

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food.

1 Cor. 10:1-3



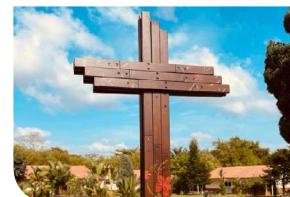
**Celebrating 12 years of Pope Francis' pontificate**

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# 1,047 to join the Peninsular Malaysia Church at Easter

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Church in Peninsular Malaysia is set to welcome 1,047 new Catholics this Easter, a slight increase from last year's 1,016 baptisms. The Rite of Election, a key liturgical event marking the formal acceptance of catechumens into the Church, was celebrated across three dioceses on the First Sunday of Lent.

As the Elect prepare for the Easter Vigil on April 19, the faithful are encouraged to continue praying for them as they complete their spiritual journey toward baptism.

In Kajang, the Church of the Holy Family hosted the Rite of Election for the *Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur*, where 549 catechumens gathered with their sponsors and RCIA facilitators. Archbishop Julian Leow presided over the Mass, concelebrated by Msgr Stanislaus Soosamariam and Msgr Patrick Boudville.

In his homily, Archbishop Julian emphasised the significance of the catechumens' decision to inscribe their names in the Book of the Elect, marking their desire to be initiated

into the Catholic Church during the upcoming Easter Vigil.

He also highlighted the special meaning of this year's Rite of Election, noting that Pope Francis has designated 2025 as the Jubilee Year with the theme *Pilgrims of Hope*, whereby the catechumens and the entire faithful are called to embark on a journey of faith, growing in holiness. The archbishop encouraged both catechumens and baptised members of the community to make a pilgrimage to one of the five designated "pilgrim churches" in the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur.

Reflecting on the Scripture readings of the day, Archbishop Julian pointed out a common thread running through the Jubilee Year, the readings, and the Rite of Election — that is, all of us have been "elected," chosen by God to be a part of His People.

In Johor Bahru, over 530 catechumens, sponsors, and RCIA facilitators gathered at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the Rite of Election of the *Malacca Johore diocese*. The Mass, celebrated by Bishop Bernard Paul and assisted by Permanent Deacon Dr Sherman Kuek OFS, who leads the Diocesan Catechetical Commission, was attended by 281 catechumens from 17 parishes and outstation chapels, together with priests from the diocese.

At the beginning of his homily, Bishop Bernard called out to four individuals from the congregation, inviting them to come forward. As they walked toward him, he repeatedly called, "Come." Once they reached him, the bishop highlighted three key points. First, the call to come. Second, their movement towards the voice, following it. Third, the shrinking gap between them, symbolising their journey closer to one another.

Addressing the catechumens, Bishop Bernard emphasised the importance of the process as they prepare for baptism. He urged them to listen attentively to the One voice — the voice of God — and not be distracted by others. This voice brings peace and dispels fear. "Some may perceive God as harsh," he said, "but His voice is gentle, inviting, and encouraging, never forcing or threatening." He reassured the catechumens that it is God's dream for us to be united with Him, to be one in Him — as one people, one nation.

In the *Diocese of Penang*, the Rite of Election was celebrated on the weekend of March 8 and 9. At the Church of the Holy Name of Mary in Permatang Tinggi, 156 catechumens from the North and Island Deaneries participated, while 61 catechumens from the Deanery of Perak were welcomed as Elect at the Church of St

Michael in Ipoh. Cardinal Sebastian Francis presided over both celebrations, which were concelebrated by several priests from the diocesan deaneries.

In the spirit of the Jubilee Year of Hope 2025, Cardinal Sebastian encouraged all to embrace the joy of hope and continue their Lenten journey, guided by figures such as the Archangel Gabriel, the Holy Spirit, and Blessed Carlo Acutis. The theme of the Jubilee Year, *Spes Non Confundit* (Hope does not disappoint, Romans 5:5), calls on the faithful to care for the community, promote social justice, and sustain hope through acts of charity, relief, and service.

The Cardinal emphasised the importance of conversion — repentance and belief in the Gospel — as the foundation of the Lenten season and urged all to live out the pilgrimage of hope, united in faith through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and to bring hope and joy to those in need.

As the Elect continue their journey towards baptism, the Church in Peninsular Malaysia celebrates not only the Rite of Election but also a renewed commitment to living in hope, faith, and charity as they prepare for the joyous occasion of Easter. **Paul Peter Fernandez, Angila Yong and Deva Manoharan**





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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

As Pope Francis marked the twelfth anniversary of his papacy on March 13, his health added a poignant layer to this milestone. For over a month, he has been recovering from a lung infection at Rome's Gemelli Hospital. While his prognosis is improving, and there is hope for his return to the Vatican soon, his absence has highlighted a deeper aspect of his leadership. This anniversary fell not only amid his extended absence but also after significant achievements, including the conclusion of the Synod on Synodality and the opening of the Holy Door for the Jubilee year.

In this challenging moment, Pope Francis personifies the vulnerability he has long spoken about — the fragility of human existence and the importance of embracing it as part of the Christian faith. His current situation reflects the nature of his papacy, which stands in contrast to the image of a corporate manager often associated with the head of the Catholic Church. Pope Francis has emphasised that the papacy is not about power or administrative efficiency, but about humble service and spiritual guidance. He has consistently warned against the temptation of spiritual worldliness — the notion that the Church can rely on its own strength, rather than reflecting God's light. As He has said, "without me you can do nothing." (Jn 15:5).

Even as his health falters, this understanding of leadership continues to vibrate. Pope Francis' calls for peace, compassion, and dialogue — especially amid global tensions — remain vital. His daily prayers and encouragement for people to pray for him have fostered a sense of solidarity between him and the faithful worldwide. His embrace of fragility serves as a powerful reminder of what true leadership in the Church

looks like: not invincibility, but a dependence on God and love for others.

At the same time, the Pope's absence has raised questions about the direction of the Church in his stead. Pope Francis has deliberately distanced himself from the Vatican's traditional courtly structure, which was common under previous popes. Unlike his predecessors, who were surrounded by influential figures, Pope Francis has cultivated a smaller, more informal inner circle. His trusted secretaries — Fr Daniel Pellizzon and Fr Juan Cruz Villalon, both from Buenos Aires — and Calabrian Fr Fabio Salerno, play crucial roles in his daily life, ensuring the continuity of his mission even when he is unable to participate in public activities. Fr Pellizzon, in particular, exemplifies the Pope's reliance on longstanding relationships, having worked with Francis from before his papacy.

Although figures like Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican Secretary of State, continue to wield influence, Pope Francis has largely shifted the governance of the Church away from the central apparatus of the Roman Curia. Since the beginning of his papacy, he has critiqued the Curia's power dynamics and sought to decentralise authority. His restructuring of the Curia, including the establishment of the Council of Cardinals (C9), reflects his desire to involve a broader network of global voices in the Church's decision-making. The Pope's appointments of close allies, like Cardinal Marcello Semeraro and Fr Antonio Spadaro, to key positions accentuate his strategy of relying on those who share his vision for a more responsive Church.

Pope Francis has also turned to his fellow Jesuits and compatriots from Argentina for support. Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, a

close friend from the Aparecida Conference, has been appointed to lead the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, one of the most influential positions in the Vatican. Other Argentine figures, such as Emilce Cuda, have also been placed in important roles, ensuring that the Pope's vision is effectively carried out in the Vatican's operations.

One of the most notable aspects of Pope Francis' leadership is his commitment to reform and rejuvenation within the Vatican's ranks. He has appointed younger, dynamic individuals, such as Salvatore Cernuzio and Gleison de Paula Souza, to energise the Vatican's outreach to contemporary issues like family life and communications. This infusion of new talent, alongside the continued guidance of figures like Cardinal Joseph Farrell, ensures that the Pope's vision for a Church in tune with the needs of its people remains at the forefront, even as he takes time to recover.

Pope Francis' papacy has always been characterised by pastoral care and humility, and his current health situation only highlights the wisdom behind his leadership. Despite facing a health crisis, his moral authority remains a powerful force in the world. His commitment to mercy, peace, and solidarity continues to inspire millions, even from the confines of his hospital room. His legacy will not be defined by displays of power, but by his steadfast commitment to faith, compassion, and human dignity.

In this moment of frailty, Pope Francis offers the world a lesson in true leadership. It is not about strength or authority but about love, vulnerability, and a willingness to be led by God's grace. The Church still needs his voice, and the world still needs his example.

Patricia Pereira

## An invitation to respond and embrace new life

In her poem *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes, "Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God." This line prompts a thought-provoking idea: what if burning bushes aren't as rare or extraordinary as we often believe? Instead of being a singular, one-time miracle for Moses, the burning bush could be a metaphor for moments that occur throughout our lives. The ancient rabbis suggest that while others passed by the burning bush, Moses was the one who chose to turn aside and take notice. What if the true miracle wasn't the bush itself, but Moses' decision to pay attention and listen?

What if burning bushes are present in our lives too, waiting for us to turn aside, pay attention, and respond? These burning bushes may not be literal, but rather, moments — circumstances, people, or events — that disrupt the mundane, calling for our attention. In these moments, we can experience awe, surprise, or even confusion, as our expectations are shattered and new possibilities unfold.

I believe that burning bushes are present in our lives when we least expect them, and the real question is not whether they exist, but whether we will respond when they arise. These moments can stop us in our tracks, forcing us to pause, reflect, and reconsider our path. They challenge our expectations and invite us to think beyond our usual frame of reference. Moses, for example, never imagined seeing a bush that burned without being consumed, nor did he foresee leading God's people out of Egypt. His life was changed forever because he responded to the unexpected. Similarly, we all experience moments when our expectations are shattered, whether through hardship or unexpected blessings. These disruptions — our own burning bushes — call us to stop and reflect.

In today's Gospel reading (Luke 13:1-9),

the suffering of the Galileans, the collapse of the Tower of Siloam, and the barren fig tree all represent burning bushes. They disrupt the expectations of the people who witness them. The key, however, is not that God causes these events but that, in every situation, God is calling us. God is speaking to us through these moments, offering the possibility of new life. Each call waits for a response, just as Moses had to respond to God's call. The miracle is not in the fire, but in the choice to turn aside, listen, and act.

God's words to Moses — "I have observed the misery of my people... I have heard their cry... I have come down to deliver them" — are followed by a call to action: "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt." God's plan of deliverance begins with Moses' response. What if God's calls to us are not about fulfilling some divine task but about responding to the needs of justice, love, and deliverance? How often do we fail to respond to these burning bushes, assuming someone else will take action? How often have we walked past our burning bushes, unaware of what God might ask of us? The burning bush story is a powerful reminder that God calls us to respond, to act, to bring justice, mercy, and love into the world. These moments of calling don't necessarily appear in dramatic, once-in-a-lifetime events but often arise amid our ordinary lives. Just as Moses was tending his flock when he encountered the burning bush, we too find ourselves confronted by these calls while going about our daily routines. They appear in our work, relationships, struggles, and joys. So, where is your horizon of expectation being shattered today? It could be something as simple as a fig tree not bearing fruit or as tragic as the collapse of a tower. Every disruption is an invitation to respond. What is the burning bush

## Reflecting on our Sunday Readings

with Fr Ravi Alexander, OFM Cap

### 3rd Sunday of Lent (C)

Readings: Exodus 3:1-8, 3-15;

1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12;

Gospel: Luke 13:1-9

in your life right now? How will you respond?

The challenge often comes when we ask ourselves what the "right" response is. How do we know we're making the right choice? Maybe the answer isn't about being "right," but about responding in a way that brings forth life — new life, growth, and potential. Consider the vineyard owner and the gardener's responses to the barren fig tree. One wants to cut it down, while the other wants to nurture it. Both responses make sense in their context, but perhaps the right response is the one that nurtures life, helps something grow, and believes in its potential.

Moses didn't have the guarantee that his response would be perfect. He had no assurances, only God's promise that he would know God's presence in hindsight: "You will know I am with you when you look back and see how I was there all along." This echoes the way life often works: we move forward, uncertain and unsure, but we only begin to understand when we look back and see how God was guiding us all along.

What if there are no guarantees in the face of every burning bush? What if the best we can do is respond with hope and trust, knowing that our response will bring forth new life? What if every burning bush is an invitation from God, saying, "Turn aside, listen, and respond. I am here. And I am with you."

Fr Ravi Alexander OFM Cap is the guardian for the Capuchins at Gethesamany Friary, Cheras.

# PJ crematorium privatisation will burden the public

PETALING JAYA, 11: The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST) has raised serious concerns over the proposal by Majlis Bandaraya Petaling Jaya (MBPJ) to privatise the Petaling Jaya City Crematorium, located at Section 51, following an upcoming RM8 to RM12 million upgrade.

In a recent statement, the Mayor of Petaling Jaya reassured the public that MBPJ would continue to oversee the management of the crematorium to ensure high-quality service. He also stated that service charges would be regulated to remain reasonable. However, MCCBCHST has expressed doubts, noting that despite regulatory measures, privatisation could still lead to rising costs that may become unaffordable for many.

“The primary objective of a private business is to generate profit, and even with strict regulations, a private operator will always have grounds to increase charges. The burden of these increased costs will

inevitably fall on the public, particularly those in the lower-income groups, at a time when many are already struggling with the high cost of living,” said the MCCBCHST in their March 11 statement.

The council also questioned why the provision of crematorium services, a fundamental public facility, is not considered part of the basic services provided by local authorities, especially given that citizens already contribute taxes to the government.

“MCCBCHST urges MBPJ to reconsider this privatisation proposal and instead focus on improving the efficiency of its own management of the crematorium,” the council concluded, calling for a review and abandonment of the plan.

The proposal has sparked concerns among residents who fear that the privatisation of such essential services may lead to unfair cost increases, further straining the public, particularly vulnerable communities.

Separately, Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) has announced plans to hold



discussions before deciding on an increase in cremation service charges. On March 5, Kuala Lumpur Mayor Datuk Seri Maimunah Mohd Sharif confirmed that, while the proposed charges were on hold, a stakeholder meeting would be organised before a final decision was made.

This follows controversy over a planned 1,200 per cent hike in cremation fees at the Jalan Kuari Crematorium in Cheras, which would have raised charges from RM100 to RM1,000, along with a daily RM300 charge for hall usage. The total cost of

RM1,300 would have made it more expensive than private crematoriums, which charge between RM800 and RM1,000 for similar services.

In response to protests from funeral service providers, DBKL postponed the planned fee hikes. The authority also temporarily suspended new charges, which were part of the ‘DBKL Rate of Charges Standing Order 2025’, that had been set to take effect on February 1. City Hall has stated that it will review the situation while all charges remain at previous rates.

**KUALA LUMPUR  
ARCHDIOCESE**

**Diary of Archbishop  
Julian Leow**

**March**

**27 Meeting – Archdiocesan Finance**

**29 Feast Day – Church of the Annunciation, Raub**

**PENANG DIOCESE**

**Diary of Cardinal  
Sebastian Francis**

**March**

**23 Mass – Church of the Assumption at 10.00am**

**23 Meeting – General Councillor of Canossian Daughters of Charity (FDCC) at 11.00am**

**23-28 Conversion Experience Retreat (CER) for Clergy of Penang Diocese by Cardinal William Goh and team from Catholic Spirituality Centre (CSC), Singapore**

**MALACCA JOHORE  
DIOCESE**

**Diary of Bishop  
Bernard Paul**

**March**

**25 Opening of Caritas Canossa Home, Segamat**

## Malacca Johore Diocese News Update #215

**Dear friends of MJD,** The Rite of Elections took place at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart Johor Bahru, attended by 522 individuals comprising of catechumens, sponsors and facilitators from all over Melaka and Johor. The Ash Wednesday attendance were exceptional. The VPCs or Vicariate Pastoral Councils are taking shape. All Pastoral Services and Ministries exist to develop parish leaders and ministries.

**Conveniences to conversions?** It is about letting go of the third world mentality and the “muka”. The ETS, the much-awaited rail link from JB to KL via Gemas, a three-and-a-half-hour journey, is expected this August.

Domestic violence cases have surged to 7,116 last year, up from 5,507 in 2023.

Era FM radio and three DJs were taken off the air for mocking a religious festival.

Malaysia has topped the data leak table in Asia, with 98 per cent of our phone numbers lost to scammers. Billions are being lost annually to scammers.

More than 10,000 were recorded as absent for SPM exams this year.

The overuse and misuse of antibiotics are fuelling the rise of superbugs that are outsmarting modern medicine.

**Some interesting local comments to consider!!**

a) Head of Insolvency Department (Bankruptcy) commenting on the many young workers going bankrupt; “Why don’t they (fresh grads) cut their coat according to their cloth? If they can only afford a “P” brand car, why insist on buying a “H” brand car?”

b) Regards the growing ignorance,

intolerance and insensitivities, a religious leader advised: Don’t insult other religions while promoting yours. Show the goodness and proof of the truth of your religion, and your good character instead. Many civilisations disappeared when decadence and corruption set in or when God was kept out of their religions.

**MAGA Times:** MALAYSIA is fast becoming a hub for this and that. Some bring fame for the country; a few infamy. Fame we can handle. As for infamy, it has come uninvited. Do not be deceived by the word “few”. Malaysia’s infamy hub list is a fast growing one. Human trafficking, money laundering, illegal plastic waste and e-waste processing, scams and some such criminal activities. The common factor, mostly, if not entirely, is the involvement of foreign nationals and local cartels. We are going one way.

The US is going the MAGA way i.e. “Making America Great Again”, the Trump solution. There is a MAGA religion, which believes in: Not apologising, not admitting your wrong, name-calling, fearing the different, condoning cheating, lying and bullying, blaming others, never giving credit for the hard work of others. We loudly claim to be Malaysia Truly Asia. But news coverage speaks otherwise. We are beginning to reflect some of the MAGA traits.

**A Thought for the Week: A Lizard in the Wall**

When tearing down a wall, in the hollow between the wall, was a lizard stuck, with one of its feet nailed from the outside. The workman pitied the lizard, wondering what had happened. The nail

was five years old when checked. The lizard had survived in that position for five years, in that dark space, without moving, with its foot nailed down! The worker stopped to watch what it would do, how it would feed itself. Suddenly another lizard appeared with food in its mouth. It fed the trapped lizard.... it must have been untiringly feeding its partner for the past five years.

*The lesson from the lizard:* Never abandon your kind, your loved ones. Faithfulness, perseverance and long suffering endures and sustains. Our faithful commitment awes the watchers.

**QnQ! Q asks? How can we mend a broken person? Is there a way to put the pieces together?**

“When life breaks you, is it because you are ready to be put back together differently? Every piece of you that feels shattered is a piece that will find a new place, a new purpose, a new meaning. Trust that the cracks are where the light gets in. And sometimes, in our brokenness, we find our greatest wholeness. We find the courage to rebuild, to reimagine, to redefine what it means to be strong. You are not broken; you are breaking through.” *Unknown*

**The Holy Spirit @work:** Religion can reform a person’s life, but it can never transform him. Only the Holy Spirit can transform! *Aiden Wilson Tozer*

**Something To Tickle You:**

“The limitations you have and the negative things that you internalise are given to you by the world. The thing that empowers you — the possibilities — come from within.” *Les Brown*

**Bishop Bernard Paul**

# Women's health awareness programme at PD parish

Valarie Gregory

PORT DICKSON: In conjunction with International Women's Day, March 8, the Women's Ministry of the Church of the Immaculate Conception (CICPD) teamed up with Pejabat Kesihatan Port Dickson to host a Women's Health Awareness Programme. The initiative, designed to empower women, provided valuable knowledge and resources to enhance their overall well-being while promoting proactive healthcare practices.

The day began with registration at 8.00am, followed by a welcoming speech from CICPD parish priest, Fr Edwin Peter. He emphasised the importance of women's health and well-being within the community, setting an inspiring tone for both the day's activities and the 30 participants in attendance.

Dr Esther, a dedicated health care professional, delivered the



The organisers with medical personnel at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Port Dickson.

first session, providing a comprehensive talk on key aspects of women's health, including regular check-ups, nutrition, and lifestyle choices for long-term wellness. The session was interactive, giving participants the opportunity to ask questions and seek professional advice on their health concerns.

Following the talk, a health care team, including a doctor and eight nurses, facilitated health screen-

ings, including breast examinations and pap smear tests. These screenings were essential for the early detection and prevention of health issues, providing women with valuable insights into their personal health.

The programme transitioned into a spiritual gathering with Mass presided over by Fr Edwin, dedicated to blessing and honouring all the women in the church,

acknowledging the invaluable role of women in families, communities, and society. During the Mass, a historic moment unfolded as two young girls were inaugurated as the first female altar servers at the PD Church.

The celebration continued with a cake-cutting ceremony, symbolising appreciation and unity among the women. The event concluded with a potluck fellow-

ship, where attendees shared food and enjoyed meaningful conversations, strengthening community bonds.

A representative from the Women's Ministry expressed, "We believe that a woman's health is the cornerstone of a strong and thriving community. By raising awareness and providing women with the right knowledge, we hope to encourage healthier lifestyles and empower women."

The Women's Ministry of CICPD extends its heartfelt thanks to all participants, volunteers, and health care professionals who helped make the event a success. The initiative serves as a reminder of the ongoing importance of women's health and the value of coming together as a community to support and uplift one another. Looking ahead, the ministry is committed to organising future programmes that continue to educate, empower, and celebrate women.

## Kuantan parish celebrates women's strength and resilience



The women enjoying board games in conjunction with International Women's Day celebration.

KUANTAN: On March 8, the parishioners of the Church of St Thomas the Apostle gathered in celebration of International Women's Day, a day dedicated to honouring the extraordinary progress and achievements of women throughout history.

Organised by the parish's women's ministry, the event brought together a vibrant community of women, united in their commitment to celebrate the ongoing journey of empowerment and progress for women.

The festivities began with an introduction by Georgina Lim, who offered an insightful reflection on the origins of this significant

day, highlighting the courageous women who have paved the way for gender equality and empowerment. She reminded us that, while change often requires patience, we must never hesitate to speak out and actively work towards transformation.

The highlight of the day was a heartfelt tribute to six remarkable women from the parish, aged 80 and above. Their stories, accompanied by treasured photographs, spoke volumes of courage, determination, faith, and love. These life journeys became living testaments to the strength and resilience of women. As a token of appreciation for their lifelong con-

tributions to the parish, society, and their families, these incredible women were honoured with the medal of St Benedict.

Following the tribute, the celebration picked up with a series of games, activities, and heartfelt fellowship, led by the women's ministry. The event was filled with laughter, joy, and connection. From lively dances to friendly games, the atmosphere rekindled the joy of being part of a close-knit community.

The day concluded with a delicious lunch, lovingly prepared by the women of the church, nourishing both our bodies and our hearts. **Euphrasia Kee Yhin Ying**

## A divine start to Lent at Church of Our Lady of Lourdes Klang

KLANG: The season of Lent at the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes (OLL) commenced with an evening of reflection and sacred music on March 8. The parishioners gathered in reverence as the church hosted a spiritually uplifting Lenten cantata, marking the beginning of a holy season dedicated to prayer, penance, and preparation for the joy of Easter.

The Broadway Academy Christian Fellowship Choir, under the masterful direction of Dr Casey Broadway, joined hands with the OLL Choir, featuring singers from the English, Bahasa, and Tamil congregations. Together, they delivered a moving performance of *The Power of the Cross*, a sacred Lenten cantata composed by the renowned Mark Hayes. The collaboration between these talented choirs brought a unique and unifying spirit to the evening,

reflecting the universal message of Lent that transcends languages and cultures.

The cantata was more than just a musical performance; it was a meditative journey. The program interwove scripture readings recounting the final days of Christ's life — His passion, death, and resurrection — with powerful hymns that resonated deeply with the congregation. Selections such as *Hosanna*, *Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross*, *Lamb of God*, and the title piece *The Power of the Cross* were performed with heartfelt emotion and technical precision, drawing listeners into an atmosphere of solemn contemplation and worship.

Each hymn and reading was carefully chosen to guide the faithful through Jesus' 40 days in the desert and His ultimate sacrifice on the cross. The reflective nature of the evening invited everyone pre-

sent to look inward, to embrace the Lenten pillars of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and to renew their spiritual commitment during this sacred time.

The Gospel readings, narrating Christ's journey during the Holy Week, enriched the experience further, offering a powerful reminder of the events that lie at the heart of the Christian faith.

The evening concluded with a sense of communal unity and spiritual renewal. It was a heartfelt celebration of God's mercy and grace, reminding all present that Lent is not merely a time of sacrifice but also of hope and transformation. As the congregation departed in reverent silence, there was a shared sense of readiness to embark on the Lenten journey, inspired by the love of Christ, His triumph over death, and the promise of eternal life. **Arvin Ross Alexander**



The OLL Choir with the Broadway Academy Christian Fellowship Choir.



# Celebrating 12 years of Pope Francis' pontificate

Tianne Pereira

KUALA LUMPUR: On March 9, the Cathedral of St John the Evangelist hosted a joyful celebration marking the 12th anniversary of Pope Francis' pontificate. The Mass, held at 11.00am on the First Sunday of Lent, was presided over by Archbishop Julian Leow. Concelebrating were His Excellency Wojciech Zaluski, the Apostolic Nuncio to Malaysia; Archbishop Emeritus Murphy Pakiam; and parish priest Fr Gerard Theraviam. The event was attended by numerous religious, dignitaries, ambassadors, Church luminaries, and the faithful.

Addressing the congregation at the end of the Mass, Archbishop Wojciech expressed gratitude for their presence in celebrating Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome and successor of St Peter. He acknowledged the rapid passage of time since Pope Francis' election, particularly with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. He reflected on Pope Francis' leadership in guiding the Church through the synodal path, fostering a renewed spirit of evangelisation.

With the Filipino congregation animating the Mass, the nuncio recalled Pope Francis stating that Filipinos serve as modern-day missionaries around the world. He also noted how the Holy Father's recent travels to this region allowed him to establish a deeper connection with the faithful in Southeast Asia. Although not all could attend the papal audiences, the nuncio assured them of the Pope's awareness of, and appreciation for,



Archbishop Wojciech Zaluski and Archbishop Julian Leow during the Mass.

the vibrant faith of the Church in the region.

The nuncio expressed heartfelt thanks to all who have continuously prayed for Pope Francis, especially as he faces health challenges. He reiterated the Pope's customary plea at every public audience: to pray for him, and he urged the congregation to keep the Holy Father and his intentions in their prayers. He also extended his gratitude to Archbishop Julian for the invitation to celebrate this special occasion and acknowledged the presence of all those attending, including his colleagues and the Argentinian community. Before concluding, the nuncio reminded the faithful that Lent is a time of preparation for Christ's passion, death, and resurrection, and led the congregation in

prayer for Pope Francis.

Earlier, Archbishop Julian, in his homily, reflected on the Gospel reading of the day, which recounts the temptations of Jesus after His baptism and divine acknowledgment by God. The archbishop posed a thought-provoking question: "If Jesus Himself could be tempted, what about us? Do we stand a chance against the devil, who is indeed real?" He emphasised that just as the devil sought to derail Jesus' mission, he attempts to lead us away from God.

The prelate urged the faithful to recognise that we are not just physical beings; we are also spiritual — we have a soul, a mind, reasoning, and the Divine within us. Because of this divine presence, we are more than just

human. He reminded the congregation that Ash Wednesday serves as a reminder of the temporary nature of the body, which will return to dust, while the soul endures eternally with God. "How am I preparing my soul? How am I strengthening my spiritual life?" he asked.

Drawing from the Gospel, Archbishop Julian noted that Jesus resisted temptation by using Scripture, the Word of God. He also emphasised the importance of fasting to help individuals gain control over their desires, encouraging them to abstain from sin and draw closer to God. As Lent progresses, he called upon the faithful to dedicate themselves to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. "Let us look after our souls and the souls of others. May we rely on God more and more and not on ourselves. May the Eucharist we receive help us focus on Christ," he concluded.

To close the celebration, Fr Gerard invited Archbishop Julian and the Apostolic Nuncio to bless a statue of Our Lady of the Magnificat, which is to be installed on the façade of the cathedral's upcoming community centre. The new facility, now in its final stages of construction, will be named the Magnificat Community Centre and will serve as a beacon of faith and service for the community.

The Mass and accompanying celebrations reflected the deep gratitude and unity of the Catholic faithful in Kuala Lumpur as they honoured Pope Francis' twelve years of unwavering leadership and commitment to the Church and the world.

## Fr Nelbart Peter welcomed into presbyterate of Keningau diocese

SOOK, Sabah: The parish of the Holy Spirit in Sook made history for the fourth time in priestly vocations when Deacon Nelbart Peter was ordained as a priest on March 2, at the Church of the Holy Spirit.

This significant milestone follows the previous ordinations of Fr Bede Morti Lamutan in 2022; Fr Bonaventure Unting in 2001, and Fr David Gasikol in 2018.

Thousands of Catholics from across all dioceses gathered for the sacerdotal ordination of Deacon Nelbart, which was presided over by Rt Rev Cornelius Piong, Bishop of Keningau.

With the theme "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few" (Luke 10:2), the ordination ceremony began with the presentation of the candidate and concluded with the Sign of Peace. In this sacred tradition, Bishop Cornelius and the attending priests offered the kiss of peace to Fr Nelbart symbolising his admittance into the presbyterate. This moment marked his official role as a co-worker with the bishop and the priests, who work together in serving the diocese.

Fr Nelbart, originally from Kg Simbuan, Sook, completed his philosophical studies at College General in Penang from 2018 to 2019. He then pursued theological studies at St Peter's College in Kuching, Sarawak, from 2020 to 2024.

In his speech, Fr Nelbart expressed heartfelt gratitude to all those who supported his formation. He recalled a pivotal moment in 2013 when Bishop Cornelius visited his



Bishop Cornelius Piong places the chalice into the hands of the newly ordained Fr Nelbart Peter.

village, urging him, "If you don't want to be a priest, then who will replace us? We, the priests, will grow old one day." These words had a lasting impact on him, motivating his decision to follow the path to priesthood.

Bishop Cornelius warmly welcomed Fr Nelbart into the presbyterate of the Diocese of Keningau, thanking God for the gift of this new priest. The bishop also acknowledged the vital role of Fr Nelbart's

family in nurturing his vocation.

Reflecting on the significance of the ordination, Bishop Cornelius shared a personal memory from 47 years ago when he walked to Simbuan, a place that had no church at the time. He expressed his awe at the steady growth of God's kingdom, now evident in the ordination of Fr Nelbart.

The bishop also announced that Fr Nelbart would serve at the parish of St Theresa in Tambunan. **Lynn Jipanis**



## Novices make first Religious profession

KUCHING: Novices Wivina Gelan Lick and Agnes Anak Austin Rungga made their First Religious Profession with the Congregation of Sisters of St Francis of Sarawak at the Chapel of the Convent of Mary Immaculate in Padungan. Both are from Kapit, Sarawak, and belong to the Mary Immaculate Conception Parish.

Their First Religious Profession marks the beginning of their temporary profession, which will be renewed annually before culminating in a final perpetual profession.

During the ceremony, the novices professed their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, symbolised by the exchange of their probationary garb for the congregation's religious habit. Sr Rose Wong, Superior General, expressed gratitude to Archbishop Simon Poh, the formators, and all those who supported the event, especially the parents of the newly professed Sisters for offering their daughters to God.

Sr Rose encouraged the Sisters to stay focused on Christ and follow in the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi, living authentic lives of service. The two Sisters were assigned their first posts: Sr Wivina Gelan to St. Bernadette's Convent in Marudi and Sr Agnes to St Mary's Convent in Sibul.

## St Ann church expands with new facilities for 25,000 parishioners

KOTA PADAWAN, Sarawak: The Archbishop of Kuching, Most Rev Simon Poh, blessed and opened the newly constructed St Ann Complex on March 8. The complex includes an administrative block and a religious education block, marking a significant milestone in the region.

This new development is set to strengthen faith formation and enhance pastoral services for over 25,000 parishioners across 51 villages and nine residential areas in the districts of Kota Padawan, Padawan, and Penrissen.

Built at a cost of RM6.7 million, the complex provides better facilities for religious education. With 14 additional classrooms, the church can now support catechism classes for children, the RCIA programme for adults, and preparation for First Holy Communion and Confirmation.

St Ann's parish rector, Friar Don Don Romero Ramirez, OFM credited the project's success to generous contributions from various parties, including UNIFOR (Unit for Other Religious), which donated RM2 million in 2022 and 2024, and YB Datuk IR Lo Khere Chiang, who contributed RM200,000 towards an additional RM1.7 million parking facility. Parishioners also played a vital role through weekly Mass collections, St Ann's feast day fundraising, and personal donations.

In his speech, Archbishop Simon emphasised the importance of time, talent, and treasure in strengthening the faith community. He reminded parishioners that "the church is not just a building, but a spiritual home built by its people."

The new St Ann Complex is a significant step toward nurturing faith. The church hopes for continued support in building a stronger faith community. **Irvina Joan**



Archbishop Simon Poh signing the plaque.



The newly opened St Ann Complex.

# Psycho-spiritual workshop enhances skills for MJD counsellors

Michael Bay

PLENTONG: A recent workshop on *The Essentials of Psycho-spiritual Counselling*, held at the MAJODI Centre, proved to be an eye-opening experience for 17 para-counsellors and counsellors from the Malacca Johore Diocese (MJD).

This workshop was part of a formation programme aimed at equipping and upskilling these dedicated volunteers. The session was facilitated by Fr Dr Charles Sim, a highly esteemed Jesuit priest from Singapore and a distinguished professor of Psychology at Tianjin Normal University, China. Fr Charles, renowned for his extensive qualifications and expertise in the field of Psychology, provided valuable insights into psycho-spiritual counselling, enriching the participants' skills and knowledge.

The topic may seem complex at first, but Fr Charles' practical and experiential teaching style made it easy for participants to grasp the content. His non-imposing approach, particularly in applying psycho-spiritual methods, left a lasting impression. He began by emphasizing the important distinction between religion, which encompasses a system of beliefs, values, rules, and rituals, and spirituality, which involves personal beliefs and practices related to the meaning and purpose of life. As a priest, Fr Charles typically begins each counselling session with a simple prayer, seeking wisdom and strength from God, rather than imposing his own knowledge and values onto the client.

Fr Charles shared his unique approach to counselling, often using analogies and stories to connect with clients. He emphasised the power of storytelling, where some recalled the saying, "Facts tell, stories SELL!"



The para-counsellors and counsellors listening intently to Fr Dr Charles Sim SJ (pic inset)

His simple, non-directive style helps clients feel at ease, encouraging them to open up, reflect, and gain new perspectives.

Emphasising the importance of applying the LEAP principles — Listen, Empathy, Affirmation, and Perspective — in counselling, Fr Charles highlighted that these principles can contribute to up to 80 per cent of a successful therapeutic experience, guiding counsellors in effectively supporting their clients.

- **Listen:** Active listening, including summarising and clarifying, helps clients feel heard and respected.

- **Empathy:** By paying undivided attention and using appropriate body language, counsellors can build rapport and create a safe space for clients.

- **Affirmation:** Words of encouragement and respect can boost clients' self-esteem, especially those struggling with negative self-talk.

- **Perspective:** Understanding a client's unique viewpoint without judgment allows counsellors to tailor their approach and achieve better outcomes.

This workshop has helped deepen the

understanding of the participants, allowing them to practise their faith while adhering to their belief systems without imposing them on clients. By applying the LEAP principle, participants were able to enhance their therapeutic skills and provide better support for their clients.

The workshop emphasised that it's not just knowledge, but our way of life, conduct, and personality in handling everyday challenges that truly impact others. As one participant reflected, the key takeaway was that "it is all about LOVE," echoing the words of 1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not love, I am just a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal".

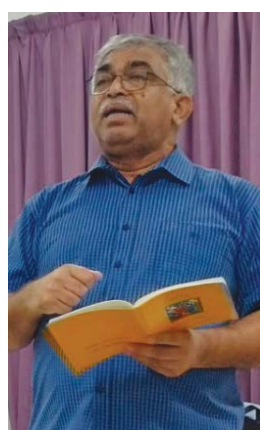
The event also served as an opportunity to express gratitude to Fr Norris Seenivasan, SJ for his unwavering commitment to continuously upskill and equip the para-counsellors and counsellors of the Malacca Johore Counselling Ministry. His support has empowered them to provide effective mental health services to the laity of the Malacca Johore diocese, ensuring they can better serve the community.

## Assumption parishioners gain renewed appreciation for the Mass

PETALING JAYA: Over three Friday nights in February, between 50 and 70 parishioners of the Church of the Assumption gathered for the *Mass Explained* series, organised by the Assumption Charismatic Ministry. Led by parish priest Fr Leonard Lexson *pic*, the series offered a deeper understanding of the Mass, which is the source and summit of the Catholic faith.

Each evening began with a Praise & Worship session led by the Charismatic Ministry, providing an opportunity to glorify God, give thanks, and prepare spiritually for the teachings that followed. Attendees left the series with a renewed appreciation for the Mass, having been enlightened by the insightful lessons shared over the three nights.

In the first session, *In Memory of Jesus*, Fr Leonard guided participants through



an interactive introduction, emphasising the theme *Mass is Heaven on Earth*. He explained that the Mass centres on the greatest love story — God's life, death, Passion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost. The Mass, Fr Leonard shared, is God's invitation to His house, a gift we accept not because we love Him, but because He loves us. The session focused on the significance of the Mass's introduction and the Liturgy of the Word, highlighting the unity and solidarity symbolised through shared gestures and symbols.

The second session, *See What Must Be Done*, focused on the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Fr Leonard elaborated on the miracle of the fully human and fully divine coming together during the Eucharistic celebration. He explained the significance of the water and wine, which symbolised the sharing of Christ's divinity through His humility. The session also reflected on how the Mass unites the Church, angels, saints,

and our departed loved ones in a cosmic celebration of God's glory.

In the final session, *Do What You Have Seen*, Fr Leonard emphasised the importance of seeking the Kingdom of God with eyes of faith. He urged participants to listen, see, and experience the Mass with renewed awareness, reminding them that the Mass is a preparation for the promise of future glory. It is a time for healing, sanctification, and renewal, and concludes with the dismissal, sending attendees out with the mandate to glorify God in their lives.

Throughout the series, Fr Leonard's passionate and engaging teaching, filled with humour and anecdotes, helped participants deepen their understanding of the Mass's history, mystery, and glory. The event concluded with a reminder that the Mass is for glorifying God and equipping us to be His witnesses in the world.

The Assumption Charismatic Ministry was thanked for organising and hosting the series, and Fr Leonard was appreciated for his thorough and inspiring teachings. **Cilia Rasasegram**

# RCC parishioners 'rediscover, proclaim and build hope' at recollection

Stephanie Cheong

PENANG: Parishioners of Risen Christ Church (RCC) gathered for their Parish Recollection on February 28 and March 1. The event was organised by the parish and led by Joe Fernandez and his team from the Gloria Patri Ministry, Singapore.

Joe, a lay missionary with years of experience in leading prayer and recollection retreats locally and internationally, facilitated the sessions. Nearly 200 participants, including attendees from nearby parishes, took part in the event.

Themed *Rediscover, Proclaim, and Build Hope*, the recollection featured a series of spiritual activities, including praise and worship, adoration, praying over, and spiritual input sessions. Masses were celebrated by parish priest Friar Esmond Chua, OFM, adding a solemn and reflective aspect to the retreat.

Using Scripture as the foundation, Joe invited participants to reflect on



The participants during the praise and worship session.

their relationship with Christ, as well as with their neighbours and friends. He reminded everyone that, as God's children, we are always loved by Him, even in our sinfulness. We are His treasured possessions, called to place our faith and trust in Him, especially during times of trial and tribulation. Loving the merciful God, we are called to extend that same mercy to others. Forgiveness, Joe emphasised, is essential, as God has forgiven us.

In essence, "rediscover" calls us to actively re-engage with and deepen our understanding of God's will for us, encouraging individuals to reflect on their faith and embrace the richness of the Lord's teachings.

With a personal and intimate relationship with Christ, those who identify with Him through faith find their true identity in Him. Just as Christ appointed the twelve apostles (Mark 3:14), we too are called to "proclaim" Him and

share His message. The Church, as emphasised by Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, has made the "New Evangelization" a central mission. This involves proclaiming the Good News to those who have never heard of Christ, offering ongoing catechesis, and "re-proposing" the Gospel to those who, though baptised, have drifted away. The Holy Spirit is the principal agent of this evangelisation. As the one who was entirely open to and

guided by the Holy Spirit, Mary is recognised as "the Mother of the Church which evangelises."

Joe further explored Romans 8:24-25, emphasising that a Christian's salvation is rooted in the "hope" of what is yet to come. If something is already visible or in our possession, there is no need to hope for it. This passage underscores the essence of true hope — it is for what has not yet been realised — and highlights the importance of patience and perseverance while waiting for the fulfilment of God's promises. Joe posed a powerful question: Are we a source of hope for others? The key takeaway was the reminder to always place our hope in the Lord, no matter the circumstances we face.

Risen Christ parish was truly blessed by this recollection, which proved both physically and spiritually healing. Many attendees of the two half-day sessions shared that they had gained valuable insights and experienced a personal transformation.

## Klang district parishioners unite in journey of hope

KLANG: A spiritually enriching day unfolded for a group of pilgrims from the Klang district as they embarked on a Pilgrimage of Hope to the Church of St Francis of Assisi in Cheras and the Cathedral of St John the Evangelist recently.

With the blessings of Our Lady of Lourdes' parish priest, Fr Gregory Chan, this spiritual journey was organised by BEC St Michael, Bandar Botanik, Klang. Pilgrims from various BECs, along with the faithful from the Church of St Anne, Port Klang and Shah Alam, came together to form a united family of faith and devotion.

The pilgrimage began with a warm welcome at the Church of St Francis of Assisi (SFA), where pilgrims registered and received their welcome packs. After break-

fast, they participated in the outdoor Way of the Cross at the Gethsemane Garden, where life-sized statues beautifully illustrated the Passion of Christ.

As they walked the sacred path, a profound sense of love, unity, and support filled the air. Pilgrims, both young and elderly, took turns carrying three wooden crosses from station to station, remaining steadfast despite the scorching heat.

A highlight of the visit was the introduction to the church's stunning stained-glass artwork, which depicted the life of St Francis of Assisi. The pilgrims also learned about the church's rich history and spent time in silent adoration at the Chapel of Portiuncula, where sacred first-class relics are enshrined in the altar.



The Klang district pilgrims at the Cathedral of St John the Evangelist.

The day's activities continued with games and a Bible quiz after lunch, further fostering camaraderie among participants.

After bidding farewell to SFA, the pilgrims continued their journey to the Cathedral of St John the Evangelist. There, they explored the magnificent cathedral and its

surroundings before gathering to recite the Chaplet of Divine Mercy together.

The pilgrimage reached its peak with a sunset Mass, followed by a peaceful dinner in the cathedral's vicinity, enhancing the serene and reflective atmosphere of the day.

As the pilgrims made their

way back to Klang, a sense of camaraderie, unity, and spiritual fulfilment was evident among them. More than just a trip, this pilgrimage became an experience that deepened their spiritual devotion and social bonds — a powerful testament to how faith brings people together.

Patricia Anne

## Bringing smiles of hope to individuals with special needs

PETALING JAYA: The Ministry for Special Needs of the Archdiocesan Office for Human Development (AOHD) recently hosted a dental programme titled *A Happy Smile is a Happy Mind* as part of its Lenten Campaign Outreach. Held on March 8, the event aimed to provide essential dental care and raise awareness about oral health for individuals with special needs. In collaboration with the Ministry of Health and with the support of dedicated dentists and staff from Klinik Pergigian Kelana Jaya, the initiative was a resounding success.

Held at the La Salle Hall PJ from 8.00am to 1.00pm, the dental programme saw approximately 50 participants, including both children and adults, receiving comprehensive dental check-ups in a welcoming and inclusive environment. The children from SSVIP also took part, ensuring



The children learning how to properly brush their teeth.

that everyone had the opportunity to benefit from the dental care provided. The event featured a variety of parallel workshops and activities designed to educate participants about dental health in an engaging and enjoyable way.

The workshop included dental check-ups, an oral health awareness

talk, demonstrations using dental models to show the effects of good and bad oral health, fun games, and a practical session teaching proper brushing techniques.

The programme aimed to create a safe space where both children and adults could comfortably receive dental care. For individuals with

special needs, oral health can be particularly challenging due to factors such as oral sensitivity and muscle tightness, which often make dental check-ups difficult. However, the event proved to be an invaluable experience, helping participants overcome these barriers.

The Ministry for Special Needs extends its heartfelt gratitude to the dedicated dentists from Klinik Pergigian Kelana Jaya, Dr Shahziha and Dr Lee Jiawen, for their invaluable collaboration in ensuring the success of the dental programme. Special recognition also goes to their nurses and support staff, whose tireless efforts contributed to the smooth running of the event.

Sincere appreciation is also extended to James Sia, the person in charge of La Salle Hall, for generously providing the venue and sponsoring breakfast for the participants.

Additionally, a heartfelt thank you to Manjunathan, CEO of Data Sree Company, for his generous sponsorship of toothbrushes and toothpaste for all attendees.

Finally, the ministry would like to express its deepest gratitude to all the volunteers who stepped forward to support the event. Their time, dedication, and commitment made a significant impact on the success of the programme and the lives of all those involved.

This event not only provided essential dental care but also raised awareness about the importance of maintaining oral health, leaving a lasting positive impact on the lives of individuals with special needs. It is initiatives like this that highlight the power of community collaboration and compassion in creating an inclusive and supportive environment for all. AOHD

# Celebrating faith and creativity at Jubilee of Artists

Trasilla Annette

CHERAS: The Church of St Francis of Assisi (SFA) hosted the Jubilee of Artists, a full-day celebration that highlighted the contributions of artists in glorifying the Lord. This event showcased a diverse range of artistic expressions, including visual art, auditory art, and meditative (zentangle) art.

Over 20 artists from various parishes gathered to participate in the event on March 8, which began with a welcome speech by parish priest Fr Paul Cheong, OFM, Cap. This was followed by a praise and worship session led by the musicians from the Catholic Char-

ismatic Renewal. A few artists then took the stage to share their personal journeys — revealing the origins of their passion, how they discovered their chosen medium, and the divine calling they felt from God.

One such artist, Norah Khor, shared her journey of struggling to stay motivated while working on murals depicting the 20 Mysteries of the Rosary for the Church of St Ignatius in Petaling Jaya. Despite facing internal challenges, she persevered and completed the murals. She revealed that the parishioners' admiration for her work reignited her passion for art, allowing her to fall in love with it once again.



One of the artistes explaining her work to interested parishioners.

## God's mercy is in the sacraments

PETALING JAYA: Catholics need to be constantly reminded that the sacraments are the inherent expression of His mercy every time they are celebrated.

Fr Simon Yong, SJ, in emphasising this, said mercy was not an added "component or ingredient" to the sacraments. "Every time a sacrament is celebrated, it is inherently an expression of God's mercy," he said.

The parish priest of the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Johor Bahru was delivering a talk titled *Misericordiae Vultus - The Face of the Father's Mercy*, organised by the Firm Foundation Ministry at the Church of St Francis Xavier.

He quoted a passage from Pope Francis' declaration of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in 2015: "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. And His mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive."

Fr Simon delivered a stimulating reflection on mercy in a challenging pastoral landscape, noting that the Sacraments are directed towards the salvation of souls which requires the exposure of sin and error. Yet many choose to avoid confronting the truth. He said: "It is a spiritual act of mercy to instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful and admonish the sinners because to speak the truth in love is always merciful. Sadly, the world will judge that as not being merciful."

He began his talk with a witty overview on how perception in a utilitarian world was blurring the understanding of mercy and pastoral justification when "possibility is confused with permissibility ... we set aside morality in favour of potentiality" in matters like irregular unions, communion for the divorced and remarried, as well as same-sex attraction.

He linked this to what he called the "self" trapped in a subjective vortex in which the "self" somewhat became the benchmark in one's measure of mercy. This is when one feels his experience is larger than others, and in this case, God. "We are supposed to be as



merciful as the Father is merciful. But what has happened is that the Father is supposed to be as merciful as I am," he said.

Fr Simon said: "When we dispense with the commandments of God, meaning we feel that they are not merciful enough, or not pastoral enough, then it is left to us to be more merciful than God." To allow this, he cautioned, would make it "easier for us to justify pastoral needs ... to meet the needs of God's people in the name of mercy", which in turn "reinforce heresies, misconceptions, bad liturgies and teachings". He described such pastoral justifications as the "abuses we commit in the name of mercy" in occasions like weddings and funerals.

He stressed that if the best place to experience mercy was through the Sacraments, "then the Church needs to constantly remind that it is not *lex vivendi*, *lex credendi*, *lex orandi* (how we live determines what we believe and how we worship) but *lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, *lex vivendi* (how we worship reflects what we believe and determines how we live)."

The Seven Sacraments instituted by the Lord are the Sacraments of Initiation — Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist; the Sacraments of Healing — Penance and the Anointing of the Sick; and the Sacraments at the Service of Communion — Marriage and Holy Orders.

Reflecting on Pope Francis' often quoted but misunderstood "Who am I to judge" comment, he pointed out that the Vicar of Christ also stressed the need for sinners to acknowledge their sins. This, he said, put to rest the misconstrued idea that he was soft on sins. On the skewed understanding that confession did not really require contrition or amendments, he said: "But the Pope has made a correction to this skewed understanding. We love the sinner but condemn his sins."

The Firm Foundation has lined up an Encyclical series of talks for its Jubilee 2025 programme, Journeying as Pilgrims of Hope: Living Pope Francis' messages of hope in his Papal documents. **Bob Ho**



Next in line was a performance by the illustrious Francisca Peter, who graced the stage with one of her hit songs, *Sekadar di Pinggiran*, along with a selection of beautiful church hymns. Throughout her performance, she engaged with the audience, answering questions and emphasising the importance of allowing youth to explore their talents within the safe confines of the church. Additionally, a choir of students from underprivileged communities, shared their powerful voices, filling the church with sound that resonated effortlessly, even without the aid of microphones.

While all the artists showcased their work in the JPPI Hall, various workshops were held on the floors above. In the acrylic bottle painting workshop, participants created and deco-

rated bottles with their own unique patterns, which they were able to take home. Meanwhile, the candle-making workshop taught attendees how to craft beautiful candles using only a thin layer of tissue and baking paper.

The event proved to be both inspirational and enriching for artists and non-artists alike. As one of the featured artists, Anna Faustina (@thewaywemend), succinctly expressed in her Instagram reel: "When engaging with other artists and seeing their creations, it made me realise one thing: art goes far beyond creation. Each artist plays a unique role in giving voice to something greater — it can be the light and salt, a bridge, a mediator, and a vessel for healing. [...] Art and faith are truly interconnected; art is a medium of reconciliation and inner healing in a wounded world."



## Evangelisation from foot to heart

PENANG: On March 7, the Fr Josef's Method (FJM) Reflexology pilgrimage group from Taiwan, China, and Inner Mongolia visited the Church of the Holy Name of Jesus in Balik Pulau. The group was warmly welcomed by the Bishop of Penang, Cardinal Sebastian Francis, Fr Edmund Woon and Fr Dominico Evan CSE. The Fr Josef Eugster Holistic Development Association, affiliated with the Catholic Church in Taiwan and chaired by Bishop Philip Huang Chao-ming of the Hualien Diocese, is behind the FJM Reflexology initiative. FJM Reflexology serves as a complementary therapy tool for evangelisation, focusing on holistic care that encompasses physical health, mental well-being, and spiritual companionship.

In his message to the FJM group, Cardinal Sebastian drew a powerful analogy between reflexology and Scripture. He referenced the story of Jesus washing His disciples' feet in John 13:1-7, describing it as an act of "Communion of the Feet" and likening Jesus to the first foot reflexologist. Cardinal Sebastian also pointed to Luke 7:36-50, where a woman, labelled as sinful by onlookers, performs a unique form of "foot reflexology" on Jesus — washing His feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, and anointing them with perfume. He explained that the feet serve as a pathway to the heart and evangelisation. Reflexology, deeply rooted in Asian culture, when combined with evangelisation, represents the 'Inculturation of the Gospel,' aligning with the Healing Ministry

of Jesus Christ today.

Fr Josef Eugster, a Swiss missionary with the Chinese name Fr Wu Ro-shih, has been residing in Taiwan for over 50 years, offering reflexology treatments to alleviate the health issues of his parishioners. FJM Reflexology, grounded in the principles Reflexology and integrates Yin-Yang and the Five Elements Theory of Traditional Chinese Medicine, is renowned for its healing benefits and affordable therapeutic approach, with the slogan: "Learn the reflexology skill to reduce the health care bill."

Fr Josef's latest book is *Advanced Fr Josef's Method of Reflexology*. As a member of the clergy, he considers his ability to serve others and alleviate their pain as a blessing from God. He believes that through the practice of reflexology, he can offer his sincerest praise to the Lord. FJM Reflexology has expanded beyond Taiwan to countries such as China, Malaysia, India, Macao, Indonesia, Canada, Germany, Australia, Bolivia, and Zimbabwe.

Msgr Henry Rajoo, Vicar General of the Diocese of Penang, is collaborating with FJM to train practitioners within the diocese, aiming to provide holistic care that nurtures both the body and soul. During the visit, FJM reflexologists conducted a therapy session on Cardinal Sebastian and the clergy present. The visit concluded with Cardinal Sebastian offering a laying-on-of-hands blessing to each pilgrim. **Michael Yip and Christopher Kushi**

# South Korean diocese launches Lenten fundraising drive

UIJEONGBU: A Catholic diocese in South Korea has launched a Lenten fundraising drive through a Church-run mobile app to collect donations for its humanitarian activities.

The 2025 edition of the Lenten Piggy Bank was launched by the Uijeongbu Diocesan Social Welfare Association.

Fr Lee Jung-woo, chair of the association, said the diocese has established a temporary system to receive donations through Catholic Pay at the diocesan level and is "implementing it in the form of a pilot project."

"In the future, we plan to use both cash donations and donations through Catholic Pay for the Lenten Piggy Bank," Lee said.

The Catholic Pay was developed by the National Conference of Catholic Priests for Computerisation (NCCPC) and launched in 2023.

Catholic Pay is a mobile payment system specifically designed for Catholics to conveniently pay their church offerings and donations through a dedicated app called *Catholic Hasang*.

This is the first time the diocese is running the

drive via the Catholic Hasang mobile app.

The *Catholic Hasang* platform is an integrated Catholic register linked with the national integrated administrative programme "Next Generation Bondang (Parish) Yangeop 22."

The Catholic users are connected to their respective registers in the nation's Catholic Churches and their records such as baptism and confirmation data, among other details.

Diocesan officials said the Lenten Piggy Bank has a QR code enabling donors to scan and pay donations of 1,000 South Korean Won (around 69 cents).

Parishioners who are unfamiliar with digital payment systems can make their payments in cash by depositing them in the piggy bank.

Lee said the diocese aims to make the donation process smoother as compared to the previous system.

"Until now, it was somewhat complicated to donate to social welfare organisations in addition to the Lenten Piggy Bank, including submitting documents," Lee said.

"But after the system is implemented, it will

be convenient for anyone who wants to donate," Lee added.

The priest cited difficulty in depositing the coins collected through the Advent and Lenten piggy banks as commercial banks are reluctant to handle coins in large numbers.

The diocese said it also plans to expand the payment system from parishes and shrines to include the Catholic church's various organisations.

The Catholic church in South Korea has been closely involved in humanitarian activities through its organisations.

In 2021, nearly a dozen parishes in South Korea joined hands to donate to a social welfare programme titled *The Sharing Warehouse* to support their poor, needy neighbours badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Sharing Warehouse was a social charity programme of Daegu Archdiocese covering 11 parishes that sought to collect money and other materials to supply daily essentials and groceries to needy people who were deprived of state-run welfare schemes. **ucanews**



*The Uijeongbu Diocesan Social Welfare Association has created a 2025 Lenten Piggy Bank that will allow both QR code sponsorship and coin collection. (ucanews photo/catholictimes.org)*

## Meeting reinforces interfaith tolerance and harmony

PHILIPPINES: Bishop Socrates Mesiona, the Apostolic Vicar of Puerto Princesa recently visited Muslim leader Hadji Jamael Kasim, highlighting the growing interreligious rapport in Palawan, the country's largest province by land area.

The bishop's visit aimed to express solidarity with Kasim and the Muslim community. "I wanted to show you respect as a leader," Bishop Mesiona shared with Kasim.

Kasim, in turn, expressed gratitude for the gesture. "It's the first time a priest, a bishop, has visited me," he said in Filipino. "We also see each other at events in the plaza," he added, referring to interfaith gatherings in the province.

Kasim reassured the bishop of the continued spirit of interfaith tolerance and harmony in the region. "We are like a broom; when bound together, no one will say this one is a Muslim, and that one is a Christian," he said in Filipino.

"We are all humans, after all," Bishop Mesiona responded.



*Bishop Socrates Mesiona, Apostolic Vicar of Puerto Princesa, meets with Muslim leader Hadji Jamael Kasim, fostering stronger interreligious dialogue and unity in Palawan.*

Kasim acknowledged the strong bond between Christians and Muslims in Palawan, noting the harmonious relationship within the community.

Palawan, while predominantly Christian, has a notable Muslim population, especially in the southern part of the province, making up about 10 per cent of the population. The province's religious landscape is shaped by the influence of the Sulu Sultanate and Brunei

Muslim missionaries.

Interfaith cooperation in Palawan also extends to joint initiatives like environmental conservation, including seaside clean-ups.

The bishop's visit took place early on the morning of March 10, at Kasim's store in Balabac, a town in Palawan. He was accompanied by Divine Word Fr Rodrigo Salazar, parish priest of the ICP Balabac Parish, and several parish church leaders. **RVA**

## We are not giving up on reconciliation

SEOUL: The Archdiocese of Seoul's National Reconciliation Committee celebrated its 30th anniversary, March 12, with a Mass of thanksgiving at Myeongdong Cathedral. The special service was led by Archbishop Peter Chung Soon-taek of Seoul, *pic*, alongside his predecessor Cardinal Andrew Yeom Soo-jung, Apostolic Nuncio to Korea Msgr Giovanni Gaspari, and other clergy, religious, and lay people.

In his remarks, Archbishop Chung reflected on the origins of the committee, which was founded on March 1, 1995, 50 years after the division of Korea and 45 years after the Korean War. The committee's creation followed Cardinal Stephen Kim Soo-hwan's announcement of his intention to visit North Korea, marking a significant step in efforts for reconciliation.

"Over the last 30 years, this committee has worked tirelessly to promote a pastoral vision focused on prayer, education, research, and dialogue," Archbishop Chung



noted. "Our commitment includes the Mass for reconciliation and national unity, which has been celebrated every Tuesday at Myeongdong Cathedral, with 1,457 Masses already held."

Addressing the ongoing challenges on

the Korean peninsula, Archbishop Chung expressed disappointment over the current state of inter-Korean relations, describing the situation as one marked by discord and division. "It is disheartening that the situation is characterised by hatred rather than love, and division rather than unity. However, our journey toward reconciliation is far from over," he said, urging for renewed courage and commitment to the mission of peace and evangelisation.

The archbishop concluded by stressing the need for a collective effort to heal the divisions that have persisted for 80 years on the Korean peninsula. "To move forward into a new era, we must start with a conversion of hearts," he said. "I hope that our Diocesan Reconciliation Committee can collaborate not only with other organisations and members within the Church but also with all religions, civil society, and political groups that seek a new path toward unity and peace."

**AsiaNews**

## 130 million children still out of school in 22 countries

CONNECTICUT: The COVID-19 pandemic and global climate disasters have left 130 million children out of school in 22 countries, according to Save the Children. Despite the pandemic starting five years ago, many countries are still facing prolonged school closures, with additional disruptions caused by climate-related events like floods and heatwaves.

In the Philippines, for instance, students faced over 520 days of school closures, with ongoing disruptions from extreme weather. Save the Children found that children in countries with longer school shutdowns experienced the most significant learning losses, and between early 2022 and June 2024, 404 million children across 81 countries faced educational disruptions due to the climate crisis.

The organisation warns that climate-related disasters are becoming more frequent, increasing the risk to education, with half of the world's children now vulnerable. Remote learning, while helpful, is limited by the lack of internet access for two-thirds of school-aged children globally. Save the Children continues to provide educational support and works to strengthen education systems against climate and environmental challenges. **Vatican News**



*(Pixabay/akshayapatra)*

# St Joseph guides families with hope

In the quiet corners of Scripture, where words are few but actions speak volumes, St Joseph emerges as a towering figure of faith, resilience, and love. Often overshadowed by the radiant presence of Mary and the divine mission of Jesus, Joseph stands as the silent guardian, the steadfast protector, and the humble provider for the Holy Family.

His life, though sparsely detailed in the Gospels, offers a profound blueprint for families today, real families navigating the complexities of life with hope as their anchor. As we reflect on St Joseph, we find in him not just a saint of the past but a living hope for families in the present.

## A Man of Trust: Scripture's Witness

The Gospel of Matthew introduces Joseph as a "righteous man" (Matthew 1:19), a title that carries weight beyond mere moral uprightness. When he discovers Mary's pregnancy, Joseph faces a crisis that could unravel any man, a betrothed woman, a child not his own, and a society quick to judge.

Yet, his response is not one of anger or despair. Scripture tells us he planned to divorce her quietly, sparing her public shame. Then, in a dream, an angel reveals the divine purpose: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20).

Joseph awakens and obeys. Without hesitation, he embraces Mary and the child, stepping into a role he could scarcely have imagined.

This moment of trust is a cornerstone for families. How often do we, like Joseph, face situations that defy our plans, unexpected pregnancies, financial strain, or wounded relationships?

Joseph's faith reminds us that God's voice can pierce through our confusion, calling us to courage. His "yes" to God mirrors Mary's fiat, showing that family life thrives not on control but on surrender to a greater purpose.

## The Protector in Exile

Joseph's role as protector shines in Matthew 2:13-15, when an angel warns him in a dream: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for

Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy Him." Without delay, Joseph uproots his young family, leading them into the unknown to shield Jesus from Herod's wrath.

This flight into Egypt is more than a historical footnote; it's a testament to a father's instinct to safeguard his own, even at great personal cost.

Consider the real families who echo this journey today. Refugees fleeing war-torn countries, parents working multiple jobs to keep their children safe from poverty, or single mothers shielding their kids from violence, these are modern reflections of Joseph's protective love.

I think of a friend, Julie, a single mother of two, who left an abusive relationship to start over in a new city. With no family nearby and little money, she took on night shifts at a warehouse, ensuring her children had a stable home and an education.

Like Joseph, she heard no audible angel, but her resolve was guided by an inner call to protect. Saint Joseph stands with these families, a quiet intercessor who knows the weight of sacrifice.

## The Provider in Silence

Though Scripture never records Joseph's words, his actions as a carpenter speak loudly. In Nazareth, he laboured with his hands, teaching Jesus the trade (Mark 6:3). This humble work sustained the Holy Family, grounding their life in simplicity and dignity.

Joseph's role as provider was not marked by wealth or status but by steadfastness, a daily commitment to meet his family's needs.

This resonates with countless families today. Take the example of John and Sarah, a couple I know who weathered the storm of unemployment during the pandemic. John, a construction worker, lost his job when projects halted, while Sarah's hours as a teacher's aide were cut.

They tightened their budget, grew a small garden, and leaned on their faith to keep going. John eventually found part-time work, and Sarah tutored online.

Their story is not one of dramatic triumph but of quiet endurance, much like Joseph's. His example reminds us that providing for a family is



not about grand gestures but about showing up, day after day, with love and grit.

## A Hope for Real Families

St Joseph's life offers hope because it mirrors the messiness of our own. He was not a king or a scholar; he was a man thrust into extraordinary circumstances with ordinary tools, faith, obedience, and love.

Real families today face their own trials: divorce, addiction, illness, or the strain of balancing work and home. Yet, Joseph's story suggests that holiness is not reserved for the perfect but forged in the imperfect.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls Joseph "the shadow of the Heavenly Father" (CCC 533), a title that invites us to see him as a reflection of God's care.

For families wounded by loss, like the Justins, who buried their teenage son after a car accident, this shadow brings comfort. They turned to St Joseph in prayer, asking for strength to rebuild their shattered bonds.

Over time, they found solace in small steps, shared meals, honest conversations, and a renewed faith. Joseph, who cradled the Christ Child through danger, cradles families still, pointing them toward healing.

## A Call to Emulate

Pope Francis, in his apostolic letter *Patris Corde* (2020), declared a Year of St Joseph, urging us to look to him as a model, "Fathers are not born, but made," he wrote, emphasising that Joseph became a father through his choices.

This is a call for all, fathers, mothers, spouses, and children, to emulate Joseph's virtues. Be

a listener, like he was to God's messengers. Be a worker, pouring effort into those you love. Be a dreamer, trusting that God's plans unfold even in the dark.

For families teetering on the edge, St Joseph is a lifeline. Scripture promises, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord" (Jeremiah 17:7).

Joseph lived this trust, and his legacy endures as a beacon. Whether it is a couple like Thomas and Leena, reconciling after years of distance, or a young family like the Parises, welcoming a child amid uncertainty, Joseph whispers: You are not alone.

## A Prayerful Conclusion

As we reflect on St Joseph, let us pray: O St Joseph, guardian of the Redeemer, guide our families through trials. Teach us to trust, to protect, and to provide as you did. Be our hope when we falter, and lead us to your Son, our Saviour.

In a world that often pulls families apart, Joseph stands as a steady hand, drawing us together under God's care. His life, rooted in Scripture and alive in real families, is a testament that hope is not a fleeting wish, it is a promise fulfilled in love.

**Fr Dr John Singarayar, SVD**, is a member of the Society of the Divine Word, India Mumbai Province, and holds a doctorate in Anthropology. He is the author of seven books and a regular contributor to academic conferences and scholarly publications in the fields of sociology, anthropology, tribal studies, spirituality, and mission studies.

In an age of bold evangelists and charismatic spiritual leaders, the story of St Joseph offers a compelling counter-narrative for today's believers. Unlike more prominent saints who performed miraculous healing or authored theological texts, Joseph's legacy is defined by quiet faithfulness, a model increasingly relevant to modern Christians navigating ordinary life.

Joseph's journey began with a personal crisis that could have ended in public scandal. When his betrothed, Mary, became pregnant, Jewish law permitted severe consequences. Yet following a divine message in a dream, Joseph chose compassion over convention, protecting both Mary and her unborn child without fanfare or recognition.

"Joseph teaches us to listen first," explains Simon, a ministry volunteer who recently counselled his overwhelmed friend Anthony about church commitments. "Before reacting to conflicts or demands, we are called to pause and discern what is truly important."

## The silent saint

This "holy inconvenience," as Simon describes it, exemplifies how Joseph's example can transform mundane obligations into opportunities for spiritual growth.

Joseph's carpentry career further illustrates this principle of sanctified ordinariness. Working with his hands, he demonstrated that holiness does not require visibility, only love. This perspective has inspired individuals like James, who maintains a "Joseph Journal" documenting small acts of service performed out of the spotlight.

"Joseph probably swept his workshop every night. Someone has got to do it," James remarked after being discovered washing dishes alone after a church function. His approach challenges the contemporary emphasis on recognition and social media visibility.

Beyond humility, Joseph embodied active protection. When Herod threatened

Jesus, Joseph immediately relocated his family to Egypt, demonstrating that faith sometimes requires decisive action. John, a church member, applied this principle when approached by a teenager facing parental divorce.

"Joseph stayed with Mary even when things got messy," John told the teen, offering ongoing support rather than platitudes, a practical application of Joseph's guardianship model.

Joseph's adaptability amid unexpected circumstances offers another lesson for today's believers. "He teaches us to hold plans loosely," notes one minister who restructured his schedule to prioritise family time after realising his church commitments had created domestic tension.

For working Christians, Joseph represents the seamless integration of faith and vocation. One professional keeps a St Joseph statue on

his desk as a reminder that ordinary tasks can become sacred when performed with intentionality. "St Joseph reminds me to focus on what matters," he explains.

Faith communities increasingly honour Joseph's example through practical devotions. Simple prayers like "St Joseph, teach me to serve quietly and trust boldly" are gaining popularity. Some families commemorate his feast days by serving at shelters or hosting meals for those experiencing loneliness, embodying Joseph's family-centred ministry approach.

Joseph's enduring relevance lies in his demonstration that spiritual significance does not require extraordinary circumstances. His legacy continues to inspire believers who feel overlooked or uncertain, reminding them that holiness manifests through consistent, loving action in everyday contexts.

As one devotee put it: "Pick up your tools, whether they are a Bible, a hammer, or a listening ear, and get to work. St Joseph has got your back."

# Don't we belong to each other?

Sally (not her real name) is living with a diagnosis of dementia. She failed her cognitive assessment test, and if we rely on the assessment score, she would be categorised as having early advanced dementia.

How would you support Sally based on her test result? At times, Sally cannot recognise her daughter or son or is unsure if she has taken her meals. Sally cannot recall who brought her to our centre a minute ago. She may get disorientated with time, thinking that it is already late at night when it is only afternoon. It is obvious that Sally is experiencing some loss. However, Sally is also a woman, a mother, a wife, a grandmother, and a friend. Such roles can only be played with support. Can you be a wife to a husband who has left you? We all live in an interrelated community, as we are social beings.

Despite failing her cognitive assessment test, Sally could teach us how to grow sweet potato leaves, how to harvest them, and how to cook them. She may not be able to label the fruit as papaya, but she can advise us that the papaya tree is not bearing fruit because we are not watering it regularly and the leaves look dry. If we



## Dancing with Dementia

DR CECILIA CHAN

had relied solely on the assessment results, we would have missed all her retained skills and abilities.

My concern is that there is little space for those living with dementia if we define them by their defects and reduce them to disease stages. It is not uncommon that we treat these stages as a way to determine their individual needs, remaining capacities, or emerging desires. But putting humans into such boxes is not

helpful and often results in frustration for all parties involved.

When we look at dementia through a purely medical lens, what we see is an individual's problem that medicine can't cure. The bio-medical model sees purely deterioration and loss. What if we look at it differently, since dementia does not exist in a vacuum?

If we look through a social-relational lens, dementia is not just a single problem for the person. It is a condition that affects all of us within the community, including family, doctors, caregivers, colleagues, and friends.

Yes, dementia certainly can take away memory and some cognitive abilities.

Yet, life is about much more than brain-powered abilities. Life is also about laughing, loving, connecting, creating, and enjoying music, art, and nature. When we focus on brain decline, we miss seeing the range of capacities people with dementia still retain.

Very often, we fixate on what people with dementia have lost instead of the capacities they still have. Relatives and family members may feel ashamed by the condition, as if it's something to hide. We are tempted to want to tuck them away so that their deficiencies won't disturb anyone.

We hear narratives such as these:

"She is a living dead."

"I have lost my mum."

"She is not herself."

I guess this is how we have been programmed to see it. I am not denying the fact that dementia can be excruciatingly painful. But we do them a disservice when we say that they are gone when they are not. If my team were to focus on Sally's loss, we would simply take over her life instead of supporting her to live her life to the fullest no matter what stage she is at. Sally is not gone just because she cannot recognise her daughter or gets her days and time mixed up. Sally is still a person, a full human being with a different reality because of the changes in her brain. Sally may have changed, but she

is still very much here. We just need to be with her in the present moment instead of clinging on to the past. This would require some rewiring of sorts on our part.

The truth is that we must remind ourselves that there are no insignificant people in this world, and a diagnosis, disease, or disability does not reduce the value of a person.

I readily admit that I learnt a lot from the people living with dementia, as they taught me how to have an authentic connection with them in the present moment. They taught me how to live in the moment. They taught me how to connect without relying on words. They taught me the importance of connecting without conditions or expectations and how to value the person the way he/she is, not very different from what Jesus taught us.

This brings me to what St Mother Teresa reminded us: "Today, if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other – that man, that woman, that child is my brother or my sister. If everyone could see the image of God in his neighbour, do you think we would still need tanks and generals?"

**Dr Cecilia Chan is a Gerontologist and Dementia Advocate and Activist. She can be contacted via WhatsApp (013-4384388).**

## Access to education – Opportunities and barriers

Pope Francis' prayer intention at the beginning of this year focused on the right to education: 'Let us pray for migrants, refugees, and those affected by war, that their right to an education, which is necessary to build a better world, might always be respected'. In his prayer, he highlights some of the world's most vulnerable groups – refugees, migrants, and those impacted by conflict. These individuals often face displacement, whether across borders to safer countries or within their own, seeking refuge in more stable regions. Their lives are marked by instability and constant uncertainty.

### The Access to Education for Refugees

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has an office in Kuala Lumpur, even though Malaysia is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. This makes refugees 'illegal' migrants and thus not eligible for entry into public schools and universities. Over the last 15 years of working with refugees with mental health disorders, Health Equity Initiatives, has found that one of the most common sources of stress for refugees in Malaysia is the lack of access to education for their children.

This lack of access is not only the lack of opportunities for education but also the lack of financial capacity to educate their children. The good news, though, is the setting up of schools for refugee children. One such school is the Kachin Refugee Learning Centre in Kuala Lumpur. Health Equity Initiatives and Monash University, Malaysia facilitated a project named PARSEL, which focussed on Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) with the children at the Kachin Refugee Learning Centre. This project had good outcomes resulting in the holistic development of the refugee children, including inculcating resilience.

### Barriers of Gender, Ethnicity and Socio-economic Status

It is a well-known fact that girls and



(UNHCR/TedAdnan)

women in low-income countries have less access to education compared to boys and men. Many refugees and migrants originate from low-income countries. A group of economically challenged female children and women who are discriminated against based on their ethnicity and religion are the Afghans from the Hazara tribe, who are Shia Muslims. Afghanistan has been a conflict torn country for the better part of half a century and is now ruled by the Taliban. The Taliban led government has banned girls above the age of 12 from continuing with their education.

There is a sizeable group of Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in Malaysia from the Hazara tribe. Some of the women were able to complete tertiary education. Health Equity Initiatives has engaged a few as refugee community health workers. These are intelligent and able young women who are committed to serving the refugee community they belong to. The opportunity to receive tertiary education made a positive difference in their lives.

### The Children and Grandchildren of Migrants

Many of us in Malaysia, especially those who are ethnic Indian and ethnic Chinese, are children or grandchildren of migrants. Some of these migrants were educators. My grandfather, Thomas Vincent Pereira, who hailed from Kerala, India, was the headmaster of St Michael's School, Alor Setar from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s. He was a well-known educator and the Malaysian Malayalee Catholic community knew him as Vincent Saar. He was also known to have brought the Senior Cambridge examinations to the school and thus created access to this examination for many boys who could not gain entry to the Sultan Abdul Hamid College, Alor Setar, which was the only school that offered the Senior Cambridge examinations in Kedah during that period.

I am a third-generation teacher. My parents were both teachers. My mother was the first woman graduate from her village in Kerala. She was the beneficiary of the access to tertiary education created by the former archbishop of Quilon, Archbishop Jerome Fernandez. The archbishop established

Fatima College and my mother was amongst the first batch of students to study in the college and gain a degree in science and mathematics. She was a teacher at Fr Barre's Convent, Sungai Petani for many years and in turn, provided access to quality education in her classes in school and in her Maths tutoring sessions.

In both the cases above, receiving access to education led to creating access to education for others.

### The Catholic Church and Creating Access to Education

The Catholic Church has been providing access to education for centuries in many countries around the world. Both my grandfather and mother gained their degrees from Catholic institutions. In Malaysia religious congregations have handed over the administration of Catholic missionary schools to the government, though the land the schools are on still belongs to the religious congregations or the Malaysian Catholic Church.

Interestingly, the Infant Jesus congregation has taken back two of these schools, that is Light Street Convent, Penang and Pulau Tikus Convent, Penang with the intention of turning one into a private school and the other into a private university for women.

We hope that more of these schools will be reclaimed by the Catholic Church in Malaysia and turned into community schools, colleges and universities that provide holistic education to the young who, in turn, will make the world a better place to live in.

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❖ *The views expressed are entirely the writer's own.*

# A journey of sacrifice

## The struggles of migrant workers in India

**S**ujeet Tigga, a 27-year-old from the Sambalpur Diocese in the eastern Indian state of Odisha, once dreamed of becoming a priest. He was undergoing formation in a seminary when tragedy struck — his father suffered a fall while working in the jungle, leaving him ill and unable to continue providing for the family. Faced with this harsh reality, Sujeet made the difficult decision to leave his priestly formation and take on the responsibility of supporting his loved ones.

Determined to find work, he travelled over 1,300 kilometres from his home in Badkhalia Village, Odisha, to Chennai in South India, where he found employment in a company called 'Emerging from Equipment' (Pvt. Ltd.). The firm specialises in manufacturing cutting-edge components for ploughshares, a far cry from the path he had envisioned for himself.

"My priority shifted from serving God's people as a priest to becoming the breadwinner for my family," Sujeet shared. For the past six years, he has been toiling in the factory, earning Rs 700 (\$8) for 12 hours of strenuous labour. He carries the weight of responsibility, having already arranged the marriages of three of his sisters and continuing to support his siblings' education. His voice carries a tinge of regret as he reflects on the limited job opportunities back home.

When asked if he still aspires to the priesthood, he expressed his desire but acknowledged his family's needs must come first — at least for a few more years. "Only after fulfilling my responsibilities can I think about myself and my future," he said with quiet determination.

Sujeet's story is not unique. Ajay Kerketta, also from the Sambalpur Diocese, once dreamed of joining the Missionaries of Charity Brothers, but had to forgo his calling to support his siblings' education. In total, 22 young men, ages 19 to 27, work in the same factory, struggling to make ends meet. Among them, 19 are Catholic and from the Sambalpur Diocese, each carrying the burden of their family's well-being. Except for one, none are married, dedicating their hard-earned wages to supporting their parents and siblings. Their stories paint a poignant picture of the harsh reality that forces many to trade their aspirations for survival.

I met Sujeet in January 2025 while travelling through South India, particularly Kerala and Tamil Nadu — more than 2,000 kilometres from Odisha — to visit migrant workers. My mission was to meet them, listen to their stories, seek justice for families who had lost loved ones in tragic workplace incidents, and strengthen ties with organisations, labour departments and church institutions supporting migrants.

### Forced migration and unemployment

During my visit, I met migrants in factories, marketplaces, bus and railway stations, parishes on Sundays, hotels and even on the streets. It was heartbreaking to see young, energetic men toiling long hours for meagre wages, struggling just to survive. Yet, back home, they had no opportunities.

I approached them, letting them know I was there to see them, to listen and to help in any way I could, even though we were strangers. But in those moments, we connected — sharing our struggles, hopes and dreams. I felt a deep connection, like



*Sr Sujata Jena giving awareness training on rights, entitlements, government schemes, and provisions for migrant workers at Delta Company, Ernakulam, Kerala, January 19, 2025. (Global Sisters Report/Sujata Jena)*

we understood each other, even without words.

Northern Indian states like Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Assam continue to be the primary sources of migration to South Indian states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. The lack of employment opportunities in their home states pushes young men to migrate, often into exploitative working conditions.

According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), India's unemployment rate rose sharply between May and June 2024, from seven per cent to 9.2 per cent, the highest in eight months. Many young migrants are unskilled, making them vulnerable to low-paying, labour-intensive jobs with little to no social security.

I was surprised to witness that every week, on Fridays, a bus departs from Raikia, Kandhamal district of Odisha, for Kerala, carrying around 50 migrant workers seeking employment. These workers pay Rs 3,000 (\$34) for the journey, which takes two days. They lament that if they could find 20 days of work in their own state, they would not need to leave. Yet, they have no choice. Some leave behind young children, who grow up without their fathers; others leave behind

elderly parents, hoping that their sacrifices will bring a better future.

### What does the government do?

As per available data, the government has issued licenses to companies to transport workers to different states, with either no guarantees or only limited guarantees regarding wages, layoffs and workplace benefits.

In the last six months, I have witnessed more than 30 migrant workers return as dead bodies — a heartbreaking reality. Yet, the government keeps no data on this and washes its hands of the issue.

If South Indian states can attract industries and companies, why can't states like Odisha and Bihar do the same? The government must invest in small-scale industries to create local jobs and prevent mass migration. Instead of prioritising large corporations, which automate jobs and exclude unskilled workers, policies should focus on developing industries that provide sustainable employment for the youth.

While India's GDP grew by 8.2 per cent in 2023-24, the benefits are concentrated in a few large companies rather than being distributed among the working class. The government must take responsibility for ensuring that economic policies benefit the poor and unemployed, not just the

elite.

The government must recall the Talisman (Amulet) of Mahatma Gandhi, which serves as a guiding principle: "Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest person you have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to them."

### The role of the Church

The Church has been widely engaged in providing education and health services. Recently, the Church and some religious congregations have been at the forefront of supporting migrants, particularly in destination states. In Kerala, some parishes conduct special Masses for migrant workers, followed by free meals.

However, new challenges have emerged. Many young migrants fall into illegal activities, including drug abuse, trafficking and alcoholism. Sex work, broken families, lack of education for their children and poor living conditions are growing concerns.

It is time for the Church and more and more religious communities to prioritise their ministries, journeying with migrant workers and providing them with skills training coupled with spiritual and moral support. We can support them by advocating for policies that ensure fair wages, safe working conditions and economic opportunities in their home states. As individuals, we can walk with them, listen to their struggles and extend our hands in solidarity.

In this Jubilee Year of Hope, what could be the greatest grace in life? It is to share the burdens of others and help them overcome their pain and suffering through accompaniment and empowerment. We are called to bring light to these struggling workers. Let us be the voice of the voiceless, standing for justice, dignity and compassion. Together, we can ensure that migration is a choice, not a necessity. We owe it to those who have sacrificed everything for their families to create a world where they no longer have to.

**Sr Sujata Jena, Global Sisters Report (NCR)**

*Sujata Jena is a religious sister of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary based in the eastern Indian state of Odisha.*



*Sr Sujata Jena interacting with young migrant workers at Emerging from Equipment (Pvt. Ltd.) company, Chennai on January 22, 2025. (Global Sisters Report/Sujata Jena)*

# I am the only Catholic....

Early within the season of Lent, one hears of the Rite of Election where those who may be baptised (also called catechumens) at the upcoming Easter Vigil are called together to meet the local bishop and others in the same journey as themselves. Their names are enrolled in a book and witnessed by the bishop. The entire Rite of Election sets a welcoming tone and aims to encourage the catechumens as they enter the final stages of preparation for baptism. Following this ceremony, there will be three more “Scrutinies” on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays in Lent. The pinnacle of the journey is found at the Easter Vigil night when the catechumens are baptised and welcomed into the Church. Most church-going Catholics are aware of the journey the catechumens make.

Over the last 17 years as a priest serving in different locations and parts of the world, there is another voice that one also hears, perhaps throughout the year: “Father, I am the only Catholic in my family, and....” I am sure, like me, many of you have heard the above statement or similar ones, countless times. It is said with a sense of loneliness, both spiritual and human. One senses sadness and struggle. It is a struggle that seems to say, “How do I make them understand my newly found faith and worldview without offending them?”

If investigated further, one would find that a number of these people are catechumens. They were baptised as adults during Easter. They enjoyed the formal entry into the Christian faith, and the glow that followed. But, in the months and years that follow, the reality of the struggle emerges. They, knowingly or unknowingly, experience the Paschal

Mystery to which they enjoined themselves by becomes disciples of Christ in the world.

Another place one hears this struggle is in inter-religious marriages. While the couples work towards maintaining their marriages, the give and take actions (done in the spirit of unity and preventing conflict) leave an uneasy feeling deep within. They wonder, “Am I choosing something else over God?” Questions abound, as does the fear to talk to one’s spouse less something unfavourable should happen. We all want our marriages to work and bring about hope and joy. However, we also have, as Christians, to acknowledge the struggle of the person who says, “(Father), I am the only Catholic....”

The practical answer we hear from many in response to the struggles mentioned above is, “Pray and everything will be alright.” Prayer is indeed needed to encounter and overcome challenges. Jesus prayed, and at times for long periods. However, beyond prescribing that the person spends time in prayer to address their loneliness and struggle, is there something more that we, as Church, should do? Did Jesus stop at prayer? Or did He do more?

The process of accompaniment does not end at the moment of baptism. Baptism is the beginning of Christian life, not its conclusion. I wonder if, amidst the numerous activities the diocese and parishes organise, there are provisions for the ongoing integration of the neophytes. Are there special teams, or a ministry set up precisely to accompany the neophytes into their new life? What would be the role of the sponsor or godparent in all this? And the BECs or other ministries? In some parishes, it appears that the RCIA also does the ongoing accompaniment of the neophyte

in addition to their existing tasks. This may be manageable when the number of neophytes is small, but if the numbers are bigger, then they may need to reconsider. More importantly, should not other “non-RCIA” facilitators (fresh faces, as some call it) be responsible in helping the neophytes in their integration process? This is not to imply that RCIA facilitators are not suited for the task at hand, but rather to allow the neophytes to see, experience and understand the life of faith in the church from others as well. It is about “enlarging the tent” and allowing more to participate in the forming and integration process of the neophytes. It is to provide new “friends-in-the-Lord.”

If we look at the Gospels, it seems like Jesus took about three years to recruit and form His disciples. He journeyed with them. And most certainly, He got to know them beyond the formation He was giving them. Even when He sent them out on mission to the towns and villages, He sent them in pairs. Not alone. The companionship allows for accompaniment.

Integration should be accompanied with reflectiveness, an important aspect of Christian life and spirituality. The path of spiritual accompaniment, which includes discerning and interpreting the events of one’s life in the light of the faith, leads to discovering the voice of the Lord. Fostering that union and relationship is the ultimate goal. A common worry these days is how neophytes are immediately recruited to be part of the parish RCIA team. Is this suitable for the wellbeing and development of the neophytes, given their late entry into the faith, one wonders. The Church has much more to offer. Perhaps



## Canvas

FR RICHARD ANTHONYSAMY SJ

aligning our ministries to support the development of the neophytes should be considered to promote integration of faith and life.

I wonder how we could, as Church, help those who are the only Christians in their family better in terms of “ministering” to those families as well. Do we invite them in a special way to our parish feast day or Christmas gathering? In one

parish, each year they would have a special gathering of those in inter-religious marriages. I have often wondered if the parable of the Samaritan Woman at the well (John 4) could serve as a meditation to the challenges mentioned above. The way in which Jesus went from transforming the Samaritan woman to transforming her village in a respectful and humane way, provides useful points for deeper pondering.

Lent is a time for soul searching and returning to the Lord. Within our midst, there are these fellow Christians who carry the blessing and weight of being the only Catholic in their family or circumstances. Almsgiving in Lent is to those who need it. This would be one group of persons whom we need to open our hearts to. After all, by their baptism, they are also part of the family of the church. Shouldn’t we care for our family?

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❖ *The views expressed are entirely the writer’s own.*

We have reached the Third Sunday of Lent, a milestone in our journey of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. By now, many of us have hopefully found a steady rhythm — whether it is through personal sacrifice, deeper prayer, or acts of generosity. Families in our BECs are gathering to pray the Way of the Cross, and many have sought the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

However, if you feel you haven’t fully embraced the Lenten spirit yet, do not be discouraged. Lent is not about perfect execution but about renewal — both spiritually and practically. God does not seek perfection but transformation. There is still time to recalibrate, reflect, and make this season meaningful.

Interestingly, this year, we share a unique sense of solidarity with our Muslim brethren. As we observe Lent, they are observing *Ramadan* — a season of fasting and reflection. For me personally, I felt united with many of my Muslim friends and colleagues.

Both our faiths emphasise self-discipline, sacrifice, and generosity. This parallel reminds us that fasting, whether from food or material comforts, is not meant to deprive us but to refine us.

While Lent is often associated with spiritual cleansing, what if we also used this time for financial renewal? Jesus reminds us in Matthew 6:21:

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” A modern take on this might be: “Show me where you spend your money, and I’ll show you what matters most to you.”

This Lent, let us not only examine our spiritual lives but also our financial habits. How we manage money reveals a great deal about our priorities. Do our spending patterns align with our values? Are we being wise stewards of what we have been entrusted with?



## Faith and Finance

HAZEL ONG-ARCHIBALD

Beyond giving up certain foods or habits, have you considered applying the principle of fasting to your finances? A financial fast can be a powerful way to grow in discipline, gratitude, and generosity.

For the remainder of Lent, consider taking on these challenges:

- Avoid non-essential spending — No impulse buys, luxury

indulgences, or unnecessary expenses.

- Track every expense — Write down everything you spend to gain awareness of your financial habits.

- Redirect savings toward meaningful causes — Use what you save to bless others, whether through charity, community support, or long-term financial goals.

### Why a financial fast?

A financial fast offers both spiritual and practical benefits.

- It reveals spending habits. When you pause non-essential spending, you quickly realize how little you actually need. Many of us experienced this during pandemic lockdowns, when we learned to live with less.
- It builds gratitude. When we abstain from excess, we begin to appreciate what we already have. Instead of constantly seeking more, we learn contentment.
- It improves cash flow. Mindful spending leads to healthier finances in the long run, reducing financial stress and increasing stability.

However, the goal isn’t simply to hoard money. The savings from this fast should be seen as an opportunity for generosity — a way to give back, help someone in need, or invest in something meaningful.

Lent invites us to pause and reflect: Where

# Fasting financially this Lent

is our treasure? Are we using our resources wisely? Are we being intentional with our money, or are we spending unconsciously?

Take a look at your recent transactions. What story do they tell? Are you spending more on luxuries than on meaningful giving? Are impulse purchases draining resources that could be used for something more fulfilling?

For example, shopping apps make spending easier than ever. Perhaps, this Lent, consider deleting those apps to reduce temptation. You may be surprised at how much you save simply by removing the convenience of instant purchases.

Imagine if the financial discipline we develop during Lent extends beyond Easter. Small, intentional changes can have lasting effects like:

- Better financial stability — Small savings add up over time. “Sedikit-sedikit, lama-lama jadi bukit.”
- Less financial stress — Cutting impulse purchases leads to greater financial security.
- Increased generosity — When we control our finances, we have more freedom to give and serve others.

The key is balance. Just as fasting from food is not about starvation but self-discipline, a financial fast is not about deprivation but about intentionality. After Lent, you don’t have to live like a monk, but you would have developed healthier financial habits that can serve you for life.

To make this journey more actionable, here are five simple steps to guide your financial fast:

1. Commit to avoiding unnecessary spending for the rest of Lent.
2. Track your expenses. For the next 30 days, write down every expense. Awareness is the first step to change.
3. Set a giving goal. Decide how much of your savings you will donate or use to

bless someone in need.

4. Reassess your financial goals. Where do you want to be financially by next Easter? Identify one step you can take today.

5. Pray for wisdom. Ask God to guide you in being a better steward of your financial resources.

Lent is not meant to be a temporary season of sacrifice. The habits we cultivate — both spiritual and financial — should continue long after Easter.

If Lent has helped you become more intentional with spending, keep applying those lessons. If you have found joy in giving, make it a lifelong practice. If you have gained financial clarity, build on it with better planning and stewardship.

Ultimately, money is more than just a worldly concern. It affects our stress levels, relationships, and ability to serve others.

When we manage our finances well, we experience greater freedom — the freedom to give, to help, and to live without unnecessary burdens.

This Lent, may we not only prepare our hearts for Easter but emerge from this season with stronger faith, wiser financial habits, and a deeper commitment in line with God’s purpose and mission for our lives.

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❖ *The views expressed are entirely the writer’s own.*



Fr Ron Rolheiser

# Casting out demons through silence

There is an incident in the Gospels where the disciples of Jesus were unable to cast out a particular demon. When they asked Jesus why, He replied that some demons can only be cast out by prayer. The particular demon He was referring to in this instance had rendered a man deaf and mute.

I want to name another demon which seemingly cannot be cast out except by prayer, namely, the demon that forever fractures our personal relationships, families, communities, and churches through misunderstanding and division, making it forever difficult to be in life-giving community with each other.

What particular prayer is needed to cast out this demon? The prayer of a shared silence, akin to a *Quaker Silence*.

What is a *Quaker Silence*?

A tiny bit of history first: Quakers are a historically Protestant Christian set of denominations whose members refer to each other as *Friends* but are generally called *Quakers* because of a famous statement once made by their founder, George Fox (1624-1691). Legend has it that in the face of some authority figures who were trying to intimidate him, Fox held up his Bible and said: *This is the word of God, quake before it!*

For the Quakers, particularly early on,

their common prayer consisted mainly in sitting together in community in silence, waiting for God to speak to them. They would sit together in silence, waiting on God's power to come and give them something that they could not give themselves, namely, real community with each other beyond the divisions that separated them. Though they sat individually, their prayer was radically communal. They were sitting as one body, waiting together for God to give them a unity they could not give themselves.

Might this be a practice that we, Christians of every denomination, could practice today in the light of the helplessness we feel in the face of division everywhere (in our families, in our churches, and in our countries)? Given that, as Christians, we are at root one community inside the Body of Christ, a single organic body where physical distance does not really separate us, might we begin as a regular prayer practice to sit with each other in a Quaker Silence, one community, sitting in silence, waiting together, waiting for God to come and give us the community that we are powerless to give ourselves?

Practically, how might this be done? Here's a suggestion: each day set aside a time to sit in silence, alone or ideally with others, for a set period of time (fifteen to

twenty minutes) where the intent, unlike in private meditation, is not first of all to nurture your personal intimacy with God but rather, to sit together in community with everyone inside the Body of Christ (and with all sincere persons everywhere) asking God to come and give us communion beyond division.

This could also be a powerful ritual in marriage and in family life. Perhaps one of the most healing therapies inside of a marriage might be for a couple to sit together regularly in a silence, asking God to give them something that they cannot give themselves, namely, an understanding of each other beyond the tensions of everyday life. I remember as a child, praying the Rosary together as a family each evening and that ritual having the effect of a Quaker Silence. It calmed the tensions that had built up during the day and left us feeling more peaceful as a family.

I use the term Quaker Silence, but there are various forms of meditation and contemplation which have the same intentionality. For example, the founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (the religious order I belong to), St Eugene de Mazenod, left us a prayer practice he called *Oraison*. This is its intention: as Oblates we are meant to live together in community, but we are a worldwide con-

gregation scattered over sixty countries around the world. How can we be in community with each other across distance?

Through the practice of *Oraison*. St Eugene asked us to set aside a half hour each day to sit in a silence that is intended to be a time when we are not just in communion with God but are also intentionally in communion with all Oblates around the world. Akin to a Quaker Silence, it is a prayer wherein each person sits alone, in silence, but in community, asking God to form one community across all distances and differences. When Jesus says some demons are only cast out by prayer, He means it. And perhaps the demon to which this most particularly refers is the demon of misunderstanding and division. We all know how powerless we are to cast it out. Sitting in a communal silence, asking God to do something for us beyond our powerlessness, can exorcise the demon of misunderstanding and division.

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## What the Blessed Mother teaches us about beauty and wisdom

Years ago, I sat in my afternoon theology class at Franciscan University as my classmates, professor and I had a lively conversation about our Blessed Mother. As we discussed her immaculate conception, we pondered how it might have affected her in the "little" aspects of her life.

We students wondered aloud what common calamities Mary might have dodged via her sinless nature. Would she ever come down with a cold or the flu? Would she always smell sweet? These questions allowed us to reflect on Mary in a new, more personal way. As we each took turns intuiting other ideas, another question arose: As she grew older, would Mary wear the visible signs of age? Would her skin have wrinkled? Would her hair have turned grey?

At the time, I remember confidently assuming Our Lady would have remained vibrant and youthful. But as I grow into my own adulthood and reflect on holy women who have gone before me, I'm inclined to change my mind. With each passing year, I have an increased reverence for the particular beauty, earned only by age.

As Proverbs 16:31 states: "Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained by a life that is just."

As a young child, I was so intrigued by both my maternal and paternal grandmothers' skin. I remember their soft hands, lined with deep hues of blue just beneath the surface, that held mine tightly. I remember their faces, with

cheeks that crinkled and squiggled in every direction, that looked upon me with love and tenderness. Lines running above and below their eyes, around their mouths, and across their foreheads moving as they spoke, laughed, smiled or showed concern. Their skin, looking and feeling so different from my own at the time, seemed ethereal.

Each of my grandmothers, maternal and paternal, was beautiful. Yes, physically. But that was such a small bit of their beauty. Both were generous, virtuous, selfless and faithful — much like Mary. They were hearty homemakers, loyal wives, and loving mothers and grandmothers. They were radiant women. They were beautiful.

While they've both completed their earthly pilgrimage, I slowly notice my own mother becoming more and more like those women, my grandmas, in all the loveliest ways. She is generous and gentle. She is crafty and handy. She is devoted, steady, faithful and brimming with holy joy. And, yes, she has wrinkles and grey hair. And she is beautiful.

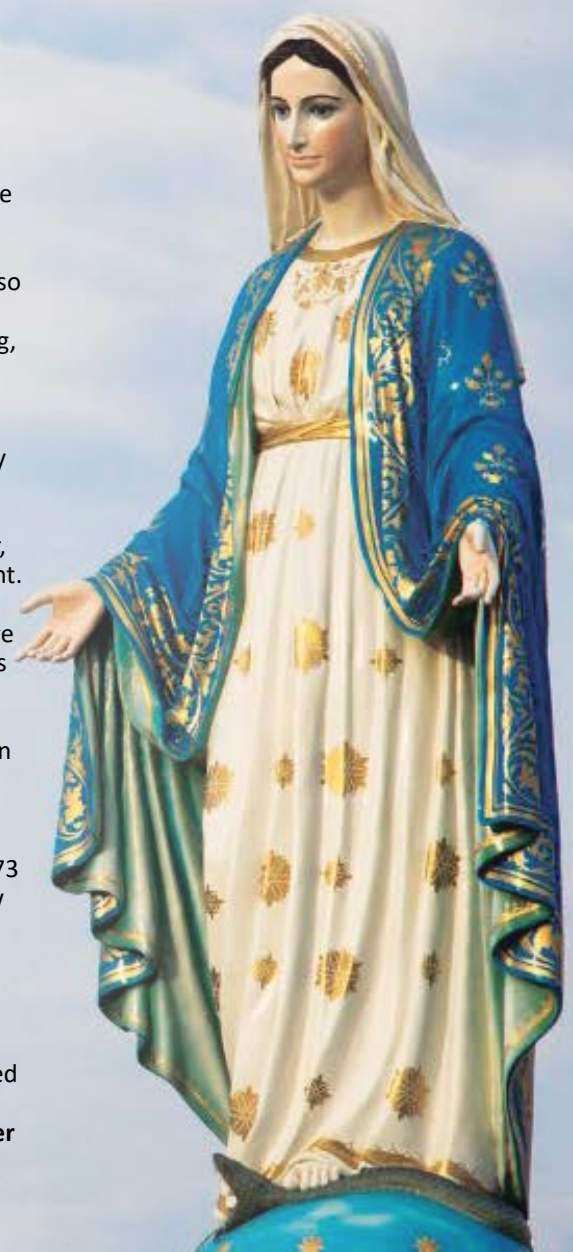
Her face reflects the years she has lived through — seasons of labour, joy and harvest. The lines etched into her skin are the remnants of a million smiles and the footprints of grief; lines that knit her brows together carry memories of wonder, concern and concentration. Couldn't Mary, having experienced the greatest splendours and sorrows of all humanity, have looked the same?

Despite all the admiration I feel, I surprise myself when, at the slightest whisper of a wrinkle or thinning of a lip in my own reflection, I quickly recite an internal "anti-aging litany," touting all the ways I could hide or fight the inevitable. While the practices and products that come to mind are not objectively bad, I so often miss the point.

If my face or body shows signs of aging, this is only because I've lived enough days, months and years for this process to occur. What a glorious reality! Rather than putting my energy, time and money into resisting aging, I pray to live like the women before me, my grandmothers, my own mother and my Blessed Mother, radically tethered to the present moment. We do not know how many days we will be given, but we are here now. Let us live with abundant gratitude, revelling in this unmerited gift of our life — reflecting beauty and wisdom in their fullness.

Though my Marian theology discussion occurred nearly a decade ago, I continually find myself mulling it over, especially since some sources indicate Mary was taken to heaven at age 72 or 73 — and, since the Middle Ages, "the view prevails that she 'died' of love," per the Catholic Encyclopaedia.

I'm no theologian, so I won't try to claim with certainty what her aging process actually looked like. But in my heart, I love imagining a beautiful Blessed Mother Mary, radiant with wisdom and age. **Bridget McCartney Nohara, Register**



# Little Catholics' corner



Complete the paragraph by filling in the blanks with the correct words from the words in the word bank:

Jesus told them this parable. " \_\_\_\_\_ upon a time there was a \_\_\_\_\_ who had a \_\_\_\_\_ tree in his \_\_\_\_\_. He came to it looking for \_\_\_\_\_, and didn't find \_\_\_\_\_.

So he said to the \_\_\_\_\_; \_\_\_\_\_ here! I've been \_\_\_\_\_ to this fig tree for \_\_\_\_\_ years hoping to \_\_\_\_\_ some fruit, and I haven't found any! \_\_\_\_\_ it down! Why should it use up the \_\_\_\_\_?



The gardener replied, "let it \_\_\_\_\_ for just this \_\_\_\_\_ year more. I'll \_\_\_\_\_ all \_\_\_\_\_ it and put on some \_\_\_\_\_. Then, if it fruits next \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_; and if not, you can cut it \_\_\_\_\_."

(Luke 13: 6-9)

Word Bank		
once	gardener	manure
man	three	year
fig	cut	well
vineyard	find	good
fruit	alone	down
any	one	soil
look	dig	
coming	round	

What's wrong with this fig tree?  
See what the two men want to do with it by reading what they say in a mirror.

Below are five similar-looking pictures. Can you spot the two photographs that are identical?



Answer: Pic 1 and 3

Dear children,

In our Bible lesson today, Jesus tells a story about a man who planted a fig tree in his garden. Year after year he watched the tree, but the tree never produced any fruit.

Finally, the man went to the gardener who took care of the tree and said to him, "For three years I have been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! It is just taking up space in the garden."

The gardener answered, "Please, sir, give it one more chance. Leave it for another year. I will give it special attention ... If the tree produces fruit next year, great, if not, then you can cut it down."

In telling this story, Jesus is really talking about us and about God.

God has "planted" us here on this earth and He expects us to produce good fruit in our life. What kind of fruit does He expect?

When He looks at the way we live our life, He wants to see things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and gentleness. There are times when He is disappointed in what He sees, but He is willing to give us another chance.

Children, what can we do to produce the kind of fruit that God expects? We can worship regularly, read God's Word, and pray. Those things will help us to live a fruitful life!

Love  
Aunty Eliz



# Perjalanan SALIB towards MPC2026



**KUALA LUMPUR:** Since 2018, the Catholic Church in Malaysia has been working towards a shared dream: uniting all nine dioceses to Celebrate, Listen, and Walk as one Church.

This ambitious vision of unity in diversity will culminate in the Malaysia Pastoral Convention 2026 (MPC2026), which is scheduled to take place in September 2026, coinciding with Malaysia Day.

## Family, Society, Ecology, Church

The journey towards MPC2026 has been shaped through a series of assemblies that have provided opportunities for the faithful to engage in discussion, discernment, and reflection on the pastoral needs and concerns of the local Church. These assemblies, which began at the parish level and extended to diocesan and regional gatherings, have focused on four main areas: Family, Society, Ecology, and Church. While the process has been challenging and, at times exhausting, it has also been deeply enriching and rewarding.

In 2023, the Malaysia Religious Assembly (MRA2023) was held, and the momentum will continue with the Malaysian Catholic Youth Day (MCYD2025) in 2025. The MCYD2025 will bring together young people from across Malaysia to engage in discussions about their concerns and how to address them as part of their faith journey. These events are key milestones in the larger process leading to MPC2026, offering a path of reflection and action for the Church as a whole.

## Perjalanan Salib

Echoing the words of Pope Francis, “without prayer, there will be no synod,” the final leg of the journey towards MPC2026 will be marked by *Perjalanan SALIB* — a devotion of prayer and pilgrimage. The aim of *Perjalanan SALIB* is to visit every parish, even those in the peripheries, and guide the community in a



The diocesan coordinators with the salib.

shared experience of prayer that deepens their relationship with God and with one another.

*Perjalanan SALIB* will officially commence on April 3, 2025, during MCYD2025, when a special cross will be solemnly blessed for public veneration. The cross will then be divided into nine individual *salibs* — one for each diocese — and will journey across Malaysia until August 2026. At MPC2026, the *salibs* will be reunited as one, completing the Corpus and symbolising the unity of the Church in Malaysia.

## Diocesan Coordinators

To ensure the smooth running of this journey, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia has appointed coordinators in each diocese to oversee the *Perjalanan SALIB*. In January 2025, about 15 coordinators and assistant coordinators from across the dioceses gathered at the Archdiocesan Pastoral Centre in Kuala Lumpur for a workshop. The training focused on the logistics of the journey, including how to han-

dle the *salibs*, set up events, and finalise the 18-month plan leading up to MPC2026.

## Bangkitlah - the official hymn

In support of *Perjalanan SALIB*, an official hymn titled *Bangkitlah* has been composed. The hymn reflects the dual nature of the journey — it is not just a reflection of Christ's

passion but also a celebration of His victory and the grace of salvation that we receive through His love.

## Social Media platforms

Additionally, creative media has been developed for sharing on various social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube: Gereja Katolik Malaysia) to engage the wider community. A dedicated website ([gerejakatolik.my](http://gerejakatolik.my)) has also been launched, offering resources and updates on the journey towards MPC2026.

As we continue on this path towards unity, let us seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the true protagonist of the Church, to lead us toward a new way of being Church — a synodal Church that embraces its diverse members and walks together in faith, hope, and love. The journey is long, but with prayer and dedication, we trust that the Church will be united and strengthened for the challenges of tomorrow.

Let us walk this path together — toward a future where the Church, united in diversity, continues to grow in faith and witness to the love of Christ.



Perjalanan SALIB coordinator, Gregory Pravin giving an explanation to the coordinators.

# Fr David Michael's million moment: Digital faith shines on!



**O**n Ash Wednesday, Fr David Michael Moses added a modern twist to the Lenten season by sharing the exciting news that he's reached one million Instagram followers.

In an era where sharing one's journey of faith can feel as daring as it is inspiring, Fr David's milestone reminds us that genuine connection is always worth celebrating.

Born with an unmistakable spark for ministry, Fr David Michael, from Houston, has charmed followers with his authentic storytelling and creative ministry. Whether he's sharing behind-the-scenes glimpses of his Concerts for Life; using real-life (and often, fun) analogies that make the Church's teachings even more understandable; or opening up about his personal journey of calling and community

service, his online presence has become a beacon of hope and inspiration.

Therefore, a huge congratulations to Fr David on this digital milestone, and to all members of the clergy who put themselves out there to spread their joy for the Catholic faith. After all, it takes real courage to post these reels — especially with the eyes of the world watching!

This exciting achievement is part of a broader movement within the Catholic digital community. Innovative platforms like the *Hallow App* (which has been downloaded over 14 million times), *Formed* (a media platform with over one million users across 5,500 parishes), and *Word on Fire* (Bishop Barron's online ministry that reached one million followers last February) have also been making waves, reaching audiences far and wide with their unique takes on prayer, reflection, and teaching.

And along with Fr David and the apps mentioned above, there are plenty of

other Catholic ministries lighting up the digital sphere. The popular *Ascension Presents* channel, known for its engaging and heartfelt content, celebrated reaching one million YouTube subscribers, while the Vatican's own media channels have seen tremendous growth — connecting millions around the world.

Of course, we shouldn't forget Pope Francis, whose Twitter presence has a staggering 18.4 million followers, further emphasising how digital platforms are becoming powerful tools for spreading the Gospel.

In the vibrant intersection of tradition and technology, milestones like these are more than just numbers. They're a joyful reminder that when you live your faith boldly and authentically, the community finds you — and together, you create a ripple effect of hope, inspiration, and love. Here's to Fr David Michael Moses and all those who bravely share their light in the digital age! **Cerith Gardiner, Aletea**

## Bangkok Christian College introduces Thailand's first AI-powered student ID

**THAILAND:** Bangkok Christian College (BCC) has launched Thailand's first AI-powered student ID card, incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) and data analytics to support students in personal development, financial literacy, and career planning.

The initiative, introduced on March 10, is a step towards modernising education, though it also came amid growing global discussions on AI ethics, including concerns raised by Pope Francis and the Vatican.

BCC officials said the student ID card, which they claim is the first of its kind in Thailand, offers students more than basic identification.

"This is more than an ID — it is a personal assistant, financial guide, and career development tool, all in one," said Wichai Seesut, Deputy Director of Bangkok Christian College.

According to Seesut, the card integrates Generative AI and Data Analytics as part of what the school describes as a "seamless learning" approach.

The card provides real-time financial tracking, aims to promote responsible spend-



**Bangkok Christian College (BCC) introduces Thailand's first AI-integrated student ID card. (LiCas News/BCC)**

ing, and includes features designed to develop financial literacy.

It also monitors eating habits and analyses nutrition using Bioelectrical Impedance

Analysis (BIA) technology.

The system tracks students' participation in extracurricular activities, with data used to assess individual strengths, interests, and potential career paths, beginning at the primary school level.

As AI technology expands into education and other sectors, the Vatican has raised ethical concerns over its implications.

A Vatican document released recently provides guidelines for AI applications, cautioning against over-reliance on automated systems.

The document, which addresses AI use in fields ranging from warfare to health care, emphasised that AI should complement, not replace, human intelligence.

"The impact of AI's uses in various sectors may not always be predictable from their inception," the document said, underscoring the need for ethical oversight.

Pope Francis has also warned about the risks of AI, addressing world leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos last month.

In a statement delivered by Cardinal Peter

Turkson, the Pope said AI presents "critical concerns" for humanity's future and could contribute to a "crisis of truth."

"This technology is designed to learn and make certain choices autonomously, adapting to new situations and providing answers not foreseen by its programmers, thus raising fundamental questions about ethical responsibility, human safety, and the broader implications of these developments for society," he said.

He urged governments and businesses to approach AI development with "due diligence and vigilance" to prevent ethical compromises.

The BCC AI-powered student card was developed over three years by the school's Education Policy and Innovation Division and has received official approval from the Bank of Thailand, according to school officials.

The card can be used for tapping to pay for meals in the cafeteria, borrowing books from the library, and checking in to extracurricular activities. **Chainarong Monthienvichienchai, LiCAS News**

## Altar servers enjoy fun beach outing

**PENANG:** The Altar Servers Ministry of Risen Christ Catholic Church, known as the Society of St Stephen, recently organised a "Beach Outing Potluck 2025" for its members.

The primary purpose of organising this event was to strengthen the relationships among members, fostering connections that extend beyond serving at Mass, to building friendships that support their shared journey of faith. The youth believe that friendships that encourage one another to grow closer to Christ will help deepen their faith, empowering them to serve not only God but also His children.

The outing began with an opening prayer seeking God's protection and guidance throughout the day, led by one of the members. The group then engaged in a series of fun games, including a relay race and captain's ball, designed to strengthen teamwork and camaraderie. Following the games, participants enjoyed a potluck lunch and BBQ, where members had the

opportunity to cook their own burgers and share the dishes they brought.

The day concluded with a closing prayer, expressing gratitude for God's protection and asking for His continued blessings upon all involved.

Reflecting on the event, two members shared their thoughts on its significance:

Katrina, 18, said, "This beach outing was a meaningful experience, allowing us to bond as a team while enjoying the scenery. Through various activities, we strengthened our teamwork, communication, and trust, which will undoubtedly enhance our collaboration moving forward. It not only boosted our spirits but also reinforced the importance of working together towards shared goals within the ministry."

Joseph, 18, added, "This outing helped me realise that the relationship between servers is important, no matter as a committee or as a member. The responsibility and effort involved in planning an event



are also crucial, as they contribute to making it meaningful and full of happiness."

Overall, the "Beach Outing Potluck 2025" successfully achieved its objectives of strengthening bonds within the ministry and fostering a sense of community, while creating lasting memories for the members. **Kenneth Chung**



# Remembering Pakistani Catholic martyrs this Lent

ISLAMABAD: Lent arrives each year as a season to focus on Christ, His suffering and His sacrifice. But for Pakistani Christians, it is also overshadowed by painful memories of violence.

The assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, a Catholic Minister for Minorities, in Islamabad in 2011, a mob attack on Joseph Colony in Lahore in 2013, followed by church bombings in the same city in 2015, all happened in March.

This was followed by the horrific Easter carnage in 2016, when a suicide bomb attack targeted Christians in a park in Lahore, killing at least 72 people.

For Christians, March has become the deadliest month, particularly in Lahore, the capital and largest city in Punjab province, home to 80 per cent of Pakistan's 2.4 million Christians.

Lahore has become a hotbed of religious intolerance, following decades of institutionalised discrimination, targeted violence, and state inaction.

It is ironically known as the cultural capital or "Heart of Pakistan." The city was once known for its hospitality, intellectual diversity, and openness to other cultures.

But in the past few decades, it has come to serve as the base for many hardline organisations that thrive on the misuse of blasphemy laws, religious nationalism, and anti-Western and anti-liberal rhetoric.

However, the anti-Christian violence is not limited to Lahore.

In 2018, four members of a Catholic family were killed in a militant attack in Quetta, the capital of restive Balochistan province, a day after Easter.

The so-called Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack.

In the national capital, Islamabad, the 2011 killing of Bhatti was claimed by the Taliban al-Qaida Punjab.

Pakistani Catholics remember Bhatti as a fearless fighter of minority rights and as someone who dared to defy the blasphemy laws and so paid the ultimate price.

They are yet to reconcile to the

fact that his killers still roam free, 14 years after the brazen killing.

It also hurts them that his cause for sainthood remains in limbo.

The Community of Sant Egidio, a Catholic lay organisation that continues to honour his legacy, believes he is a modern-day martyr for peace and social justice.

But the recognition he deserved, many believe, was denied except on Wikipedia, which ranks him as the first native Pakistani Servant of God in the history of the Catholic Church.

It's not him, but Akash Bashir who became the first native-born Pakistani put on the path to sainthood by the Catholic Church.

Bashir was just 20 years old when he was killed on March 15, 2015, while preventing a suicide bomber from entering a packed St. John's Catholic Church during Sunday Mass. Both Bashir and the bomber were killed when the bomb exploded outside the church.

However, very few Pakistani Catholics visit his grave in a nondescript Catholic cemetery in Youhanabad. People do not remember him and his sacrifice.

The Church in Asia often hesitates to highlight its sainthood candidates, perhaps due to the Vatican's stringent requirements and the associated costs.

The Church in Pakistan could take the lead here, not merely follow. It must break free from clericalism, hesitation, and indecision.

It cannot wait for the Vatican to recognise these two martyrs while remaining silent. The bishops' conference, religious communities, and lay leaders must declare them heroes.

Specifically, Bashir's heroism proves that young Pakistani Christians, despite being subjected to discrimination and intolerance, have refused to cower and have stood for the dignity of their faith.

How many more martyrs will it take for justice to be served? How long will the Church continue to turn a blind eye to its own fallen heroes?

**Kamran Chaudhry, ucanews.com**

## MEMORIAM

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**Mr Kitriyan @  
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Savarimuthu**

From the Lord:  
**1905**

To the Lord:  
**25th March 1998**

Dear Tatta  
although you can't be  
here with me,  
we're truly not apart  
until the final breath  
I take you'll be living  
in my heart.  
Thank you for your love,  
understanding and support.  
Till we meet again and  
may your soul rest in peace  
Tatta.

Deeply Missed  
By: Daniel Gnanaprasam

**6th Anniversary  
In Ever Loving Memory of**



**Yvonne Yeoh Siew Lay  
Departed: 22-03-2019**

*In our lives  
you will always remain.*

**Deeply missed and  
forever cherished by  
Joseph, Michael and  
Marie Ong**

**In Loving Memory of**



**Francis Louis PPN  
14.6.1931 - 27.3.1987**



**Julia Louis  
22.4.1936 - 2.1.2023**

*In our hearts, the memories left behind,  
will be cherished forever.*

Deeply missed by  
family, relatives and loved ones

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Precious beautiful mother, angel  
Angel all our lives  
By your walk of faith and love  
Suffering and compassion  
Patience and forbearance  
Giving and ever-forgiving  
Honesty, humility and simplicity  
You shine a blessed light.  
Beloved mother  
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Pray for us.  
Your loving family.

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# Synodality meets Indigenous wisdom in new Asia-centred book

BANGKOK: A network of faith-based organisations and Indigenous rights advocates has launched a book that explores the intersection of Synodality and Indigenous traditions in Asia.

The publication, titled *Synodality and Indigenous Living Traditions in Asia*, is a collection of papers, reflections, pastoral experiences, and proposals aimed at amplifying Indigenous voices within the universal Church.

The book was introduced by Salesian Bishop George Pallippambil of Miao and released by Cardinal Filipe Neri Ferrão, the President of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, during a meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, on March 12.

The book is a product of a seminar held in Kathmandu, Nepal, from Nov 10-16, 2024, where bishops, scholars, pastors, youth, and women leaders — many of whom belong to or work with Indigenous communities — gathered for discussions on faith and Indigenous identity.

*Synodality and Indigenous Living Traditions in Asia* is a collection of papers, reflections, pastoral experiences, and proposals aimed at amplifying Indigenous voices within the universal Church.

The event and the book were part of an initiative led by ROOTS: Catholic Network

Among Indigenous Peoples of Asia, a group that seeks to deepen the Church's engagement with Indigenous perspectives through the Synodal process.

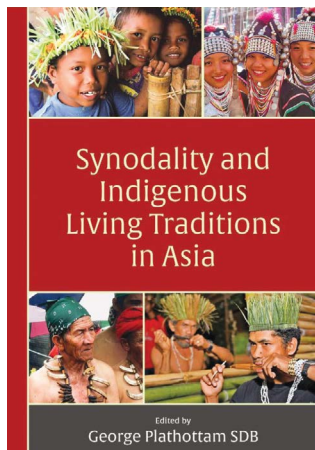
Divided into two broad sections, the book first delves into theological and pastoral reflections, while the second part presents contextual stories and testimonies from Indigenous communities.

According to the editor of the book, Fr George Plathottam, SDB, the book highlights the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, their wisdom, communal values, and their relationships with the Divine, the environment, and one another.

It also addresses pressing challenges such as urbanisation, migration, climate change, and struggles for land and cultural preservation.

"The ideas shared by the authors are the fruit of their own study, reflection, and experience, and hence, while editing them, efforts have been made to present them without diluting the original flavour of their contribution," he said.

The priest said the book serves as a call for



greater recognition of Indigenous theologies, liturgical inculturation, and reconciliation efforts. It aligns with the themes of the Synod on Synodality and *Laudato Si'*, emphasising the importance of full participation of Indigenous communities in shaping the Church's future.

The contributions in the volume reflect a growing awareness within the Church, governments, and Indigenous groups themselves about the need to involve Indigenous voices in decision-making processes.

In the book, Cardinal Michael Czerny, Prefect of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, emphasises the importance of engaging with Indigenous communities as "principal dialogue partners" and learning from their "civilisational wisdom" while sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

He stressed the need for the Church to engage in a "continuous, loving, and humble dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions — in brief, with all the life realities of the people in whose midst it had sunk its

roots deeply."

Bishop Paul Tighe, Secretary of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, underscores the value of listening and intercultural dialogue, noting that "the Church and the Indigenous communities have much to learn from, and much to give to, each other."

He reiterated Pope Francis' vision of a Church that is outward-looking and engaged in genuine conversations with different cultures. "We start by genuinely listening to other people, listening to their concerns, to their hopes, to their expectations, then entering into conversation with them," he said.

Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, Apostolic Nuncio to India and Nepal, highlighted the richness of Indigenous traditions and their relevance to modern society.

"Ecologists rightly argue that tribal cultures have much to teach the rest of the world about rebuilding and maintaining a healthy relationship with nature," he said, adding that these communities have a strong sense of solidarity, honesty, and mutual belonging that serve as important lessons for the wider world.

The authors expressed hope that the insights shared in the book will lead to deeper theological engagement and concrete actions in support of Indigenous communities in Asia. **LiCAS News**

## Join our tree planting campaign

KUALA LUMPUR: Since the launch of our CSR initiative, the *HERALD Tree Planting Campaign* on September 8, we have planted 183 trees the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary, Sabah.

This campaign goes beyond responding to Pope Francis' call in *Laudato Si'* to care for our common home — it is an opportunity to leave a lasting legacy of love for creation.

In partnership with APE Malaysia under their ROAR (Restore Our Amazing Rainforest) initiative, these trees are transforming a once-barren patch of land into a vibrant rainforest full of life. In just five years, these saplings will stand tall as part of the forest canopy. Over the next decade, they will become a thriving habitat for gibbons, orangutans, birds, and countless other species.

Climate change is one of the most urgent challenges we face today. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), global temperatures are expected to rise by 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels by as early as 2030, which will result in more extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and the loss of ecosystems. Forests, however, are our natural allies in this fight. They act as "carbon sinks," absorbing carbon dioxide

from the atmosphere and helping to mitigate the effects of climate change.

While print media remains central to *HERALD's* mission, we also recognise the environmental impact of production. This tree-planting initiative allows us to offset that footprint while actively contributing to the global fight against deforestation, climate change, and biodiversity loss.

For just **RM35 per sapling**, you can sponsor a tree through the ROAR initiative. Your sponsorship covers four years of nurturing and care to ensure the sapling thrives.

By sponsoring a tree, you'll help restore degraded forests, rebuild vital wildlife corridors, and support the local communities who depend on these ecosystems. This is a gift of hope, healing, and harmony with nature — a living legacy of love that will grow and endure for generations to come.

In fact, forests help absorb up to 30 per cent of global carbon emissions, playing a crucial role in the battle against climate change. By participating, you are directly contributing to this vital effort.

For more details, go to: <https://www.heraldmalaysia.com/CSR-reforestation>



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