His own less-than-ideal circumstances. But more than that, it also reveals to us how much Jesus wants to be born into our own less-than-ideal circumstances as well, and be there for us in those conditions. The good news of Christ's birth is that, not only is Christ willing to be with us in our less than perfect situations in life, He is also the One who offers us a beautiful image of what love can look like even in such a less than perfect picture. In fact, it is through the eyes of the religious painters, who add the awe and wonder of the nativity scene, that we can see with eyes of faith the greater gift of hope, joy, peace and love that comes with Christ, even in the most inconvenient and imperfect of conditions.

"As they were terrified, the angel said to them, 'Don't be afraid; I am here to give you good news, great joy for all the people. Today a Saviour has been born

to you in David's town; he is the Messiah and the Lord.' (Luke 2:9-11)

Inspired by the above revelation, I offered my workshop guests a few different types of images for them to choose from, and pick one that best reflected how their life looks like at the moment. One of them chose a room in ruins, depicting how his life feels like such a mess at the moment. Another picked a boat stranded in the middle of the ocean, depicting how he feels a little lost in life. Someone else picked a picture of buildings covered in mist, representing how he feels confused about many things in his life. These sharings painted a very real and painful reality of the lives of many in the world.

Yet, after sharing the good news of what Christ came into our world to do, to bring renewed hope and light into our world, depicted by the nativity scene that brings us the gift of faith, love and hope despite the less-than-ideal conditions, I invited them to look at

the pictures they had selected again, and this time use the lens of faith to pick out what gifts their current situation can still offer, despite the less-than-perfect conditions.

Soon, the one who chose the room in ruins noticed a doorway with light coming out from it, inviting him to walk towards whatever light he can find in his life with hope and anticipation of a way out. The one who chose the boat realised he can start paddling towards the sun and would not lose his direction if he kept his focus on the sunlight. The one who chose the buildings covered in mist discovered that he can still enjoy the beauty of what might be partially revealed, and trust that more shall be revealed in time to come.

Having the participants discover how a change of lens can turn a less-than-ideal picture into one that offers gifts of hope, love and joy, truly also turned my less-than-ideal condition into one of greater encouragement and joy. It was as if Christ was born into my very situation, and offered gifts of hope, love and joy for me to share and pass on to the others.

From this experience, I realise that we may not always have a picture perfect situation in life, but we have been given a perfect gift in Christ that can turn every less-than-ideal picture into one that exudes awe, wonder and splendour, if only we have the eyes of faith to see and enjoy. Perhaps Christmas is a time not only to give and receive presents from one another, but more so to open our eyes to the greater gift of Christ and what He might already be offering us even amidst our not-so-picture perfect conditions.

● **Nicholas** is a lay missionary and creative evangelist who loves to use creativity and various art forms to share the faith and help people encounter God's truths in a fun and meaningful way.



Fr Ron Rolheiser

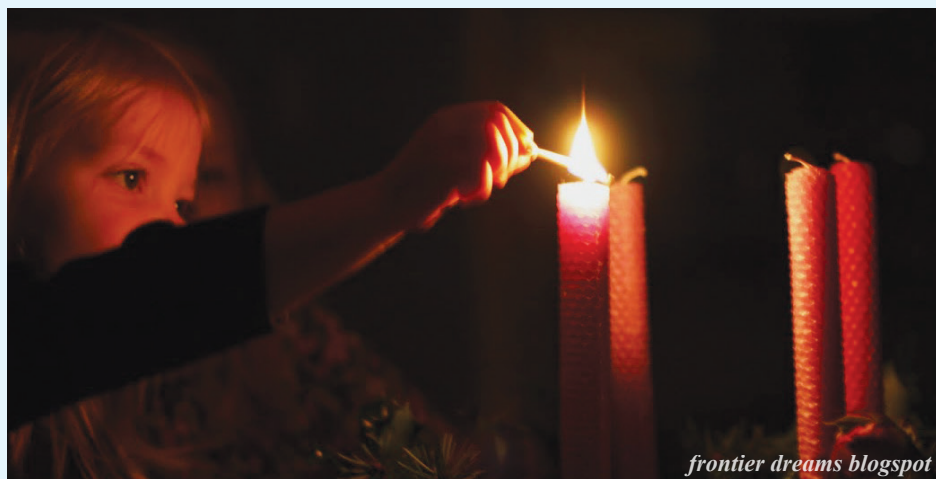
Lighting an Advent candle

In the days of apartheid in South Africa, Christians there used to light candles and place them in their windows as a sign to themselves and others that they believed that someday this injustice would end. A candle burning in a window was a sign of hope and a political statement. The government didn't miss the message. It passed a law making it illegal to place a lit candle in a window, the offence being equal to owning a firearm; both were considered equally dangerous. This eventually became a joke among the kids: "Our government is afraid of lit candles!"

And well they should have been! Lit candles, more than firearms, overthrew apartheid. Hope, not guns, is what ultimately transforms things. To light a candle as an act of hope is to say to yourself and to others that, despite anything that might be happening in the world, you are still nursing a vision of peace and unity that's based upon something beyond the present state of things and upon deeper realities and powers than what the world admits. To light a candle is to state publicly that you believe that, at the end of the day, more than what you see on the evening news will shape the final outcome of things. There are other powers also at work. To light a candle is an act of political defiance and an act of hope.

What is hope?

First, it's not wishful thinking. I can wish to win a lottery, but that wish, in itself, contains no real power to make it happen. Second, hope is not simply temperamental optimism, an upbeat temperament that always sees the bright side of things. An unwavering optimism about things can sometimes be helpful, but it's



frontier dreams blogspot

no basis for hope; like wishful thinking it lacks the power to make its own dream come true. Finally, hope is not simply shrewd observation and common sense, a talent for sorting out the real from the fluff. Useful as this is, it's still not hope. Why not?

Because hope doesn't base itself upon a shrewd assessment of the empirical facts, but upon belief in a deeper set of realities: God's existence, God's power, God's goodness, and the promise that flows from that.

There's a story told about Pierre Teilhard de Chardin that helps illustrate this. Teilhard wasn't much given to wishful thinking or even to an optimistic temperament; he tended rather toward a lonely realism. Yet he was a man of real hope. For example, on one occasion, after giving a conference where he laid out a vision within which ultimately unity and peace would be achieved on earth in a way that parallels the vision of Scripture, he was

challenged by some colleagues to this effect: "That's a wonderful, idealistic vision of things, but suppose we blow-up the world with a nuclear bomb, what happens to your vision then?" Teilhard replied, "that would set things back some millions of years, but this will still come to fruition, not because I say so or because the facts right now indicate that it will, but because God promised it and in the resurrection of Jesus has shown that He is powerful enough to deliver on that promise."

Hope, as we can see from this, requires both faith and patience. It works like yeast, not like a microwave oven. Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners, expresses this colourfully: "All politicians are alike," he says, "they hold a finger up and check which way the wind is blowing and then make their decisions in that direction. That will never change, even if we change politicians. So, we must change the wind! That's hope's task — to change the wind!"

When we look at what has morally

changed this world — from the great religious traditions coming out of deserts, caves, and catacombs and helping leaven whole cultures morally, to apartheid being overthrown in South Africa — we see that it has happened precisely when individuals and groups lit candles and hoped long enough until the wind changed.

We light Advent candles with just that in mind, accepting that changing the wind is a long process, that the evening news will not always be positive, the stock markets will not always rise, the most sophisticated defences in the world will not always protect us from terrorism, and secular liberal and conservative ideologies will not rid this planet of selfishness.

However, we continue to light candles and hope anyway, not on the basis of a worsening or improving evening newscast, but because the deepest reality of all is that God exists, that the centre holds, that there's ultimately a gracious Lord who rules this universe, and this Lord is powerful enough to rearrange the atoms of the planet and raise dead bodies to new life. We light candles of hope because God, who is the ultimate power, has promised to establish a kingdom of love and peace on this earth and is gracious, forgiving, and powerful enough to eventually make it happen.

● **Oblate Fr Ron Rolheiser, theologian, teacher, and award-winning author, is President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, TX. He writes a weekly column that is carried in over 90 newspapers around the world. He can be contacted through his website www.ronrolheiser.com**

SOCIAL JUSTICE



Making a Difference
Tony Magliano

A Christmas message from the heavens

On Christmas Eve, December 24, 1968, the crew of Apollo 8 entered lunar orbit and began circling the moon — the first time in history for humans to visit another world.

That evening the crew's astronauts Bill Anders, Jim Lovell and Frank Borman transmitted a live television broadcast including spectacular pictures of the moon just 60 miles below them, and of the Earth — a quarter of a million miles away!

In a most fitting conclusion to the broadcast, the astronauts shared a biblical reading of the first 10 verses of the creation account in the Book of Genesis.

Anders started by inspiringly saying "We are now approaching lunar sunrise, and for all the people back on Earth, the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send you: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light: and there was light.'"

Immediately after reading from Genesis, Borman said, "And from the crew of Apollo

8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas — and God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth."

But in 1968, the good Earth, and countless good people on it, were suffering from various evils. The bloody Vietnam War, the brutal Soviet crushing of the Prague uprising, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and race riots throughout the U.S. were among the critical ills sickening our good Earth.

Today, 55 years later, as we approach Christmas, the sad realities of 1968 are still with us — although in different forms.

Savage wars between Russia and Ukraine/NATO, and between Israel and Hamas — with continuous bombs being dropped upon Gazans — as well as at least 54 other internal armed conflicts have resulted in countless deaths — most sadly thousands upon thousands of children, not statistics, but real flesh and blood little boys and girls killed by heartless adults obsessed with the mass murder of war (see: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/>).

Mass shootings, death penalty executions, 73 million abortions of unborn babies

annually, death dealing effects of climate change, and over 700 million hungry people — 50 million of whom now facing starvation, are horrendous examples of the pandemic of violence worldwide.

Tragically, it appears we haven't learned a thing.

One beautiful way to help change things for the better is by making a heartfelt Christmas gift to our desperate war-torn, poor and hungry brothers and sisters in the Holy Land (see: <https://www.churchinneed.org/help-for-christians-caught-in-holy-land-crisis/>).

But don't stop there. Jesus is asking to be reborn in you to continue doing his work in our violent world crying out for justice, peace, and love.

Humanity's first manned step toward the heavenly bodies in 1968 gave all of us living on the good Earth an astronomical boost. And the famous "Earthrise," photographically captured by Anders, offered humanity a fresh heavenly perspective of how we might better view our earthly home.

Give yourself a wonderful Christmas gift. Click onto the following NASA link and meditate on the awesome "Earthrise"

photo. And with an open mind and heart prayerfully listen to Apollo 8's Christmas Eve 1968 message (see: https://www.nasa.gov/topics/history/features/apollo_8.html).

Anders said that despite all the training and preparation for an exploration of the moon, the astronauts ended up discovering the Earth. Oh, that we too might discover the goodness of planet Earth and the goodness of every person on it!

On Christmas Day, with a view of the distant Earth from above the moon, Apollo 8 astronaut Frank Borman offered this deeply inspiring prayer. Let's pray it together: "Give us, O God, the vision which can see thy love in the world in spite of human failure. Give us the faith to trust the goodness in spite of our ignorance and weakness. Give us the knowledge that we may continue to pray with understanding hearts, and show us what each one of us can do to set forth the coming of the day of universal peace. Amen."

● **Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated Catholic social justice and peace columnist. He can be reached at tmag6@comcast.net**

Little Catholics' Corner



Dear children,

The Fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve are on the same day! It must be a challenge for you, children, to get up in the morning to go for

Mass and in the evening, celebrating Christmas Eve!

Knowing this Sunday may feel full or eventful, let this time of worship, be set apart for this final stage of prep-



aration. Make it simple, make it genuine, proclaim the truth about the love of God growing in Mary's womb and living in our hearts today.

This is, ultimately, everything we need as we

transition from the end of Advent in the morning to welcoming the Christ child in the evening. Blessed Christmas and Happy New Year 2024, children!

Aunty Eliz



Who did What?

Write the number of the person beside what they did in the Christmas Story.

1. Saint Joseph

Announced the joyful news of the Saviour's birth

2. Our Lady

Commanded that everyone register in their hometown

3. The Shepherds

Did not have room for the man and his wife

4. The Angels

Took his wife to Bethlehem

5. The Innkeeper

Pondered all these things in her heart

6. Baby Jesus

Went to find the newborn Saviour

7. The Emperor

Came to save the people from their sins



COLOUR BY NUMBERS



1- Brown

2- Yellow

3- Skin color

4- Blue

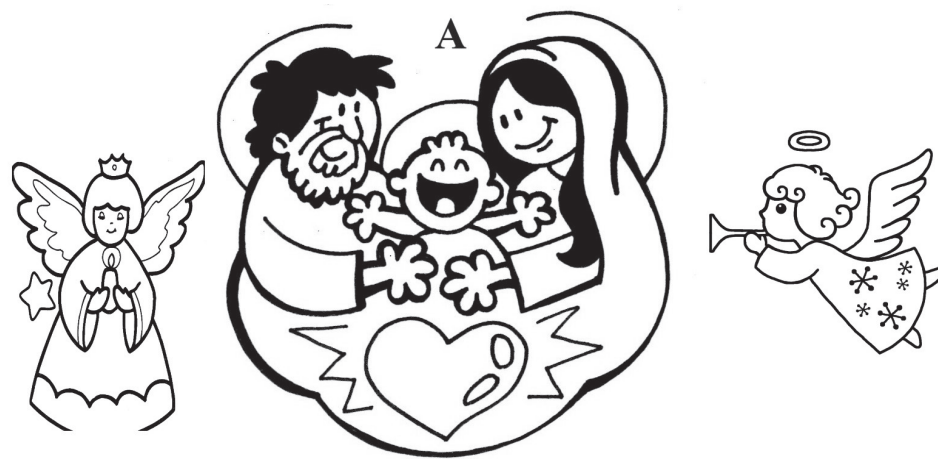
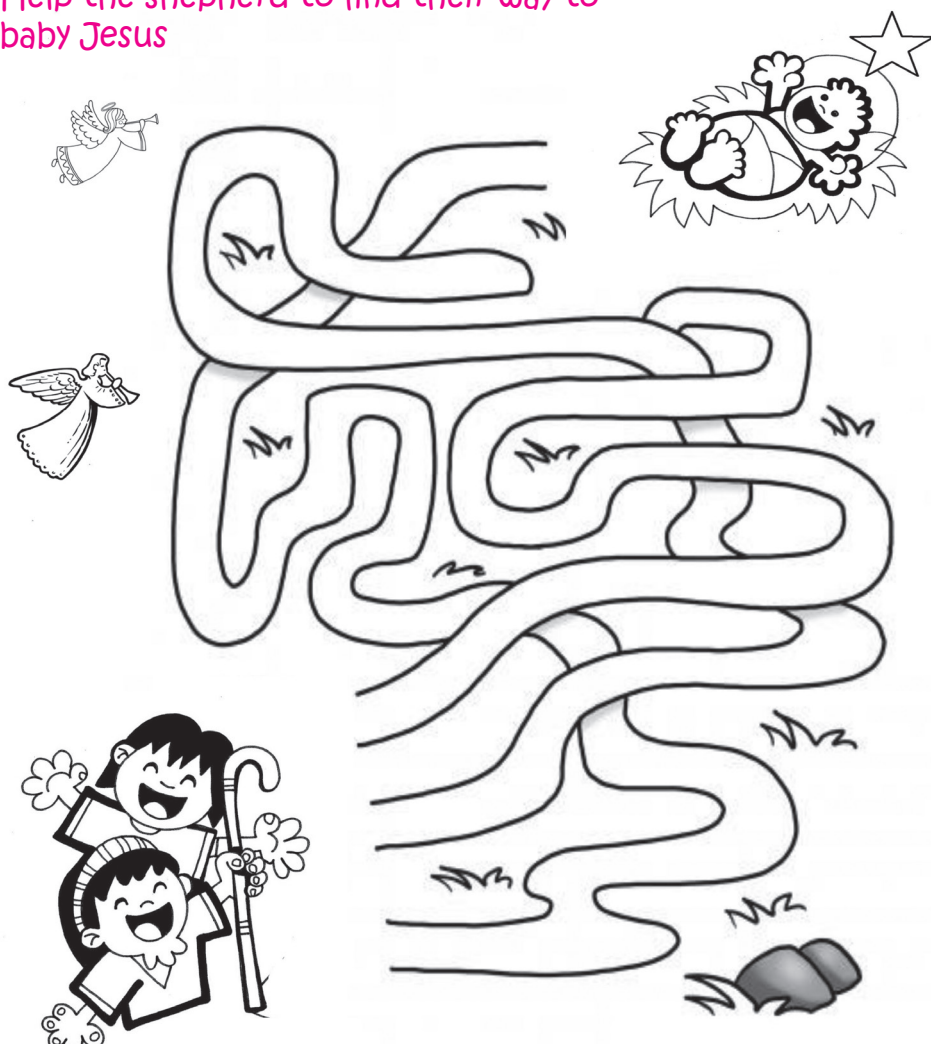
5- Gray

6- Black

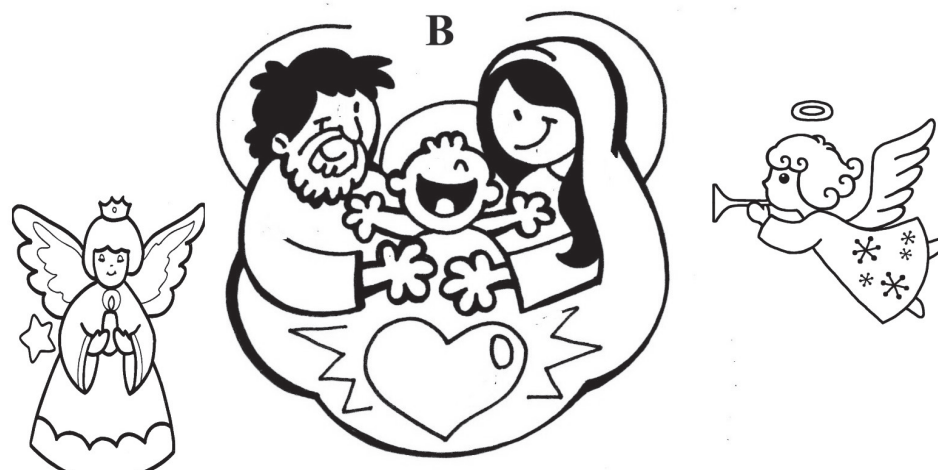
7- Red

8- Purple

Help the shepherd to find their way to baby Jesus



Can you find EIGHT differences in this picture?



YOUTH

DECEMBER 24, 2023

UNIVERSITY LEADERS PLAN FOR 2024

PENANG: Twenty-five student leaders met recently to enrich their spiritual lives and brainstorm creative initiatives for the upcoming year's events.

Representing public and private higher education institutions, they gathered at Stella Maris Retreat Centre December 1 – 3. Facilitated by the Penang Diocesan Youth Network (PDYN), the programme was aimed at fostering a tighter-knit community among youth groups.

The event commenced with a registration session, dinner and followed by an engaging ice-breaking session, songs and games. The day concluded with a serene Taize prayer session, uniting participants in reflection and spirituality.

The following day, Fr Simon Anand led a session on *Faith, Hope, and Love*, drawing inspiration from Romans 8:24-30. He emphasised the tangible impact of these virtues on leadership and ministry. “Faith, hope, and love are not merely abstract concepts but are transformative forces that have the power to shape our leadership and bring us closer to God. Our faith gives us the courage to step into the unknown. Hope is a beacon of light



that shines in the darkest of times and Love, invites us to move beyond our own self-interests, to become vessels of divine grace creating positive change in the world around us,” said Fr Simon, who is head of PDYN.

The day continued with team building activities designed to encourage collaborative

group dynamics, showcasing the participants' creativity as they worked together to promote activities that required support and encouragement from the entire team.

Discussions on leadership types, methodologies, and phases of team development were punctuated by a session where participants delved deeper, asking pertinent questions and gaining insights into effective leadership strategies.

On the third day, participants were divided into groups based on their campus, ministry, and parish affiliations for focused discussions. Each group enthusiastically contributed ideas for activities in the forthcoming year, which were collated and submitted to PDYN representatives, Jason Alexander and Serena Jonius, for evaluation.

The PDYN Council concluded with the Eucharistic celebration, and before departing, participants captured shared moments with group photos, signifying the bonds formed during the enriching gathering.



Interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding promotes harmony



The participants listening to the briefing on Sri Balathandayuthapani temple in Seremban.

SEREMBAN: The Parish Ministry of Ecumenical Interreligious Affairs of the Church of the Visitation organised a walk to the Sri Balathandayuthapani temple on December 9. The interfaith initiative saw the participation of 65 young people and adults, comprising students, catechists, and parish leaders.

The day commenced with an introduction to interreligious dialogue and an opening prayer, setting a tone of reverence and respect as attendees embarked on their visit to the temple. Exploring the temple's history and understanding the significance of its various statues offered participants a captivating insight into the temple's cultural and religious heritage.

The gesture of providing a vegetarian lunch at the temple exemplified a thoughtful embrace of cultural and dietary traditions,

fostering a deeper connection between the visitors and the temple's ethos.

Upon returning to the church, a brief sharing session, facilitated by parish priest Fr Xavier Andrew, provided an opportunity for all involved to reflect on their experiences and openly express their thoughts and feelings following the visit.

Initiatives such as this play a crucial role in cultivating interfaith dialogue and fostering mutual understanding among diverse religious communities. Feedback from the participants attest to the excursion's success, as it was imbued with a spirit of unity. Each individual found the visit profoundly meaningful and spiritually uplifting, signifying a step forward in promoting harmony and respect among the different religious groups.

SFA youth filled with fiery passion and purpose

CHERAS: Fuelled by fiery passion and a theme that resonated deeply, 80 youth embarked on a transformative journey at the Church of St Francis of Assisi (SFA) Youth Camp 2023. Held from December 8 to 10 at the scenic Golden Sands Baptist Assembly in Port Dickson, the camp pulsed with an energy that mirrored the theme: *I have come to set the world on fire, and I wish it were already burning!*

The excitement started brewing even before the camp officially began. On December 8, at 12 noon, eager young faces gathered at the parish for registration. By 2.00pm, they were buzzing in the buses with anticipation as they departed for Port Dickson. The journey itself was a prelude to the adventure ahead, filled with laughter, chatter, and a shared sense of purpose. By 3.30pm, the Golden Sands Baptist Assembly welcomed the vibrant SFA youth with open arms.

Upon arrival, the campgrounds became a hive of activity. After settling in and enjoying some free time, the first spark of the camp's fire ignited with a praise and worship session. Led by the SFA Youth Praise and Worship group, aptly named LPK (Love, Peace, and Kindness), the session was a joyous explosion of song, dance, and unbridled energy.

But before the official camp kickoff, SFA Youth added their own unique touch – a rousing lion dance performance. This vibrant display of tradition and cultural pride



set the stage for a camp filled with positive energy and good fortune.

The camp schedule was packed with opportunities for learning and growth. Fr Ramon Borja SDB's four sessions were thought-provoking and inspiring, each one igniting a different flame within the young attendees.

1. Are you HOT or COLD? or neither? This session challenged the youth to identify their personal relationship with their faith, urging them to embrace a passionate commitment.
2. Be Youth on FIRE! This session explored the power of youth to make a difference in the world, encouraging them to be agents of positive change.
3. COOKing (Christ Our Only King) Takeaways This session provided practical tools and insights for living a Christ-centred life.
4. How to be FIREmen? This final session equipped the youth with the skills

and mindset to become compassionate and impactful leaders in their communities.

Saturday night offered a different kind of spark – the quiet contemplation of taize. Led by ASAYO members, this meditative experience was followed by confession sessions led by both ASAYO and Fr Ramon. It was a testament to the openness and vulnerability of the young people that many embraced the opportunity for spiritual renewal. Later that night, the campgrounds erupted in a joyful cacophony of talent. The BBQ dinner and talent show provided a platform for the youth to showcase their diverse skills and passions. From Christmas carols to energetic dance routines, beatboxing to heartwarming skits, the night was a celebration of creativity and shared joy.

Sunday marked the final chapter of the SFA Youth Camp 2023. After breakfast, the group gathered for a Mass with Fr. Ramon, followed by a delicious lunch. By 2.00pm,

the buses were rolling back to SFA, carrying with them not just tired bodies but hearts brimming with newfound purpose, strengthened faith, and memories that would forever burn bright.

The SFA Youth Camp 2023 was more than just a gathering; it was a crucible that forged friendships, ignited passions, and set 80 young hearts ablaze with the transformative power of faith and purpose. As they return to their communities, they carry the torch of hope, love, and action, ready to set the world alight, not with destruction, but with the radiant glow of a future built on the pillars of Love, Peace, and Kindness.

The SFA Youth Camp 2023 may have ended, but the embers of its transformative fire continue to glow within the hearts of the 80 youth who participated. And as we reflect on this incredible journey, a chorus of gratitude rises to express our deepest appreciation to those who made it all possible. — *By SFA Youth Committee*

GRADUATES CALLED TO BE "SALT AND LIGHT OF THE EARTH"

KOTA PADAWAN: Twenty-eight students from the Church of St Ann successfully completed Level 10 of the Malaysian Catechetical Series recently.

A simple yet memorable graduation ceremony with the theme, *Be the Salt and Light of the Earth*, was held as an appreciation for

the students who had undergone the 10-year course.

It took place at St Anthony's Hall and was a special occasion as it was held for the first time at St Ann. The main organiser was the catechists' group led by Mariana Matthew.

Assistant parish priest, Friar David Au

OFM, in his speech reminded all the graduates to keep on enriching their faith as they will most likely be on their own when furthering their studies and in their career life. They were advised to always seek for God's guidance and serve God by any possible means.

The two-hour event included the presenta-

tion of certificates to all the graduates by Friar David, accompanied by the Advisor of the catechists' group, Anna Dreba and witnessed by the parents, Chairperson of the Ministry of Faith Formation, John Dawi and catechists of St Ann.

Certificates were also presented to some outstanding graduates in several categories: *Certificate of Top Attendance* to Ferexious Delrance Allanceson anak Kasar, *Certificate of the Most Active Member in Church Service* to Hayden Smith Aldrine and the *Top Scorer* and *Excellent Student Certificates* to Claudia Samson.

The event then continued with a slide presentation, sing-along session and photography session. Besides leading the opening prayer, Friar David led the group in saying grace before meals and gave the final blessing to all present, before a humble pot blessing meal. — *By Magdaline anak Salin, Today's Catholic*



Level 10 achievers standing proud with their certificates alongside Friar David Au, OFM.

Sacraments celebrated at Christ the King parish

SUNGAI PETANI: Young people were in the spotlight at the Church of Christ the King recently as the parish celebrated the Sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation.

Twenty-five children received the Sacrament of First Holy Communion on November 4. The Sacrament of Confirmation was conferred upon 18 candidates on Dec 1 by Fr Victor Louis, who was granted authority to confirm by

Cardinal Sebastian Francis.

A "year-end party" was organised for the confirmands and everyone who were involved in the preparation of this auspicious occasion. This gesture served as a token of gratitude, particularly to the Catechism teachers, whose dedicated efforts in meticulously preparing the candidates for both sacramental events were acknowledged and appreciated during the celebration. — *By Juliana Fernandez*



Confirmands with Fr Victor Louis and Deacon James Kameron.

For enquiries, please contact:
Email: advertisement@herald.com.my
Tel: 03-2026 8291

MEMORIAM

12th Anniversary In Loving Memory of



Mathen Zachriah

**From the Lord:
21 August 1927**

**To the Lord:
19 December 2011**

*May the winds of Heaven blow softly
And whisper in your ear
How much we love and miss you
And wish that you were here.*

Deeply missed and forever loved by
Wife, Daughters, Sons-in-law,
Grandchildren and Grandsons-in-law.

33rd Anniversary In Loving Memory of



**Aloysius Anthony
Theseira**

Departed: 24-12-1990

*"Eternal rest grant unto
him, O Lord,
and let perpetual light
shine upon him."
May His soul rest in peace.*

Deeply missed
and always remembered
in our hearts and with love
by Wife, daughters, son,
relatives and friends.

10th Year Anniversary In Loving Memory of Selver Pakiam @ Annamal Sebastian

February 08, 1941 - January 05, 2014



*It's been a decade
since your heavenly journey.
Yet, your radiant love
continues to warm our soul.
Your encouraging words, your
gentle reprimands, your loving
embraces. In your absence,
we have learnt to hold onto your
teachings as our guiding light.
We still - miss you, love you,
and remember every moment
with you. Rest in Peace Amma.*

Please join our family in
celebrating her memorial Mass
on Saturday, 6th January 2024,
at the Church of Sacred Heart of
Jesus, 152, Jalan Peel, Maluri,
55100 Kuala Lumpur, at 6:00pm
followed by fellowship at the
Church Hall.

Deeply loved and forever cherished by her husband, daughters,
sons-in-law, grandchildren and a host of relatives and friends.
The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want. (Psalm 23:1)

12th Anniversary In Ever Loving Memory of



Ruth Mary Michael Pillay

Gift from God 18th November 1947

Returned to the Lord 31st December 2011

Husband: Late Sandanasamy Anthony Pillay

*Eternal rest grant unto her, Oh Lord
and let perpetual light shine upon her.
May her soul rest in peace. AMEN.*

We Love and Miss you

Forever loved & dearly missed by
family members, relatives and friends.

Celebrating 2nd Year Heavenniversary

Sandamamary Parisutham

27 November 1945 - 29 December 2021



This day is remembered and quietly kept,
No words are needed, we shall never forget,
For those we love don't go away,
They walk beside us everyday.
Unseen and unheard, but always near,
So loved, so missed and so very dear.

*Sadly missed, Lovingly remembered,
by husband, Joseph Peter,
Sons, Son-in-law, Daughters, Daughters-in-law,
Grandchildren and Great Grandchild*

*John 11:25-26 - Jesus said,
"I am the Resurrection and the Life.
Whoever believes in Me will live
even if he dies, and everyone
who lives and believes in Me
will never die."*

In Loving Memory of

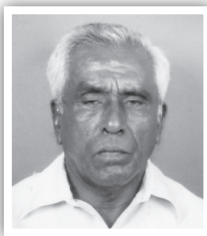


Pauline Malathi Roch

**(13th October 1971 - 30th
December 2015)**

*"Time is too slow
for those who wait.
Too swift for those who fear,
Too long for
those who grieve,
Too short for
those who rejoice,
But for those who love,
time is Eternity."*

IN LOVING MEMORY OF



S. SABASTIAN

Departed on: 26-12-2005



**RAJANAYAKI
SABASTIAN**

Departed on: 9-11-2011

In memory of our loving parents/grandparents.

*We dearly miss you, your laughter, and your presence.
Though it has been years since you have left us, it just
feels like yesterday. The memories of you always close,
and forever cherish in our hearts. No words can describe
the emptiness with you gone.*

We love you

~ Fondly remembered by all loved ones ~

In Loving Memory of Anyah and Amma



T. JACOB & M. SANTHAMMAL

24th Anniversary

**Departed:
24 December 1999**

6th Anniversary

**Departed:
19 October 2017**

*You gave us everything, We thank you.
We pray that God grants you eternal rest.
Always remembered by your loved ones.*

Sandakan diocese mourns demise of a beloved priest

The Diocese of Sandakan grieves the loss of a cherished figure, Fr Marcellinus Pongking, who passed away on December 8 at the age of 64, following a prolonged illness.

The funeral Mass at St Mary's Cathedral on Dec 11, drew over 600 mourners from diverse communities within the parish and neighbouring areas. Bishop Julius Dusin Gitom presided over the Mass, joined by clergy members from across the Sandakan Diocese and Msgr Nicholas Stephen representing the Archdiocese of Kota Kinabalu.

Bishop Julius delivered a poignant homily that touched the hearts of everyone present, especially the family of the late Fr Marcellinus, who had cared for him during his lengthy illness. The bishop expressed deep gratitude to the communities of Kunak and Lahad Datu for their unwavering love and undivided attention shown to the priest during his tenure in the parishes.

The prelate emphasised how Fr Marcellinus devoted himself to his ministry, prioritising God's love above his own health. Despite failing health, the late cleric persisted in travelling to remote areas to administer sacraments, despite the prelate's counsel to prioritise his well-being. Fr Marcellinus was resolute, insisting, "Saya masih boleh bah,

Uskup" (I can still do it, Bishop).

Bishop Julius acknowledged that among the many sacrifices the priest made, his unwavering dedication to serving despite illness stood out.

When the Diocese of Sandakan was established 16 years ago, Fr Marcellinus was among the clergy who volunteered to serve in the diocese. His passing has deeply affected Bishop Julius and his fellow clergy. Describing him as an irreplaceable virtuous priest, Bishop Julius highlighted Fr Marcellinus' commitment, dedication, and goodness.

Born on July 13, 1959, in Kg Raganan, Kiulu, Fr Marcellinus had a deep-rooted connection with his community. Ordained on February 17, 1997, his commitment led him to serve in various parishes within the Sandakan Diocese, with his longest tenure at St Dominic's Church, Lahad Datu.

Despite his initial aspirations to become a teacher and his love for outdoor activities in his youth, Fr Marcellinus embraced his calling to the priesthood. He devoted himself not only to his pastoral duties but also played a pivotal role in caring for his family of 11, tending to his parents and siblings.

Remembered as compassionate and approachable by his fellow priests, he leaves behind a legacy of profound dedication.



In Ever Loving Memory of



**Joseph
Fernandez**

**30.12.1949 -
31.12.2017**

*Six years have passed since that sad day
when one we so dearly loved was called away.*

*God took him home, It was His will,
But in our hearts he liveth still.*

*Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord,
and let your perpetual light shine upon him.
May his soul rest in peace. Amen.*

Sadly missed by
wife Iyfin, daughters Ivanna and Justine,
family and friends.

24th Anniversary In Loving Memory of



Arokiasamy Arulantham

From the Lord: 16/12/1912

Returned to the Lord: 30/12/1999

Cherished by
wife: Viagulamary w/o Arokiasamy
sons: John, Joseph, Richard Henry, Francis Xavier
and daughters: Victoria, Regina Arokiamary,
Margaret Rosalind, Janiffer Janet and all loved ones.

1st Anniversary In Loving Memory of



**Mdm. Mary Yannama
Ganapiragasam**

**Called to the Lord:
25th December 2022**

*'Be thou faithful unto
death, and I will give thee
a crown of life'
Revelation 2:10*

Deeply missed by
loved ones.

CHERISHED MEMORIES of Our Beloved Dad & Mum



**Georgina Benedict
Nair**



**Kunnath
Swaminathan
Benedict Nair**

With Christ on

4 Jan 1993

27 May 1983

Your most affectionate loved ones.

13th Anniversary In Loving Memory of



**EDMUND
THANGAPRAGASAM**

Departed: 5th Jan 2011

*Surely goodness and love
will follow me all the days
of my life and I will dwell in
the house of the Lord.
Ps. 23:6*

Forever missed by
Wife: Mdm Soosammah
Children and loved ones.

Vatican unveils Nativity scene honouring St Francis of Assisi

VATICAN: The Vatican unveiled its annual Nativity scene, paying special tribute to the origins of the beloved tradition on its 800th anniversary.

The scene in St Peter's Square depicts not only Mary and Joseph standing beside the manger but also St Francis of Assisi, who organised the first Nativity scene in a cave in the Italian village of Greccio on Christmas Eve in 1223.

Cardinal Fernando Vérgez Alzaga, the president of the Governorate of Vatican City State, presided over the December 9 inauguration ceremony. Over a thousand people gathered in the square for the event, which included moments of catechesis, an explanation of how the scene was put together, and the singing of seasonal hymns.

The Vatican's Greccio-inspired Nativity scene does not include live animals and people as St Francis' original did, but it does feature life-sized terracotta figures, crafted by renowned Neapolitan sculptor Antonio Cantone.

At the centre of the scene is the now-empty manger, where a figure of the new-born saviour will be placed on Christmas Eve. On one side of the manger, Mary kneels, flanked by Joseph, while on the other side, St Francis of Assisi stands in a pose of wonder.

In addition to Mary, Joseph, St Francis,



The Vatican unveiled its annual Nativity scene on Dec. 9, 2023, paying special tribute to the origins of the beloved tradition on its 800-year anniversary. (CNA photo/Daniel Ibañez)

and the traditional ox and donkey, the 13th-century mayor of Greccio who helped organise the first Nativity scene, Giovanni Velita, is featured in statue form, along with his wife, Alticama.

Three Franciscan friars, whom St Francis had tasked with setting up the first Nativity scene as a place where local faithful could come and contemplate the poverty of the incarnate Lord, are also depicted.

The backdrop of the scene is a replica of the fresco that decorates the Chapel of the Nativity in Greccio, which is built into the

grotto where St Francis set up the first Nativity scene. On one half of the fresco, he kneels in adoration of the Christ child; on the other side, Mary feeds the new-born saviour while Joseph, the ox, and the donkey look on.

Underneath the fresco, a Franciscan friar is depicted celebrating Mass in the grotto. The friar elevates the body of Christ directly behind the manger.

In another fitting tribute to the Nativity scene's origins, this year's Vatican display was provided by the Diocese of Rieti, which is where Greccio is located.

The Vatican's Christmas tree was also lit at the Dec 9 ceremony. The tree, an 80-foot-tall fir, had been donated by the Italian community of Macra, located in the northwest of Italy. The tree was adorned with edelweiss flowers that are native to the Alpine region. Upon lighting, it glowed with ever-changing patterns of green, blue, and red.

After the tree's use in St Peter's Square, its wood will be used to make toys for children in need.

Earlier in the day, Pope Francis spoke to delegations of the two communities that had donated the Nativity scene and the Christmas tree. The Pope said that meditating in front of any Nativity scene should "awaken in us the nostalgia for silence and prayer, in our often-so-hectic daily life."

The Pope also said that the Vatican Nativity scene's connection to Greccio should in turn prompt people to think and pray for the inhabitants of the Holy Land amid the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas, especially children and their parents affected by the conflict.

"These are the ones who pay the real price of war," Pope Francis said.

Both the Nativity scene and the tree will remain in St Peter's Square until the feast of the Baptism of the Lord on January 7, 2024. — CNA

All of us at Topaz Travel & Tours would like to wish everyone a

Merry Christmas & A HAPPY NEW YEAR

May the joy of Christ's birth fill your hearts anew with peace and love and enliven within you a spirit of hope for the world!

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Thanksgiving Solemn Mass

MONDAY 8 JAN 2024 6.00 P.M.

MINOR BASILICA OF ST. ANNE, BUKIT MERTAJAM, PENANG, MALAYSIA

LET US JOIN TOGETHER AS ONE UNIVERSAL CHURCH TO GIVE THANKS AND CELEBRATE THE APPOINTMENT OF H. EM. CARDINAL SEBASTIAN FRANCIS TO THE COLLEGE OF CARDINALS

Thanksgiving Mass Celebrated by His Eminence Cardinal Sebastian Francis together with his brother bishops from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia - Singapore - Brunei, the Clergy, Religious, Lay Faithful and all People of Goodwill