



Pope Francis has asked that 2024 be marked as a Year of Prayer. The Holy Father announced its launch on Sunday, January 21, 2024, on the fifth annual celebration of the 'Sunday of the Word of God'.

Previously, in a letter written on February 11, 2022, addressed to the Pro-prefect, Archbishop Rino Fisichella, to entrust the organisation of the Jubilee to the Dicastery for Evangelisation, the Pope wrote: "From now on I am happy to think that the year preceding the Jubilee event, 2024, will be dedicated to a great 'symphony' of prayer.

First of all, to recover the desire to be in the presence of the Lord, to listen to Him and adore Him." In preparation for the Jubilee, therefore, individual dioceses are invited to promote the centrality of individual and community prayer during this year.

## THE JUBILEE PRAYER

Father in heaven,  
may the faith you have given us  
in your son, Jesus Christ,  
our brother,  
and the flame of charity enkindled  
in our hearts by the Holy Spirit,  
reawaken in us the blessed hope  
for the coming of your Kingdom.  
May your grace transform us  
into tireless cultivators of the  
seeds of the Gospel.  
May those seeds transform from  
within both humanity  
and the whole cosmos  
in the sure expectation  
of a new heaven and a new earth,  
when, with the powers  
of Evil vanquished,  
your glory will shine eternally.  
May the grace of the Jubilee  
reawaken in us, Pilgrims of Hope,  
a yearning for the  
treasures of heaven.  
May that same grace spread  
the joy and peace  
of our Redeemer  
throughout the earth.  
To you our God, eternally blessed,  
be glory and praise for ever.  
Amen

## Pope Francis to the world's children

# 'If we really want to be happy, we need to pray'

VATICAN: Pope Francis has issued a message to the world's children in anticipation of the Church's first-ever World Children's Day, which will take place in Rome from May 25–26, reminding them that the key to happiness lies in cultivating a prayer life and personal relationship with Christ, which in turn forms the basis of broader social action.

"If we really want to be happy, we need to pray, to pray a lot, to pray every day, because prayer connects us directly to God. Prayer fills our hearts with light and warmth; it helps us to do everything with confidence and peace of mind," the Pope wrote in his March 2 letter addressed to the world's children.

The Pope followed up this reflection by asking children to pray the Lord's Prayer "every morning and every evening, in your families too, together with your parents, brothers, sisters, and grandparents." But the Pope urged children to not merely recite the words but to reflect on their meaning and on Jesus' ministry.

"He is calling us and He wants us to join actively with Him, on this World Children's Day, to become builders of a new, more humane, just, and peaceful world. Jesus, who offered himself on the cross to gather all of us together in love, who conquered death and reconciled us with the Father, wants to continue his work in the Church through us," the Pope continued.

The Holy Father encouraged them to be united and listen to advice from grown-ups because, he says, their "please" and "thank you" are the first step towards a better world.

He explained that creating a caring and fraternal society starts with little things "like saying hello to others, asking permission, begging pardon, and saying thank you". If we are not ashamed to take small steps, one at a time, our world will change, he says.

Then, the Pope highlights the importance of friendship. Everything is always better



Pope Francis poses with a woman and three children during a lunch in the Vatican's Paul VI Hall for over 1,000 poor and economically disadvantaged people on Nov. 19, 2023. (Vatican Media)

"when we are together!" stresses the Pope, inviting the children to share their joys. "Gifts are nice" he says, "but only if they help us to be together".

In his March 2 letter, the Pope writes that he wants to speak to "each" of them because each individual is precious. At the same time, he continues, the message is addressed to "all" of them, because all children, everywhere, "are a sign of every person's desire to grow and flourish".

The Pope also explained that the theme for the World Day of Children is taken from Jesus' words in the Book of Revelation: *Behold, I make all things new*. The Pope noted these words "invite us to become as clever as children in grasping the new realities stirred up by the Spirit, both within us and around us."

Reflecting on the importance of children for families, the pope noted that they are a sign "of every person's desire to grow and flourish" and a "source of joy," a recognition that helps foster an intergenerational link "from the past to the future."

The Pope's message also touched upon the need for social action, asking young people to always remember "other children and young people who are already battling illness and hardship."

Highlighting the examples of those who are facing poverty and hunger, "victims of war and violence," or those "forced to be soldiers or to flee as refugees, separated from their parents," Pope Francis pleaded that "we need to hear those voices, for amid their sufferings they remind us of reality, with their tearful eyes and with that tenacious yearning for goodness that endures in the hearts of those who have truly seen the horror of evil."

Pope Francis announced the creation of World Children's Day last December, saying that it will be an event to bring children from all around the world together to reflect on the question of "What kind of world do we wish to pass on to the children who are growing up?" The Vatican's Dicastery for Culture and Education is sponsoring the initiative. — CNA/Vatican News

# HERALD

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Throughout history, women have played indispensable roles in nurturing faith, shaping the Church, and spreading the message of love and compassion — often quietly and behind the scenes. Yet, their contributions have been profound and enduring. From the early disciples who supported Jesus' ministry to the courageous witness of the early Christian martyrs, and to the tireless dedication of modern-day women who have been the backbone of the Church, exemplifying the values of compassion, humility, and service.

Each year, March 8 marks International Women's Day, a global celebration honouring the remarkable contributions of women worldwide. This year's theme, *Inspire Inclusion*, deeply echoes the Catholic Church's ongoing mission to embrace diversity and ensure that all voices are heard. In particular, we must consider the dual nature of women's roles within the Church, embodying both the active service of Martha and the contemplative spirit of Mary.

In the Gospel of Luke, we encounter these two remarkable women who exemplify different dimensions of discipleship and a balanced life of service and prayer that women can aspire to be. Martha exemplifies the spirit of service, the active engagement in the Church's mission, diligently attending to the practical needs of those around her. On the other hand, Mary demonstrates the contemplative aspect of discipleship, sitting at the feet of Jesus, eager to learn and absorb His teachings, emphasising the importance of prayer and reflection. Both Martha and Mary teach us that there is beauty and necessity in both action and contemplation, in service and reflection. It is not a matter of choosing either one, but rather embracing both aspects harmoniously.

Women bring unique perspectives, gifts, and talents that enrich the Church's mission and help it better respond to the needs of the

world. As Church, we are called to recognise and celebrate the diverse gifts of women, encompassing both the Martha-like service and the Mary-like reflection. This integration enriches our faith community, fostering a holistic approach to discipleship.

However, while women have made invaluable contributions, there's still a crucial need for greater inclusion and representation within the Church hierarchy and decision-making processes. The call for synodality, emphasised by Pope Francis, invites all members of the Church, including women, to actively participate in discerning the path forward for our faith community. He has emphasised the need to break down the barriers that prevent women from fully exercising their God-given talents and leadership abilities. In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, the Holy Father reminds us that "a truly fraternal society ... will allow women to occupy their rightful place."

Pope Francis has also repeatedly called for a "Church that walks together," emphasising the importance of listening to the voices of all the faithful, especially women. Let us heed the Holy Father's call for inclusivity and actively encourage the participation of women at all levels of the Church.

To inspire inclusion in the Church means recognising and valuing the unique perspectives and insights that women bring to the table. It means empowering women to take on greater roles of responsibility and leadership within the Church hierarchy, including decision-making bodies and pastoral ministries. It means creating spaces where women are not only heard but actively listened to and respected.

Moreover, inspiring inclusion requires confronting the entrenched attitudes and prejudices that perpetuate gender inequality within our faith communities. It demands a commitment to education, dialogue, and cultural transformation, rooted in the Gospel values of justice, solidarity, and love. By fostering a culture of inclusion and equality, we can truly reflect the transformative message of the Gospel and build a more vibrant and flourishing faith community.

As we celebrate the achievements and contributions of women around the world, let us also recommit ourselves to building a Church where women are valued as equal partners in faith, service, and leadership. In doing so, we honour the legacy of those who have gone before us and pave the way for a more inclusive and vibrant future for the People of God.

*Patricia Pereira*



## Embracing Divine Mercy: A call to transformation

As we gather on this fourth Sunday of Lent, we find ourselves journeying deeper into the season of reflection and renewal. Today's readings from Chronicles, Ephesians, and John, invite us to contemplate the profound depths of God's mercy and the transformative power it holds in our lives.

In the passage from the Second Book of Chronicles (36:14-16, 19-23), we are reminded of the consequences of human disobedience and the faithfulness of God's response. The people of Israel had repeatedly turned away from God, ignoring His commandments and pursuing their own desires. Their rebellion led to suffering and exile. Yet, even in the midst of their waywardness, God did not abandon them. He remained faithful to His covenant promises, offering them the opportunity for repentance and restoration.

Similarly, in his letter to the Ephesians (2:4-10), St Paul emphasises the incomprehensible richness of God's mercy. We, who were once dead in our sins, have been made alive through Christ. It is by grace that we have been saved, not through our own merits or deeds, but as a gift from God. This gift of salvation is freely given to all who believe, irrespective of their past transgressions or shortcomings. Our reconciliation with God is not the result of our efforts, but of His boundless love and mercy.



The Gospel passage from John (3:14-21) further illuminates this theme of divine mercy. Jesus speaks of His impending crucifixion, comparing Himself to the bronze serpent lifted up by Moses in the desert. Just as those who looked upon the serpent were healed and saved from physical death, so too will those who believe in Christ be saved from eternal death. Yet, Jesus also acknowledges the human tendency to prefer darkness over light, sin over righteousness. He invites us to embrace the light of truth and allow it to expose our sins, so that we may come to the light and experience the fullness of God's mercy.

What do these readings teach us about the nature of God's mercy and our response to it?

Firstly, they remind us that God's mercy is boundless and profound. No matter how far we may have strayed or how grievous our sins may be, God's mercy is always available to us. It is never too late to turn back to Him in repentance and receive His forgiveness.

Secondly, they challenge us to acknowledge our own need for mercy and to humble ourselves before God. We are called to recognise our sinfulness and shortcomings, not to wallow in guilt and shame, but to seek reconciliation with God and with one another. This Lenten season is a time for honest self-examination and conversion of heart, as we allow God's mercy to transform us from within.

Finally, these readings call us to respond to God's mercy with gratitude and obedience. We are called to live as grateful recipients of God's grace, bearing witness to His love and mercy in our words and deeds. Just as God's mercy has been freely given to us, so too are we called to extend mercy and compassion to others, especially to those who are in need or who have wronged us.

As we continue our Lenten journey, let us embrace the gift of God's mercy with open hearts and minds. Let us allow His mercy to penetrate the depths of our being,

## Reflecting on our Sunday Readings with Fr George Vaithynathan

**4th Sunday of Lent (B)**

**Readings: 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23;  
Ephesians 2:4-10;  
Gospel: John 3:14-21**

transforming us into instruments of His grace and agents of reconciliation in the world. May we be ever mindful of the words of St Paul: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). Amen.

*Let us pray,  
Heavenly Father,  
We thank You for the gift of Your mercy,  
Which knows no bounds and endures forever.  
Grant us the grace to turn away from sin  
And to embrace the light of Your truth.  
Transform our hearts and minds  
So that we may live as grateful recipients  
Of Your saving grace,  
And bear witness to Your mercy  
In all that we say and do.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

● **Fr George Vaithynathan is the assistant parish priest of the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes, Ipoh.**



## KUALA LUMPUR ARCHDIOCESE

### Diary of Archbishop Julian Leow

#### March

- 10 *Cathedral of St John - Pope Francis 11th Anniversary Mass*
- 12 *Meeting – College General Bishops-Staff, College General Major Seminary, Penang*
- 14 *Archdiocesan Finance Meeting*
- 18 *Christian Federation of Malaysia EXCO Meeting*
- 19 *Chrism Mass – Church of Christ the Light*
- 19-20 *Clergy Recollection*



## PENANG DIOCESE

### Diary of Cardinal Sebastian Francis

#### March

- 12 *Meeting – College General Bishops-Staff, College General Major Seminary, Penang at 9.00am*
- 12 *College General Inaugural Mass – Academic Year 2024, College General Major Seminary, Penang at 6.00pm*
- 13 *Meeting – Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem (EOHSJ) - Penang Section, Bishop's Office at 3.00pm*
- 14 *Meeting – Seeds Ministry, Bishop's Office at 11.00am*
- 15 *Digital Coffee "Spilling the Boba Tea Towards Full Presence" by Dicastery for Office of Social Communications, Vatican at 4.00pm, ZOOM*
- 16 *Mass & Meeting – Auxiliary of the Apostolate, Bishop's Residence at 10.00am*



## MALACCA JOHORE DIOCESE

### Diary of Bishop Bernard Paul

#### March

- 12 *Meeting – College General Bishops-Staff, College General Major Seminary, Penang*
- 14 *Meeting – FSIC Mother Superior & Council at Bishop's Office*
- 14 *Meeting – Graceville Board of Management at Graceville*
- 15 *MAJODI Centre Outdoor Meditative Way of the Cross @ 3.00pm followed by Mass – St James Chapel*
- 21 *MJD Young People Network Meet – Bishop's Office*

# Help us rebuild our church

JOHOR: The Church of St Theresa in Masai, which has served the local community since 1937, has launched a plea for donations to rebuild its dilapidated structure.

Despite decades of service to parishioners, the passage of time has left the church in a state of disrepair. To address this pressing issue, the church has embarked on a new construction project. However, progress has been hindered by challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and bureaucratic obstacles in obtaining necessary approvals.

Breaking ground on the construction of a new church marks a significant step forward, but funding remains a critical issue. While various fundraising initiatives have been undertaken, the church acknowledges that additional support is needed to realise its vision.

Appealing to sister churches across Peninsular Malaysia, the clergy and parish community of St Theresa's church



Construction work in progress for the new Church of St Theresa, Masai.

humbly requests for contributions. Every donation, regardless of size, will play a vital role in the rebuilding effort, bringing the community one step closer to achieving its goal.

The parish community extends its sincere gratitude to those who have already

contributed and prays for God's abundant blessings upon them for their generosity and support.

For those wishing to make a donation, please contact Fr Cyril Mannayagam at 012-5809541 or via email: [cyrilmanna70@gmail.com](mailto:cyrilmanna70@gmail.com).



## Malacca Johore Diocese News Update #167

**F12**  
MJD NEWS  
UPDATES

### Greetings to you, dear friends of MJD.

The Yang di Pertuan Agong has said no to destabilising the government and to growing disunity in the country. The Ringgit and other currencies i.e. Japan, China and the rest of ASEAN, except for Singapore, are facing currency decline too. Bersih called Malaysia to march for reforms. The PM is under pressure. Population estimates show that Malaysia reached the aged nation status in 2021. Birth rates among the Chinese and first year registrations in Chinese schools have dropped. An ebook *Feudalism in Malaysia Today* by Murray Hunter, is available free on Ovi eBooks Publications. Understand where we are!

**Separation Times:** Going into hiding! Avoiding! Holding back! Withdrawing! Isolating oneself! It is a story of separation: separation from each other, separation from God and goodness, separation from the earth and the ecosystem of which we are a part, and separation even from ourselves.

Jesus came to subvert all stories of violence and harm, not to repeat them. He did not avoid them but He sent His followers into the world to be agents of positive change — like salt, light, and yeast. But needing peace and quiet, Jesus sought isolation, withdrawal or separation.

That's the real need of inner life-CONTEMPLATION. A strong peace to face the roaring traffic, the people on the street and the bombardment of headline news on our screens.

Instead of withdrawing from the world, leading a lonely, separatist, isolationist life, become hospitable hermits, more alive in the world and more active for the common good, by learning light and shadow and discovering that it's not about where we live, or with whom we live but how we live. (Story of Isolation: Richard Rohr)

### Thought for the Week:

#### The Lone Ranger

The Lone Ranger and Tonto were camping in the wilderness. After they got their tent set up, both men fell into a deep, restful sleep after a long day on the trail. Some hours later, Tonto wakes up the Lone Ranger and says, "Kemo Sabe, look towards sky ... what you see?"

The Lone Ranger replies, "I see millions and millions of stars."

"What does that tell you?" asked Tonto. The Lone Ranger ponders for a minute then says, "Astronomically-speaking, it tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Time-wise, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three in the morning. Theologically, the Lord is all-powerful and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it seems like we will have a beautiful day tomorrow.

What does it tell you, Tonto?

Then Tonto exclaims: "You dumber than a buffalo...it means someone has stolen the tent." The lesson from the sky: See with eyes that see. See the here and now. "We are only as blind as we want to be". (Maya Angelou)

### Announcements for this Week

1. *The Malaysian Catholic Youth Ministers Initiative at Malacca* was attended by 18 pastoral workers, volunteers and associates from eight dioceses. They were housed with foster families, and engaged with the community leaders and the young of the Portuguese Settlement for five days. It was a "listening, learning and being led" experience.

2. *Caritas MJD features weekly Lenten reflections* on "I Fast! I Pray! I Give Alms!" based on the Sunday readings. It began with Ash Wednesday and will conclude on Easter Sunday.

3. The *MJPT* or the *Malacca Johore Pastoral Team Assembly* will take place at Kluang on March 9, 2024. A reminder to all heads of ministries and their exco that pastoral listening, pastoral discernment and pastoral response is to avoid personalistic visions and missions.

### This week's QnQ:

#### Q asks: How do we listen?

Robina Scott shared in the PRH space something for us to think about: Where are your ears? Where do you listen from? What do you listen to?

#### Are your ears on the outside or the inside, or both?

Do you tend to prioritise the noise going on outside of you, rather than listening to your inner world?

#### Are your ears in your head?

Listening for the language of thoughts and ideas, what is logical, familiar, structured, etc.?

#### Are your ears in your sensitivity (feeling area)?

So, you listen primarily for feelings, what makes you feel good/not good, safe/not safe, etc.?

#### Are your ears in your body?

Listening to its messages of what resonates physically or psychologically for you, and naturally gives you energy, or well-being — or not?

#### Are your ears in your inner being?

Listening for truth, resonance, potential, deep connections, including the transcendent?

#### Are your ears in your deep conscience?

Open to another level of wholeness, freedom, inclusivity, expansion, wisdom, peace, unity?

Take some time to observe at different times where your ears are, and then note down what you notice and feel (<https://bit.ly/3OZOu7b>)

If you want help to explore this further, ask a PRH professional!\* [www.annieprhmalaysia.org](http://www.annieprhmalaysia.org)

Entering the Fourth Week in Lent. Do not stop doing good. God bless you. Just to tickle you: God doesn't call the qualified; He qualifies the called.

*Bernard Paul*

Bishop Bernard Paul

# Lenten formation for children at St Joseph's parish

By Shekinah Louis

SENTUL: St Joseph's parish witnessed an enthusiastic gathering of Standard 1 to Standard 3 children on February 25 as they participated in a faith-enriching formation, led by their dedicated catechists.

The day kicked off with an ice-breaker session, where each child seized the opportunity to introduce themselves. With beaming faces and a palpable eagerness, the children made their presence known, setting the tone for an eventful day ahead.

Following the introduction, a lively praise session ensued, allowing the children to express their gratitude to God through song and dance. Led by the catechists, the young participants joyfully sang along to *Lord I Lift Your Name on High*, recounting the story of Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection.

An Afro-beat Gospel tune concluded the praise session, serving as



The children during the formation.

a reminder for the children to entrust their worries to Jesus, who cares deeply for each of them. Transitioning into the first session, the children were treated to a humorous skit performed by the St Joseph's Church Youth, evoking laughter and imparting a valuable lesson.

In the skit, a seemingly innocuous chair bore the inscription "DO NOT TOUCH," yet those who defied the warning found themselves inexplicably stuck. Through comedic yet insightful vignettes, the skit illustrated how adherence to God's

Word liberates one from the entrapment of sin.

As the rest of the sessions unfolded, the formation evolved from the encounter of Jesus through the involvement of humorous activities and engaging songs into a more serious segment.

Children were brought into a quiet, thought-provoking session known as the Cross Activity. One of the catechists explained what "sin" is and why it deeply hurts Jesus when we sometimes mistreat others through our actions. The children

were allowed to give examples of common sins we often commit, and the catechist explained how Jesus' death on the Cross saved us from our lives of sin and inevitable death.

Sticky notes were then distributed to each child, who was asked to privately write down one sin that they wanted to stop doing. With examples displayed in the front, the children solemnly wrote their sins down in separate seating areas and stuck their sticky note to the cross displayed in the front of the hall upon completion. This served to remind

the children that they can always lay down their sins at Jesus' cross and walk into the path of forgiveness.

Finally, the day ended with a personal "Lenten Passport" distributed to each one of the kids, which held various Lenten-themed activities for the children to try at home with the help of their parents. One of the pages included a list of small sacrifices that they can accomplish, such as complimenting a friend or even speaking to someone that they haven't spoken to previously.

The children were challenged to see who could finish the list first, and they speedily moved from achieving one sacrifice to another. After they had completed this task, Fr George Harrison gave a final address to the children and prayed together with them. In all, these young and bright children experienced Jesus in a multitude of ways and encountered His presence through both serious-led activities and thrilling ones.

## Prayer and spiritual connection towards transformation

SEREMBAN: The Lenten retreat organised by the Church of the Visitation drew participants from across peninsular Malaysia, with approximately 350 attendees from the three dioceses.

Spanning two and a half days from February 24 to 26, the full day retreat offered a comprehensive programme, providing participants with an immersive and intensive experience focused on spiritual renewal and reflection. The extended duration allowed for a variety of activities including prayer sessions, talks, and opportunities for confession and spiritual direction, enabling retreatants to delve deeply into Lenten themes and their personal faith journeys.

The presence of guest speakers, Fr Michael Payyapilly, VC, director of the Divine Retreat Centre in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Fr Shinu Vithayathil, VC, director of the Divine Retreat Centre in Goa, India, brought significant depth and perspective to the retreat. Drawing from their extensive experience in leading spiritual retreats,

both priests offered unique insights and teachings rooted in their backgrounds, enriching the spiritual journey of all in attendance.

Some of the participants shared their experiences of the Lenten retreat, highlighting personal spiritual growth and a deeper connection with their faith.

Evelyn Magdalene, from the Church of Divine Mercy in Shah Alam, described the retreat as a pivotal moment for her prayer life and relationship with God.

George Lazaroo, from the Church of the Holy Family, Kajang, reflected on the rejuvenation of his spirit during the retreat.

Fidelis Joseph, a participant from the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Johor Bahru, emphasised the importance of daily spiritual practices reinforced during the retreat.

First-time attendee Ann Suganthi Peter, from the Church of the Visitation in Seremban, found the retreat to be an extraordinary introduction to Lenten observances.

— By Sabrina Smith



Reflecting on the 'Seven Last Words' of Jesus

MELAKA: Parishioners of the Church of St Theresa gathered for a Lenten recollection focused on the *Seven Last Words of Jesus*. Facilitated by parish priest Fr Thomas Chong, SJ, the session took place on February 25. A total of 191 participants immersed themselves in the contemplative exercise, seeking to deepen their faith for the Lenten season.

To facilitate an immersive experience, seven distinct stations were set up throughout the church premises, each dedicated to one of the *Seven Last Words*. Participants were divided into seven groups, with Fr Thomas, Fr Louis Chin, assistant parish priest and Brother Gabriel (on pastoral assignment) actively participating.

The groups were organised by language preference, with the first five groups communicating in Mandarin and the last two in English. Fr Thomas addressed the congregation adeptly in both languages, emphasising that the recollection was not only a communal act of prayer and meditation but also an intensely personal journey that calls for inner silence.

Fr Thomas introduced the re-

treat by urging attendees to seek a specific grace: to recognise Christ's love personally and to allow that love to manifest fruitfully within them. At each station, participants were encouraged to meditate on provided scriptural texts, reflection questions, and to envision the poignant scene of Jesus' crucifixion under the sweltering sun at 3.00pm. Each station offered a 20-minute period for contemplation, accompanied by a reflection paper, a meditation passage, and sometimes an activity or short video clip to deepen the reflection.

Upon completing the circuit of stations, the congregation reconvened in the church for a comprehensive review by Fr Thomas. Each of the seven words spoken by Jesus on the cross was revisited, offering profound insights into themes of forgiveness, remembrance, abandonment, thirst, completion, and surrender to the divine will.

● First Word: "Father, forgive them! They know not what they are doing."

● Second Word: "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with

Me in Paradise."

● Third Word: "Woman, behold your son. "Behold your mother."

● Fourth Word: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

● Fifth Word: "I thirst."

● Sixth Word: "It is finished."

● Seventh Word: "Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit."

Our response mirrors that of those who witnessed these events. We acknowledge Jesus' righteousness and mercy, repenting of our sins and embracing the message of redemption. Like the faithful disciples, we remember Jesus' words and proclaim them to the world, sharing the hope of resurrection and eternal life.

Parishioners shared their feelings of enrichment and spiritual growth following the event, reflecting the universal impact of the recollection. This Lenten exercise not only fostered a deeper understanding of Jesus' final words but also reinforced the community's faith in the resurrection and the power of proclaiming the Gospel.

— By Christine Ong



Retreatants with Fr Michael Payyapilly VC, Fr Xavier Andrew & Fr Shinu Vithayathil VC.

# Chosen to be the Elect

This Easter, we will have 1016 new members welcomed into the faith in Peninsular Malaysia. This is an increase from last year where we had 852 new Catholics.

KAJANG: The Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur held the Rite of Election on February 25, the Second Sunday of Lent.

It was with a sense of excitement and joy, mixed with feelings of nervousness, that 547 catechumens gathered at the Church of the Holy Family, together with their godparents, RCIA catechists and collaborators, parish priests and others. They came from almost all parts of the archdiocese, including the East Coast.



Archbishop Julian Leow proclaiming the Gospel.

In his homily, the celebrant, Archbishop Julian Leow spoke about the faithfulness of Abraham, who was asked by God to sacrifice his only son, Issac. In the end, God was pleased with Abraham's obedience, and showered blessings

on him. The archbishop then highlighted the faithfulness of Jesus. As Jesus is transfigured, the voice of the Father is heard, "This is My Son, the Beloved. Listen to Him". It is a confirmation of the faithfulness of Jesus to His mission - to sacrifice

Himself for the sins of humanity. Yet, the death of Jesus will not be in vain. He will rise from the dead.

According to the archbishop, both Scripture readings with begin with a sense of uncertainty and end with a message of hope. Through Abraham, a nation is born. Through Jesus, a descendent of Abraham, salvation is gained for all humanity. In this regard, the archbishop reminded the faithful and the elect that, regardless the uncertainty and discouragement they may face in their lives, the sacrifices they make lovingly for others and their commitment to remain faithful to God, will never be in vain.

Archbishop Julian also addressed the catechumens in his homily. He informed them that at the Rite of Election, the entire community rejoices with them for their faithfulness in answering God's call to become members of the Catholic Church. The archbishop stated, "In the Rite of Election, we celebrate that God has personally chosen you to be a part of His elect". And this is what is celebrated at the Rite of Election - God's personal election or choice of the catechumen.

Later, the key rites of the Rite of Election took place: the Presentation of the Catechumens, the Affirmation by the Godparents and the

Assembly, and most importantly, the Enrolment of Names. Here, one by one, book-bearers, representing their parish, and accompanied by the parish priest, came forward carrying the Book of Elect, and solemnly placed it before the archbishop.

As head of the diocese and representative of God, Archbishop Julian ratified the names, that is, formally acknowledged and accepted the names of the catechumens who will receive the Sacraments of Initiation. At the conclusion of the rite of Enrolment, the archbishop said to the newly enrolled elect, "I now declare you to be members of the elect, to be initiated into the sacred mysteries at the next Easter Vigil.

The Rite of Election continued with the Prayer of Intercession for the elect and with the archbishop praying over the elect. After the dismissal, the faithful and the elect joined in partaking of the light refreshments which were served in the parish grounds. In addition to the elect who are seeking full initiation at the Easter Vigil, there are also 44 persons who seeking Reception into the Catholic Church, and 192 persons who are seeking only the Sacrament of Confirmation. — *By KL Archdiocesan Catechetical Centre*



## MJD conducts first RCIA Recollection since pandemic

PLENTONG, Johor: The Diocese of Malacca Johore hosted the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) Recollection on February 17 at MAJODI Centre. The recollection was conducted in four languages and consisted of three sessions, to cater to the linguistic diversity of the attendees. Each session was presided over by three priests and two deacons.

Organised by the MJD Catechetical Office, over 450 catechumens, godparents facilitators, and family members, journeying from the Melaka, North and South Johor Vicariates. Throughout the recollection, attendees were provided with essential faith formation, aiding them in their transformation into newborn Catholics. This is the first time it's being done after the



Bishop Bernard Paul signing the Book of the Elect.

pandemic.

The peak of this journey took place on Feb 18 with the Rite of Election incorporated in the multi-

lingual Mass at 12.00 noon in the Church of Immaculate Conception in Johor Bahru.

The Rite of Election marks a pivotal moment in the RCIA process, where catechumens publicly express their intention to receive the sacraments of initiation at the upcoming Easter Vigil.

Bishop Bernard Paul, in his homily, emphasised the significance of gifts they had encountered in their journey, stating, "God has bestowed three gifts upon you today: His Son on the Cross, the Bible, and the Eucharist. Remember these gifts as you embark on your journey in the Catholic faith."

The Mass left a profound impact on all those who participated, as they eagerly anticipate their formal acceptance into the Catholic Church during the Easter Vigil celebration. — *By Matteguil Julian*



The sponsor laying their hands on the catechumens.

## To be signed and sealed and delivered

PENANG: There was an air of anticipation as the faithful gathered at the Church of the Assumption in Penang and Our Mother of Perpetual Help in Ipoh at two special Masses on February 17 and 18, respectively. For they were there to witness and to celebrate the Rite of Election for 229 of our brothers and sisters in the Diocese of Penang who will be baptised at Easter.

In Penang, 148 Catechumens from 14 churches and in Ipoh, 81 Catechumens from nine parishes, stepped into the final leg of their journey towards becoming baptised and confirmed Children of God. Having answered the call of Christ and undergone the RCIA preparations for the past year, it was a poignant moment for them, their families and friends and sponsors alike.

The presence of the various priests representing each of the parishes, together with Cardinal Sebastian Francis, the Bishop of Penang, made the celebrations so much more meaningful and richer. In these times when the Church is crying for more vocations, it was



Cardinal Sebastian Francis accepting the Book of the Elect.

truly wonderful to see a gathering of so many of our priests in one place.

The Rite of Election Masses at the two churches were quiet and solemn. However, they were filled with anticipation and joy with the realisation that these 229 Catechumens, now called, the Elect of Christ, number among the thousands who have been chosen and called throughout Malaysia and the whole world for initiation into the Sacred Mysteries this Easter. — *By Elaine Jeyakumar-Wong*



# Celebrating 48 years of Catholic healthcare

By Lucille Dass

PENANG: It was the heartbeat of love that drew a community of friends, family, former patients, donors, and supporters of Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital (MMCH) for its 48th Anniversary Thanksgiving Gathering on February 21.

The Mass was presided over by Msgr Jude Miranda, Vicar General and parish priest of the Church of Immaculate Conception (CIC), standing in for Cardinal Sebastian Francis, Bishop of Penang, who was away on a prior commitment. Concelebrants included Fr Simon Labrooy, Rector of College General, and Fr Oliver Tham, priest-in-residence at CIC, with Deacon Paul Kang assisting.

In his introductory remarks, and again in his homily, Msgr Jude reminisced about how as a boy he was in awe of the service-oriented Catholic mission hospitals in the country. He was born in such a one — Assunta Hospital, Petaling Jaya. He noted that, despite “all the noise and distractions” around us, “sacredness must stay.” In a pointed reference to the Gospel of the day, he illustrated how Jesus was surrounded by a mixed group of believers, doubters, the curious, and the faithless “who asked for a sign” although they



A Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital (MMCH) staff carrying the MMCH mission plaque as an offertory gift during the Thanksgiving Mass held at the hospital chapel on February 21, 2024.

had seen Jesus work many wonders in their midst. Will we, who work in MMCH, ask the same? Forty-eight years is enough sign! With so many challenges faced, God still works wonders in this hospital. If we ask for a sign, it means we have lost a sense of God and need to redirect our focus because Jesus is the sign! The divine element at work for 48 years will continue to be present. No matter how busy we are, if we listen, God will speak

love to our hearts and if we open our eyes we will see and appreciate the good He has worked in our lives.”

After Mass, Deacon Paul, who is the CEO of the hospital, thanked the bishop, priests, and congregation for their presence and support. Recalling Cardinal Sebastian’s concise communication, Msgr Jude closed with three pithy takeaway statements: 48 years of beauty; 48 years of wonderful works of the

Lord; 48 years that the Lord has not failed MMCH. He thanked all who give hope to others through Jesus in little ways. Fr Oliver spoke a munificent blessing, especially upon those involved in MMCH service, and Fr Simon sealed the blessing with a sprinkling of holy water.

The congregation then joined others in a simple ceremonial celebration that began with a brief video clip address by the Board Chairman Dato’ Dr Patrick Tan. He thanked the Franciscan Missionaries of Divine Motherhood (FMDM) for the legacy of mission that continues to this day, and MMCH supporters for “bringing God’s healing presence” into the lives of all concerned.

Deacon Paul paid tribute to the FMDM sisters, ten of whom had travelled from Ipoh to grace the occasion. He thanked all who served selflessly. Special mention was made of Catholic Health Care Asia (CHCA) members. CHCA is a governance structure set up in 2019 with its headquarters in Singapore Archdiocese, for the three FMDM Health Care Ministries: Mt Alvernia Hospital, Assisi Hospice in Singapore, and MMCH in Malaysia.

● See also Page 12

## Encouraging revival of BEC activities

PLENTONG, Johor: In several parishes, the revival of BEC activities and gatherings post-pandemic has been met with a lukewarm response from the members. Despite these challenges, the Permas Jaya BEC of the Church of St Joseph successfully organised a Chinese New Year celebration for its members on February 24.

The event, attended by 70 faithful from the English, Chinese, and Bahasa-speaking groups, aimed to blend cultural traditions with spiritual reflection.

The celebration included a sumptuous buffet lunch, traditional Chinese New Year cookies, oranges, and games. However, the highlight of the event was the spiritual aspect, which featured prayers, praise and worship hymns, and a spiritual talk delivered by a BEC member in three languages.

The talk emphasised the importance, for Catholics, of maintaining cultural traditions

while placing God at the centre of all celebrations and events. The speaker reminded the audience that, despite the popularity of the lunar horoscope, humans are considered superior to animals according to the hierarchy of living things created by God. Therefore, instead of following the Chinese zodiac, Catholics are encouraged to focus on God, surrendering their lives to His divine providence.

The speaker also referenced the traditional calendar, AD 2024, noting that “AD” stands for *Anno Domini* in Latin, meaning “the year of the Lord,” referring to Jesus Christ. This perspective encourages Catholics to celebrate Chinese New Year in a way that aligns with their faith, incorporating Masses, prayers, and thanksgiving to God.

Drawing from the Gospel of Matthew, the speaker highlighted the importance of embodying the eight beatitudes taught by Jesus,



The BEC members of Permas Jaya posing for a group photo, February 24, 2024.

including humility, compassion, righteousness, and mercy. These teachings, the speaker emphasised, should guide interactions within the community, allowing the spirit of Christ to transform individuals into the image and likeness of God.

The event concluded with a reminder to BEC members that gatherings should not fo-

cus solely on food and fun but should also aim to share Catholic values and build a strong Catholic community within the parish. Members were encouraged to reach out to others in their community and invite them to participate in similar events, fostering unity and love for God. — **By Benedict Joseph Maria Kwok**

## Inter-Faith dinner promotes unity among diverse faiths

KUALA LUMPUR: In a display of unity and diversity, over 100 adherents from various religions gathered at the Raintree Club, for an inter-faith dinner. The event, held in the Titiwangsa constituency, aimed to foster harmony and understanding among different faith communities.

Organised by the inter-faith division of Titiwangsa under the patronage of YB Datuk Seri Johari Abdul Ghani, the Member of Parliament for Titiwangsa and

Federal Minister of Plantation Industries and Commodities, the dinner saw a significant turnout. Datuk Seri Johari, who also sponsored the event, graced the occasion as the guest of honour.

Dr Florence John, coordinator of the Parish Ministry of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (PMEIA) of the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (SHC) and chairperson of the inter-faith division of Titiwangsa, emphasised the dinner’s role in bringing to-

gether adherents of different religions in unity amidst diversity.

The event was graced with speeches from a wide array of religious leaders and representatives, all underscoring the dinner’s pivotal role in fostering unity among followers of diverse religions amidst their differences. They included Ven Datuk K. Sri Dhammaratana, the Buddhist chief high priest of Malaysia; K T Lee from the Bahai Interfaith Council; Tuan Haji Nicholas Sylvester Abdullah, chairperson of Myguide Malaysia and the Hidayah Centre Foundation; Mitchy Letchumy, Hindu Secretary of the Sri Ganesar Temple in Kg Pandan; Maria Vetha, a catechist from SHC; Jasvinder Singh, a delegate from the Gurdwara Sahib Temple in Kg Pandan; Rev Matthew K. Ponnose from the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and Secretary-General of the Bible Society of Malaysia; and Tan Seri Lee Lam Thye, a prominent advocate for national unity.

Entertainment for the evening was as diverse as the participants, with a band led by Deva Dass from SHC performing songs in

multiple languages, and a ‘unity dance’ by the Pannir Bharathanatya Vidyalaya Academy. The St John’s Institution Naval Cadet Band Boys, under Mr. Marshall, also provided musical performances, adding to the celebratory atmosphere.

The evening also saw Datuk Seri Johari being honoured with a garland and shawl by SHC PCC chairman, Clement Ambrose, and Sara Andriana, the secretary of PMEIA SHC, acknowledging his contributions to the event and the community.

Although Msgr Stanislaus Soosaimariam, the parish priest of SHC, could not attend due to prior commitments, he sent his well-wishes to all participants, underlining the spirit of togetherness and mutual respect the event sought to cultivate among Titiwangsa’s diverse faith communities.

It was an event aimed at fostering cordial relations among the diverse faiths and races residing in the Titiwangsa constituency, an initiative actively encouraged by its MP. — **By Bernard Anthony**



Datuk Seri Johari Abdul Ghani with some of the representatives from the different religious groups.

## A gift for parishioners by parishioners

PENANG: The parishioners of the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit have given each other a special gift from the heart. The parish recently published a prayer book aptly titled *From Me to You – Prayers from the Heart* that contains prayers for various intentions that were written by parishioners for the parishioners.

The brainchild of the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC), the book took approximately six months to materialise — from idea to publication. When the PPC and parish priest, Fr Joachim Robert, approved of the idea, an announcement was made to the parishioners that a prayer book was underway and they were encouraged to submit prayers via a Google form prepared by the special committee that was formed to edit and publish the book.

Parishioners were invited to submit their prayers, in English, Chinese and Tamil, within a timeframe. A total of 150 prayers were received and the committee then read through

the submissions, made the necessary edits and arranged the selected prayers into the appropriate categories. Once the manuscript was ready, it was sent for printing and the books were then distributed to parishioners through their BECs and Zone leaders.

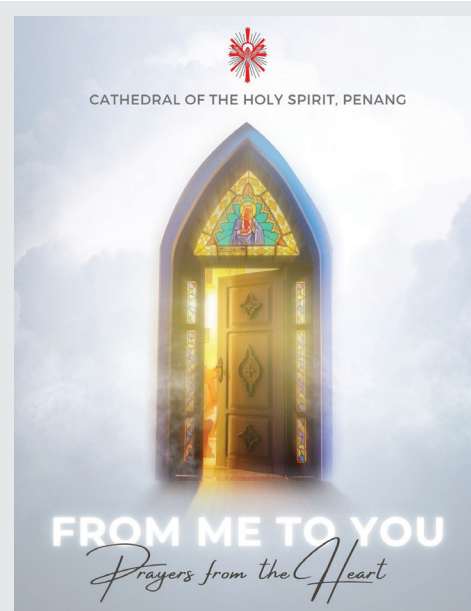
There is a prayer for almost every intention — from financial freedom to examinations and everything in between. If one would flip through the book, you would find that the prayers are meticulously arranged into categories — like prayers for financial blessings, prayers for success in examinations, prayers for various forms of healing and then into subtopics, like healing from physical ailments, prayers for better concentration while studying and etc. The book is so carefully thought out, easy to understand and is suitable for anyone above the age of 10. The prayers are truly meaningful and from the heart.

Maria Yeap, the editor of the project, said

that in the past two years, the parish distributed candles as gifts to each family. The idea of a prayer book was very welcome, considering its intent, uniqueness, practicality and creativeness.

“Instead of just giving out candles this time, we thought that the idea of asking parishioners to share their own personal prayers with those who either wished to pray but didn’t know how or maybe just didn’t have the right words, could use the book as a guide to help them pray,” Maria said.

It would also be helpful to the faithful to intercede for divine intervention in challenging times and also when they want to praise, glorify and thank the Lord for the many blessings bestowed upon them and their families. She added that the book could also be used as a start of a healthy prayer life and to deepen one’s relationship and walk with Jesus. — *By Carmel Dominic*



**From Me to You – Prayers from the Heart** a prayer book by parishioners of the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit.

# Understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

GEORGETOWN, Penang: To foster a deeper understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit hosted a forum which was attended by over a hundred people.

Organised by Caritas Malaysia and the parish, the event aimed to delve into the origins, context and current realities of this long-standing issue.

Speaking at the forum were Dr Francis Loh, a retired professor of politics from USM; Anil Netto, president of *Aliran*; and Fr Bernard Hyacinth SJ, who previously worked with the Jesuit Refugee Services in Jordan. Dr Francis’ decades of academic rigour provided a solid foundation for the discussion. Anil, an accountant-turned activist, brought his commitment to social justice and advocacy for human rights to the forefront. Fr Bernard offered a unique perspective informed by his firsthand experiences, working with displaced communities in Jordan. Together, they dissected the complexities and origins of this modern-day conflict, deepening the audience’s understanding of the issue.

The situation in Gaza has now reached a critical juncture. The staggering statistics of displacement, destruction and loss of life are horrifying. The International Court of Justice’s recent ruling, accusing Israel of potential genocide in Gaza, underscores the urgency for informed perspectives.

### Going back to history

Francis began by embarking on a journey through time in the land where Jesus once lived — from the time Israel gained offi-



*Dr Francis Loh shares on the history of Israel and Palestine.*

cial statehood in 1948 to the present day. He talked about how settler colonialism has led to an ever-expanding occupation of the Palestinian territories and the siege of Gaza — “the world’s largest open-air concentration camp”. This gave the audience a better understanding of the Intifada (Palestinian uprising) and the Palestinian resistance to the occupation.

The second session by Anil provided a Christian perspective of the conflict. Amid the often-polarised discourse, Christians need to anchor ourselves on the teachings of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who wanted to build a new kingdom of love and justice, Anil said. The Gospel’s timeless message serves as our guiding light in our efforts to promote peace. We are called to be the salt and light of the world amid the genocide taking place now, he added. Unfortunately, Anil noted, many mainstream Christians have been influenced by the “End Times” worldview of Christian Zionists in the

US and elsewhere. This has prompted many Christians to unquestioningly take sides with Israel, even though it is the Palestinians who have suffered the brunt of the occupation and now genocide.

Fr Bernard invited the audience to open their hearts and minds to the inherent dignity of all persons, especially the refugees who do not differ from us. All they want is to be treated with dignity, to live a dignified life with basic human rights and freedom. He cautioned against the ease with which individuals are swayed by superficial narratives and unreliable sources in trying to understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The danger is that biased information and misinformation could poison our minds towards the refugees, many of whom are Palestinian. He urged the audience to exercise discernment and critical reflection when consuming the news.

As the Q&A session opened, the room buzzed with anticipation. Several participants raised thoughtful questions and shared personal reflections. They touched on the historical oppression of the Palestinians and how the mainstream media have described the genocide in Gaza as a response to Hamas’ “unprovoked attack” on October 7, 2023 — whereas the history of the occupation and subjugation of the Palestinians goes way back to 1948.

Also raised was the possibility of a two-state solution (this will be difficult now as the West Bank has been ghettoised), the demand for an immediate ceasefire and the military-industrial complex in the US.

### Prominent guests

In the audience was former UN assistant secretary general for peacebuilding support, Judy Cheng-Hopkins from Penang, who welcomed the forum: “It was informative but more im-

portantly, it showed another side of this very complicated situation we have today.” Unfortunately, Judy noted, the ultra-conservative evangelical movement and Jewish lobby, in the USA especially, is so overpowering that people around the world, including Malaysia, are unlikely to hear another side of the story or get the full historical picture. “This was really innovative on your [the organisers’] part, and I wish other churches would do likewise,” she said.

Also in the audience was Mary Symmonds from Barbados. Mary was formerly country director of the United Nations Development Programme in Zimbabwe and other African countries. “The effort to counter the biased propaganda emanating from the US, including through religious institutions and some European nations, is indispensable,” she said. “I liked the combination of the history and reality of the Palestinian people with the religious foundations of Zionism and the role of the Church.” Mary also liked the way Fr Bernard humanised the refugees. This she felt was especially important, given how Israeli propaganda makes much of the 1,200 lives lost reprehensibly on Oct 7 — a massacre which is then used to justify the relentless slaughter and displacement of Palestinians for selfish ends.

### Importance of informed opinion

In closing, Fr Fabian Dicom, the National Director of Caritas Malaysia, stressed the importance of an informed awareness. He said we need to constantly re-evaluate our opinions and seek wisdom to understand the historical context of Israel-Palestine. With no end in sight to the current genocide, it is easy to fall into hopelessness and despondency. The act of praying for peace and speaking out against genocide is something that all Christians can do as we work for a most just world. Fr Fabian urged everyone to be guided by the principles of justice, mercy, peace and love as we become beacons of hope, in the quest for peace in the Holy Land and beyond. Christians need to discern what is happening. We yearn for peace and the teachings of love, justice and reconciliation. All this resonates deeply, especially during this season of Lent, when we reflect on the suffering of Jesus, whose passion was to build the kingdom of God.

The evening ended with a heartfelt prayer from a Methodist pastor, Rev Hwa Jen, seeking God’s help for all Christians to continue to work for peace. — *Caritas Malaysia*



*Fr Fabian Dicom giving the closing address with Fr Bernard Hyacinth SJ and Anil Netto looking on.*

# Northern Kerala gets first basilica

MAHE, Kerala: Thousands of people were present when the Vatican raised an 18th century shrine in Mahe as a basilica, marking a historic milestone in Kerala's northern region.

During a Mass on February 24, Bishop Varghese Chakkalakkal of Calicut announced that the Vatican has given the new status to St Teresa's Church in Mahe that comes under his Latin rite diocese.

The formal decree of the declaration from the Vatican Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments was read in Latin by Fr Vincent Pulicken, the rector of the new basilica, with its translation into Malayalam presented by Fr Sajeev Varghese, the chancellor of the diocese of Calicut.

The Mass was presided over by Archbishop Joseph Kalathiparambil of Verapoly.

Syro-Malabar Archbishop

Joseph Pamplany of Tellicherry, who delivered the homily, thanked the shrine for playing a significant role in fostering the faith of Catholics from central Travancore who had settled in the Malabar region since the 1930s.

He commended the Calicut Diocese for nurturing and supporting those people and serving as guiding other dioceses in northern Kerala as their mother diocese. He highlighted the outstanding leadership of past prelates of the Calicut diocese, especially Italian Jesuit Bishop Aldo Maria Patroni (1904-1988) for the Catholics in the Malabar region.

Fr Stephen Alathara, deputy secretary general of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, explained the significance of a basilica and the process involved in the elevation of a church to that status.

The Mahe church's proposal

to be recognised as a basilica was first approved by the CCBI Boundary Commission and later ratified during the CCBI Plenary Assembly in 2022. The official approval from the Vatican was received on November 21, 2023, Fr Alathara said.

The Mahe church stands as one of the renowned pilgrimage destinations in southern India. Established in 1736, the church holds a significant place in the religious landscape, symbolising unity and faith, Fr Alathara said.

The church is widely recognised as a beacon of religious harmony. Its annual feast is dedicated to St Teresa of Avila, whom the local people call "Amma Theresa" (Mother Theresa).

People from all religions attend the festival. The Mahe administration, recognising its cultural significance, celebrates it as the territory's primary festival. —

Matters India



Church of St Teresa in Mahe, India.

## Italian music conductor praises missionaries in Vietnam



Children attend piano classes, run by WYO4Children.

HO CHI MINH CITY: An Italian music conductor, currently leading an international music project in Vietnam for underprivileged children, has lauded the support extended by local Catholic missionaries.

Damiano Giuranna, founder and conductor of the World Youth Orchestra (WYO), said the help he received from Missionaries of Charity in Binh Duong was "fundamental" for the success of this project.

The international project, called WYO4Children, is realised only through solid local social support, Giuranna said in a February 27 statement.

The Missionaries of Charity in Binh Duong have provided their facility, located about an hour's journey from Ho Chi Minh City, for eight months for the music-learning project that began on Feb. 27.

Vietnamese Fr Dominic Nguyen

assisted in recruiting five young Vietnamese teachers for the project.

Among those selected, Hoang Vuwill will train and direct the choir. The students will have access to guitar, percussion, piano, and violin lessons, the statement said.

The WYO4Children project, run by Giuranna's foundation, aims to give music lessons to 80 orphaned and abandoned children aged between five and 17 years.

The project is part of a three-year-long programme in South-east Asia, starting with Vietnam.

The project will allow children to share their experiences and strengthen their bond with the community, the WYO said.

The project will promote cultural and artistic cooperation between Italy and Vietnam, developing the artistic, musical, and theatrical language of the local people.

The programme includes play-

ing classical and traditional Vietnamese instruments, creating a community choir, and improving skills by playing social games.

The programme includes recitals and small concerts every two months and a final event in September 2024.

The WYO4 Children is part of the Sounds of Brotherhood project by the World Youth Orchestra and is supported by the Italian CDP Foundation, the LCA Studio Legale, and the Italian embassy in Vietnam.

"Music is a universal language that brings together different cultures and transmits emotions and sensations that transcend single realities," said Enrico Padula, consul general of Italy in Ho Chi Minh City, said,

"Between Italy and Vietnam, it represents a fundamental bridge of dialogue and understanding," Padula emphasised. — ucanews.com

## Minority leaders hail Indonesia's inclusive policy

JAKARTA: Islamic groups and leaders of religious minorities in Indonesia have welcomed a government plan to offer services of the Religious Affairs Office to people of all faiths in the Muslim-majority nation.

The plan, presented by Religious Affairs Minister Yaqut Cholil Qoumas on February 26, offers premises of the Religious Affairs Office for conducting weddings of religious groups that do not have places of worship.

It also allows non-Muslims to register their marriages with the office.

"So far, our non-Muslim brothers and sisters have registered their marriages in the civil registry. We want to provide them convenience," said Qoumas.

The minister, a member of the Nahdlatul Ulama, the country's biggest moderate Muslim organisation, added that his ministry is examining the plan to overcome possible hurdles.

The Religious Affairs Office is under the Directorate General of Islamic Community Guidance and is spread across regencies and cities in the country.

"It is the duty of Muslims in the country to protect brothers and sisters from the minority community," Qoumas observed.

It should not be "the other way around," he insisted.

Fr Agustinus Heri Wibowo, executive secretary of the Bishops' Conference of Indonesia's ecumenical and interreligious affairs, welcomed the proposal.

"The government is obliged to provide services to all citizens without discrimination," the priest

observed.

Before finalising the plan, the ministry should consult representatives of religious councils, Wibowo demanded.

It is necessary so that its implementation "does not create new problems," Wibowo said on Feb 27.

When it comes to wedding venues, each religion has its internal norms, which do not need to be regulated by the state, he added.

Rev Henrek Lokra, executive secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission at the Union of Churches in Indonesia, a Protestant group, asked the government to study the policies of each religion before finalising the plan.

Suresh Kumar, head of the Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia, a Hindu group, hailed the ministry's move.

The Religious Affairs Office can solve many problems at the micro level, Kumar said.

Hidayat Nur Wahid, a lawmaker from the conservative Islamic Prosperous Justice Party, said that "historical factors" should be studied before implementing the plan.

Moderate Islamic groups like Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah have backed the plan.

Of Indonesia's 279 million people, about 87.2 per cent are Muslims, about 7 per cent are Protestants, 2.9 per cent Catholics, and 1.7 per cent Hindus.

Other religions include Buddhism, Confucianism, Gafatar, Judaism, traditional Indigenous religions, and other Christian denominations. — ucanews.com



# Pope Francis' schedule for Holy Week and Easter 2024

**VATICAN:** The Vatican has released Pope Francis' schedule for Holy Week 2024, which will include five papal liturgies, Stations of the Cross at the Colosseum, and other traditions to mark the most sacred week of the year.

Easter is the highest feast in the Catholic Church, known as the "solemnity of solemnities," celebrating Jesus' resurrection and defeat of sin and death, and the Vatican celebrates Holy Week with pomp, reverence, tradition, and a busy schedule.

The 87-year-old Pope is scheduled to preside over liturgies on each day of the Easter Triduum as well as Palm Sunday.

The Holy See Press Office published the Pope's Holy Week schedule one day after Pope Francis visited the hospital for diagnostic tests. Reuters reported that the Pope had a CT scan during the hospital checkup. Last year, Pope Francis was discharged from the hospital one day before presiding over Palm Sunday Mass.

Holy Week 2024 begins on March 24 with Palm Sunday and culminates with Easter on March 31. Here is the Vatican's full schedule:

## Palm Sunday

On Sunday morning, March 24, Pope Francis is scheduled to preside over Mass for Palm Sunday, also known as Passion Sunday or the Commemoration of the Lord's Entrance into Jerusalem.

The Mass, which will be in St Peter's Square at 10.00am local time (10.00pm Malaysia time), will kick off with a grand procession of deacons, priests, bishops, cardinals, and laypeople carrying palms.

The procession includes olive tree branches, palm fronds, and the large, weaved palms called "pamureli," all blessed by Pope Francis.

## Holy Thursday

Pope Francis is set to start Holy Thursday with a chrism Mass in St Peter's Basilica at 9.30am (4.30pm) in the presence of cardinals, bishops, and priests living in Rome.

During the Mass, Pope Francis, as the bishop of Rome, will bless the oil of the sick, the oil of catechumens, and the chrism oil to be used in the diocese during the coming year.

The Vatican has yet to release the details for where Pope Francis will celebrate Holy Thursday Mass 2024. Last year, the Pope offered Mass at the juvenile detention centre Casal del Marmo, the same detention centre where he offered Holy Thursday Mass in 2013 shortly after his election.

**Good Friday**  
Continuing the liturgies of the Triduum, Pope Francis is also scheduled to preside over a celebration for the Passion of the Lord on Good Friday at 5.00pm (12 mn) in St Peter's Basilica.

## Good Friday

During this liturgy, which is not a Mass, Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, the papal preacher, typically preaches instead of the Pope.

In the evening, Pope Francis will lead the Stations of the Cross devotion at 9.15pm (4.15am) in Rome's Colosseum illuminated by candlelight.

## Holy Saturday

On Holy Saturday, Pope Francis is set to preside over the Easter Vigil at 7.30pm (2.00am) in St Peter's Basilica.

The Easter Vigil, which takes place on Holy Saturday night, "is the greatest and most noble

of all solemnities," according to the Roman Missal.

The liturgy begins in darkness with the blessing of the new fire and the preparation of the paschal candle. At the Vatican, cardinals, bishops, and priests process through the dark basilica carrying lit candles to signify the light of Christ coming to dispel the darkness.

Pope Francis also typically baptises new Catholics at this Mass.

## Easter Sunday

The morning of Easter Sunday, Pope Francis will preside over Mass in St Peter's Square at 10.00am (5.00pm) on a flower-decked parvis.

After Mass, he will give the annual Easter *urbi et orbi* blessing at noon from the central balcony of St Peter's Basilica.

*Urbi et orbi* means "to the city [of Rome] and to the world" and is a special apostolic blessing given by the Pope every year on Easter Sunday, Christmas, and other special occasions.

In 2023, local authorities estimated that there were close to 100,000 people present in St. Peter's Square for the blessing. — **By Courtney Mares, CNA**

## Australian Catholic University training Nigerian lay ministers

**ABUJA:** The Australian Catholic University's Center for Liturgy offered a training programme for lay liturgical ministers of the Word in Nigeria. The programme, delivered online, aims to equip participants with spiritual and technical skills needed to effectively proclaim the Word and serve in their ministry.

The four-week programme, conducted throughout February, covered topics such as liturgy, the Bible, the Church's liturgical year, and the documents and guidelines of the universal Church. The programme also addressed the specific needs and challenges of the Church in Nigeria, such as the translation of the Bible, pastoral practice and cultural diversity.

Cathy Murrowood, liturgy educator at the ACU Centre for Liturgy, said that the programme was designed in consultation with the parish leaders in Nigeria, who expressed interest in a comprehensive and relevant training programme from a dedicated liturgical centre.

"The Church in Nigeria places great importance on worship so they train their ministers well. They were looking for a comprehensive programme from a dedicated liturgical centre with liturgy specialists. We are honoured to be able to offer this program to them and to support them in their ministry," Murrowood said.

She said the programme was adapted to meet the specific needs of Nigerian lay ministers. Sixty Catholics participated in the training.

"We made changes to the translation of the Bible in the programme so that technical exercises corresponded to the Lectionary used in Nigeria. We were able to discuss aspects of pastoral practice in the Nigerian church and make some adjustments to the programme," she said.

Uju Nwoga, a member of the Divine Mercy Catholic Church in Lekki, located in Nigeria's Lagos state, who solicited the training, said that it provides an opportunity "to reinforce and validate what we are already doing in our ministry, helps us to appreciate cultural differences with respect to our ministry and provides the



*The Australian Catholic University's Center for Liturgy offered a four-week online training programme in February 2024 for lay liturgical ministers of the Word in Nigeria, the first such programme in Africa for the center. (OSV News photo/Afolabi Sotunde, Reuters)*

platform to make inquiries on matters pertaining to our faith from experts in the ACU Centre for Liturgy."

For Murrowood the need for ministers is to go beyond just reading the Word of God. They have to proclaim it if their ministry aims to be successful.

"The term 'proclaimer' is commonly used by the Church to describe those who undertake ministry of the Word in the Church's liturgy," she said.

"Proclaimers are people of faith who understand that God speaks to his people through sacred scripture. 'Proclaim' comes from Latin, pro and clamare, meaning 'cry out' or 'shout forth.' Proclaiming, then, is much more than simply reading words on a page," Murrowood emphasised.

"A dynamic proclamation evokes a prayerful response in believers," she explained.

Part of the training, she said, involves an exploration of the significance of proclamation so that all can become more effective ministers.

The programme is delivered through a combination of online resources, videos, quizzes

and live Zoom classes, where participants can interact with the facilitators and other ministers.

The facilitators are experts in liturgy and ministry from the ACU Centre for Liturgy and other partner institutions.

The programme is the result of collaboration between the centre and the Archdiocese of Lagos, which expressed interest in providing quality training for its ministers of the Word. The archdiocese has over 200 parishes and more than 1,000 ministers of the Word, who serve in various liturgical celebrations.

Nigeria is one of the countries in the world with the best Mass attendance. As many as 94 per cent of self-identified Nigerian Catholics surveyed said they attend weekly or daily Mass, according to a study published in early 2023 by Georgetown University's Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate. It also is one of the most persecuted, according to reports.

"We are both excited and delighted to connect with our fellow Catholics in Nigeria," said Clare Johnson, director of the

Centre for Liturgy.

"The Catholic Church constantly needs to train enthusiastic members of the faithful, both new and more experienced, to undertake liturgical ministries. When well-trained Catholics perform liturgical ministries with knowledge, belief and confidence, liturgical celebrations are enhanced, and our faith is strengthened," she said.

Murrowood hopes that the programme is the beginning of a long partnership with the Church in Lagos and the centre's staff "look forward to providing more training, if requested," she said.

"It is an exciting and dynamic church. We believe that this programme would be suitable for any Catholic community and so requests from other parishes and dioceses from other countries are welcome," she said.

Nwoga said the training helped the group gain a better understanding of worship in the Mass, so that they can now proclaim the Word of God from a place of relationship ... rather than simply reading — and igniting in us a love for God and the community we serve.

"We are hoping to become more effective proclaimers and ministers of the Word, becoming more transformed into the image of Jesus and walking in his footsteps more closely," she said.

The ACU Centre for Liturgy's online training programme is now in its third year. Murrowood said both rural and city parishes and schools in Australia and in and around the Pacific region have benefited from the programme, but training ministers from Nigeria is a first in Africa.

"There has been great interest in the programme, and feedback has been consistently positive," Murrowood said.

Johnson added that they "truly welcome the opportunity to engage with our African brothers and sisters in this special educational programme." — **By Ngala Killian Chinton, OSV News**

# How to be a 'synodal bishop'

Synodality is an issue that everyone in the church needs to understand and embrace, Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, told an audience at the University of Notre Dame.

The cardinal addressed *The Role of the Synodal Bishop* in a February 26 talk at the Indiana university attended by bishops, university administrators, members of the faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, and laypeople.

Cardinal Grech, a native of Malta, came from Rome to join US bishops gathered at Notre Dame in the last week of February. They were there to explore, discuss and pray about their own roles as bishops in the synodal Church.

The cardinal, as theology professor John Cavadini noted in his introduction, was both appointed as the Synod of Bishops' secretary-general and named a cardinal by Pope Francis in 2020. Cavadini, director of the university's McGrath Institute for Church Life, noted the institute was co-sponsoring this special gathering of bishops with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine.

"This has been a welcome development for many of us," Cavadini said about the Synod on Synodality called by Pope Francis. The first global session took place in Rome in October 2023; a second and final session is scheduled for Oct 2-27.

A synod, he explained, is a gathering intended for the bishops of the Church.

"Nonetheless," he pointed out, "it's also a suitable instrument to give voice to the entire people of God via the bishops who are



Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the synod gave a talk February 26, 2024. (OSV News/Bob Roller/CNS/Paul Haring)

established as the authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses to the faith of the whole Church."

Cardinal Grech began his address by saying that even in the few days he spent on campus with the bishops, some impressions about them were coming into sharp focus. "It's clear that the Catholic Church in the United States has a lot of gifts to share with the whole Church," he said.

Cardinal Grech explained he would discuss the all-important role of the diocesan bishop in the synodal church from three different perspectives: first, through the Second Vatican Council's teaching emphasising the Trinitarian nature of the church; second, in light of Vatican II's teaching that the laity — like bishops and priests — participate in the threefold offices of Jesus Christ as priest, prophet and king; third, as an invitation to

bishops from Pope Francis to engage in ongoing formation as "synodal conversion" in the light of St John Paul II's 1992 exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (*I Will Give You Shepherds*).

Regarding the Church's Trinitarian nature, the cardinal said that the bishops participating in Vatican II (1962-65) had carefully studied and clearly saw that "the church comes from the Trinity and is meant to image the distinctiveness of each of the Divine Persons of the Trinity."

That's why, he continued, the last chapter of the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* (The Light of Christ), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, describes the church in Trinitarian terms. The Church is called "the people of God" to represent the Father, "the Body of Christ" to represent the Son, and "the Temple of the Spirit" to represent the Holy Spirit.

Because of this Trinitarian nature, Cardinal Grech continued, a diocesan bishop's perception of his own ministry must match this theological reality of the Church he serves.

Bishops are, he stated, "successors of Jesus' Apostles through the Holy Spirit. They are ordained to be mediators, facilitators and servants from within the whole church," who must understand and serve the Church as it truly exists.

The second theological reality or truth that diocesan bishops must constantly keep in their hearts and minds, the cardinal continued, is that baptised laypeople also participate in the three offices of Christ as priest, prophet and king.

This point is repeated in a preparatory document for the 2023 session of the Synod on Synodality, he noted. The statement declared: "Every synodal process, in which the Bishops are called to discern what the Spirit is saying to the Church, not by themselves but by listening to the People of God, who 'shares also in Christ's prophetic office' (LG, no. 12), is an evident form of that 'journeying together' which makes the Church grow."

The third perspective that should be considered in examining the role of any synodal bishop, the cardinal said, is to look at the bishop's need for ongoing formation and conversion.

"In the synthesis report of last October's assembly," he said, "the word 'formation' appears 55 times. So, it was clearly a critical issue." But, he pointed out, "none of these instances of (the need for) formation refers to bishops. Isn't that strange?"

Clearly, modern documents of the church promote and illustrate the need for proper formation of every bishop, he said, quoting again from *Lumen Gentium*, that the bishop "invested with the fullness of the sacrament of Orders is the steward of the grace of the Supreme priesthood."

"We must be able to relate to others," Cardinal Grech said. "This is especially important for a man who is called to be responsible for a community. This demands that the priest not be arrogant or quarrelsome, but be affable, sincere in his words and heart, proven to be discreet, generous and open to clear and brotherly relationships and capable of encouraging the same in others." — **By Catherine M. Odell, OSV**

## Catholic digital leaders urge modern-day missionaries to learn the internet

When Francis Xavier reached India or Mother Cabrini arrived in the United States, neither believed they would make converts overnight.

First, they had to get to know people, learn the language and appreciate the local customs and culture. Only then could they begin to evangelise.

And according to some of the participants at last October's synod on synodality, it's time for the church to apply that same approach to the digital world.

"We have never been afraid as a church for 20 centuries to be out there," said José Manuel De Urquidi. "You were sent on a mission and who could know what would happen?"

For Urquidi, who is the founder of the Juan Diego Network, which supports Catholic digital ministries to connect with Latinos, the Church has always been aware that sending missionaries into new frontiers entails risks, including that of martyrdom.

"We've never been afraid of that," he said. "Why are we now afraid of the internet? What's the difference?"

During the synod last October, Urquidi was one of a few voices who over the course of the month-long summit continually made the case that the internet is "a place of encounter" and that "it's not a tool, but rather a culture."

His message was direct: Like those earlier missionaries of centuries past, the digital space is "a place where we need to be. We need to learn the language and to engage."

And being only 39 years old, Urquidi is a young adult representing a target demographic that most church leaders are desperate to have more of in their pews.

Pioneering work in this arena began over a

year before the 400 synod delegates arrived in Rome. Under the banner of "The Church is listening" (also known as the "digital synod"), it was the brainchild of Msgr Lucio Ruiz, secretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication.

The project galvanised "digital missionaries" — in a group that began with 250 people and has now exceeded 2,000 — to actively engage Catholics and non-Catholics alike so that their voices could be included as part of the synthesis document during the continental stage of the synod.

The idea was for these digital missionaries — Catholics with large followings online — to use mediums like podcasts, WhatsApp and social media platforms to engage people in conversation and, most importantly, to listen to their concerns.

The result: tens of thousands of respondents, many non-believers, who wanted to contribute to the conversation about how the church might become more welcoming, care for migrants and the environment, engage in peace-building and support families and young people.

"You must go where the people are. As a missionary, you must go and learn the language, learn the music and learn the culture in order to express the message for them," said Msgr Ruiz.

During the first week of the synod, Purity of Mary Sr Xiskya Valladares of Nicaragua was one of the first delegates to formally bring up the topic of the church's digital mission.

Known as the "Twitter nun," Sr Valladares told the room — including the Pope — that within the digital realm, she encounters people who "need to heal their wounds."

"It is not enough to tell them the Mass



José Manuel De Urquidi

schedule or invite them to visit the cathedral if we have not first engaged in dialogue with them, getting closer in order to listen to them," she said. "Sometimes they feel confused or ashamed, and they need a 'travel companion' to assist them. To be that companion, we need to step outside of ourselves, our ways of thinking, to meet them, listen to them, and accompany them."

Reflecting back on that moment, Sr Valladares said that many synod delegates began to approach her and De Urquidi at coffee breaks or during small group discussions to learn more about what ideas they had about the church's digital mission. Many people were concerned about reaching young people and felt as if this might be a useful starting point.

When the synod's synthesis document was published at the end of October 2023, it dedicated one of its 20 chapters to this very theme.

Under the title *Mission in the Digital Environment*, Chapter 17 proposes the creation of collaborative networks of digital mis-

sionaries in order to "unleash new energies for new forms of mission."

"It's not just enough to create content," such as posting on Instagram or TikTok, Ruiz insisted, but rather it's about entering the digital culture and relating with real people there.

"The ultimate goal is to bring back people to a sacramental life," said De Urquidi. "But sometimes the journey has a hundred steps."

As for what comes next, De Urquidi — who was born and raised in Mexico but now lives in the United States, where he has helped launch nearly 100 podcasts — says it's important for bishops to start figuring out who the digital missionaries are in their diocese and taking the time to get to know them. And for the missionaries to meet their bishop, as well.

The hope is that dioceses will recognise their digital missionaries, find ways to form them, send them on mission and then accompany them in their ministry.

Ruiz said that a few dioceses already have an organised digital mission, others are just beginning to think and ask about it, while for most it's still completely new.

But while the digital mission is deeply connected to the synod, De Urquidi is quick to point out that the Vatican meeting is only a starting point.

"It's the start of the Church recognising the internet as a mission frontier," he insisted.

"People are in search of meaning, they're in search of love, they're in search of truth. They're in search of God, most of them without knowing," he continued. "People aren't going to church, but they're on their devices. So we have to go to them there and show them the One who is love." — **By Christopher White, NCR**

# The hidden Christians

**“The blood of martyrs  
is the seed of the Church.”**  
– Tertullian, Early Church Father,  
2nd century

Imagine denouncing your faith, the faith of your ancestors, and the faith of your community for over 260 years, spanning seven generations.

Imagine teaching your children to worship the Lord in silence, in the dark, within the depths of your home, as if it were a shameful secret.

Imagine never celebrating Easter or Christmas in public on the pain of death for you, your family and your community.

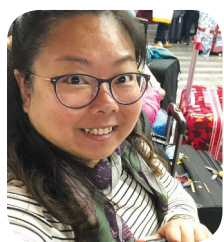
That was the reality of the Hidden Christians of Japan between the 16th and 18th centuries.

## How It Began

The 16th century was the golden age of European trade exploration and the nascent ascend of global Western imperialism. While the Spanish were headed west towards the Americas, the Portuguese sailed east towards Asia via Africa, India, Malacca and Macao, to the cry of God, Gold and Glory.

Close on the heels of these merchant traders were the Christian missionaries. The Spanish and the Portuguese had committed to the Holy See to evangelise and Christianise the “heathens” wherever they went. True to form, Christian missionaries sailed on board these merchant ships, bringing the Gospel to the pagans.

The Japanese lords’, or *daimyōs*, early reception of these Westerners was cordial as they were eager to trade with the Portuguese, and they welcomed these mis-



## GETTING SIDETRACKED

Agnes Ong

sionaries with an open mind. In 1549, St Francis Xavier was one of the few Jesuits, including Cosme de Torres and Juan Fernandez, to arrive at Kagoshima, a port in Kyushu, to begin spreading the Word of God.

The first *daimyō* lord to convert to Christianity was Ōmura Sumitada, who took the name Bartolomeu in June 1563. Soon, many *daimyōs* received the rite of baptism, which invariably resulted in many in the community converting to Christianity, especially in the western islands of Japan.

However, the path of the early Christian missionaries in Japan wasn’t smooth sailing as they encountered a language barrier and had a tough time breaking through the centuries-old hold of Buddhism and Shintoism on the Japanese population. Monks of both religions were antagonistic at what they perceived as a rival religion and a threat to their way of life. At the same time, the early Christians in Japan began to question the idea of absolute authority of man.

Thus, clashes between the authorities and early Christian communities became inevitable. Over the next four decades, Japanese authorities would issue prohibition edicts against the Christians.

## The Persecutions

An early tipping point came in 1596 when the Spanish ship San Felipe ran aground off

the coast of Shikoku while on its way from Manila to Acapulco. Some say it was the captain of the ship; others allege that it was a drunk crewman who let it slip that the Spanish used religion before sending in the might of the military to take over a country.

By then, Christianity was officially prohibited in Japan. Suspicion grew when the shogun, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, decided to exercise the prohibition by executing a few Christians and a Franciscan friar who was on board the San Felipe.

Thus began the Christian persecution campaigns under the rule of Hideyoshi, the catalyst being the crucifixion of the 26 martyrs in Nishizaka, Nagasaki, in 1597.

The group of 26 martyrs, often known as St Paul Miki and his companions, which includes Sts John of Goto and James Kisai, comprised four Spaniards, one Mexican, one Indo-Portuguese and 20 Japanese, the youngest of which was 12 years old. Mutilated with their ears and noses cut off, the companions sang the *Te Deum* as they were force-marched through villages from Kyoto to Nishizaka, a journey of 966 kilometres over one month.

On a hill overlooking Nagasaki, the companions hung on crosses with chains and ropes before being lanced to death. In 1862, Pope Pius IX canonised the Martyrs of Nagasaki. Today, the Museum of 26 Martyrs stands where the companions and many more Nagasaki martyrs, including Julian Nakamura, died for their faith.

## The Hidden Christians

After the execution of the 26 Martyrs in Nagasaki, Japanese rulers continued to persecute Christians en masse, beginning with the Madre de Deus ship incident in 1610. Other great persecutions include the Great Kyoto Martyrdom, Gen’na Great Martyrdom (Nishizaka), Great Edo (Tokyo Martyrdom), 31 Unzen Martyrdom, and many more.

Because of the prohibitions, persecutions and expulsions, Japanese Christians began to go underground by the early 17th century. These Hidden Christians, or Kakure Kirishitan, modelled depictions of Mary and the saints on the Buddhist’s goddess of mercy, Kannon. There was no written literature; all religious teachings were imparted orally from parent to child. Prayers called *orasho* (*oratio* in Latin) were chanted in the manner of Buddhist chant in a mix of Latin, Portuguese and Japanese. There were no priests; lay persons were nominated to conduct the rituals and lead services.

During the persecution, Christians in Japan were forced to renounce their faith publicly. One such method was to have everyone in

the community trample on brass plates bearing Christian images (*fumie*) to filter the Christians. Japanese were also forced to register their religious affiliation to a local temple and to participate in all Buddhist and Shinto rites and rituals.

The ban on Christianity was eventually lifted in 1837. It is estimated that 2,000 Japanese were martyred during the two century-long persecutions. Of those who died during the Japanese persecution of the Christians during this period, the Catholic Church has beatified over 400 martyrs and canonised 42 as saints.

Today, due to the elusive nature of the Hidden Christians, there is no recent number of their population available. Indisputably, the Hidden Christians acknowledge that their numbers are dwindling.

In 2018, UNESCO recognised 12 Hidden Christian sites in the Nagasaki region, comprising 10 villages, Hara Castle and Oura Cathedral, as World Heritage Sites.

If you ever visit the Nagasaki region in Japan, do make the time to visit the Museum and Monument of 26 Martyrs, St Philip Church, and UNESCO’s 12 Hidden Christian sites. Don’t forget to pray for those who had suffered for their faith.

Watch the BBC Reel on “The Hidden Religion Banned in Japan for 200 years” by scanning the QR Code.



## Supplementary Reading on the Hidden Christians:

1. “The Japanese Christians Forced to Trample on Christ” - Yvette Tan, 24 November 2019, BBC.com
2. “Japan’s Ageing ‘Hidden Christians’ Fear They May Be Their Religion’s Last Generation” - Linda Sieg, 15 November 2019, Reuters.com
3. “My Ancestors Passed on the Faith as Hidden Christians in Japan” - Devin Watkins, 24 November 2019, VaticanNews.com
4. Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region, 2018

● Agnes Ong is a self-professed curious traveller and lifelong learner with a lamentable tendency to get into sidetracked experiences. She aspires to explore as many historical UNESCO sites as possible, funds permitting. Agnes has a travel-slash-work-slash-dump everything IG at @agnes\_gets\_sidetracked.



Monument to the 26 Martyrs of Japan, with St Philip Church in the background.

# Understanding why terrorists attack worshippers in Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, the scourge of terrorist violence has once again reared its head, claiming lives across faith communities. On February 25, both a Catholic church and a mosque fell victim to deadly assaults in the country’s east, underscoring a grim reality — while places of worship are targeted, the surge of jihadist violence in the Sahel does not overtly appear to be fuelled by religious warfare.

## What happened?

The day of February 25 was marked by tragedy as the Catholic community of Essakane, nestled in the northeastern part of Burkina Faso, suffered a “terrorist attack” resulting in fifteen fatalities and two injuries. This village, situated close to the Mali and Niger borders, is in a region where armed movements linked to Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State group are rampant. Simultaneously, a significant “attack”

devastated a mosque in Natiaboani, an eastern village, killing scores of Muslim worshippers. In Burkina Faso’s northeast, as well as in neighbouring Sahel countries, the daily toll of jihadist group violence is devastating, with nearly 20,000 deaths since 2015. An October 2023 study by the Institute of International and Strategic Relations reported approximately 1.93 million internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso. According to its research director Caroline Roussy, “the military is overwhelmed by the terrorist threat, with 40 per cent of the territory beyond the state’s control.”

## Was religion the primary motive?

The Christian community in Burkina Faso has been a target for terrorist groups before. In February 2020, an attack on a Protestant church in the village of Pansi, in the east, resulted in 24 deaths. May 2019 saw four

attacks directly targeting the Christian community in various northern localities. Muslim worshippers have not been spared either, with mosques and imams often in the crosshairs of jihadists. In August 2020, Souaibou Cissé, the Grand Imam of Djibo in northern Burkina Faso, was abducted and killed by armed individuals.

Yet, as Roussy points out, “it’s challenging to determine if the recent events were motivated by religion or part of a series of indiscriminate attacks.” In northern Burkina Faso, a web of territorial, social, and ethnic conflicts intertwine. Violence has become ubiquitous, ultimately affecting all societal spheres, including religious institutions. “Young people joining the ranks of jihadists often do so out of opportunism, mostly for financial reasons. Religious warfare is merely a tool,” Roussy analyses.

## What do we know about the assailants?

In the Sahel region, terrorist groups are not a unified entity, complicating military authorities’ efforts to address the threat. Quantifying the exact number of movements operating in Burkina Faso or their membership also remains a challenge. The two main factions, Al-Qaeda and Daesh (ISIS), have been in open conflict since 2013, further destabilising the situation.

Roussy highlights a growing concern: these groups are not only advancing westward across the African continent but also establishing lasting footholds within certain states, including Burkina Faso. Here, the military junta that seized power in 2022 had vowed to eradicate the jihadist menace. Two years on, however, the situation seems far from resolved. — By Alexis Gonzalez, LCI (<https://international.la-croix.com>)

# Reaching out in God's love

## Healing hands of Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital

By Lucille Dass

PENANG: "Serving with Love in Cancer Care" is the distinct mission-related tagline of the not-for-profit Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital (MMCH) that is totally reliant on public donations. Unbowed, "Mission before money," declares the CEO, is what sets it apart from other private cancer hospitals.

MMCH shares in the global mission of the FMDM to provide high quality and compassionate care with respect and integrity to all patients regardless of race, religious belief, or financial status. A litany of interview questions for distribution to selected personnel was sent in advance to the hospital's newly minted Mission Manager, Simon Chan. Additionally, the serendipitous on-site impromptu interview-cum-chat with different persons helped capture a holistic picture of the guiding philosophy that reflects the core values in Catholic health care.

### The CEO shares ...



At the helm for about a year now, is CEO Deacon Paul Kang Hian Beng. This surely heralds fresh beginnings and a new steering of MMCH to achieve the (fund-dependent) mission envisioned. Deacon Paul reveals how Covid-19 adversely impacted MMCH: an 85 per cent drop in patient numbers due to travel restrictions; loss of three oncologists to other private hospitals; and financial losses. "In the midst of this tailspin, staff morale was also affected. My challenging role as CEO is to turn around the hospital financially and rebuild staff morale," he states categorically.

How does he strike a balance between his professional and diaconal service? "My service as CEO of MMCH is part of my service as deacon. I'm not here as a secular CEO; I'm here to strengthen the Catholic ethos of the hospital, working together with our mission manager to inculcate our core values of compassion, respect, and integrity. My role here is an integral part of being a deacon in assisting the bishop in a work of charity." For example, the tax-exempt needy patients' fund (about RM2 million raised annually) aids in providing the necessary treatment to about 200 patients annually. The hospital serves both in-patients (licensed to have 28 beds) and walk-ins. To a question on categories of patients, he discloses, "Palliative patients far outnumber hospice patients. We are not a dedicated hospice."

For ongoing staff training and development, MMCH works with the two sister hospitals in Singapore. MMCH is also a centre for seminarians, clergy, and lay people to undergo Clinical Pastoral Experience. His two-pronged operational philosophy is "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" (Theodore Roosevelt), while the deacon in him reflects, "Will people encounter Christ when they deal with me?" The service tagline is also the focus of MMCH's 48th anniversary celebration. This resonates with the spirit of St Francis of Assisi in serving all patients according to MMCH's core values.



### The Mission Manager shares ...

Simon Chan explains that his role as mission manager in Catholic health care is to collaborate with the CEO in upholding the mission and its aforementioned core values. "My role involves guiding strategic initiatives and ensuring that our Catholic identity permeates all operational aspects, aligning our mission-driven approach." Could he list some practical operational strategies? "Conducting assessment and feedback surveys to ensure that service aligns with the mission; creating a caring environment for patients; offering spiritual support and pastoral care services to patients, their families, and caregivers, while respecting their religious beliefs and practices." With regard to staffing, human resource manager Loh Sub Mui shares how there happens to be racial equity among the 136-strong workforce, though unplanned. How serendipitous!

Pope Francis' exhortation: Be close to those with cancer and support their families prompted me to ask how MMCH involves families in the care of their loved ones undergoing treatment. Simon said the Clinical Pastoral Care (CPC) team, driven by compassion and empathy, extends support to family members and caregivers by fostering relationships. They provide space, time, and a listening ear for members concerned to share challenges faced – "financial, emotional, dietary ... etc. Our CPC team then facilitates referrals to appropriate resources such as the welfare fund department or dietitian while offering affirmation and encouragement to uplift their spirits and morale."

### The nursing staff share ...

Why choose to join MMCH? Passion and affection for FMDM's mission and core values of service, and the calm and serene atmosphere make them "feel right at home." They are

*The FMDM Sisters, staff and volunteers of Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital during the 48th anniversary thanksgiving gathering on February 21, 2024.*

content with their lower earnings in MMCH, placing service to humanity above money. Do any extra/special personal and professional qualities apply in their nature of work at MMCH? Yes; the need to honour the FMDM core values that underscore a "Spirit of Service." Are their facial expressions varied or set when dealing with patients and does this have an effect on patients? "My facial expression has to be varied and this definitely has an effect on the patients." Another disagreed. How do they feel about seeing death on a frequent basis? Does it make them overly concerned about their own health care? Does it make them 'sit and think' about death, sickness and pain? Some interesting takes on this: "...different perspectives emerge when working in cancer health care. I feel relieved that the patient's suffering has ended." A senior nursing sister adds, "Each death has its own story that teaches me to live as a blessed person. Yes, it makes us more health conscious, and yes, I do sit and reflect on the matter." A pragmatic response is, "No. The nature of my work is to provide health care until the patient's life ends."

Generally, job satisfaction comes from keeping patients comfortable and cheerful; a pleasant working environment; relationship with workmates; and career growth opportunities. Would they encourage others to work in MMCH as nursing staff? Why? "Yes, but only people with the right attitude, passion and compassion in caring for patients and with no personal agenda." Working in MMCH has positively affected their self-conduct, "I have become humbler. I think a lot of how my family and I are blessed." Another said it made her feel needed and important!

### Patients share ...

The Pastoral Care Coordinator, Peter Too, kindly made available to me three patients of different ages and stages of cancer for a chit-chat. None objected to being named or photographed. 73-year-old pretty Ibu Daisy Tandoyo even sat up in bed, and literally and figuratively "let her hair down" for a shoot and a hearty chat! This, while on IV chemotherapy to help combat an early-stage cancerous tumour. Chatty and effusive in her praise of the hospital, this Pentecostal Christian felt grateful that a seminary stops by to chat and pray with her regularly.

Another Pentecostal Christian, 40-year-old cheerful Rolly Dimassetya simply "rolls with the punches!" He was undergoing post-operative chemotherapy and radiotherapy for salivary gland cancer. Although he had lost his sense of taste for saltiness, he was confident of regaining it. Meanwhile, to compensate the loss, "I eat extra spicy food!" Grateful for his family's support, the spirited Rolly observes, "It took a big leap of faith to decide to fly from Jakarta to seek healing at this single-discipline hospital."

50 plus Alison Yeo is another gutsy, animated, and devout Christian. She boldly bargained with God, "I'm not yet three

score and ten (Psalm 90:10), so You can't take me!" (The words *Heaven Can Wait* - 1978 film, flashed across my mind). She is resolute about getting through her "recently discovered stage-four pancreatic cancer" and feels gratified having moved from a bigger multi-discipline private hospital to MMCH. "I feel a sense of belonging here." She spoke enthusiastically about her pastors and prayer support group. Her faith-filled belief, "I pray before every chemotherapy so I don't suffer from any side effects apart from hair loss." When I suggest that her positively strong internal disposition would make her a great "morale booster," she chips in exuberantly, "I'm doing exactly that with some patients here!"

My two-decade old published quote, "What is not done in love and for love, will soon be lost" played on my mind as I drove down the 'Mount.' Indeed, "Serving with Love in Cancer Care" is the reverberating heartbeat of this hospital on the mount. To keep mounting continuity and sustainability of this loving care, MMCH is seeking donations through its Jubilee Fund Appeal. For enquiries call 04- 8923874/875 or email [clement@mountmiriam.com](mailto:clement@mountmiriam.com)





## WORD IN PROGRESS

Karen-Michaela Tan

Insanity, says Albert Einstein, is repeating the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results. That is why this Lent is going to be just another failed diet for many.

I know two things well: God's love, and my failure to lose weight. Let me just state for the record that the weight I have to lose is not the be-able-to-look-better-at-the-pool weight, but rather the better-not-wear-black-in-the-pool-or-be-mistaken-for-an-orca kind. I don't care how politically correct or kind you are. Don't patronise me and call me big boned, chubby, large, or any acceptable adjective. I am fat. Obese. And I am secure in myself and God's love for me to call a spade a spade.

For countless Lents I have endeavoured to lose weight on the pretext of fasting. I lied to myself that I was doing it because it was one of the three traditional pillars of Lent (prayer and almsgiving being the others). It invariably never worked because it came from a place of dishonesty.

God is aware of the intentions behind our actions, but because He is so good, He allows us the free will of our personal falsehoods. It is only when I learnt to look at the liar in the mirror and give her my name did I enter truly into the spirit of Lent. This kind of revelation only comes

from the Holy Spirit.

John 16:8-11 reads: *And when the Holy Spirit has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.*

I have been 75, 90, 100 and 103 kg at different times in my life. Menopause and a difficult 2023 (my mother died, my poodle died, and killed off a bad relationship) saw me start this year at my heaviest yet. So of course, after the face-stuffing exercise that is Chinese New Year, I was more than happy to declare to all and sundry that good Catholic that I was, the festivities were over, and I was going to fast. Which made me want to eat more than ever.

There is in me a petulant child who does exactly what she is told not to, just out of spite. Call it self-sabotage or whatever you want, but after Ash Wednesday's slice of bread, green tea and two crackers, I was ready for the whole enchilada, literally and figuratively.

Because female kind is shamed into silence when it comes to the struggle of weight loss, I have never really spoken to anyone about how hard it was for me to regulate my eating. I myself, trained in consumer psychology, could not pinpoint my triggers. I ate when I was happy to celebrate in the company of friends, but I also stuffed my face alone. I embraced the discovery of the Japanese word

*kuchisabishii* because its meaning of "lonely mouth" or "longing to have or put something in one's mouth" described what I felt to a T. I ate alone, I ate in company, and I ate *kuchisabishii*. I could lose three kilos a week and put it back on in two days.

I underwent hypnotherapy, which I think curtailed my desire for sweets, but the truth is, sweets are not my weakness. I can take a bite of ice cream and throw the rest away without any problem save my Chinese financial sensibilities about waste, but it is the allure of crunchy, salty things that do me in.

Over *teh tarik* I blurted out to my friend Jenny who was visiting from Singapore that I thought I had an eating disorder. Jenny is someone I have known for over 20 years, but she would not have been my first choice of confidant, being a tiny little wren of a woman who had not changed in dress size since puberty. And yet the Spirit convicted me to speak to her about my inability to keep my Lenten observances despite my desire to do so.

She quoted Jeremiah 17:9-10 to me: *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.*

And in that tacky-floored, sticky-tabled *mamak* restaurant, I felt the Spirit convicting me of deceit. The thing that made me know that it was the Holy Spirit instead of a counter spirit, was the

lightness I felt from this discovery. The Holy Spirit had convicted me: He had pointed out a long-standing falsity in my thinking, but it was not done to make me despair, but to set me free. The Holy Spirit breaks the power of lies over lives, and brings about the possibility of a new life through conversion powered by an educated understanding of the state of our fallenness.

I realised then the resonating truth of Hosea 6:6, *I desire mercy and not sacrifice*. I needed to show myself the mercy and compassion I sought when I set out to fast at Lent. I needed to be healed before I began my spiritual observances in earnest. I had gotten it wrong by beginning from a place of guilt, when what God needed me to be was free to begin properly.

You may not suffer from *kuchisabishii*, or need to lose weight for the very sake of your life or joints, but I hazard I am not alone in my duplicity of intention this Lent. The beauty of Lent is that as we reach upwards to God and to the better version of ourselves, God reaches down to us. This Lent, I hope when you ask God for help with your weaknesses, you will hear Him reply, as Jesus did to the leper who said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean" in Matthew 8:1-3, *I am willing, be cleaned.*

● **Karen-Michaela Tan** is a poet, writer and editor who seeks out God's presence in the human condition and looks for ways to put the Word of God into real action.



## INFORMED OPINION

Prof Xavier V. Pereira

# Repentance and change

## The challenge of maintaining change

The season of Lent is upon us again. Repentance is a consistent theme during the season. The word *Metanoia*, an ancient Greek word meaning 'changing one's mind' is often heard from pulpits. The season of Lent also coincides with the initial third of the year. Many make resolutions during the New Year, and Christians often review these resolutions during Lent. Failure to adhere to these resolutions can result in either trying again or waiting for an appropriate time to make resolutions afresh. Some people give up trying to change because of repeated failures.

*Metanoia* is often the experience of those who have gone through a life changing experience. This can be a God experience like that of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9: 1-22). Mine was at a charismatic retreat in Bangalore in November 1982, preached by the lay evangelist Fritz Mascarenhas. One of the verses that provoked repentance was Isaiah 53: 6 – "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, we have all turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all"

Repentance in the Christian tradition acknowledges God's great love for us, our turning away from God, and our returning to God through Jesus Christ.

Repentance is also a key concept in other religions. In Islam, the Arabic word *tawba* means to repent, and the Malay translation of the word is *bertaubat*.

**Repentance is Ongoing and not One Off**  
Many Christians, especially non-Catholic Christians, believe that repentance is one off. They also use the term *backslide* to

describe a person who returns to his or her old ways. Thus, the person who backslides may have to repent again. This phenomenon of repenting, backsliding, and repenting again, sheds light on the fact that repentance is not one off but a repetitive exercise.

I was introduced to the concept of ongoing repentance by the Redemptorist priest Fr Gino Henriques, who was the chairman of the National Service Team of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal of India in the 1980s. Ongoing repentance acknowledges our repeated failing and falling, and the need of repetitive seeking and implementing of transformative change in our lives through the Holy Spirit. The liturgy of the Mass also acknowledges our need for ongoing repentance through the Penitential Rite in the beginning of every Mass. Healthy ongoing repentance fills a person with remorseful hope and not guilt, and the insight that we often relapse but will be forgiven seventy times seven, by a loving God.

### The Cycle of Change

The model of the Cycle of Change by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983) helps us understand our efforts to make change and maintain change.

This cycle of change was first applied to people who were addicted to substances. The changing of behaviour in this model of change involves moving through five cognitive stages – *precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance*.

It is unlikely that a person will repent or make change if the person is not thinking

about change. The *precontemplation* stage is precisely a stage in which a person does not think there is a need for personal change.

The word *contemplate* in the Oxford Language Dictionary means 'to think about' or 'to think deeply or at length'. In several religions including Christianity, people are exhorted to think deeply or at length about their sinfulness and the need to repent.

The *contemplation stage* and other stages of change are well depicted in the Parable of The Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11 – 32). The wayward son in this parable, after hitting rock bottom, began thinking of returning to his father. He prepared himself (*preparation stage*) by rehearsing the words he would say to his father and was willing to work as a servant in his father's household. He finally summoned the courage to face his father against whom he had grievously sinned (*action stage*). He was surprised by the unconditional love and acceptance of the father which most likely would have assisted him in maintaining change.

Thus, (loving) social support is instrumental in maintaining change. Social support can be sourced from significant others including family members and friends, and a healthy religious community.

The failure to maintain change is termed *relapse*. To prevent relapse in people who have addiction issues, *relapse prevention strategies* are utilised to maintain change. These would include addressing both external cues (e.g. the places where substances are sold) and internal cues (e.g. a change of mood that drives a person to elevate the mood with substances). These

strategies can also be applied to addiction to pornography and technology which is rampant in the present day and age.

To maintain transformative or positive change, avoidance of the exposure to temptation that will likely overwhelm a person leading to relapse, is wisely elucidated by Jesus in the prayer that He gave us (Matthew 6: 9-13). The avoidance of temptation is further emphasised in the 'cutting off of the sinful hand' and the 'gouging out of the sinful eye' (Matthew 5: 29, 30).

Psychotherapy can also assist people in making positive change. Some people though, are reluctant to change their unhealthy behaviours. Among this group are people who have traits of a personality disorder or fulfil the criteria for a personality disorder and often do not have the insight that their behaviours are destructive to self and to others.

Psychotherapy is an excellent tool to exact change but the therapist needs to be trained under supervision and be certified. Sadly, this is not the case of many who claim to be therapists in Malaysia, unlike in countries like Australia, the UK, the USA and many others.

Change is difficult, and maintaining change is even more difficult.

● **Xavier V. Pereira** is a medical doctor, psychiatrist and internationally certified interpersonal psychotherapist, supervisor, and trainer. He is on the Malaysian Ministry of Health's Taskforce for Psychotherapy. He is also the founder chair of the Catholic Counsellors and Therapists of Malaysia.



Fr Ron Rolheiser

# Reindeer games

I hate crowds, at least most of them. I'm okay at football games, where a crowd has bracketed its sanity for a couple of hours for a cathartic release. But I hate those crowds that are caught up in a fever that feeds off group think, be that a cultural fad, a political ideology, a religious fundamentalism, an unconscious racism, a misguided nationalism, or hype of any kind. I fear such a crowd because, irrespective of whether its voice is coming from the right or from the left, conservative or liberal, one hears in it echoes of intimidation, crucifixions, lynchings, holocausts, assassinations, wars, suppression of other voices, and (today) teenage suicides from cyber bullying. Crowds take various modalities, but their bent and their energy are invariably the same.

One of my favourite authors is Czeck novelist Milan Kundera who, like me, hates crowds. In them, he sees something he calls "the great march", namely, a blind, mindless march toward a totalitarianism of some kind or other. Crowds with an ideological intent always end up there.

But this raises a question: What about crowds (marches, demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins) that have led to helpful social, political, and even moral change? What about

the crowds Gandhi inspired? What about the crowds that followed Martin Luther King? What about the crowds that helped end apartheid in South Africa? What about the crowds that gather around Black Lives Matter? What about the folks that gather round a just cause and go to prison for their actions? Aren't those good crowds?

Yes, they are, but they are good precisely to the extent to which they are mindful and not mindless; that is, they are good to the extent that they are not caught up in a fever of group-think and their focus is on healing a sick situation as opposed to hating and crucifying whatever opposes them. That is why in such a crowd, both in its leader and in its overall ethos, you don't see hatred and violence.

Admittedly, you do see hatred and violence even within these crowds because, a crowd by the very fact that it is a crowd, will invariably have its rogue elements. But the hatred, violence, and anarchy you see then is not representative of that overall crowd. The Gandhis, the Martin Luther Kings, the Nelson Mandelas, and the Dorothy Days are the real face and ethos of any crowd which is genuinely bent on moral change.

But not all crowds are mindful and so it's

hardly a surprise that Jesus' crucifixion was incited by a crowd (ironically by the same one who just five days earlier was chanting that He should be their king). Crowd energy is fickle and mindless. That is why crowds are to be feared, irrespective of whether they are idolising you or hollering for your crucifixion.

I'm not much of a poet, but sometimes something just lends itself to a different kind of language. So, stealing some lines from an old (mindless) Christmas song and adding my own little commentary, allow me to express my feelings about crowds in an attempt at a poem – which in good conscience you may disagree with.

## Reindeer Games

*Rudolph, the red nosed reindeer  
Had a very shiny nose  
And if you ever saw it  
You would even say it glows.  
All of the other reindeer  
Used to laugh and call him names.  
They never let poor Rudolph  
Join in any reindeer games.  
Then one foggy Christmas eve  
Santa came to say:  
Rudolph with your nose so bright*

*Won't you guide my sleigh tonight?  
Then all the other reindeer loved him  
As they shouted out with glee ...  
Rudolph smiled ...  
and then  
said reflectively:  
Forgive, dear friends, my reluctance  
To see this affection  
Separate from the cruelty  
Mock difference – Crucify him!  
Exult triumph – Make him king!  
Hype is hype  
Hysteria  
Mindless and blind  
Self-serving  
A reindeer game  
With the crowd forever amazed and  
chanting  
Whether for a coronation  
Or a crucifixion.*

● **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](http://www.ronrolheiser.com)**

## How peeling a pomegranate led me to the Passion of Christ

Removing the peel of a pomegranate feels nothing like removing the peel of a banana or an orange. Even though I've seen plenty of video hacks that are supposed to make it easier, I've never managed to do what they say I should be able to do. It usually takes me about 30 minutes to get every little seed out of that tough red rind, but it's almost like the extra work adds to the flavour of an already delicious fruit.

I recently opened a pomegranate that had been on my kitchen counter for a while, greeting me every morning for at least a month. Based on previous experiences, I knew I was going to spend even more time and energy on this one. When I finally decided to open it one sunny afternoon, I marvelled at the gem-like seeds glistening before me, newly separated from that hard, shrivelled shell.

"Something's different about the pomegranate," I thought to myself.

So naturally, I went to Google to see what the internet had to say. Two things caught my attention — a piece of art and an article.

The artwork was a painting of the baby Jesus cradled on Mary's lap with a pomegranate in His hand. Called "Madonna of the Pomegranate" or "Virgin and Child with the Angels," it was painted by Sandro Botticelli circa 1487 and is now housed in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy. The museum's website describes the painting's significance: "On His mother's lap, Baby Jesus grabs the pomegranate handed to Him by Mary: a fruit that was considered a symbol of Christ's passion, whose red



"Madonna of the Pomegranate" or "Virgin and Child with the Angels" was painted by Sandro Botticelli circa 1487 and is now housed in The Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy. (Wikimedia Commons/Yair Haklai, CC BYSA 4.0 deed)

and His Passion, but I can understand the connection.

I've never endured what Jesus did, but I've endured my own types of suffering. We all have. Maybe some of us are in the midst of it right now, or we see it all around us. Maybe we've seen it in the rising levels of hunger around the globe, accompanied by violent wars, conflict and genocide. Maybe we've seen it in nature, too, in deforestation, extinction and decay.

Sometimes I want to look away, and I wonder how many people looked away as Jesus suffered on the cross. Would I have looked away?

Even in the midst of suffering that seems to never end, Jesus Himself reminds us that it will end. Not only that, but there can be new, abundant life beyond the pain. In Botticelli's painting, Jesus as an infant holds up for us the promise of a forthcoming sweetness in the symbol of the pomegranate. Will we receive it? Will we not look away from the terrible challenges that we face, that the world faces? And if we choose to stay at the foot of the cross, at the feet of those who cry out, how will we

journey with them to the promise of new life?

That's what Lent is for. A time to pause and reflect, to be in solidarity with others through prayer, fasting and giving what we can of ourselves and our resources. Lent is a time to wake up from the comfort that has lulled us to sleep.

I need Lent. I need to be reminded that comfort is not the goal. That a full life, a fulfilled life, also includes hardship; but more importantly, it includes walking with my created family through the hardship.

Lent reminds me that I am not alone, that I am part of a beautiful family of people all around the world. I am one small but significant creature among countless even tinier, yet also significant creatures. The bees count on me, and I count on them. People I will never meet need my contribution to the world, and I need theirs.

In Lent we must be honest with ourselves. Have we looked away? Will we turn back? What will we do if we turn around to find a world crying out in pain? Lent's invitation is to stay connected, to remember what matters and to give what we can. We're family. We're in this together.

I return to my beloved pomegranate, whose rough peel is also a challenge that leads to a rich reward. — **By Desiré Findlay, NCR**



# Little Catholics' Corner

## SAMUEL FOLLOWED GOD

### CROSSWORD PUZZLE

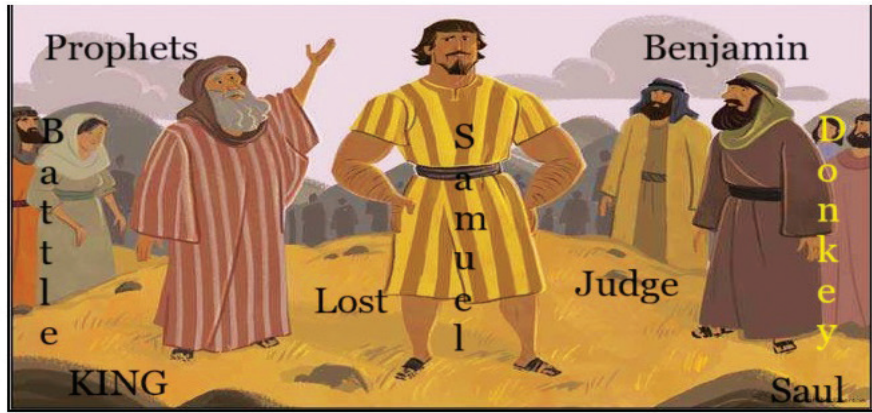
#### DOWN

1. Not a queen but a
3. Saul was looking for these animals.
4. The Israelites wanted Saul to lead them in this.
6. He told Saul to look for three signs.



#### ACROSS

2. A person who decides legal matters.
4. The tribe Saul belonged to
5. Opposite of found
7. He was chosen to lead the Israelites.
8. People asked if Saul was among these people.



## LOVE: TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Love sometimes fails. True or false?
2. If I have faith enough to move mountains but don't have love I am nothing. True or false?
3. Love is patient and kind. True or false?
4. Love is jealous. True or false?
5. If I can prophesy and understand all mysteries but I don't have love then I'm still great. True or false?
6. When you love then you are mostly interested in taking care of yourself. True or false?
7. The three most important virtues are faith, hope, and love, but love is the greatest. True or false?

1 Cor. 12:31 - 13:13

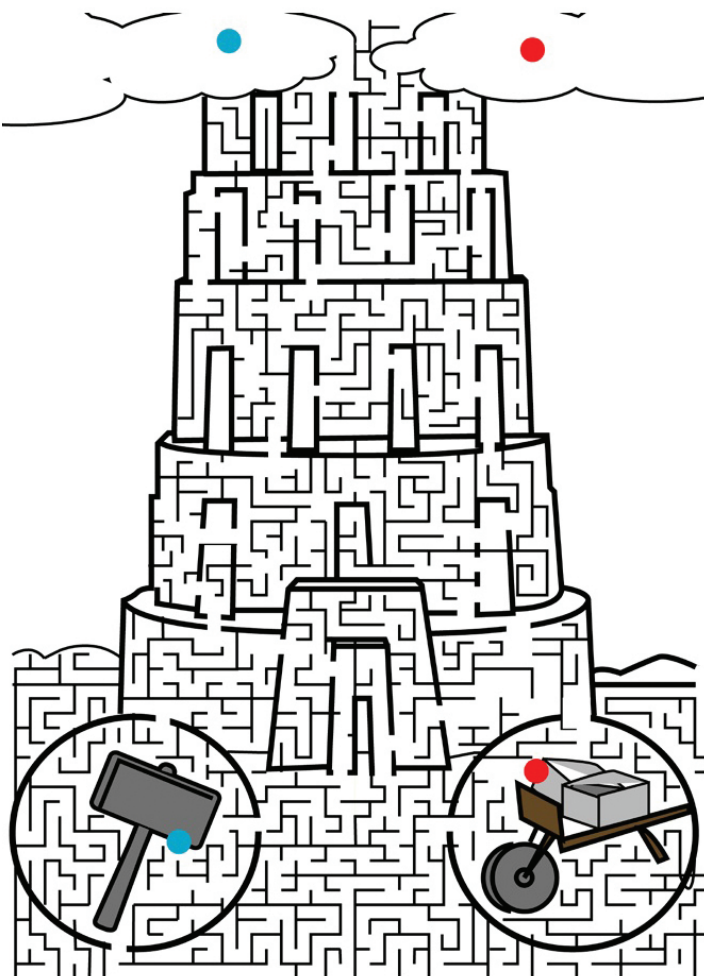
Do you know what St Paul taught us about love? See if you know which are true and which are false.



Answer: 1. false 2. true 3. true 4. false 5. false 6. false 7. true

## TOWER OF BABEL DOUBLE MAZE

There are two separate mazes to complete here. Help the workers take the tools from the bottom of the tower to the top. Then take the bricks from the bottom to the top.



## EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE IN HIM (JOHN 3:15)

Let's Colour



Dear children,

When God made the world, He wanted the people to be His friends and always live in happiness.

But instead of choosing to love God completely, the people sinned. They were cut off from the happiness of God because they chose to love themselves more than they loved God.

But God still loved the people so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, to save the people from their sins. Now we just need to choose to believe in Jesus, and to love Him.

As today's Gospel reading says, "...so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."

How can we turn to Jesus that we can be saved from our sins? Here are a few things that can help you a lot:

1. When you wake up in the morning, tell Jesus that you are offering everything that happens today to Him.
2. Every day look at a crucifix (a cross with Jesus on it.) Think about how much Jesus loves us. How much do we love Him back?
3. Each night before you go to sleep, think about your day. Did you show your love for God today? If you did something bad, be sorry and think about how you can do better tomorrow.

Aunty Eliz

# YOUTH

March 10, 2024

## Thousand Christian youths walk the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem for peace

**J**ERUSALEM: On Friday, February 23, a large group of young people brought life to the streets of Jerusalem for the first time since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war last October. About a thousand children and youth from Christian schools walked the Via Dolorosa in the Old City, offering prayers for peace, leaving a trail of hope in their wake.

The initiative, titled *The Way of the Cross... A Way of Peace*, was organised by the Custody of the Holy Land and involved 12 institutions, including two schools of the Anglican Church and the school of the Armenian Apostolic Church, as well as various Catholic groups. Father Francesco Patton, the custos of the Holy Land, and the apostolic delegate to Jerusalem, Fr Adolfo Tito Yllana, were also present.

The Way of the Cross began at the Church of the Flagellation and concluded at the Church of St Saviour. The first eight stations took place along the traditional route of the Via Dolorosa. At each station, after the reading of Scripture and prayer, two children

released a pair of doves, a visible sign of the prayer for peace and freedom lifted up by the youngest participants.

"Every year, we organise a *Via Crucis* with the students from the schools," Fr Ibrahim Faltas, vicar of the Custody of the Holy Land and director of the Terra Sancta Schools, explained to CNA. Last year, the event had a particular resonance: The students wore red scarves — the colour of blood — with the image of the vandalised statue of Jesus, which had been desecrated just a few weeks earlier within the premises of the Flagellation complex.

The broken and defaced statue has never been restored and has become a symbol of the suffering Jesus. This year, too, the first station of the *Via Crucis* was held around that statue.

"For the scarves, we chose white, the colour of peace," Faltas said. "The inscriptions *Da nobis pacem Domine* and *Grant us peace* form a cross on the fabric. We also printed a dove holding an olive branch in its beak, the symbol of peace."

Faltas emphasised the importance of freedom of worship in light of recent reports suggesting that the Israeli government might consider restricting access to the Esplanade of Mosques/Temple Mount during

the month of Ramadan.

"Jerusalem must be open to everyone; that is its nature. People cannot be prevented from going to pray, at any age. Everyone has the right to pray in their places of worship. If during Ramadan people cannot reach the mosques, it would be a significant problem," he said.

Stations 9 through 14 took place in the Franciscan Church of St Saviour and at the end of the Way of the Cross, the custos of the Holy Land delivered a brief meditation on the gift of Jesus, who gave his life for all humanity — even for those who persecuted him.

"Let's ask Him for the grace to keep our hearts free from hatred and the desire for revenge against those who harm us. Let's ask for the grace that all walls built of enmity and hatred be demolished. Let's ask Jesus, who stretched out His arms between heaven and earth, to help us today in building a bridge of peace through our commitment to peace and reconciliation in the Holy Land and throughout the world," Patton said.

After the recitation of the "Simple Prayer"



**The first eight stations took place along the traditional Via Dolorosa route and at each station, after the Scripture reading and prayer, two children released a pair of doves, a visible sign of the prayer for peace and freedom raised by the younger participants. (CNA photo/Marinella Bandini)**

attributed to St Francis, the Apostolic Delegate to Jerusalem, Fr Adolfo Tito Yllana, bestowed the final blessing with the relic of the holy cross.

After the event, the custos spoke to journalists who were present for the event, where he commented on the children's participation.

"This Way of the Cross also aimed to encourage our children to remain steadfast in hope," he said. "In moments when it seems that people are unable to come to an agreement, we must knock more insistently on God's door with our prayers, so that those who must and can provide a solution to this war may be guided back to reason." — **By Marinella Bandini, CNA**



**The crowd brought life to the streets of the Holy City for the first time since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war last October. (CNA photo/Marinella Bandini)**



**A group of children around the vandalised statue of Jesus at the beginning of the Way of the Cross for Christian school children in Jerusalem organised by the Custody of the Holy Land on Friday, Feb 23, 2024. (CNA photo/Marinella Bandini)**

# Emcee Workshop by **EMPOWERED** and **KAYC**

KUCHING: The Empowered Ministry (St Joseph Parish Youth Ministry) and the Kuching Archdiocesan Youth Commission (KAYC) recently organised an Emcee Workshop at the Archdiocesan Curia and Cathedral Pastoral Centre (ACCP). This two-day event, held recently, was the first emcee workshop organised by Empowered and KAYC.

The workshop featured Timothy Marimuthu, a seasoned emcee with over 15 years of experience across church, social, corporate, and government events. Timothy's extensive portfolio includes emceeing prominent events such as the recent What About Kuching (WAK) 2022, Rabies International Borneo Conference 2022, and the ASEAN Food Conference 2023, among others.

The workshop's primary objectives were to familiarise participants with the roles, re-



sponsibilities, and essential skills of an effective emcee, tailored specifically for Christian gatherings and events. Eight participants from various parishes engaged in practical exercises, simulating scenarios from church dinners to wedding receptions.

The workshop yielded positive outcomes, empowering participants with increased confidence and the ability to manage performance anxiety while emphasising the spiritual aspects of emceeing. As the workshop concluded with favourable reviews, KAYC and Empowered anticipate future emcee workshops to further equip aspiring emcees for the Archdiocese's upcoming events. — **By Empowered Ministry, Today's Catholic**

“The emcee workshop was great, it was practical, Tim, our speaker was very hands-on in his approaches to teach us on

the way to emcee. Overall, if there are more to come, I highly recommend anyone interested to join.” ~ **Lucas**

“I now have a deeper understanding of the importance of the emcee role thanks to the emcee workshop. What I learnt from this workshop was how to develop the bravery to face people and not be afraid while also learning from them. I would like to express my gratitude to the speaker s

and organisers for giving me the chance to practise a skill I wanted to hone and for using it in future events.” ~ **Hillary**

“It was a pleasant experience and an informative workshop. A very hands-on learning with all the personal sharing and insights from our speaker, Bro Timothy. It was helpful for personal growth and deepening our relationship with God in terms of the Christian perspective.” ~ **Jennifer**



## Marian devotee chooses to share her knowledge, talents for Church's missions



Indonesian authorities suspected her activities in Jakarta when she was only 21 and a fresh graduate in journalism from UP Diliman. The authorities interviewed her, and she felt “very nervous” during the process.

However, they let her go by her simply telling them the truth — that she was in the country for Catholic lay missionary work — and showing them travel documents.

Nirva'ana Ella Delacruz, a Filipino, served as a young lay missionary in Indonesia — the world's largest Muslim country — for the Couples for Christ, Youth for Christ, and Kids for Christ as a young lay missionary for two years.

She volunteered for one year after graduating from college. She was hired in her second year in Jakarta, to help them run their ministry.

She had to learn to the Indonesian language and culture to effectively communicate with them.

Her responsibilities included giving talks, organising activities, designing programs, opening new chapters, and onboarding new members.

Delacruz grew up in a Catholic family. But her later experiences with both the secular environment and the Church led her to realise that being a Christian is not only about going to church but also about helping it carry on with its missions.

As a result, she learned a lot about Mary and eventually became a Marian devotee.

So, when she returned to the Philippines from Indonesia, instead of seeking employment in the mainstream media, she joined the media office of the Catholic Bishops' Confer-

ence of the Philippines in 2012.

Delacruz began her career as a writer for the CBCP Monitor, the conference's news service, published in print fortnightly. The media office also publishes CBCPNews, an online news site.

“Our Lady is one of the biggest influences in my life,” she said. “In 2012, for the first time, I did the Marian consecration according to Saint Louis-Marie de Monfort.” She promised that she would take you as her property when you consecrate yourself to her, and that she will give you everything that she has.”

Within a week after her consecration to Mary, Delacruz became the associate editor of *CBCP Monitor* in 2013.

“So many opportunities opened up,” she added. “I met a lot of people and organisations. My spiritual life also grew because of Our Lady. She helped me overcome the personal struggles that I had. It's been unbelievable.”

Then Delacruz went on a fellowship in Malaysia for one year. She studied leadership and design thinking at Harvard.

The foundation where she had her fellowship hired her as the lead for communications and brand development.

Following her tenure with the foundation, the CFC ANCOP Global Foundation appointed her as communications and marketing head in August 2020. ANCOP, the social action arm of Couples for Christ, stands for Answering the Cry of the Poor.

The ANCOP helps economically challenged families by offering scholarship grants to their children, building decent homes, providing livelihood programmes, and providing calamity assistance.

In the last 10 years, the foundation has given scholarship grants to over 13,000 less

fortunate students and built more than 3,000 homes for financially struggling families.

Delacruz currently works as a communications officer for the Arnold Janssen Kalinga Foundation, but she is also a consultant for the ANCOP CFC Global Foundation.

The Arnold Janssen Kalinga Foundation seeks to help restore and improve the lives of the homeless and victims of abuse by providing them with “dignified, systematic, and holistic care.”

Delacruz's consecration to Mary had even grown deeper when she joined World Youth Day 2013 in Brazil.

At that time, Brazil had cold temperatures, and she was so prone to cold that sometimes

she could not even handle the temperature of the air conditioning. She was there, freezing and so cold in Rio de Janeiro. She remembered taking a shower, but it was not working well. So, she offered her suffering to Mary. She was in the middle of a prayer when suddenly the water began to warm.

“She was answering my prayer,” Delacruz said. “Even the smallest details, such as the temperature of the water, even the small details, she would look into that.”

People need Mary's intervention because she fully understands their wants, Delacruz stated.

“She has the heart of a mother,” Delacruz said. “Our Lady was a human being. She knows even men's smallest needs. My path to God has been, in a way, full of roses. It has had its thorns until now, but even the sufferings become sweet because she somehow

smooths the path and makes it easy.”

She heard the call to be part of the Church's missions when she started working in a secular setting, which engaged her in a lot of work for the common good in building society.

“Then I realise that working for Mother Church is also like deciding to work for the biggest, most relevant, and most important business in the world.”

Delacruz also helped spread and share the best of Harvard University leadership ideas, like design thinking, which is a cutting-edge concept proven to have worked in transforming people.

“But I realised that there's still something greater,” she said. “On a very human level, you can change the world and society.”

Delacruz, who is still single, sees the Roman Catholic Church as her link to the afterlife.

“That's why I decided to give myself to the Church,” she said. “I can't see myself anywhere else.”

When she went out and thought that she was the one blessing the Church, she realised that she was the one being blessed.

“So I have the best job in the world,” she said. “And always, at every chapter in my life, I could claim that I felt that God knew how I needed to grow in virtue, to grow in who I am, and placed me in jobs where I could have the best adventure. And the best adventure is growing to be who God meant you to be, and I could say that about all the jobs that I had.”

— **By Oliver Samson, R/V4**



# Fr Thomas O'Connor, passes away in Ireland

## He ministered to the 'Amazons of Borneo'

SIBU: Fr Thomas O'Connor, a dedicated Mill Hill missionary with over five decades of service in Sarawak, passed away on February 26 at St James's Hospital in Ireland.

Born the eldest of four siblings, Fr O'Connor was ordained on July 7, 1963, and shortly thereafter embarked on his lifelong mission to the Diocese of Kuching in Borneo (this was before the establishment of the Dioceses of Sibu and Miri). His first assignment was in Dalat in 1963, and by 1965, he was appointed to the parish of Song, also overseeing the spiritual needs of Kapit and Belaga.

Fr O'Connor spent 33 years ministering to the communities along the Rajang River, reaching out to indigenous peoples including the Kayans, Kenyahs, Kejamans, Lahanas, Sekapans, Bukitans, Ukits, Punans, and Penans in the Belaga area. His missionary work was characterised by remarkable journeys to remote villages, often described as the furthest reaches of the earth.

In a reflective interview before his departure from Sibu in 2015, Fr O'Connor shared vivid memories of his adventures and the profound connections he made with the local communities. "I



During his 60th Anniversary of Priestly Ordination on July 9, 2023 in Ireland.

told the headman that 'this is surely the farthest place on earth, the end of the world', he said 'No, this is the centre of the world', Fr O'Connor recounted, highlighting the deep sense of belonging and purpose he found among the people of Borneo.

His adventures also led him to a large Kenyah settlement up the Balleh River, where he humorously noted, "I was amongst the Amazons of Borneo," highlighting his deep immersion in the local cultures and communities. In 1999, Fr O'Connor was transferred to the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Sibu, where, despite initial challenges, he

felt a profound connection to the people, declaring, "I feel at home in every home here. I love the people here."

Fr Tom's niece Michelle has extended her deepest gratitude to the communities where he devoted many years of service. "Fr Tom held you all so close to his heart, and his eyes would light up at the chance to speak of you. Indeed, his heart never truly left you," Michelle shared, emphasising the deep affection her uncle had for the community and the profound bond he shared with both the country and its people, whom he considered part of his extended family.



Amazing Sarawak page

## Avid promoter of interreligious dialogue passes away

PETALING JAYA: Fr Aloysious Mowe, SJ of the Society of Jesus in Malaysia-Singapore Region (MAS) passed away on February 23 at University of Malaya Medical Centre, Petaling Jaya.

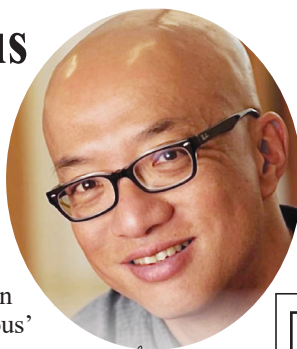
The late Fr Aloysious was the Country Director of Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia, and an avid promoter of inter-religious dialogue with Islam in Sydney from 2011 to 2017.

After that, he took the role of Director of Advocacy and Communications at the International Office of Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Rome from 2017 until 2020

when he suffered a massive stroke and was invalid until his death.

Ordained priest in 1996, Fr Aloysious' main academic research had been in the area of Islamic history and law. He taught Islamic history and Arabic at the University of Oxford and had lectured in Islamic law at Georgetown University in Washington DC.

The funeral was held on Feb 26 at the Church of St Francis Xavier, Petaling Jaya.



Fr Francis Lim SJ leading the prayers for the late Fr Aloysious Mowe SJ.

## MEMORIAM

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### 44th Anniversary In Ever Loving Memory of



**Mr. S. Anthony Samy**  
From the Lord: 8th August 1931  
Returned to the Lord:  
10th March 1980

*We greatly miss your presence  
We treasure your wisdom  
and sacrifices  
Loving you always  
Forgetting you never  
Appa, you will always  
live in our hearts forever.*

Eternal Rest Grant Unto Him,  
O Lord And Let Perpetual Light  
Shine Upon Him. May his soul  
rest in peace. Amen.

Always remembered and not  
forgotten by Loved Ones.

### 7th Anniversary In Loving Memory of



**F A Moses**  
15th June 1928 –  
3rd March 2017

*Always missed along life's way  
Fondly remembered every day  
No longer in our  
lives to share*

*But in our hearts,  
you're always there*

Deeply missed by  
family and loved ones.

### 25th Anniversary In Loving Memory of John Toh Bah Bah



**Departed:**  
15 March 1999

*25 years have gone by  
in a blink of an eye.  
We love and miss you.*

Deeply missed and  
fondly remembered by  
family, loved ones  
and friends.

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**Susan D. E  
Sundram**  
19th July 1949 –  
10th March 2019

*"In Life  
We Loved You Dearly,  
In Death We Love You Still,  
In Our Hearts,  
You Hold A Place  
No One Else Will Ever Fill"*  
*"Strength and dignity  
are her clothing,  
she opens her mouth with  
wisdom, and the teaching  
of kindness  
is on her tongue.  
"Many women  
have done excellently,  
but you surpass them all."*  
Proverbs 31:25-29

Deeply missed and  
lovingly remembered by her  
Husband, Children,  
Sons & Daughters-in-law  
and Grandchildren.

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## Asian bishops elect new leaders

BANGKOK: The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has elected the cardinal of Goa in India and the bishop of Kalookan in the Philippines as president and vice-president, respectively.

Cardinal Felipe Neri Ferrão of Goa and Bishop Pablo Virgilio David of Kalookan were elected as the next top officials of FABC during its central committee meeting at the Camillian Home for Children Living with Disabilities in Bangkok on February 22.

Cardinal Filipe Neri and Bishop Pablo will take over from Cardinal Charles Maung Bo of Yangon and Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith of Colombo, respectively.

Archbishop Tarcisius Isao Kikuchi of Tokyo has been reelected as Secretary General for a second term. The tenure of the three FABC officials is set to commence in January 2025.

"On behalf of the Bishops Conference of Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, I congratulate His Eminence Card Filipe Neri on being elected the President of FABC from 2025 for the next three years," said Archbishop Julian Leow.

"I believe Cardinal Filipe Neri has the wisdom, experience and capability to lead the FABC in these challenging times in Asia. He takes over the helm from Cardinal Charles Bo who has his mission to heal Myanmar and bring much needed peace.

"The new team is a good mix of experi-



The FABC central committee members in Bangkok February 22, 2024.

ence and new blood with Bishop Pablo as vice-president. We are all ready to serve and lead our respective Conferences and FABC on this synodal journey of Communion, Participation and Mission," said Archbishop Julian.

Cardinal Sebastian Francis who is the chairman of the FABC Office of Social Communications echoed similar sentiments saying, "The best of Asia and the Church of Asia. The continuity of the mission from Cardinal Charles Bo to Cardinal Filipe Neri is what unites us as One Asian Church."

"Together with all members of the Indonesian Bishops' Conference I would like to congratulate Cardinal Filipe Neri

for being elected President of FABC," said Cardinal Ignatius Suharyo of Jakarta, Indonesia.

"I met him several times in different occasions during FABC meetings and in the Synod of Bishops. I have a deep impression that Cardinal Filipe Neri is a bright and very committed person," he said.

"His interventions in every meeting have been always inspiring. When nobody speaks in the session of group discussions, he intervened with his bright ideas. I am convinced Cardinal Filipe Neri, when he takes office in the beginning of 2025, he will bring FABC to a bright future," the Indonesian cardinal said in a message.

Bishop Antonius Subianto Bunjamin of Bandung, the head of Indonesian Bishops' Conference, said Ferrão has "great love and commitment for Asian Church."

"We do hope that he will lead us to a more Asian synodal Church. Congratulations to His Eminence on this new pastoral call. Thanks for your generosity to accept this call. May God continue to bless you in your duties and responsibilities," he said.

The FABC is a voluntary association of episcopal conferences in Asia that was established with the approval of the Holy See. It aims to foster among its members solidarity and co-responsibility for the welfare of the Church and society in Asia.

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