

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

He is Risen, Alleluia!

In his Easter Message for 2024, Archbishop Julian Leow invites the faithful into a deep reflection on the profound significance of Christ's resurrection. Emphasising the joy and hope that Easter brings to Christians around the world, the archbishop encourages the faithful to live in the light of Christ's love, to be bearers of hope, and to actively participate in the mission of spreading joy, justice, and peace within our communities and beyond.

HERALD filepic

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As we gather in the joyous celebration of Easter, our hearts are filled with joy and gratitude for the incredible gift of salvation granted to us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Echoing the sentiments of Psalm 118:24, "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it," we embrace this day with profound gratitude. Truly, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is a testament to the unfathomable love and mercy of God, offering us the gift of eternal life through His sacrifice.

God accompanies us through every aspect of the human experience, embracing both its beauty and brokenness. Even in our moments of suffering, darkness, and abandonment, God is present, walking with us through our struggles and even through death itself. The empty tomb on Easter morning is a powerful symbol of this enduring presence — Christ

lives. With this hope and understanding, we are liberated to live and love as Jesus did, knowing that His risen presence is a constant, guiding force in our lives, filling us with joy and empowering us to embrace life to the fullest.

In the resurrection of Christ, we find the ultimate source of hope and the promise of new beginnings. As followers of Christ, we are called to be bearers of this hope to the world around us. Just as Christ brought light to the darkness and joy to the sorrowful, so too are we called to be joy-givers to those in need, especially those on the peripheries of society — the marginalised, the lonely, and the forgotten, sharing with them the hope and love that Christ has bestowed upon us.

As we rejoice in the resurrection of our Lord, let us also recommit ourselves to the task of nation-building, working tirelessly for the common good and the advancement of justice and peace in our communities. Let

us actively engage in the work of building a society rooted in justice, mercy, and compassion, where the dignity and rights of every individual are respected and upheld.

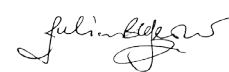
Let us also remember our role as examples to those of other faiths and traditions. Let us be agents of reconciliation and healing, seeking to build bridges of understanding and cooperation among people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs. In our daily lives, let us strive to live as true disciples of Christ, leading lives of compassion, humility, and service. May our actions be a reflection of our faith, inspiring others to seek the light of Christ in their own lives. Through our words and deeds, may we embody the inclusive love of Christ, welcoming all into the fold of God's family.

May we be strengthened to walk the journey of faith and may we be leaven to the Kingdom through our active discipleship, witness and engagement in the world. Let us

find Christ among the poor, the vulnerable and the wounded. Let us have the courage of Mary and be truly Easter men and women, bringing to life the Good News in our Church and in our world and being bearers of hope and joy to those around us. May we, together as one body in Christ, be witnesses to the power of the resurrection and agents of God's love and mercy in the world.

Let us journey as one Universal Church, conscious of our local settings but journeying together, deepening our faith as well as broadening our perspective on every aspect of being a Missionary Disciple of the Risen Lord.

My prayers remain with all of you.
A happy and blessed Easter to everyone.



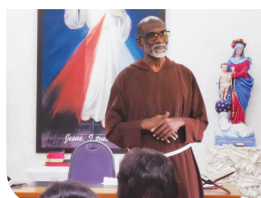
Most Reverend Julian Leow Beng Kim
Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Col. 3:1-2

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like home**

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HERALD

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COMMENTARY

Pope Francis shares his hopes for the Church's future

After 11 years in office, Pope Francis has published his first-ever autobiography. Written with Italian journalist Fabio Marchese Ragona, the new volume is called *Life: My Story Through History*, which was released on March 19 by HarperCollins Publishers.

Throughout the book the Pope looks back at significant moments of his life in light of the historical events over the last eight decades. In doing so, he unveils the portrait of a young Argentine Jesuit who became pope and how his ways of thinking have evolved. Francis also looks ahead to what will become of the Catholic Church he has led for over a decade.

"For my part, I continue to nurture a dream for the future: that our Church be gentle, humble, and helpful, with the attributes of God – and therefore also tender, close, and full of compassion," the 87-year-old writes.

Aware that he is nearing the end of his pontificate, Francis outlines the profile of a more inclusive and open Church, implicitly expressing the difficulties he has faced in his reforms for over 11 years.

"Jesus frequented and often met people living on the margins, in existential peripheries," Pope Francis explains in the book. This idea was a key concept he expressed during the general congregations, those meetings the cardinals held in the days before the 2013 conclave, which was decisive for his election.

"This is what the Church should do today with members of the LGBTQ+ community, who are often marginalised," adds the Pope. In this passage, the Latin American Pope reiterates his opposition to any liturgical marriage between people of the same sex but shows support for civil unions.

He also takes a clear-eyed look at the Vatican, a place he tried to visit "as little as possible" when he was still the archbishop of Buenos Aires. "I sincerely preferred to stay among my people, partly because the splendor of these palaces didn't make me comfortable," he admits.

"It is true that the Vatican is the last absolute monarchy in Europe and reasoning and court manoeuvres are often conducted there, but these patterns must be definitively abandoned and overcome," he continues.

In this work, which contains no new revelations, Francis revis-

its the major episodes of his life, especially before his pontificate. Childhood memories of World War II, the Cold War, the story of his vocation, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and his passion for football are among the many topics the Pope reviews as his life reaches its final chapter.

Two elements will strike readers who delve into this book. First, these autobiographical pages provide certain keys to understanding the Jesuit Pope's pontificate. One can see how Jorge Mario Bergoglio's personal experiences influenced the future Francis. For instance, his own family's story, arriving in Argentina as Italian immigrants in the early 20th century, strongly influenced his view on the current migration crisis. The end of World War II influenced his condemnation of nuclear weapons. And Argentina's near-bankruptcy affected his strong criticisms of capitalism.

Secondly, the successor to Benedict XVI is clearly using the book to shape the narrative of his theological and intellectual legacy. The Argentine pope, who in the fall of 2023 appointed one of his close associates, Victor Manuel Fernandez, to head the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and solidify the pontificate's theological legacy, offers here a personal account of his own influence on the Church.

"I believe that the ministry of Peter is *ad vitam*. So, I don't see any conditions for resigning." - Pope Francis

Yet, Francis still insists, resignation is absolutely not on the agenda.

"I am sincere," he affirms. "I have never considered it because, as I had the opportunity to say a few years ago to African Jesuit confreres, I believe that the ministry of Peter is *ad vitam*. So, I don't see any conditions for resigning."

The only case where he would consider stepping down is if "a serious physical impediment" were to occur. "If that were to happen, I wouldn't be called Pope Emeritus, but simply Bishop Emeritus of Rome, and I would settle in Saint Mary Major to serve as a confessor and give Communion to the sick."

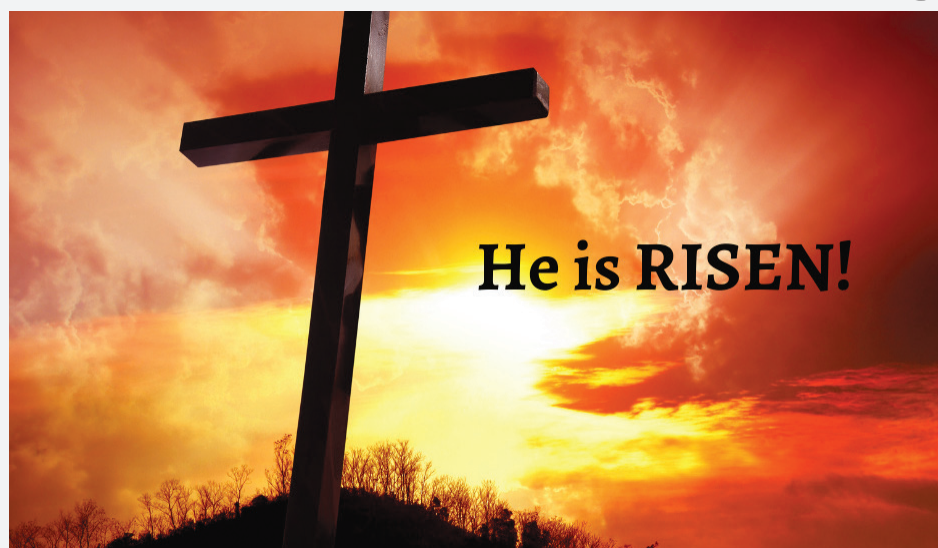
He continues to say he has "no serious reason to consider resignation", even though he knows quite well that after his recent hospitalisations, there are "some people" who are hoping he will. — **By Loup Besmond de Senneville, LCI** (<https://international.la-croix.com>)

Resurrection: A call to transformed living

Today, as we gather to celebrate the glorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, throughout the world, we are reminded of the profound truth that has shaped the course of human history: death has been conquered, and new life reigns triumphant. In the readings we have just heard, we are invited to reflect on the significance of this momentous event and its implications for our lives.

In the *Acts of the Apostles*, we encounter Peter's powerful testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He declares boldly that God shows no partiality, but welcomes all who fear Him and do what is right. Peter bears witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, proclaiming Him as the one whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and power. Through His resurrection, Jesus has become the source of forgiveness and salvation for all who believe in Him. We are called to permeate this forgiveness to all whom we encounter — with both friend and foe alike.

In his letter to the Colossians, St Paul exhorts us to set our minds on things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. He reminds us that our lives are hidden with Christ in God and that, when Christ who is our life appears, we will also appear with Him in glory. This profound truth calls us to live in a manner that reflects our identity as followers of Christ, living the virtues and values of Christ, seeking the things that are above and not being bound by the fleeting



pleasures of this world.

Finally, in the Gospel according to John, we witness the awe-inspiring moment when Mary Magdalene discovers the empty tomb. Running to tell Peter and the beloved disciple, she declares, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." Peter and the beloved disciple rush to the tomb and find it empty, with the burial cloths lying there. They see and believe, for as yet they did not understand the Scripture that He must rise from the dead.

My dear friends, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not merely a historical event to be commemorated; it is a reality that should transform our lives here and now. Just as

Christ emerged victorious from the tomb, so too are we called to rise with Him to newness of life. The resurrection is a clarion call to leave behind the old way of living and embrace the new life that Christ offers us.

In the light of the resurrection, we are called to embrace a life of holiness and righteousness, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are called to love one another as He has loved us, to forgive as we have been forgiven, and to seek justice and mercy in all our dealings with others. The resurrection empowers us to overcome sin and death and to live as children of the light, shining brightly in a world that is often shrouded in darkness.

Reflecting on our
Sunday Readings
with Fr George Vaithynathan

Easter Sunday (B)

Readings: Acts of the Apostle 10:34, 37-43;

Col. 3:1-4 or 1 Cor. 5:6-8;

Gospel: John 20:1-9 or Mark 16:1-7

Moreover, the resurrection gives us hope in the face of life's trials and tribulations. Just as Christ conquered death, so too can we overcome the challenges that we encounter on our journey of faith. No matter how difficult our circumstances may be, we can take comfort in the knowledge that Christ is with us, guiding us and sustaining us by His grace.

As we celebrate Easter Sunday, the day of the Lord's Resurrection, let us renew our commitment to living as faithful disciples of our risen Lord. Let us set our minds on things that are above, seeking always to do His will and to glorify His name in all that we say and do. And let us never forget our identity, the profound truth that we are beloved children of God, redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ and called to share in His resurrected life both now and for all eternity.

May the joy of the resurrection fill our hearts this day and every day, and may we be ever faithful in bearing witness to the transformative power of Christ's victory over sin and death. Amen.



ARCHDIOCESE OF KOTA KINABALU

Chancery Notice

Banns of Sacerdotal Ordination

Upon the request and recommendation of Fr Francis Lim, SJ, the Regional Superior of the Jesuits of Malaysia-Singapore, His Grace Most Reverend Archbishop John Wong Soo Kau, DD of Kota Kinabalu has agreed to ordain Deacon Nalerin Erone Bin Nahfirin, SJ to the Sacred Order of Presbyter on Jul 31, 2024 at 7.00pm in the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, Kota Kinabalu.

Deacon Nalerin Erone, SJ is from Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. He joined the Society of Jesus on June 22, 2012 and was ordained Deacon on Feb 4, 2023 in Madrid.

Below is his formation itinerary:

- June 2012 – June 2014: Novitiate formation at Novitiate St Stanislaus Kostka Girisonta, Semarang, INDONESIA.
- June 2014 – December 2017: Philosophy formation at Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Driyarkara, Jakarta, INDONESIA.
- January 2018 – December 2019: Regency formation at St Joseph's Private Secondary School, Kuching, MALAYSIA.
- January 2020 – May 2023: Theology formation at Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid, SPAIN.
- June 2023 – present: Licentiate in Sacred Theology (Spirituality) at Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid, SPAIN.

Catholics are obliged to reveal any impediments or circumstances that would prevent Deacon Nalerin Erone from entering the Sacred Order and should contact the parish priest or Archbishop John Wong with such information (Canon Law 1043)

The publication of these banns fulfils the canonical requirement of Canon Law 1051, 2°.

Fr Wilfred Atin
Chancellor,
Archdiocese of Kota Kinabalu
March 19, 2024

Faith and technology can complement each other

By Jacklin Victor

TAIPING: Parents, students and catechism teachers of the Taiping Catholic Church (TCC) came together for a talk presented by Deacon Clement Samuel. This event, held on March 17, marked the debut of such talks at TCC, setting a precedent for future sessions that Deacon Samuel will oversee in other parishes throughout the Penang diocese.

The discussion spanned several pertinent topics such as the advantages and disadvantages of using mobile phones; the significance of students attending Mass every Sunday and the importance of student involvement in church services.

The session facilitated an interactive dialogue, encouraging open conversation between parents and students. A notable point of discussion was the perspective shift among parents regarding the use of smartphones. They acknowledged learning



...during the dialogue session.

about the positive aspects of smartphone usage, such as utilising the device for morning prayer sessions, listening to Catholic hymns, and exploring educational content beyond the catechism textbooks. The session highlighted the necessity for parents to manage their children's screen time effectively, guiding them to prioritise God in their lives and fostering

spiritual closeness within the family.

Students were particularly moved by Deacon Samuel's insights into the importance of attending Mass, understanding it as a sacred act that commemorates Jesus' death and resurrection through the Eucharistic celebration, where Jesus' presence is profoundly acknowledged in the sharing of bread and wine.

The deacon also showcased the range of activities organised by the Parish Youth ministry, emphasising how participation in parish initiatives not only furthers the Church's mission to aid the less fortunate but also strengthens the communal bond and faith journey among the youth.

The session concluded with Deacon Samuel introducing a new resource for parents titled *As For Me & My House* authored by Emmanuel Tan, the national coordinator for the Malaysian Catechetical Commission, providing a valuable guide for nurturing faith within families.



The youths of the Taiping Catholic Church performing a sketch.



Malacca Johore Diocese News Update #169



Greetings to you, dear friends of the Diocese of Malacca Johore

So many divisive distractions: from vernacular schools to *bak kut teh* and to new villages as heritage sites. But what we see is that politicians divide, while children unite. A visually impaired person was asked about his closeness to a fellow student of another race. He simply replied: Blind people do not see race or religion. We see only kindness.

Enduring Times: Once they called it a VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous). Today we are contending with a BANI world (brittle, anxious, nonlinear and incomprehensible). This contemporary beatitude sheds some light on living through these times:

Blessed are those who remain faithful while enduring evils inflicted on them by others, and forgive them from their heart; Blessed are those who look into the eyes of the abandoned and marginalised, and show them their closeness; Blessed are those who see God in every person, and strive to make others also dis-

cover Him; Blessed are those who protect and care for the common home; Blessed are those who renounce their own comfort in order to help others; Blessed are those who pray and work for full communion between Christians. Believe and Live!

Thought for the Week: The Smartphone

A teacher, after dinner, was checking homework done by the students. Her husband was playing his favourite game 'Candy Crush Saga' on his smartphone.

As she read the last note, the wife began to shed silent tears. When her husband saw this and asked about it, she explained 'Yesterday I told my Standard 1 students to write something on the topic "My Wish". And this is what made me cry! 'Listen' "My wish is to become a smart phone. My parents love smart phones very much. They care about smartphones so much that sometimes they forget to care for me. When my father returns from the office tired, he has time for the smartphone but not for me. When my parents are do-

ing some important work and the smart phone is ringing, within a single ring they attend to the phone, but not me ... even if I am crying. They play games on their smartphones, not with me. When they are talking to someone on their smartphone, they never listen to me even if I am telling them something important. So, my wish is to become a smart phone."

The husband got emotional and asked the wife, 'who wrote this?' The wife said: 'Our son.'

Lesson from the note: Gadgets are beneficial, but they are for our ease, not to cease the love amongst family and loved ones.

Children see and feel everything that happens with and around them. Things get imprinted on their minds with an everlasting effect. Let's take due care, so that they do not grow with any false impressions.

Announcements for this Week

1. In conjunction with the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, a prayer vigil will be held at the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Krubong on April 20 starting from 8.30pm and concluding on April 21,

with Mass at 6.00am. Open to all, especially you, the young people of the diocese.

This Weeks QnQ: Q asked: Life appears to be a flow, is it true?

For every sunset, there is a sunrise; for every dream that ends, one is born; for every door that closes, another one opens; for every love that ends, another begins; for every end there is a new beginning; for each departure there is an arrival; for every defeat there is a victory. Nothing is ever finished, as long as there is life. - Paolo Coelho

Walk with the Lord from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. Pray for your clergy and diocese. Take care!

Something to tickle you: "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." — C.S. Lewis

Bishop Bernard Paul

We need to waste time with the Holy Spirit

SIBU: The Diocese of Sibu convened a Synod Synthesis Engagement session at the Kemuyang Pastoral Centre, March 16.

Fr Ivan Fang, the chief synod coordinator of Sarawak, expressed gratitude to the 50 parishioners who gathered for the half-day session aimed at responding to the synod synthesis report.

Representatives from a diverse spectrum of parish communities participated, including parishioners from various movements, groups, and parish councils. Also present were the religious from Putri Karmel, Sisters of St Francis of Sarawak, as well as priests from the Claretian and Capuchin orders,

together with Msgr Michael and Bishop Joseph Hii.

The engagement session commenced with Eta Ting, from the Sibu synod secretariat team, providing guidelines and directions for the discussion. Ten groups were formed to address ten distinct worksheets concerning the synod synthesis report, covering topics such as involving various councils, the spiritual dimension of synodality, structures for participation, Christian initiation, existing synodality practices, experiences and understandings of synodality, conversations in the Spirit, and transcending boundaries.

Fr Ivan assured the group in his

closing remarks that the synthesis responses would be compiled and summarised into an eight-page report for submission to the National Synthesis Engagement team in April 2024.

Bishop Joseph Hii encouraged all present to answer the call of Pope Francis for reformation and transformation. To heed this universal call, it takes courage to put on an attitude of non-complacency and a willingness to embrace change.

“What does the Holy Spirit want the Church to be in this 21st century? To engage ourselves in this discernment, we need to “waste” time with the Holy Spirit. This Year of Prayer is an opportune time for



Participants responding to the worksheets in 10 different groups, using the method of spiritual conversation.

us to “waste” time with the Holy Spirit. The universal Church has called upon all Christians to discern by “wasting” time with Holy Spirit so that we may be able to discern the Will of God in our time,” said the prelate.

Bishop Joseph observed that we are used to a culture of doing things. Perhaps, it is time to “UNDO”. Without this process of “UNDOing” our hearts, we cannot discern the Will of God and no reformation can take place.

The bishop encouraged a return to the common identity and charism found in baptism, emphasising

the value of each Christian’s unique role and co-responsibility in the Church’s mission.

Bishop Joseph emphasised the importance of serving others during the synodal process. He stressed the significance of both offering our service and being open to receiving service from others, a practice rooted in humility. Illustrating this point, he recounted a touching anecdote about Bishop Emeritus Dominic Su’s humility in allowing Bishop Joseph to serve him. This anecdote serves as an example of the spirit of service and humility essential for the synodal journey.

Inaugural assembly of Miri’s Diocesan Pastoral Council

MIRI: February 3 marked a historic moment for the Diocese of Miri as it hosted its inaugural gathering and Annual General Meeting of the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC). Over 40 representatives, under the leadership of Bishop Richard Ng, assembled at the St Francis Centre for this important event.

All 14 parishes were represented at the AGM by their parish rectors, chairpersons, secretaries, or treasurers of the parish councils. In addition, catechists, chairpersons of eight diocesan commissions, and representatives of religious sisters were also in attendance.

The day started with an opening Mass at the nearby Carmelite Chapel at 8.00am. Appropriately, the readings of the day were about King Solomon asking God for an understanding heart to discern between good and evil, and about Je-



Bishop Richard Ng addressing the meeting.

sus taking pity on “sheep without a shepherd” and setting out to fulfil this need despite already being so tired.

The meeting convened immediately after Mass. Bishop Richard called to order the inaugural AGM of the Miri DPC with an opening

prayer. All participants introduced themselves and Bishop Richard provided the history and context of the DPC, explaining that this council is mandated by the Church’s Code of Canon Law.

The aim of the Miri DPC is “to project and concretise the vision of the local Church as a communion of God’s people with their active participation in the life and mission of the Church”. The DPC has a consultative vote per Canon 514 and its main role is to study and make proposals for resolution of issues for the bishop to deliberate on and decide.

Bishop Richard then presented the Statutes of the DPC. The Statutes (with a small addition relating to Care of Creation) were approved by him, which was supported by a majority show of hands. Election of the office bearers to the DPC by

secret ballot followed.

After a short tea break, the delegates re-convened to discuss two projects for the diocese, guided by the theme given by the Bishop Richard, *Into the Deep* (Lk 5:1-11). Four breakout groups brainstormed over the theme for ideas for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Diocese in 2026 and the Pastoral Plan of the Diocese in line with its Vision and Mission statements.

The delegates then re-grouped in a plenary session where the various proposals were presented and recorded for subsequent deliberation by the board of the DPC later.

The AGM ended with a closing thanksgiving prayer and blessing by Fr Joseph Ding, Rector of Sungai Asa parish. After lunch, delegates headed home to their respective parishes. — **By William Gan, Today’s Catholic**

Assumption leaders on a shared mission to build parish

PETALING JAYA: The clergy and 45 leaders of the Church of the Assumption stepped away from the bustling city life for a weekend retreat at Fraser’s Hill. They embarked on a journey of contemplation and exploration, focusing on strategic planning and organising

parish activities for the year 2024.

The retreat commenced with prayer and reflection, grounding us in our shared faith and purpose. Through daily Mass, prayer, worship, and meaningful discussions following brainstorming sessions, we revisited the key areas identi-

fied in last year’s Parish Pastoral Assembly — community building; the role of families in the life and mission of the Church; walking together with our young people, and being called to be disciples. Unity, compassion, and service were emphasised as essential elements of

our Christian journey. These spiritual foundations formed the basis for our parish’s strategic roadmap.

The heart of the retreat lay in collaborative sessions where ideas flowed freely, and discussions were rich with insight. Split into focus groups, participants delved into the key areas, drawing upon diverse perspectives and experiences. Each group brainstormed innovative initiatives and practical action plans to enrich our parish life.

Under the guidance of Frs Leonard Lexson and Fr Biju Mathew Thomas, who exemplified wisdom and encouragement, ideas were nurtured and refined. Their leadership and pastoral presence fostered an atmosphere of trust and collaboration among all participants. Together, we envisioned a parish that not only meets the needs of its members but also extends its embrace to the wider community,

embodying love and inclusivity.

As the retreat concluded, a sense of fulfilment and excitement permeated the air. Armed with a wealth of ideas and a renewed sense of purpose, we left the retreat energised and empowered to bring our vision to fruition. The bonds formed during those sacred days continue to fortify our parish community, a testament to the transformative power of faith and fellowship.

Our parish retreat was a testament to the beauty of prayer, reflection, and collaboration. With our priests guiding us, we charted a course rooted in faith, fuelled by love, and guided by the Holy Spirit. As we journey together, may we draw strength from our shared mission of building a parish that radiates God’s love to all who seek solace within its walls. — **By Mary Reggie**



CHRISM MASS CELEBRATIONS

Clergy are essential and irreplaceable

By Tianne Ramona Pereira

KUALA LUMPUR: “Taken from among men yet appointed for men in the things that pertain to God” (Hebrews 5:1) was the opening line of Archbishop Julian Leow’s homily at the Chrism Mass of the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, held at the Church of Christ the Light, Desa Jaya on March 19.

Expanding on this, Archbishop Julian emphasised the significance of priests, consecrated individuals, and the laity gathering with the bishop at the Chrism Mass, highlighting how it symbolised unity with the Church and its ongoing dedication to sacramental ministry for the people of God.

“Just as Jesus called His first disciples, our priests too have responded to God’s call,” remarked the prelate, noting the providential alignment of this celebration with the Solemnity of St Joseph. He emphasised that titles attributed to St Joseph, such as protector, guardian, and model of faith, resonated deeply with the priesthood.

In addressing his fellow priests, Archbishop Julian thanked them for saying yes to Jesus not just once, but every day as they carry out their ministries. He admitted that there is often little recognition, and they are not always understood, yet they continue to give themselves



Archbishop Julian Leow pours the balsam into the oil of catechumens.

to God and His people.

Just like any human being, priests face days when they are tired, stressed, frustrated, thinking of giving up – and yet they continue to give of themselves without counting the cost. Despite their natural limitations, the Lord has called and accepted them to be His instruments.

The archbishop reminded the clergy that by sacramental consecration, priests are config-

ured into Jesus Christ as head and shepherd of the Church and that they had the spiritual power which is a share in the authority in which Jesus Christ guided the Church through the Holy Spirit.

As priests they were not chosen because they were the best among all but because God had called them into a Royal priesthood, primarily to guide all those entrusted to their care into the knowledge of our loving and merciful God. The heart of a priest pulsates with the life blood of the Body of Christ, the Church, ensuring its vitality.

To the congregation, Archbishop Julian emphasised the importance of the priestly ministry, quoting the late Pope Benedict in saying that the function of the clergy is essential and irreplaceable – announcing the Word and celebrating the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. He stressed that despite its irreplaceable role, there is a sharp decline in the number of men responding to the invitation of the Lord. The prelate said that the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur saw only one ordination in the previous year, and that there were no seminarians that entered the seminary. This year however, we are blessed with three candidates.

Acknowledging the challenges faced by some priests, including aging, illness, exhaustion, and stress, he noted that many oth-

ers were showing signs of strain. Given the declining number of priests and the demands of pastoral responsibilities, there exist unfilled gaps within the clergy. The archbishop refrained from labelling it a crisis yet, but emphasised that the signs pointed in that direction if no action was taken. He highlighted that this was a crisis concerning commitment and selflessness, with no easy solutions.

The archbishop stressed the crucial role of strong and holy marriages in fostering priestly vocations, urging young people to carefully discern what God was calling them to.

In a heart-warming conclusion the archbishop appealed to the people, “In all humility I call on you, the people of God, to love your priests, care for us, seek to understand us, look out for us and most of all, pray for us – it can truly make a difference. Remember, like you, we are on a journey of faith. The harvest is great, but the labourers few.”

Concelebrating with the archbishop at the two-hour multi-lingual Mass was the Apostolic Nuncio for Malaysia, Archbishop Wojciech Zaluski, Archbishop Emeritus Murphy Pakiam, the vicar generals, 60 diocesan and religious priests and five resident priests from Myanmar, Nigeria, India, and Korea.

All shall bear witness to Christ

SANDAKAN: The Chrism Mass for the Diocese of Sandakan was held at St Mary’s Cathedral on March 14. This sacred occasion served as a reminder to the priests of their divine calling as ordained ministers, entrusted by the Lord to carry out His work on earth.

During the Mass, Bishop Julius Dusin Gitom led the congregation in prayers for the late Fr Marcellinus Ponking, who passed away in December 2023, and for Fr Thomas Makajil, currently undergoing treatment in Kota Kinabalu, and urged the congregation to continue praying for them.

Clergy from across the diocese, including Tawau, Beluran, Telupid, Lahad Datu, Paitan, and Sandakan, gathered in unity to celebrate the Chrism Mass, after their regular clergy recollection. This coming together of clergy and faithful symbolised the solidarity and strength of the Church community.

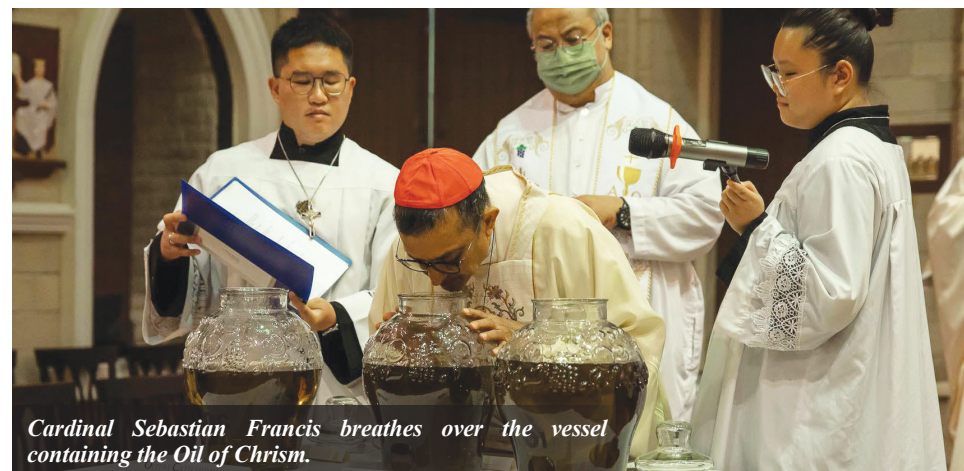
In a solemn moment, the priests renewed their vows of ordination before Bishop Julius and the assembly, reaffirming their commitment to serving God and His people. The congregation bore witness to the consecration of the holy oils essential for the sacramental life of the Church.

In his homily, Bishop Julius explained the significance of the Chrism Mass and related the importance of each consecration of the three oils needed for the administration of the sacraments. He highlighted that the priesthood of Christ was not only attributed to the ordained only but also to all baptised people. “We shall all bear witness to Christ by baptism,” he said. He also reminded the faithful of their role as the gate that opens up to the pathway of God to others, that is driven by the love of Christ and continues to serve with zeal.

Bishop Julius also gave an account of the remarkable and intelligent Bishop David O’Connell, a bishop who was shot to death in Los Angeles. Bishop O’Connell had reminded priests, in one of his messages, of their responsibilities and that their words matter. When they speak, preach, teach and counsel, the faithful listen to God’s words. Speak the truth which is Jesus Christ and live the Word.

As the Chrism Mass concluded, Bishop Julius urged the congregation to continue praying for him and his fellow priests, acknowledging the spiritual challenges they face in shepherding God’s flock.

Unique essence of the Catholic priest



Cardinal Sebastian Francis breathes over the vessel containing the Oil of Chrism.

GEORGETOWN, Penang: The Church of the Immaculate Conception welcomed clergy, religious and the lay faithful of the diocese of Penang for the Chrism Mass on March 18.

The Mass was presided over by Cardinal Sebastian Francis. Concelebrating was Bishop Emeritus Antony Selvanayagam, clergy and assisted by the deacons.

In his homily, Cardinal Sebastian encouraged the congregation and clergy to embrace the promises of Scripture as relevant and fulfilled in the present day. He drew attention to the Gospel reading from Luke 4:16-21, where Jesus proclaims His mission to bring good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, and sight to the blind. Cardinal Sebastian emphasised the priest’s role in continuing this mission, particularly highlighting the dedication of the Year 2024 to ‘Prayer’ and the Year 2025 to ‘Hope’.

The sacramental character of the Catholic priest is their uniqueness, said the cardinal, who went on to explain that only ordained Catholic priests can celebrate the three sacraments which is the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and the Anointing of the Sick. Therefore, the essence of the priesthood is the Eucharist which signifies sacrifice and thanksgiving, the Sacrament of Reconciliation which is forgiveness of sins, and the Anointing of the Sick which is healing for the completion of the mission on earth and healing for eternal life.

Drawing inspiration from saints such as St John Vianney, St Padre Pio, and St Maximilian Kolbe, Cardinal Sebastian emphasised the priestly identity, exemplified by St Maximilian Kolbe’s selfless sacrifice in Auschwitz, who when asked to identify himself before his martyrdom, simply said, “I am a Catholic Priest.” Cardinal Sebastian said that it is enough for, “we priests to identify ourselves simply as a Catholic priest.”

During the Mass, the congregation celebrated as the cardinal blessed the Oil of the Sick, the Oil of Catechumens and Sacred Chrism which will be used at the Easter vigil and in the coming year.

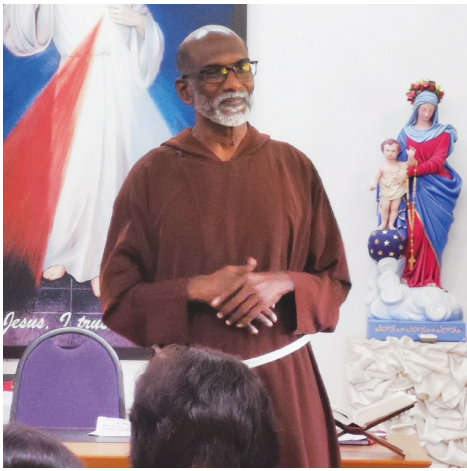
The Chrism Mass concluded with Cardinal Sebastian presenting the newly minted ‘Priests’ Handbook’ to Fr Victor Louis, chancellor of the diocese. This handbook contains essential norms, policies, and procedures for the clergy, reflecting a collaborative effort between clergy and laity through a synodal process initiated in 2021.

Cardinal Sebastian expressed gratitude to the authors of the 1989 *Pastoral Directory for the Clergy of the Catholic Dioceses of Peninsular Malaysia* for their contributions to this updated handbook, emphasising the continuity and evolution of pastoral care within the diocese. — **By Christopher Kushi**

More coverage on the Chrism Mass in the other dioceses in our upcoming issues.



The clergy renewing their vows before Bishop Julius Dusin Gitom.



By Karen Ann-Theseira

ULU TIRAM, Johor: Caritas Malacca Johore Diocese, recently organised a spiritual recollection for members of the Parish Office of Human Development (POHD), Society of St Vincent de Paul, and interested parishioners.

The serene and lush environment of St Pio Spirituality Centre offered the ideal setting for spiritual rejuvenation, guided by Fr John Anandan, OFM, Cap (*top pic*).

Helena Low, from the Church of the Holy Family in Ulu Tiram and active in the POHD group, initially doubted her participation due to her age but was ultimately inspired to “come and see.”

Reflecting on the call to “Come aside and rest for a while” (Mark 6:31), Fr John emphasised the importance of finding quiet moments for prayer and conversation with

God amidst life’s chaos. This practice, as demonstrated by Jesus, opens our hearts to a deeper communion with God, enabling us to live more Christ-centred lives. This principle was something Philip Packium, from the Church of St Philip in Segamat, learned from his devout parents.

The retreat posed the introspective question, “Are we working for God or doing God’s work?” which spurred reflection among participants on being instruments of God.

Fr John introduced the concept of the LIP method — fostering a Loving, Intimate, Personal relationship with God. This approach resonated with Jessica Kee, a POHD member from the Church of St Joseph in Plentong, highlighting her quest for deeper spiritual discernment. Similarly, for Myriam Chai of the Church of Christ the King in Kulai, it was her profound longing for a closer relationship with Jesus that drew her to participate in the recollection.

“Keep our eyes on Jesus” was another key message, emphasising patience and trust in God’s timing and guidance through Scripture and the Holy Spirit. The session



Members of POHD, SSV and parishioners at the spiritual recollection.

ended with a Mass where Fr John underscored the importance of faith and trust in Jesus through the story of Peter walking on water (Matthew 14:29-31).

The second session of the recollection focused on the Eucharist as the pinnacle of Christian life, celebrating its transformative power within the Church and individuals. Fr John reminded the participants of the joy and reverence with which we should approach the Eucharist, emphasising its role in making every Mass a celebration of Christ’s presence.

Discussions on family and community

highlighted the importance of hospitality, inclusivity, and appropriate conduct and attire within the church setting. Participants engaged in discussions about liturgical practices, cautioning against superstition while emphasising preparation and engagement with Mass readings.

The day concluded with a shared sense of hope and commitment towards becoming missionary disciples, supported by the pillars of Prayer, the Eucharist, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit, inspired by the Peace Prayer of St Francis of Assisi, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.”

Carrying the cross for the sick

KUALA LUMPUR: The Formation Ministry, from the Church of Our Lady of Fatima (OLF), Brickfields, organised a pilgrimage to the Church of St Francis of Assisi, Cheras, to offer spiritual support to those facing the ordeal of an illness or praying for a loved one.

The two buses, a van and a few cars transported over 100 participants on the evening of March 17. On arrival, everyone assembled into their small groups and picked up their cross to journey together for the Way of the Cross. The young ones had a lighter cross to carry. With eager hearts, making the first stop at the Garden of Gethsemane and reflecting on the guardian angel comforting Jesus, the pilgrims sought quiet assurance. Keeping their prayer intention in mind, groups fervently prayed the ‘Prayer for the Healing of the Sick’. Waiting for their turn, each group started off at the first station, paused for a reflection and got into a rhythm. The heavy rain did not deter the completion



Our Lady of Fatima pilgrims experiencing outdoor Way of the Cross.

of the Way of the Cross, with groups moving inside the church building.

After bonding over some refreshments, the pilgrims gathered at the Chapel of Portiuncula, dedicated to Our Lady of Angels. Fr Andrew Manickam OFM Cap, highlighted that ‘Portiuncula’ means ‘a

small portion’ in Italian and it was there that St Francis of Assisi spent his last few days. Before the veneration of the relics, Fr Andrew shared how the relics are classified and that the chapel had the First-class relics of St Francis of Assisi (ashes); St John Paul II (a drop of blood), St Padre Pio (strands of

hair), St Rita of Cascia, St Teresa of Calcutta (ex capillis-hair) and Blessed Angelo of Canete (a small fragment of his bone). All the accompanying documents are displayed in the chapel. A group of pilgrims travelled to Rome to bring the relics to the church.

The OLF pilgrims stopped for prayers at Mother Mary’s grotto and then the grotto of St Michael — seeking protection for the Church and for all those present.

Reflecting on her experience, Janet shared, “The stations of the cross for the sick was so beautiful. It brought tears and I was overwhelmed by the prayers for the terminally ill and for all who die alone. Thank you, Fr Andrew, for allowing us to experience the peace, love and healing of being able to get so close and touch the relics of the holy saints.” Another pilgrim, Ranjana, stated, “I was extremely happy as I felt we were amid the holy saints — such a close experience of God’s grace through these saints.” — **By OLF Formation Ministry**

Silver Liners’ pilgrimage to the Church of St John Vianney

TAMPIN: Forty-seven seniors from the Church of St Francis of Assisi (SFA), Cheras, embarked on a pilgrimage to the Church of St John Marie Vianney recently. The pilgrimage was organised by SFA’s Silver Liners Ministry.

During the Eucharistic celebration, in

which about 20 senior parishioners from the Tampin parish also participated, the celebrant Fr Albet Arockiasamy and Fr Valentine Gompok, OFM, Cap anointed all the pilgrims with the Oil of the Sick. This was followed by the personal veneration of the relic of the true cross (a small piece of

wood taken from the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified).

Fr Albet, parish priest of St John Marie Vianney, guided the pilgrims through their spiritual experience. He shared the rich history of the church, delving into its origins and significance. It was revealed

that the church, formerly known as the Church of St Philomena, was renamed St John Marie Vianney by the late Archbishop Dominic Vindaron, honouring the patron saint of parish priests. This insight into the church’s past added depth to the pilgrims’ understanding and appreciation of their surroundings.

After the Mass, the pilgrims were treated to lunch, arranged by their hosts.

The day was further enriched by the singing of Fr Valentine, whose voice filled the air with a sense of serenity and joy.

As the pilgrimage drew to a close, the pilgrims departed with hearts full of gratitude and spirits rejuvenated. The pilgrimage to the Church of St John Marie Vianney was not just a trip, but a transformative experience that deepened their connection to their faith and community. It served as a reminder of the importance of spiritual renewal and the power of collective devotion to uplift and inspire.



Ten years of prison ministry outreach

By Carmel Dominic

PENANG: The prison ministry in the Diocese of Penang began 10 years ago, in June 2014, when one man, who was very moved by the Gospel text in Matthew 25:35-36, began to reflect and question what he had done for our brothers and sisters who were incarcerated.

Thus, he embarked on a mission to start a ministry to reach out to them after consulting the Archdiocese of KL's Prison Ministry. In 10 years, the Penang Diocese Prison Ministry (PDPM), which began as a humble group of five, has now grown to 180 members from various parishes in the diocese. Though not all parishes have a prison ministry, those interested to join can approach the members of the PDPM and be included in their rotation roster.

There are two prisons in Penang — a remand prison on the island for men and a co-ed prison in Jawi. Ministry members make weekly visits to the juvenile detention centre in Sungai Petani, as well as weekly visits to the other two prisons. One of the pioneering members of the PDPM, Regina Xavier, who is also now a faith sharer, shared her experience serving in this ministry for the past 10 years at a Lenten Campaign event for the PDPM at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit on March 17.

"Firstly, we don't call them in-

mates or delinquents. We call them clients because we want to show respect and dignity to our sisters and brothers. They live in such deplorable conditions. Their cells are crowded, with six to seven people living in close quarters and only a common bucket as a toilet. Imagine sometimes when the bucket accidentally gets tipped over. And more often than not, they food that they get is rather basic. Some of them have even been disowned by their families. Considering all of these conditions, we, as faith sharers from PDPM have one goal — to let them know that their past doesn't define them, that there is always hope and that no matter what they have done, Jesus loves them," Regina said.

She went on to say that serving in this ministry has taught her humility and compassion because she realised that they are people just like us who have hit a bump in the road in life. The role of a faith sharer is not to find out why they were there but, rather, to help them find purpose and meaning in life that will hopefully add value and contribute to their lives once they have been released. She added that some clients had joined the RCIA after being released and were baptised.

"We first started off just visiting the prisons, but as time went by, we realised that the youths in the detention centre also needed support, so we branched out to include them. Then, we realised that the client's



Christmas Service in Jawi Prison

family also needed support and we extended our outreach efforts to them too. Now, there are a handful of faith sharers who go the extra mile and help our released clients get jobs and check in on them at their workplace from time to time. We are blessed to have so many passionate members in this ministry. We also face many struggles and challenges from various quarters while serving, but, praise God, we manage to overcome every issue through prayer and supplication," Regina said as she ended the sharing.

There was also a soap moulding workshop and a donation drive that took place for the clients. A total of 15kg of herbal soap was made and will be distributed to the two adult prisons after the Easter Mass that will be held in the prisons in mid-April. The *Share a Meal*, an awareness programme, is a special donation drive that creates aware-



ness among parishioners about the PDPM and their efforts while allowing parishioners to contribute a minimum of RM10 so that ministry members can organise a special meal for the clients in conjunction with Easter. A total of RM7,000 was collected from the awareness programme that will be used to feed the clients in the 10 prisons throughout the diocese. Each meal will consist

Soap Moulding at Cathedral of the Holy Spirit where parishioners made 500 herbal bath soaps.

of rice, sides, fruit, *kueh* and a drink. The faith sharers will join in the festivities with the clients for Easter.

The PDPM will celebrate its 10th anniversary on June 29 at the Minor Basilica of St Anne, with a Eucharistic celebration to be presided over by Cardinal Sebastian Francis.

BEC spreads compassion through food drive



St John BEC members from the Church of St Anthony distributing bags filled with essential dry food items and other necessities to the homeless in the vicinity of Masjid Jamek.

KUALA LUMPUR: In the spirit of Lent, a time for reflection and service, BEC St John of Taman Kosas, Ampang, from the Church of St Anthony organised a food drive to support the homeless and those facing hardship.

On the evening of March 10, members of the BEC gathered at the church for a blessing by parish priest, Fr Clarence Devadass, before setting out on their mission of compassion and solidarity.

Eight families, comprising individuals of all ages from children to the elderly, came together to participate in the food drive. Carrying bags filled with essential dry food items and other necessities, the volunteers ventured through the streets of Kuala Lumpur. Their aim was not only to provide nourishment but also to offer hope and kindness to those often overlooked or mar-

ginalised in society.

Traversing the neighbouring streets within the parish, including Kota Raya, Masjid Jamek, and Lebu Ampang, the volunteers sought out individuals in need. With each distribution of food items, they shared not just sustenance but also moments of connection and solidarity. As recipients expressed their gratitude and shared their stories, the volunteers witnessed firsthand the transformative power of compassion and human connection.

As the food drive concluded, the BEC members returned home with a deep sense of fulfilment. They knew they had made a meaningful impact on the lives of those they encountered on the streets, carrying with them the memories of shared moments and lives touched. — *By Pusparaj Masilamany*

Creating a cycle of kindness and love

KUALA LUMPUR: As part of their 'Lenten Outreach', the Archdiocesan Creation Justice Ministry joined hands with the Tzu Chi Foundation, for their second mission at Taman Sinar Harapan — a welfare home at Kuala Kubu Baru, on March 10.

Led by Fr Andrew Manickam OFM Cap, 70 volunteers from the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, alongside 20 volunteers from the Tzu Chi Foundation extended their touch to 200 residents that require complete care. Nestled amidst trees and the surrounding hills, the home provides a safe place for individuals who are above 15 years old and need rehabilitation, have learning disabilities, are orphaned, have been abandoned, etc.

The volunteers were divided into different groups to cater to the various wards housing females

and males. The activities during the mission included grooming, bathing, massaging, cleaning the premises, changing sheets etc., all done with a unique language of love. Volunteers sang songs while the residents clapped and cheered on, filling the room with smiles and hopeful eyes.

Being filled with gratitude for the life they had, the volunteers were reminded of the blessings that they had received and for the mission itself. Speaking about her experience, Wendy Choong added, "We didn't give them love today. I think they are the ones that helped us to love ourselves." Another volunteer, Felicity added, "It was an eye-opening experience and it took us to another world; a world which most of us are unaware of."

Fr Andrew reminded the volun-

teers that the gift of life bestowed upon us by God is an immensely beautiful gift. Being here serves as a reminder to cherish what we have, rather than fixating on what we lack. It's important to acknowledge and be grateful for all the blessings we receive — from God, and from those around us.

He also informed them that Archbishop Julian Leow extended his regards and expressed his appreciation to all the volunteers. "Thank you for dedicating your Sunday to be here and for your willingness to serve. A special note of thanks goes to the Montfort youth who volunteered today," added Fr Andrew.

The Creation Justice Ministry is grateful to Tzu Chi Foundation for their support and guidance in this collaborative activity. — *By Marilyn Menezes Simon*



Some of the CJM and Tzu Chi volunteers at the Taman Sinar Harapan welfare home.

PD parishioners embark on liturgical journey of Holy Week

PORT DICKSON: As we journey through the 40 days of Lent, the Church continually urges us to delve deeper into prayer, both individually and as a community. This sacred period of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving serves to rejuvenate and strengthen our faith with each passing day.

At the parish of the Immaculate Conception, we were fortunate to

partake in an enriching programme designed to make Holy Week a time of profound prayer and reflection.

The enlightening session, facilitated by Michael Anthony of the Archdiocesan Liturgical Ministry, titled *Journeying Through Holy Week Liturgy*, left a lasting impact on many parishioners. Michael's explanation of the liturgical journey from Palm Sunday through Holy

Week to Easter was exceptionally insightful.

The image of Jesus riding a donkey during his triumphant entry into Jerusalem serves as a powerful symbol of humility and selflessness. Michael's exploration of the contrasts between a horse and a donkey, the symbolic significance of palm leaves, the meaning behind liturgical colours, and the profound

symbolism of objects used in the liturgy were educational and informative.

Despite time constraints, Michael managed to offer us a deeper understanding of the various elements of the Paschal Triduum of Holy Week. We believe this insight will enable us to celebrate Holy Week and Easter more profoundly, thereby deepening our faith. — *By Julie Amos*



Michael Anthony giving a session.

A guide for self-reflection

By Shohbana Vythy

KUALA LUMPUR: The Church of the Good Shepherd organised a half-day Lenten retreat aimed at self-reflection during this penitential season. Approximately 80 participants, including youth and the elderly, attended the retreat held on March 16.

The retreat commenced with an hour of serene reflection, prayer, and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in the church, setting the tone for the first session in the parish function hall.

Attendees were organised into groups during registration, fostering a sense of community. The retreat kicked off with an ice-breaking session, prompting participants to mingle and engage, allowing parishioners to forge connections beyond their encounters during Mass.

Once settled into their groups, participants were prompted with two questions to initiate reflection and discussion. Initially, they contemplated the behaviours they wished to observe in others, leading to insightful exchanges. Subsequently, the focus shifted to reflecting on the Gospel of Matthew 7:12, urging individuals to embody the values they expect from others.

After the initial reflection period, Fr Mitchel Joseph, the parish priest of the Church of the Good Shepherd, led subsequent sessions. Participants delved into the effects of doubt and fear on their spiritual journeys, prompted by uncertain-



Participants sharing their thoughts during the retreat.

ties. Fr Mitchel emphasised the importance of addressing and resolving these emotions. This led to a discussion on the interplay between the conscious and unconscious mind, urging attendees to scrutinise their intentions and hidden motivations during Lenten practices.

Fr Mitchel also urged a balance between "doing" and "being," drawing parallels with the biblical story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42), highlighting the necessity of spiritual growth alongside Lenten activities.

The session also explored the concept of temptation, tracing its roots to deception and a shift away from God-centredness towards self-centredness, echoing narratives like Eve's temptation and Cain's slaying of Abel.

Various psychological theories, including Freud's Iceberg Theory, were introduced to encourage participants to transcend base instincts and selfish motives towards a more

conscious existence. Automatic responses to challenges, such as fight, flee, or freeze, were examined for their impact on spiritual well-being.

Participants were prompted to reflect on childhood experiences shaping their personalities, using the model of the rebellious child, pleasing child, and wise child.

The session culminated with an overview of three levels of relationship, encapsulating the goal of the Lenten journey — progressing from the primal and self-focused levels of instinct and self-ego, respectively to the pinnacle of a God-centred relationship.

Feedback from participants echoed a sentiment of enlightenment and gratitude, underscoring the retreat's impact on their Lenten journey. Many expressed anticipation for future spiritual formations, recognising their value in providing guidance and fostering spiritual growth.

Making every day count in service to others

NILAI: On the fourth Sunday of Lent, the Parish Integral Human Development Ministry (PIHDM) of the Church of St Theresa (CSTN) organised a blood donation drive, which saw a turnout of 78 individuals who registered to donate blood.

PIHDM chairperson Karen Kavitha said that 53 individuals successfully donated blood, while 25 either had low iron levels or belonged to the AB blood group, of which the blood bank has a surplus. "But we're committed to supporting those with low iron levels by offering nutritional guidance. It's all part of our duty," she affirmed.

Echoing the sentiments of service, parish priest Fr Christopher Soosaipillai emphasised the significance of grace amidst discomfort, drawing parallels between the Lenten journey and following the light of Christ to experience

the transformative power of faith during challenging times.

Moving forward to the fifth Sunday of Lent, CSTN parishioners, including the catechism children, enthusiastically participated in the Inti University Interreligion Fabric Upcycling Campaign. Klara Arokiyasamy, the coordinator, proudly announced the collection of 4,050 kilograms of fabric from five places of worship, including CSTN.

"Let's focus on positivity and service, as they inevitably lead to fruitful outcomes through acts of kindness and generosity," said Fr Christopher.

"Like our patron, St Theresa of the Child Jesus, let's remain steadfast in embodying compassion and service," he reiterated, stressing the importance of collective action and the joy derived from fulfilling one's role in serving others.



Catechism children from the Church of St Theresa, Nilai participating in the Inti University Interreligion Fabric Upcycling Campaign.

Recollection to deepen spiritual connection

PENANG: The parish community of Risen Christ Catholic Church gathered to reaffirm their faith and deepen their spiritual connection during their Lenten recollection, March 8 and 9.

A team from the Gloria Patri Ministry in Singapore were the presenters.

The recollection commenced with a Mass celebrated by parish priest, Fr Esmond Chua OFM, with Fr Crispus Mosinoh, OFM concelebrating and Deacon Nelson Evarinus Sipalan, OFM assisting. In his homily, Friar Esmond emphasised that Lent encapsulates the essence of God's boundless love for humanity, a love that patiently awaits our return.

Over the course of two days, the



Parishioners at the recollection.

Gloria Patri team, under the leadership of Joseph Fernandez, guided attendees through sessions of preaching, praise and worship, intercessory prayer, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and healing.

More than 200 participants, from the host parish and other parishes, expressed their commitment to aligning their lives with God's will through obedience and faith.

The first talk focused on God's

unconditional love, highlighting passages like Isaiah 49:15-16 and Joel 2:12-13, emphasising the need for repentance and returning to God. The second talk, based on 1 John 3:16 and Romans 5:6-9, challenged participants to consider if they are willing to lay down their lives for others, as Christ did for us.

Before proceeding to the third session, Joseph shared his personal journey with the Lord, recounting a profound encounter during a retreat where he felt the presence of the Holy Spirit and received a calling to be an instrument of God's love. This experience led to the establishment of the Gloria Patri Ministry in 2004.

Challenges such as misplaced priorities and the need for a change

of heart were then addressed, emphasising the commandment to love God and neighbour (1 John 4:7-21). Despite differences, the call to work together as labourers in God's vineyard was emphasised, with reassurance from Jeremiah 18:4 and Isaiah 41:10-13.

The recollection culminated with healing prayers, during which many attendees experienced a deep sense of peace and connection with the Holy Spirit. It is our sincere hope that Joseph Fernandez's ministry has had a transformative effect, strengthening the unity of our church community.

Further information about Gloria Patri Ministry is available at: <https://www.gloriapatri.org> — *By Stephanie Cheong*

Diocese of Columbus doubles number of seminarians in two years

OHIO: "When I was installed as bishop almost two years, there were no ordinations to the priesthood in our diocese. At the end of my episcopal ordination, I said to the congregation that more men will be ordained bishops than priests this year."

Bishop Earl Fernandes, bishop of the US Diocese of Columbus, Ohio, recalled that anecdote in an interview with *Vatican News* on the same day Pope Francis released his message for the 61st World Day of Prayer for Vocations, which the Church celebrates on April 21, 2024.

Speaking to *Vatican News*, Bishop Fernandes said that 16 men entered the seminary last year, adding that the diocese has recorded an increase in the number of Catholics.

The diocese expects almost a dozen more young men to enter the seminary this year as well, he noted, attributing the rise in numbers to prayer and renewed pastoral outreach efforts.

Bishop Fernandes pointed out that the Pope's message was published on feast day of St Joseph, which also marks the solemn inauguration of Pope Francis' pontificate 11 years ago.

"Joseph was a simple man — a husband,



Bishop Earl Fernandes with diocesan seminarians.

a foster father — who answered the Lord's call," said Bishop Fernandes. "So too, we have many priests who say yes to the Lord, dedicating their lives to service, giving, and offering people hope — the hope that comes from the Holy Eucharist, the hope that comes from being forgiven."

"We chose young priests to meet once a month with young men in the area, and they discern their vocation to the diocesan priesthood or religious life, as well as read Fr Brett Brannen's book *To Save a Thousand Souls: A*

Guide for Discerning a Vocation to Diocesan Priesthood, said Bishop Fernandes.

As part of the vocations drive, the Diocese of Columbus has also organised retreats called "Quo vadis?" for high school students.

"The young people spend three days in prayer, listening to testimonies, talking to priests who understand what priestly formation is but also enjoy fraternity to see that it involves more than just prayer, study, and work. This has also been very fruitful," said Bishop Fernandes.

He also highlighted the importance of prayer on the part of lay faithful, as well as women and men religious, in the diocese.

"We constantly urge people to pray and fast in the intentions of vocations," he said.

"The idea is that they, like the apostles, should proclaim the joy of the Gospel," concluded Bishop Fernandes. "We sincerely hope that our seminarians will have a true missionary impulse, so that they can be the Church that the Holy Father Francis calls us to be — a Church that goes forward." — *Vatican News*

Catholic nuns in India devise five-year strategic plan

BENGALURU: The Conference of Religious Women, India (CRWI), has released its strategic plan for 2024-2029 with a stress on networking and partnerships.

Sister Jane Wakahiu, head of Catholic Sisters Initiative under Hilton Foundation, released the document at Bengaluru on March 19 in the presence of Apostolic Carmel Sr Maria Nirmalini, head of India's more than 130,000 women and men religious.

Releasing the document, Sr Wakahiu, a member of the institute of the Little Sisters of St Francis, Kenya, referred to it as "roadmap to Christian ministries by the women religious in India, characterised by inter congregational collaborations."

"This plan is a testament to our commitment to human dignity, social justice and environmental stewardship", said Sr Nirmalini, adding the strategic plan would harness partnerships, dialogue and innovation to manifest the goals.

"Through this plan, we will leverage inter-congregational collaborations, research, and



The nuns displaying the book on strategic plan, policies and key focus areas in the next five years.

outreach to empower the marginalised, and drive systemic change," she added.

She said the plan's priorities include the empowerment and well-being of the Catholic nuns by setting up a grievance cell, supporting their holistic development through training and counselling, addressing current challenges like old age care, and decreasing vocations.

The plan aims to unify women's congrega-

tions across India, continue their ministries of teaching, healing and missionary journey in a collaborative spirit, and affirm women's rightful place in the Church by promoting equality, participation and gender justice.

The plan also underlines the need to promote interreligious harmony and inter cultural collaboration, and promoting a liveable ecosystem.

In the next five years, CRWI will strengthen nuns' skills, knowledge, and leadership abilities to enhance ministries, and support the health and mental well-being of religious sisters, and deepen the national network of sisters.

On the occasion, the CRWI also opened a new website (www.crwi.org.in), which will update information about the strategic plan, policies and key focus of areas in the next five years.

Sabrina Wong, the programme officer of the Hilton Foundation for Women Religious projects in Asia, released a handbook on policies, rules and regulations by the Conference of Religious Women in India.

The handbook serves as a set of guidelines to draw a road map for implementation of projects, to fulfil the requirements of home ministry, to build a mission focused culture in CRWI, to maintain proper documentation culture, and to pass on the legacy to the next generation. — **By Thomas Scaria, *Matters India***

Manila gains positions in the 'Happiness Index'



Family ties and informal support networks are the main factors that has improved the happiness index.

MANILA: The Philippines climbs positions in the global happiness index, rising to second place among South-East Asian countries, behind only Singapore. This is the verdict of the 2024 edition of the World Happiness Report — global monitoring conducted by a partnership between Gallup, the Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre, the United Nations Network for sustainable development solutions — which seems to confirm the archipelago's vitality and exceptional resilience.

Certainly good news, albeit in a particular ranking and which still places the country in 53rd position in the world compared to Singapore's 30th, but the leap forward from 76th place in the 2023 report is significant. The index is built on the basis of spontaneous declarations of the interviewees asked to indicate on a scale from 1 to 10 the average level of satisfaction with their lives based on the performance of the last three months. And if it is above all the

strength of the family and informal support networks in the country that has an impact, the approval that has emerged in various polls towards the policies proposed by the president could also have some weight

The data on the happiness of Filipinos goes against the trend compared to the feelings of the inhabitants of most of the regional "competitors", all of whom are decreasing in their positions: Vietnam (in 54th place), Thailand in economic decline (58th), Malaysia (59th), Indonesia (80th), Laos (94th), Myanmar engulfed in civil war (118th) and Cambodia (119th).

Overall, those for South-East Asia are however intermediate data between the record of happiness of the Finns — in first place for seven years followed by the Danes, Icelanders and Swedes — and the last of Afghanistan, slightly preceded by Lebanon, Sierra Leone and the Republic Democratic Republic of the Congo. — *AsiaNews*

Why are most Catholics so bad at almsgiving?

“You can’t take it with you,” I think St Francis once said. Okay, what he actually (maybe) said was: “Remember, when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received, only what you have given: a full heart, enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice and courage.”

Franciscan purists will point out that this quotation is only dubiously attributed to St Francis (like the pithier and better known: “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary”). But doubtful attribution and all, it remains a pretty wonderful sentiment.

Here’s a quotation from a church source I’m more sure of: “Giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God.” You can find that in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No 2462.

Pope Francis is a big believer in the importance and power of almsgiving, this “work of justice pleasing to God.” While so many of us find ways to rationalise passing by a person in need without even a nod of recognition, Pope Francis implored in his message for Lent in 2018 that Christians not pass by even one beggar on the street: “We [should] see such requests as coming from God Himself.”

“Almsgiving,” Pope Francis said, “sets us free from greed and helps us to regard our neighbour as a brother or sister.”

“What I possess is never mine alone. How I would like almsgiving to become a genuine style of life for each of us! How I would like us, as Christians, to follow the example of the Apostles and see in the sharing of our possessions a tangible witness of the communion that is ours in the Church!”

And the Pope has elevated the role of the papal almoner to new significance, making Konrad Krajewski a cardinal in 2018 and celebrating Cardinal Krajewski’s innovative approach to almsgiving in Rome. (Among other initiatives, the cardinal opened a drop-in centre at St Peter’s where unhoused people in Rome can shower and find medical care.) Pope Francis has dispatched Cardinal Krajewski to the world’s most troubled places to assist people marginalised by poverty, war and migration.

All of this is just to say almsgiving is important, one of the three posts holding up our three-legged spiritual Lenten table, alongside the practices of prayer and fasting. So why are Catholics so terrible at it?

To be fair, it’s not so much that we’re bad at almsgiving. Catholics are just pretty bad at giving in all forms. According to a 2017 Giving USA study, Jewish households give the most, averaging \$2,526 (RM10,619) annually, compared to \$1,749



(RM8,232.54) for Protestants and \$1,178 (RM5,544.85) for Muslims. Catholics ended up last with \$1,142 (RM5,375.40), according to this survey.

And Catholics long ago gave up on tithing, that is, giving 10 per cent of our income (pre-tax?) to the Church. “The other faiths that I’m familiar with in the charitable space tithe completely differently,” said Anthony Sciacca, the chief development officer for Catholic Charities USA. “Many have formulas or percentages that are pretty firm expectations.”

In terms of charitable giving, Christians in general are willing to part with about 2.5 per cent of their income — lower than the 3.3 per cent shared during the Great Depression. And it is perhaps not a shock to learn that households earning the least are regularly contributing comparatively more — giving out of their need, not their abundance — reaching double-digits in percentages of annual income while givers at the top earning ranks often contribute less than two per cent, even as their overall donations are larger.

Giving may connect us to what we can do for the rest of our world out of the great abundance many of us are experiencing, and almsgiving does that too, but it also encourages us to think about what giving may do for us, a means of liberating ourselves from the yoke of wealth accumulation, building that

spiritual indifference to the material that can free us from a couple of those seven deadly sins — avarice and envy — perhaps limiting our vulnerability to a few other deadlies that are fomented by hoarding and stinginess.

Christians should learn that they need “inner liberation” to overcome the “temptations of Satan,” Pope John Paul II said, reflecting on almsgiving in 1992.

“We need to overcome selfishness,” he said, “the anxious seeking after material goods, thirst for power and the illusion of immediate success if we want to master ourselves and reach full freedom of the spirit.” Almsgiving is a concrete way, he said, to demonstrate the Church’s preference for the poor and its call for an equal distribution of goods.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is “pretty lucky,” said Beth Martin, “that we have incredibly generous donors who give robustly around Christmas and year-round. That’s our biggest season, but actually, the season of Lent is our second largest time frame for receiving donations.” Lenten giving in the first quarter of the year “really helps provide much needed support to enable our work year-round in the more than 100 countries that we serve every year.”

According to Beth, the global relief and development agency’s director of formation and mobilisation, CRS’s annual Lenten Rice Bowl collection consciously taps into Lenten spirituality, connecting its three pillars of prayer, fasting and almsgiving “with Jesus’ call to serve our neighbours in need,” she said.

“We know that Lent is a time when Catholics look to reconnect with their faith through prayer and fasting, and the almsgiving component is a way for us to connect and share with others.”

Do CRS donors during Lent appreciate almsgiving differently than other kinds of charitable giving? Beth said that through the Rice Bowl, CRS does attempt to prod its young givers to learn about the people and communities their alms are intended to serve, to make connections among the things they are giving up briefly during Lent with the global system of farming and food production that brings a piece of the global abundance into their homes.

“I think the Lenten season invites us to really reflect on: What does it mean for us to be Catholic? How do we live as Catholics in the world?” Beth said. “And when we connect that Lenten spirituality — connect our prayers, connect our fasting — with a way to answer Jesus’ call to serve our neighbour, to feed the hungry, that really is a powerful way for us to put our faith into action and be able to live out our faith in a more in-depth and concrete way.” — **By Kevin Clarke, America**

How generous are Malaysians?

The three Peninsular Malaysia arch/dioceses focused on the three pillars of Lent in their respective Lenten campaigns.

The Lenten funds form the bulk of the monies collected to run all the projects throughout the year for all the three arch/dioceses.

Dr Gary Liew, director of the Archdiocesan Office for Human Development (pic), highlights the prevalence of generosity, particularly during the Lenten Campaign in the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur.

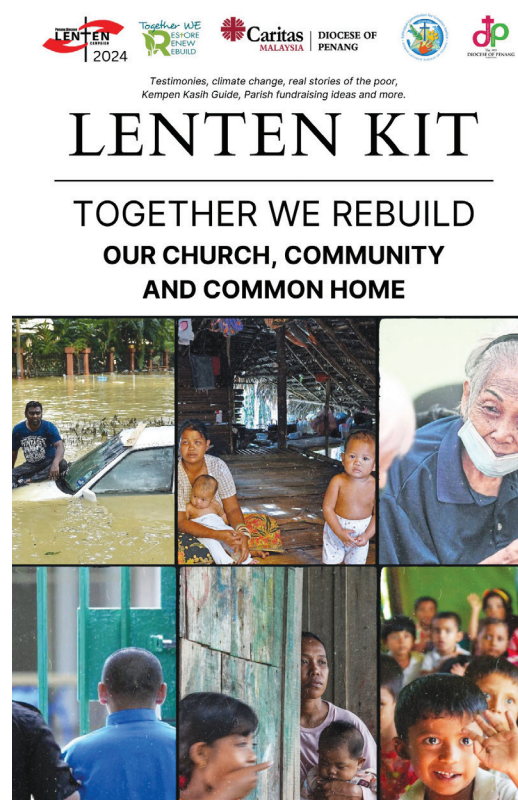
“It’s a chance to translate faith into action through various outreach activities, whether at the parish, district, or diocesan level, while also directing much-needed funds to those most in need within our communities,” Dr Gary explained. “While Lent prompts awareness of specific themes, its true significance lies in providing a spiritual framework for conscientious reflection, shedding light on the needs of others in our community, and encouraging generosity through almsgiving, whether through financial donations or hands-on efforts.”

Dr Gary noted that during Lent, there’s often a heightened sense of duty and a willingness to go the extra mile in the spirit of almsgiving compared to the rest of the year. While some



may view this as mere conscience laundering, he stressed the genuine importance of redistributing donations to support various communities in need.

“While the Archdiocesan Office for Human Development strives year-round to bridge the gap in disparity and assist the marginalised in our society, none of this would be possible without the generous spirit of our community, demonstrated through almsgiving,” he emphasised.



2024 Lenten Campaigns the Diocese of Penang (L) and the Diocese of Malacca Johore (R).



Enriching experience at Synod

Anna prepares for second session with vision for inclusive Church dialogue

In a recent interview on *KekitaanFM*, Anna Teresa Amandus, from the Diocese of Sandakan, shared her experiences and views on the Synod on Synodality, which concluded in October 2023 and is set to reconvene for its second session in October this year.

Anna Teresa is one of two delegates from Malaysia personally selected by Pope Francis as a voting member for the first session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod, in October 2023.

Throughout the engaging two-hour discussion with DJ Watitir, Anna recounted several memorable moments, including a personal encounter with Pope Francis, sharing a table with seven bishops, two cardinals, and a priest, undertaking reporting duties, and visiting the catacombs and the Vatican museum.

Discussing her role as a voting member, Anna highlighted her participation in cast-

ing votes on various issues during the first session, with these topics slated for deeper examination at the second session later this year. She shed light on the synthesis report, clarifying its aim to explore themes and discussions from the synod, stressing that it seeks to offer a holistic view on universal experiences rather than focusing on specific, localised issues. According to Anna, "It's about bringing together bishops, priests, cardinals, laypeople, and religious to share perspectives and provide a comprehensive outlook on the synod's discussions."

As the Pastoral Administrator of the Diocese of Sandakan, attending the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, enriched her understanding of the challenges bishops face and their commitment to their spiritual responsibilities.

Another interesting experience Anna had during the synod was the "Conversation

in the Spirit," which is the journey of alternating conversation and reflection in an atmosphere of prayer, silence, and listening, fully to the Holy Spirit. "Through this 'Conversation in the Spirit', each participant has time to share or speak, usually limited to three to four minutes, if it exceeds time... the microphone will be turned off. 'Conversation in the Spirit' encourages all participants to listen and dialogue, not debate!"

In anticipation of the second session of the Synod, Anna is actively participating in the preparations for the 2026 Malaysia Pastoral Conference and training 50 facilitators in spiritual conversation. This initiative, encouraged by Bishop Julius Dusin Gitom, aims to embed spiritual conversation as a core practice in the diocese's gatherings, seminars, and meetings, reflecting a deeper commitment to fostering a culture of dialogue and reflection within the community.



Anna Teresa meets Pope Francis at the Synod on Synodality in Vatican, October 2023.

Is conversation changing?

Last year, as part of a grassroots consultation for the Synod on Synodality, I was invited to an international conference organised by Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (Pontifical Athenaeum) Bengaluru, and asked to speak on: "What can I do to make the Indian Church more Synodal?"

My spontaneous response was one word: "Nothing!" because the structures of the Church do not permit synodality. We have a hierarchy in place, which is purportedly divinely instituted, making all decision-making and leadership in the Church the preserve of the clergy. Canon law ensures that this inequality is maintained.

The non-ordained can only function within parameters defined by the ordained, making it impossible to journey together as "co-responsible collaborators" as there can be no co-responsibility without equality.

Even in the 21st century, when across the world special efforts are being made to include women at the table that sets the agenda, women are still excluded from key decisions in the Catholic Church. They may be in parish councils but they have little say in how the parish is run. Sacramental ordination is denied to them because of a humiliating trivialisation of their God-given vocations. Only in exceptional cases are women allowed to preach.

In pastoral work women continue to encounter resistance, and whatever authority they have is derived from the "permission" of the parish priest or bishop. They suffer abuse by men in the Church and are denied justice and even compassion. Nuns particularly, complain that they are made the butt of sexist jokes and are often treated as cheap labour.

And yet, women are the foundation of parish life. They make the coffee, they bring life to parish celebrations and they are at the forefront of every parish activity; they sing, they pray, they teach, they fill the pews; they rally in a crisis, reach out to the poor and the hurting, and are the backbone of the Small Christian Communities (SCCs).

These stories were multiplied in the Synod on Synodality held in the Vatican last year. Participants heard of "women regularly holding Liturgies of the Word because priests cannot make it to each mountain town parish, women breaking open the Word in small groups because they speak the local language, women leading end of

life and funeral services in places of war and famine, women feeding and clothing migrants and refugees, women ministering in jails and prisons, women maintaining parish life, women walking with one another, women again and again living in service of God's people."

Many women, however, are tired of fighting, of talking and talking, year after year, decade after decade, without any sustainable steps being taken. In India, many committed Christians are walking out of church structures (but not the Church) because their voice, their experience, and their expertise are simply not part of the discourse in the Catholic Church. As Nontando Hadebe, a well-known theologian says, quoting women from South Africa, "There needs to be action and change, we can't keep having the same conversation."

So, what can women do?

The United Nations theme for this year's International Women's Day presents us with a vision: "Imagine a gender equal world. A world free of bias, stereotypes, and discrimination. A world that's diverse, equitable, and inclusive. A world where difference is valued and celebrated." All we need to do is substitute the word "world" with "Church". At Pentecost, Peter quotes the prophet Joel: Your sons and daughters will see visions and dream dreams, and "I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below..." (Acts 2:17-19). It is for us to be these signs on the earth below, of a gender equal, inclusive world and Church.

Every time you observe that women aren't present – in programmes, on stage, in decision-making bodies, in publications – ask: "Why not?"

One of these good works in recent times has been the Synod on Synodality declared by Pope Francis in October 2021. Over the past three years the faithful were encouraged to journey together, to meet at diocesan, national and continental levels, to give voice to their experiences and concerns, to listen to each other and to discern together what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us as a faith community.

In Mumbai the archdiocesan Synod was held in June 2022. Pope Francis was particularly keen that the voices from the grassroots, especially the voices of the marginalised – people who have been alienated by

the Church, or people who have been ignored by the Church – would be heard and recorded. The deliberations of all these synods served as a starting point for the Synod of Bishops held in Rome from October 4-29, 2023.

A burning topic that came up in most of the country reports and even grabbed centre-stage at the October Synod was the "women's issue".

Pope Francis' answer was to invite women to the synod – a first in the "his-story" of the Catholic Church. Since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, synod events were exclusively attended by bishops and a few priests who acted as secretaries and writers. At the family synod in 2015, new ground was broken when a religious brother, an elected representative, was given voting rights. However, three religious women who were also present were not given the same right. It had nothing to do with ordination because religious brothers are not clerics. It was a blatant act of gender discrimination.

By contrast, in the October 2023 synod on synodality, 54 of the 364 participants were women. Practically speaking, this means that there was at least one woman at every small group table. Not only were women present, but they also participated in all the discussions and were allowed to vote. Discussions at the synod assembly took place around circular tables with no "head", and no distinction between man or woman, cleric or non-ordained. This was in contrast to the traditional auditorium setting where participants are in an audience.

During the synod itself, Sr Maria de los Dolores Valencia Gomez, a sister of St Joseph of Lyon, and Momoko Nishimura, a consecrated woman from Japan, member of the Servants of the Gospel of God's Mercy (SEMD), led the assembly as two of Pope Francis' 10 president-delegates. This required them to sit next to Pope Francis in the presidential round table to facilitate the whole day's work, along with the Synod General Secretary, Cardinal Mario Grech, and Synod Relator General, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich.

Sr Maria described the experience of sitting with the Pope as a "gift and a grace" and a symbol of placing all of us at the same level. Significantly, the Mexican sister's presiding role (the first woman in this role) came as the synod assembly began its work

on the topic of "co-responsibility in mission," which includes a focus on the role of women in the Church.

Momoko had her epiphany of equality. When she was introduced to Pope Francis, she was carrying an Argentinian "bombilla" cup made of metal and wood, used for brewing a caffeine-rich infused drink called "yerba mate." When the Pope saw the traditional Argentinian drink, his eyes lit up and Momoko spontaneously offered him a sip, which he gamely took. It was an unplanned sign of the equality that pervaded the synod.

Pope Francis has already walked his talk. Thanks to him, the proportion of women in the Roman Curia has risen from 19.3 per cent to 26.1 per cent over the past ten years. This means that more than one in four employees at the Holy See is now a woman. At the executive level he has broken the stained-glass ceiling by appointing five women as undersecretaries and one as secretary of a dicastery. Secretaries and undersecretaries are the second and third levels of management respectively and are part of the management team.

At the synod the delegates felt heard. As one said, "we women, especially the Sisters, we ask very concrete questions like what will this mean for our ministries? What does this say about the mission of the Church? This is our lives we're talking about."

While all of this is good news, we still have a long way to go. As one voting woman delegate said, "I think we will make changes. (But) it is hard. There are many men who are older and can get stuck in only seeing things one way, but I think we have to [make changes]. When you hear the stories from around the world and all the ways we, as a Church, depend on women — we have to recognise that."

The "success" of the synod ultimately will depend on how much of what comes out of the synod will be implemented. Canon law must be amended now that pastors have the smell of their sheep. Structures will need to change. Attitudes will need to change. Those used to wielding unquestioned authority will have to constantly remind themselves to be open, to listen and to be humble and accept that the Spirit blows where She wills, and that maybe, like the disciples who disbelieved Mary Magdalene, they have got it very wrong (Mark 16:9-11). — **By Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Matters India**

No place like home

Mahfuz was just seven years old when he left home and started wandering the streets.

At a very young age, his parents sold him to another couple, who abused him. He also suffered abuse from his teachers at the *Madrasa* (Islamic education centre) where he was sent to study. Outside the school, he was labelled as “adopted,” with no parents to protect him.

Mahfuz had no place to call “home”. Af-

ter leaving home in 2012, life became even more difficult for Mahfuz. He began asking people for food, collecting and selling plastics found on the streets, and occasionally buying food with the money he earned by carrying goods for people at railway stations and launch terminals.

Mahfuz had to sleep on roadsides, at railway stations, or launch terminals. During this time, he encountered many young children addicted to various substances, includ-



ing alcohol, marijuana, heroin, phensedyl syrup, and *yaba* (tablets containing a mixture of caffeine and methamphetamine, produced in Myanmar).

Gradually, Mahfuz too fell into the grip of addiction. However, his life took a significant turn when he encountered a church-run rehabilitation centre.

“One day, I discovered a drop-in centre operated by BARACA (Bangladesh Assistance and Rehabilitation Centre for Addicts), where I was allowed to have *khichuri* for lunch for free,” he said. (*Khichuri* is a Bangladeshi dish made of rice, lentils, and vegetables.)

After two years of wandering the streets, Mahfuz has been able to secure at least one meal a day at BARACA since 2014. In 2016, BARACA extended their support by providing overnight accommodation at their drop-in centre, and Mahfuz began staying there.

Like Mahfuz, about 50 other children un-

der the age of 18 began residing at the centre. In 2017, BARACA initiated an educational programme at the school Mahfuz attended, starting with just three students enrolled.

This year, Mahfuz is set to take the secondary examination from a UCEP (Underprivileged Children’s Educational Programmes) school. Established in 1972, UCEP Bangladesh is a non-government organisation which provides “Second Chance Education” to out-of-school children.

Simultaneously, he completed a three-month electrical course at a technical education institution operated by Caritas Bangladesh. Meanwhile, Mahfuz has found employment as a cook at another drop-in centre, earning a salary of around US\$70 (RM330) per month.

“Drug addiction is completely gone from my life. I am now studying and even managing to save some money every month from my income.”



Children ranging from very young to 18 years can stay in the drop-in centre.

BARACA is a non-governmental, non-profit volunteer development organisation that stands as the inaugural drug treatment and rehabilitation centre in Bangladesh. Initiated by the Holy Cross Brothers and serving as a central project of Caritas Bangladesh, it began its operations on July 1, 1988.

The organisation is dedicated to offering a range of services, including treatment and rehabilitation for drug-dependent individuals (both male and female), awareness campaigns about drugs, harm and risk reduction strategies, Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) for drug-dependent persons, and providing day-care and night shelter facilities for street-based children at risk.

According to BARACA’s director, Holy Cross Brother Francis Nirmal Gomes, the initiative to establish institutions like BARACA came from the Holy Cross Brothers’ observations of inattentive students at their school, who were found to be drug ad-

Centre of hope for lost souls



The children gaining technical work experience from APON.

dicts. This discovery prompted them to consider treating drug addiction, leading to the creation of BARACA.

Bro Gomes recounted how, in pursuit of solutions for drug addiction, the Holy Cross Brothers engaged with local communi-

ties, leading to Bro Ronald Drahozal being tasked with spearheading this initiative. Under his leadership, BARACA was founded in 1988. Bro Drahozal managed BARACA until 1995, when it became a specialised project under the Catholic charity Caritas Bangladesh.

During his tenure, Bro Drahozal, together with Bro Donald J. Becker, also established APON (Ashokti Punorbashon Nibash), an addiction rehabilitation residence in Muhammadpur in 1994, thanks to contributions from his family and relatives. APON relocated to Manikganj in 2007, supported by both local and international donors.

Today, both BARACA and APON are operated by the Holy Cross Brothers, continuing their mission to combat drug addiction in Bangladesh. While APON functions independently with its own curriculum and administrative policies, BARACA operates under the guidelines set by Caritas.

Challenges: Then and Now

“Starting BARACA was fraught with challenges,” Bro Gomes reflected. “Initially, our efforts weren’t recognised by the government, which posed a significant hurdle.”

Financial constraints and a lack of experience in drug rehabilitation added to the difficulties. To overcome this, Bro Ronald and the newly recruited staff travelled to various countries to receive training at established drug addiction rehabilitation centres.

Today, Bangladesh is home to 370 private rehab centres, with 90 per cent of them managed by individuals who were rehabilitated through APON and BARACA. Their success is a testament to the effective training and knowledge acquired from our programmes, according to the religious brother.

BARACA now operates four drop-in centres, offering day and night accommodation for about 100 individuals and day-only services for an additional 50.

The main centre is equipped to treat over 50 people at a time. Both BARACA and APON emphasise outreach efforts, particularly in regions known to be origins for many addicts and street children.

Our outreach workers engage directly with these individuals, offering conversation, motivation, and sustenance. Those who are willing are initially brought to our drop-in centres and, if they agree, eventu-

ally to our main treatment facility,” said Bro Gomes.

He pointed out a significant challenge in drug rehabilitation: some drugs on the market severely damage the brain, making recovery difficult. Compounding the issue is the lack of specialised education in drug addiction rehabilitation and addiction psychology within the country.

“We’ve initiated discussions with universities to introduce at least one course on the psychology of drug addiction, where our staff could contribute as instructors. They have been receptive to this idea,” Bro Gomes shared.

Despite the availability of rehabilitation services, seeking help from a rehab mentor is not common in Bangladeshi society. Stigma persists even after recovery, with families and even spouses often doubting the individual’s return to normalcy.

Bro Gomes lamented the societal barriers to effective rehabilitation, emphasising the critical need for social and family emotional support.

“Our society still clings to social taboos. I want to convey that drug addicts are not insane; they are unwell. With the right treatment, they can fully recover and reintegrate into society, but achieving this requires support at every level,” he asserted.



Children playing football in APON’s playground.

Government efforts

The Ministry of Social Welfare, through the Department of Social Services, is undertaking initiatives to support underprivileged children, including the Child Sensitive Social Protection in Bangladesh project and Services for the Children at Risk.

Government reports from January 2012 to February 2015 indicated that 14,884 street children received social protection services via Drop-in Centres, 758 were reunited with their families, 5,229 were given access to Emergency Night Shelter, 4,578 to Child-Friendly Space, and 23,617 to Open Air Schools.

Despite these efforts, the government’s 70 child houses, each with a capacity for at least

100 residents, face criticism. Key issues include poor management, inadequate care from staff, and a lack of drug rehabilitation services for addicted children.

Abdul Jabbar, an assistant director of the social services department, asserted that these homes provide safe shelter, food, and education. While acknowledging the absence of targeted interventions for drug addiction, Jabbar suggested that improving overall living conditions for these children might also address the drug issue indirectly.

In late 2012, Mahfuz, at just seven years old, left home with a sense of uncertainty; now he is 19 and has a job through BARACA. — **By Stephan Uttom Rozario, LiCAS News**

I just celebrated my 58th birthday and yet I recall as if it was only yesterday when I was 12 years or thereabout! I began attending early Mass on Sundays at 7.30 am and after, I would remain behind to practice with the choir for the next Sunday's Mass animation. This continued for about six months without my mother's awareness.

One Sunday, I missed choir practice and headed straight home. She questioned what happened because I was quite early, unlike other Sundays. After a lengthy explanation, I was warned and stopped from attending choir rehearsal. I was to cease being a member completely. Devastated as I was, many queries lingered in my mind. Why is mother against my singing? They said, "Singing is praying twice." Does she not trust me? I thought on and on without arriving at an answer.

At this point, I swore to myself that I would find out the reason why it was wrong for me to sing and praise God. Deeply and vastly, I searched, and finally, my mother said, "I do not want you to join the choir because the members marry among themselves." Ah! It was a surprise indeed to me that even if I lived to be 100, I would not have thought of anything like this. It had not crossed my mind to look for a man among the choir gentlemen. Wonders will never cease, I thought.

Nevertheless, I obeyed my mother, and after that, I avoided anything to do with the choir as a group, which bothered me a lot due to her observation. Unfortunately, my mother's warning turned out to be true in our choir. Today, I understand why such things could happen: familiarity with those you socialise with daily, including schooling or working together and a work-like situation can sometimes develop into close relationships.

Overcoming that negative seed sowed by my authority figure had serious repercussions in my youthful stage. To the extent that in my religious formation, I was not interested in singing, key as it may be for worship. This is despite my strong second voice (alto). Today, I firmly believe, since this second voice is natural, that if I had the formative years of



training, I would have been a wonderful alto singer. And how I miss this!

By no means do I blame my mother because that was her wisdom then. She had to protect her firstborn daughter, by all means, to set the pace for the rest of the siblings. However, today, I keep contemplating how many youths' talents are buried inside, never to see the light of day because of adults down-talking the young people without providing explanations. How can youth communicate effectively with adults? And when will adults begin to take each youth as an individual?

My 19-year-old nephew, an orphan, has been difficult to understand. Needy as he may be, he has left us all in the family feeling helpless because no amount of direction or guidance will make him agree to pursue a course of study or training. On the contrary, he is obsessed with a desire for a motorcycle even though he does not possess a license. When I compare the meagre payment obtained from ferrying people on a motorcycle to the potential for a long-lasting career after acquiring skills, I am totally left without wisdom. I conclude that the youth imagine that they know what they want, only to realise later, when they have wasted time

and other resources, that they do not know a thing.

This youthful stage is a period of identity crises. The young person lacks self-awareness, something that I believe often goes unnoticed by adults. Many adults assume they know what is good for the youth without giving dialogue a chance. This observation is not reserved for lay young people; it also applies to young postulants, novices and seminarians. There is much that we can do as sisters to facilitate self-awareness in the youth.

My nephew abandoned six months of boarding school fees in 2017, in preference to a less expensive day school, despite its more distracting study environment. Losing my hard-earned cash did not stop me from assisting him again and again. This I will continue to do until he is of age and able to put food on the table independently. By helping the youth, we can teach them forgiveness, tolerance and the unconditional love of God.

The prophet reminds us: "Do you not know... though young men faint and grow weary, and youths stagger and fall..." (Isaiah 40:30).

Despite their robust energy, youth can get

(Unsplash/Jed Villejo)

weary and miss out unless they place their hope in the Everlasting and all-powerful God. In other words, young people will require counting on God and not on their own strength or understanding. Nor should they put their trust only in their talents or mentors. The youth need to discern their lives and strive for self-awareness but more so to put their trust in God. Young people just want to understand themselves as well as understand the adults. We can help them, by listening and with God's help we will help them "soar on eagles' wings" (Isaiah 40:31). — **By Nancy Watenga, NCR**

Nancy Watenga, from Kenya, is a sister living in the world as a consecrated woman for the Diocese of Nakuru. Formerly with the Immaculate Heart Sisters of Nigeria, she studied Education at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa and has been a high school deputy head for five years and a college head for seven years. Recently, she began mentoring high school and college students. Currently, she lives in Nakuru in Rift valley, Kenya, where she and eight other sisters are seeking to form an association.

BE OUR GUEST

An encounter with the Presence within

By Mary Ong



My journey of seeking the Lord has never been an easy ride. Just like any young adult, I too was very much attracted to what the world could offer. When I approached my late twenties, I started to experience a 'spiritual turbulence'. I started to sense that somethings just didn't fit. It was like no amount of money could grant me that deep sense of joy. In early March of 2020, I took myself to meet a spiritual director for the first time. As she asked what my intention was, I answered 'I would like to seek this joy that could fill this void that I have'. Since that day, God has blessed me with a spiritual director. As the years went by, the void was eventually filled with God's grace, and I am eternally grateful.

In mid-2023, my spiritual director invited me to be part of 'The Presence Within' programme (Nov '23 – Jan '24). Honestly, I was in a dilemma because learning requires great humility! After much contemplation and even hesitation, I said yes.

Our group consisted of a spiritual director, three facilitators and five participants, with me being one of them. Since we were all from different dioceses, we could only meet face-to-face during the first and final sessions; with the rest being conducted online. Our sessions were held every Saturday afternoon. We would be asked

to do some pre-work before each topic. Some of the topics that were touched on included 'What is prayer?', 'Forgiveness', 'Suffering', 'Listening Skills', etc. We normally started our session with an opening hymn, followed by Bible reading with some meditations. The facilitators toiled hard to prepare for each week's topic. Unlike traditional formations, we emphasised more on identifying our innermost feelings and learning how to express them. Therefore, active participation was required, even by the facilitators. At times, the facilitators would pause to allow us to digest our emotions and then they would encourage us to elaborate how it related to the topic of the week.

The second half of the formation was a group sharing session. Here, we could share about any topic which was inspired by the Spirit. It was a guided exercise where each of us could freely express our views and practise our listening skills at the same time. As this was a safe zone, we committed ourselves to remain unbiased and objective throughout the session. In the beginning, I struggled to comprehend the motive of this exercise. It wasn't easy for me to express myself in front of other people. During the group sessions, I had to consistently ask the Holy Spirit to help me to let go of my

prejudices and help me to see as how God sees. It was surely not a walk in the park!

I remember one of the weekly topics was regarding 'Suffering'. While working on the pre-work, I sensed something was off. Still, I prepped myself mentally for it. When the session started, it broke me. I was exceptionally quiet that day. The topic was about finding God through sufferings. I never wanted to talk about my pains, especially not after losing a dear family member of mine after years of battling with sickness. As the facilitators walked through the materials, flashbacks of painful memories swept me over. I became so numb that I lost the ability to speak. In my mind, I knew I could have allowed the group members to help me, but I stubbornly held on. The reason being, I couldn't bear the thought of burdening them with my brokenness whilst they had their own load to carry. In the end, I took silence as my last defence. When the session was over, I threw myself across the bed because I was so spiritually exhausted. This wound that I perceived had been healed, was not fixed at all! I believe this was God's way of calling out for my attention. I spent the rest of the week mending my shattered emotions through journaling; knowing that this was a red flag for me to discuss with my spiritual

director when I met her in our next session.

During our last session, I was gazing towards the wounded Jesus on the cross where He is suffering in pain. There, He opened wide Himself for the world to see. There, His wounds, the drops of blood, that crown of thorns, those nails piercing through His hands and feet; there Our Suffering Lord lies. In all vulnerabilities, He called out to me to embrace His wounds and find healing on the wounds I still bear. This was how I ended 'The Presence Within II'.

With this, I end with this favourite quote of mine:

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. (St Augustine of Hippo, The Confessions)

● Our guest columnist this week is **Mary Ong**, professional FP&A in the weekdays, catechist on the weekends. Leads a hybrid life between the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur and the Diocese of Malacca Johore. Loves food hunting, reading and concerts. Most of all, she loves spending 'me time' with God and cannot function without the Holy Eucharist!



Fr Ron Rolheiser

Practising the Way – Be with Jesus

I recently finished reading John Mark Comer's new book *Practising the Way – Be with Jesus; Become like him; Do as he did*. By way of a recommendation, I offer a series of sound bytes from the book which I hope will give you a nice taste of both the language and substance of the book.

- Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning. Sadly, this tragic misunderstanding tends to produce consumers of Jesus' merit rather than disciples of Jesus' way.

- Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not. And, as Thomas Keating says, the chief act of the will is not effort but consent.

- The great enemy of the spiritual life is hurry. We must eliminate hurry from our lives. Most of us are just too busy to live emotionally healthy and spiritually vibrant lives. (In an attempt to slow down, Comer twice quit his job. His only regret is that he didn't do it sooner.)

- Salvation is a communal experience. Jesus called disciples, not a disciple. Living in community is not easy but worth it. We can all tell horror stories of living in community when things go terribly wrong but when it goes right, it's a glimpse of eternity.

- What do you want as the substance of your eulogy at your funeral?

- Are you growing in love not just for your friends and family but also for your enemies? When you are hurt, wounded, and

treated unjustly (as we all are), are you finding yourself increasingly able to emotionally release the bitterness, to absorb the pain and not give back in kind? Can you pray for and even bless those who curse you?

- The genius of Jesus' ethical teaching is that you cannot keep the law by trying not to break the law. Don't weigh a possible behaviour with 'Is this sinful or not?' but rather, with the question, 'does this move me toward Jesus or away?'

- On healing: only one thing is required, open your pain to God. The beginning of salvation is to honestly face your own weaknesses. The more we hide, the less we heal. Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced. Generally, we sin alone, but we heal together.

- Why do you struggle? Because Jesus may be in your heart, but grandpa is in your bones! When the devil came to Adam and Eve in the garden, he didn't come with a stick, he came with an idea. Pay attention to your jealousy. Push back on the forces that deform you.

- Our generation is witnessing a cosmic shift in human history, the shift from the industrial revolution to the digital world. The digital age has us more connected than ever before. But sociologists tell us that we are the loneliest generation ever. Could the way forward be as simple as meeting people in the place of pain? Regarding the use of elec-

tronic media: Choose your own constraints or they will be chosen for you.

- Our great cultural illusion is that our growth can be: Easy, Fast, and Controllable.

- In fasting you are literally praying with your body.

- You can't think your way to Christ-likeness.

- You cannot apprentice under Jesus and not have it interfere with your life. To follow Jesus requires that you leave something behind. For Peter it was fishing nets. What is it for you? Following Jesus will cost you, but not following Him will cost you more, that is, it will cost you happiness and peace. Quoting missionary/martyr, Jim Eliot: "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

- Most people think they will grow to be more like Jesus through trying hard rather than through training hard when the exact opposite is true. You don't run a marathon by trying hard, you do it through training. Training, not trying, is the secret to becoming more like Jesus. What do monks do in a monastery? They fall and get up again, fall and get up again.

- There are four levels to prayer: Talking to God, talking with God, listening to God, being with God.

- If you want more of God, give Him away.

- We cannot die on every cross, nor are we expected to.

- Quoting Isaac the Syrian: "Speech is the organ of the present world. Silence is the mystery of the world to come."

- His nine rules of life for practising the Way:

- ❖ Practise Sabbath in a culture of hurry and exhaustion.

- ❖ Practise solitude in a culture of anxiety and noise.

- ❖ Practise prayer in a culture of distraction and escapism.

- ❖ Practise community in a culture of individuality and superficiality.

- ❖ Practise Scripture in a culture of ideological infection and compromise.

- ❖ Practise fasting in a culture of indulgence.

- ❖ Practise generosity in a culture of consumerism.

- ❖ Practise service in a culture of injustice and division.

- ❖ Practise hospitality in a culture of hostility.

But this series of sound bytes is no substitute for reading the book!

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

Five takeaways from

Sometimes the world changes with an unexpected glance by a bored boy during a bitter winter.

It was a few days after Christmas of 1963. My father was in England and we would be moving there soon. For now, Dover, Delaware, was home. I was eight, the oldest of four children. My mother did her best to keep us entertained while the snow outside was piled roof-high and the temperatures were plummeting. I had tired of playing with the toys I received for Christmas. I was bored, and made the mistake of telling my mother that I was bored. She gave me a look, the look that said if I did not find something to do, she would find something for me to do and I probably wouldn't like it.

I told her I wanted to go outside, but she said no. She told me to find something to do inside. Other than some new socks, all that remained for me under the Christmas tree were a couple of books my grandparents had sent me: the first two Hardy Boys mysteries. I sighed, and approached the books with resigned indifference.

Finding a quiet, comfortable corner away from my siblings, I opened the first book. A glance. My life changed forever at that moment. Nothing would ever be the same. I became a reader, a life-long, unapologetic reader. A book lover. I discovered then and there that living in a story could feel more real than playing outside in the snow with friends. As Stephen King described it, I had discovered "a uniquely portable magic."

Now it's many years later, and I've been invited to write an annual devotional. The project involves writing reflections throughout the liturgical year based on the daily readings of the Church calendar.

I find that the Bible, at its heart, is a magnificent story; and, as with any good story, it is easy to get caught up in it. There are wars, times of peace, great moments of sacrifice and courage, bewildering acts of cruelty and betrayal, passionate love stories, heroes to swoon over and villains evil enough to cause you sleepless nights. The Bible is as fantastic as *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Game of Thrones*, but also as real and relatable as the evening news.

As I made my way through the year of reading and writing, I took note of some of what I discovered for myself. Here are five of the more memorable takeaways for me.

1. The humanity of Jesus is astounding. Think about it: God became a human being to fully reveal Himself to us. That means we find God "right here," not "out there." Another implication is that whatever makes us more human makes us more like God. Whatever engages our minds, our energy, our creativity; whatever makes us wiser, more generous, more grateful; whatever broadens our spirits and gives space for our talents — all of this makes us more like God.

2. God goes to great lengths to reassure us not to be afraid. The Bible tells us not to be afraid between 100 and 300 times, depending on translations and versions accessed. Clearly, this is a central truth God wishes to get across to us. So let us take God at His word, and try not to let fear overwhelm us.

3. God promises He will always be with us. There is an undeniable message of return within Scripture. Not only will God not abandon us, but He will accompany us, even when we might not be aware He is with us. And He will never forget, forsake, or lose one



of His own. That is God's promise and God always keeps His promises.

4. God chooses flawed, imperfect people to perform unimaginably great and transformative feats. He may choose you, too! Look at some of the characters who have dealings with Jesus: a grieving father, a woman with chronic illness, frustrated fishermen, jealous disciples, a corrupt public official, an adulterous woman about to be stoned, desperate beggars, sinners, outcasts. These flawed, imperfect people work on behalf of the kingdom of God with astounding results. Well, you are part of that parade of flawed and imperfect people God wants to call upon to help to do the work that needs to be done. God takes the humble of heart and creates the heroes He needs to bring

about His kingdom.

5. Finally, love is at the heart of all things. There can be no greater truth that arises from a close encounter with the Bible. It is in fact an epic love story about God, forever in pursuit of His faithless flock. Fortunately for us, we know love wins. But we are also participants in this ongoing and living story, this epic tale of a loving God reaching out to His chosen people. We have a part to play, roles to fulfil, destinies to accept.

The story of God's people is still being told, and we are now the chosen people. Your part and mine in this great story is crucial. How will you respond to the invitation to find your soul's destiny in God's unfolding story of love for His chosen people? — **By Joseph Durepos, NCR**

Little Catholics' Corner

CHRIST IS RISEN! ALLELUIA!

On the Sunday morning after Jesus was crucified, a woman named Mary went to visit the grave where the body of Jesus had been laid.

When she got there, she found that the stone had been rolled away

from the tomb. She ran to find someone to tell them what she had seen. She found two of the disciples, Peter and John, and told them that someone had stolen the body of Jesus.

The three of them immediately ran to the tomb. When they got there, they all saw the same thing,

but they didn't all look at it in the same way.

Peter looked and was curious. Mary just stood outside the tomb and wept because she feared that someone had stolen the body of Jesus.

John looked and believed. The Bible says that John went inside the

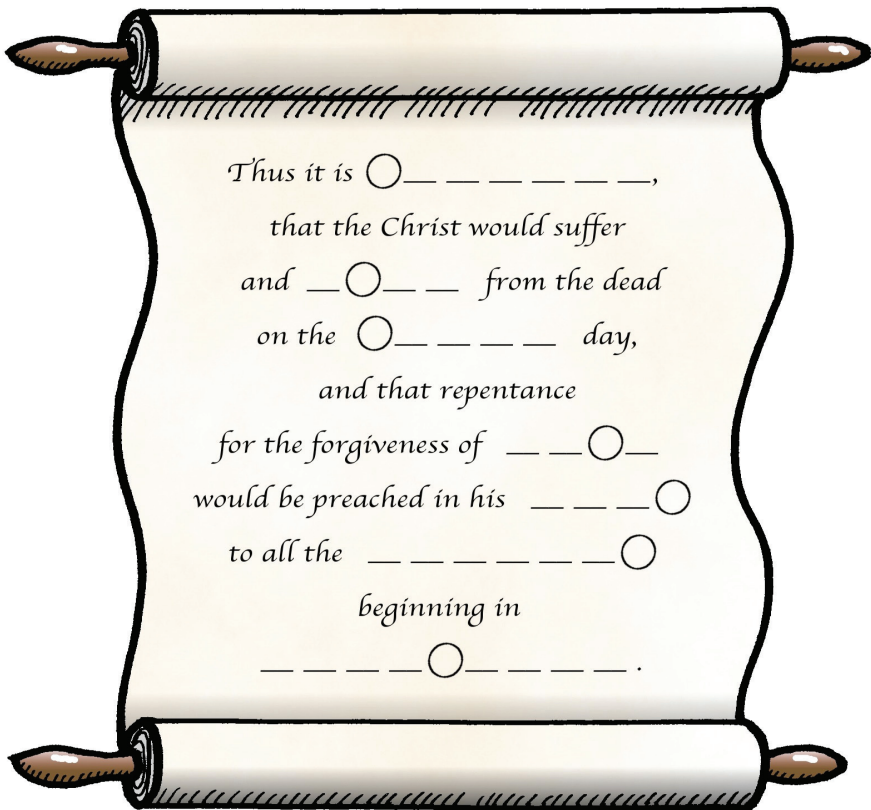
tomb and he saw and believed.

Some people, like Mary, Peter, and John can't see Jesus because they are looking for Him in a grave or on a cross. He isn't there! He is risen and is seated at the right hand of His Father in heaven!

Aunty Eliz

An Easter Word Puzzle

Use the words in the list to fill in the blanks. Then use the letters in circles to fill in the blanks at the end.



Let's
Colour



How well do you know the Easter Story?
See if you can figure out which of these are true and which are false.

1. After Jesus died on the Cross He was buried in a tomb for four days. True or false?
2. The first time the women went to the tomb on Easter morning, they saw Jesus' dead body in it. True or false?
3. Nobody went to Jesus' tomb until the afternoon on Easter Sunday. True or false?
4. At first when she saw Him, Mary Magdalen didn't recognize Jesus. True or false?
5. When Jesus rose from the dead, He could never die again. True or false?
6. With His resurrected body, Jesus could go through locked doors. True or false?
7. The disciples were not surprised when Jesus came back after He died, since they knew all along that was going to happen. True or false?

Jesus wants you to be His

_____ to the world!

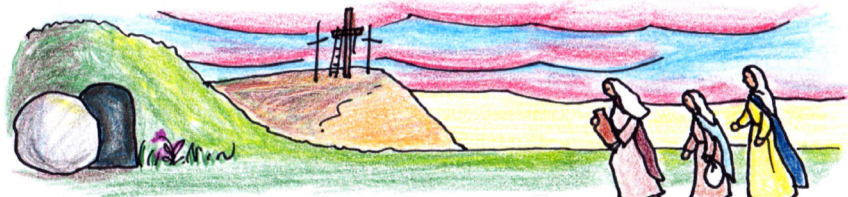
JERUSALEM
THIRD
NAME

WRITTEN
NATIONS
SINS

RISE



Early on Easter morning some women went to the tomb and saw that Jesus' body was gone!
Can you help the women find their way to the tomb?



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

YOUTH

March 31, 2024

Universality, fraternity the 'way forward' of the Church

PENANG: "With the digital world today, we can continue the Pentecostal experience... to come out there and face the world and every culture without fear," said Cardinal Sebastian Francis.

"Uniformity is a sin [and] for the lazy people. The Church is about universality and fraternity," he said.

The cardinal was speaking in a webinar on March 15 for Catholic communicators in Southeast Asia, where he reflected on the recent Church document on communication, *Towards Full Presence*.

Cardinal Sebastian emphasised how inculturation is a vital element of the Catholic Church, a mission he described as close to the heart of the Asian region.

"The spirit of the Church in Asia is inclusive. Being exclusive is going to kill us, even in the name of God," he said.

He called on all the Asian faithful to showcase their unique skills in storytelling and employ "a young and energetic spirit" when proclaiming the Gospel in today's highly technologi-

cal age.

Moreover, the cardinal, who also serves as Chairman of the Office of Communication of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), warned against the potential dangers of artificial intelligence.

He explained how this innovation, if misused or abused, could lead to humanity's reduction and self-destruction.

Therefore, the prelate encouraged everyone not to be mere onlookers and observers while artificial intelligence evolves but to take rapid action to mitigate its negative effects.

"We will engage to nurse and nurture those who are wounded... by artificial intelligence and social media, and be an evangelising culture because we have a Gospel story to share," said Cardinal Sebastian.

He also underlined how Catholic communicators must work hard to increase



"the frequency of Holy Spirit-powered algorithms" and decrease "the volume of noisy and busybody algorithms that invade private and sacred spaces."

Furthermore, the prelate said that the Holy Spirit will soon reveal the people behind the scenes who are harnessing AI-powered tools for their selfish interests.

"Forces that are hidden behind artificial intelligence who wish to control humanity and creation for the benefit of the hidden few... will be brought to light," said the cardinal.

Some 50 participants from different Southeast Asian countries attended the webinar.

The webinar was organised by the Vatican Dicastery for Communication in partnership with the FABC, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei (CBCMSB), and *Radio Veritas Asia* (RVA). — *Radio Veritas Asia*



Nurturing spiritual growth and connections At Youth Leadership retreat

CAMERON HIGHLAND: A total of 68 youths from the Church of Christ the Light, Chapel of Christ the King, and Our Lady of Lourdes, Sg Buloh, embarked on an enriching journey at the *Youth Leadership Retreat* facilitated by parish priest, Fr Peter Anthony, amidst the picturesque landscapes of Cameron Highlands.

The retreat provided an invaluable opportunity for spiritual growth and deepening bonds among the youths. Through engaging sessions and reflective activities, the youths explored the depths of their spirituality, gaining insights and wisdom that would

shape their paths forward.

Sharing sessions became a platform for heartfelt exchanges, where individuals opened up and shared their emotions, forging stronger connections with one another. These moments of sharing and listening fostered a sense of unity and understanding among the diverse group of participants.

Central to the retreat was the opportunity to reconnect with God amidst the serene beauty of Cameron Highlands. Surrounded by lush greenery and breathtaking views, the youths found solace and inspiration in their spiritual journey, reaffirming their



faith and commitment to their beliefs.

Exploring the natural wonders of Cameron Highlands added another layer of enrichment to the retreat experience. Visits to farms and tea plantations not

only provided a glimpse into the region's agricultural heritage but also offered moments of awe and appreciation for the wonders of creation.

The highlight of the retreat was the campfire, where laughter, music, and interactive games filled the night air. As the flames danced and crackled, barriers melted away, and bonds were strengthened across language barriers and cultural differences.

As the retreat came to a close, the youths returned home with hearts full of gratitude and memories that would last a lifetime. The youth leadership retreat had not only nurtured their spiritual growth but also deepened their connections with one another, laying the foundation for a vibrant and supportive community.

In the spirit of camaraderie and growth, the youth participants look forward to continuing their journey together, empowered by the experiences and lessons learned at the retreat.



CHRIST THE KING YOUTH MINISTRY'S 'ROAD TO REACH OUT' (R2RO)

KUALA LUMPUR: The recent *Road to Reach Out* (R2RO) event organised by the youth ministry of the Chapel of Christ the King (CTK), marked a significant step towards strengthening the bonds among youths as they prepared for the reopening of the chapel which took place on March 24.

With the hashtag *#WeAreBack*, this event was all about bringing youths together and building a sense of unity and belonging.

The youth ministry aimed to reach out to youths across the BECs fostering connections and building strong bonds among them. It was also a chance to engage with those who had been less active, ensuring that everyone felt included and valued. Additionally, the event served as an opportunity to share the exciting news of CTK's reopening and emphasise the vital role youths play in revitalising the chapel.

Conducted on March 2nd and 3rd across Zone 1 and Zone 2, comprising five BECs

each, R2RO warmly welcomed the youths, eager to reconnect and forge new friendships.

The highlight of the event was the games and fellowship. From team-building activities to spirited games that brought laughter and joy, every moment was filled with camaraderie and shared experiences. The event also included a potluck, where members of the BECs came together to share delicious food and deepen their bonds.

Furthermore, R2RO provided a platform for open sharing and announcements. Participants had the chance to suggest future events and offer ideas on how the Youth Ministry can improve and grow together as a community.

The youth committee took the opportunity to remind the participants the vital role of the youths in the chapel, emphasising that they should come together, support one another, and build a stronger, more connected parish community.



On a journey of faith, community and personal growth

KUCHING: The youth group of the Church of St Francis of Assisi, Pakan embarked on a spiritual pilgrimage visiting churches, convents and sacred sites within the Archdiocese of Kuching recently. For the 46 participants, the pilgrimage was a journey of faith, community, and personal growth. It was led by our dynamic leaders and accompanied by some members of the clergy.

Our pilgrimage itinerary was rich with spiritual experiences, beginning with a moving Mass and Stations of the Cross at Mount Hosanna Chapel in Sri Aman, led by Fr Henry Jimbey. This set the tone for our journey, deepening our connection to Christ's sacrifice.

One of the highlights was our visit to the Sisters of St Francis Monastery in Padungan, where we were welcomed by Srs Rowena, Delicia, and Dianna, who shared with us their wisdom and devotion to God. Their simplicity and dedication left a profound impact on us, reminding us of the beauty of a life centred on faith.

At the St Peter's College Major Seminary in Kuching, we had the privilege of engaging with Fr Francis Dakun and seminarian Br Stanley, gaining invaluable insights into the formation of future priests. The visit inspired us to reflect on

our own vocations and deepen our commitment to serving God.

Our pilgrimage also included visits to the Carmelite Monastery, St Joseph's Cathedral, and the History Gallery, each offering unique opportunities for prayer, reflection, and learning. These experiences enriched our understanding of the Church's rich heritage and traditions.

Throughout our pilgrimage, we were blessed to stay at St Lukas Centre Kota Padawan, where we formed bonds of friendship and support that will last a lifetime. Our evenings were filled with prayer, laughter, and shared experiences, strengthening our sense of community.

The pinnacle of our journey was the sunset Mass and Praise and Worship session at St Ann's Church Kota Padawan, led by the inspiring Fr Don Don Ramirez, OFM. The healing session that followed was a powerful reminder of God's love and mercy, touching each of our hearts in a profound way.

Our pilgrimage concluded with a visit to St Peter's Church Padungan, where we were welcomed by Fr Ramon Borja, SDB and Rector Fr Vincent Chin. Their words of encouragement and guidance inspired us to carry the spirit of our pilgrimage into our daily lives, spreading God's love



The youth visiting Mount Hosanna Chapel, Sri Aman.

wherever we go.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Archbishop Simon Poh, Fr James Ting, parish rector of St Anthony's Church Sarikei, Fr Fabian Kong, vice rector, and all the dedicated leaders who made this pilgrimage possible. Special thanks to Bro Julius Juli, Chairman of the Chapel, Dianna Claster, youth advisor, and youth leader Alexander Kevin for their unwavering support and guidance.

"Participating in this pilgrimage was an incredibly enriching experience for me," said Elvian Mathrell Janggut Jumat. "The

journey not only deepened my faith but also allowed me to connect with fellow pilgrims on a profound level. I am grateful for the opportunity to have been a part of this pilgrimage and for the memories and lessons that will stay with me forever."

For Lucy Lolita Layan, it was a truly a life-changing experience. "Visiting sacred sites, engaging in prayer and reflection, and sharing moments of fellowship with fellow pilgrims made this journey unforgettable. I returned home with a heart full of gratitude and a renewed sense of faith."

— *Today's Catholic*

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Requiescat in pace

**Donald De Cruz**

9th February 1929 –
2nd April 2021

(3rd Anniversary)**Theresa Danker**

1st December 1933 –
13th January 2015

(9th Anniversary)

"Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."
Psalm 23:6

Deeply missed by children, in-laws, grandchildren and only great grand-daughter.

In Loving Memory Of

SEBASTY EMMANUEL & AGNES CHOW

Returned to the Lord

21 Jan 2011

18 Apr 2023



"We thought of you today
But that is nothing new
We thought of you yesterday
And will tomorrow too
We think of you in silence
And make no outward show
For what it meant to lose you
Only those who love you know
Remembering you is easy
We do it everyday
It's the heartache of losing you
That will never go away"



The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. In grassy meadows he lets me lie. By tranquil streams he leads me to restore my spirit. He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name. Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death I should fear no danger, for you are at my side. Your staff and your crook are there to soothe me.

Psalm 23:1-4

8th Year Anniversary
In Loving Memory of**MADAM
MARIAMMAH
THOMAS**

From the Lord :
29th Oct 1938
To the Lord:
2nd April 2016

*In life we loved you dearly
In death we love you still
In our hearts we hold a place
That only you can fill.*

Mass for the soul of Mdm Mariammah Thomas will be celebrated on Sunday, 7 April 2024 at the Church of Jesus Caritas, Kepong at 9.00am.

Deeply loved and forever cherished by
Children, Grandchildren and loved ones.

1st Anniversary
In Loving Memory of**Mary Stella
Aseervatham**
Born: 22 Feb 1945
Departed: 30 Mar 2023

*"I have fought
the good fight till the end;
I have run the race to the
finish; I have kept the faith."
2 Timothy 4:7*

Dearly missed and fondly
remembered by children,
grandchildren,
family and friends.

Forever Remembered

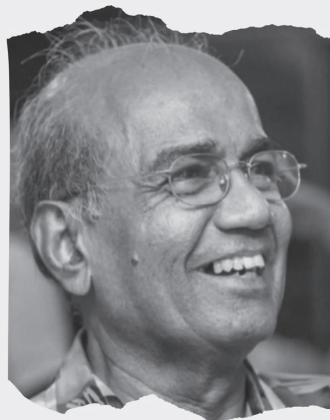
L. A. FERNANDEZ

December 20, 1936 - April 5, 2019

Today marks 5 years since you left us,
yet your love, wisdom, and laughter
linger in our hearts.

Your presence is felt in
every cherished memory.

Forever in our thoughts,
forever cherished, forever loved.



In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, O Lord,
will keep me safe. ~ Psalm 4:8

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13th Anniversary

**In Ever Loving Memory
of Louis Danasamy**
13th February 1935 -
1st April 2011

*Sadly missed along life's way,
quietly remembered every day.
No longer in our life to share,
but in our hearts,
you're always there.*

*We love you, we miss you and
wish you are here with us*

Your loving wife Rose,
daughters, sons-in-law &
grandchildren.

In Loving Memory of

**George Lamb Scott**
14th March 1971
(53rd Anniversary)**Annie Scott**
23rd April 1971
(53rd Anniversary)**David Scott**
31st March 2011
(13th Anniversary)

*In our hearts, you still live on, still loved, still missed.
For those we love, never go away. You walk beside us everyday,
unseen, unheard, yet always near.*

Always cherished by the SCOTT
and extended family, relatives and friends.

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Europe must return to Christian roots

ROME: With European elections just three months away, the continent's bishops have joined other Christian churches in lamenting that the Christian principles on which Europe was founded are either being sidelined or instrumentalised for political gain.

They have also called for an open and consistent dialogue between Church and state, and asked that all European institutions and all candidates for European Parliament promote Christian values in pre-election campaigns and fight against the politicisation of the faith.

In a joint March 20 statement, the Commission of Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) said challenges such as the successive economic, immigration, health and energy crises in Europe and the world, as well as current global conflicts, are compounded by a "broader crisis of values in the European area, which calls into question democratic principles and institutions."

In addition to COMECE, the statement was also signed by the Conference of European Churches, the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, and Together for Europe.

Among other things, the signatories said it is of "vital importance" to facilitate a participatory democracy and ensure the broadest possible participation of citizens in decision-making processes, as well as in the management of European affairs.

They noted that a significant portion of EU citizens who see the future of Europe through the lens of Christian values "now feel marginalised, as they do not have the opportunity to



express their positions and opinions in an autonomous and distinct way."

"We also notice the exclusion of any appropriate reference to Christian values in relevant EU texts," they said.

Amid growing secularism, Church leaders in Europe have long fought against progressive attempts to broaden legal protections for practices such as abortion and euthanasia, and they have consistently rallied against the rise of nationalist populism while advocating for a collective policy on issues such as migration and health, following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Their statement also comes after France recently became the first country to enshrine abortion as a constitutional right, a move some observers fear might spark similar legislative

reforms in other countries throughout Europe.

In their statement, COMECE and the other signatories observed that "the importance of the Christian tradition as the 'milieu' in which today's European values were established is being overlooked."

"Precisely in this pre-election period, we, as Christians, express our willingness to ensure a substantial and in-depth political dialogue that would also be an opportunity to express our firm commitment to European values and the EU acquis," they said.

They lamented that values such as peace, stability, prosperity and the rule of law "rather than rule by power," which for years were taken for granted, "have now been torn apart."

Christian values, which are embraced by a

large portion of European citizens, "can provide a guarantee of a safe approach to the changes and challenges we face," they said.

To this end, they said it is essential for all European factions to take Christian values into account when it comes to policy, especially on core issues "and in a labyrinthine political landscape where citizens are particularly concerned about any shifting and unstable norms."

The signatories assured of their commitment to working together in a dynamic and inclusive way in order to promote "a positive European agenda" in which Christian values serve as an inspiration.

They called for an open and stable dialogue with churches as outlined in the Treaty of Lisbon, and specifically called on political groups of the European Union, the various political parties, and all candidates for European Parliament to recognise Christian values "as a main foundation of the European project."

To this end, they asked specifically that article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – which introduced a legal obligation for the EU to conduct regular, open, and transparent dialogue with churches, religious associations, and non-confessional organisations – to be better implemented.

Signatories also asked that EU leaders and entities "fight against the instrumentalisation of Christian values for political interests and in the perspective of ethno-racial narratives," and promote Christian values in political programmes and pre-election campaigns as June approaches. — By Elise Ann Allen, *Cruz News*

Nordic's country first Catholic Bible

OSLO: A Norwegian bishop and monk has hailed the publication of Norway's first official Bible for Catholics as a breakthrough.

"The publication of a Bible presented and packaged as *The Catholic Canon* by the Norwegian Bible Society is a major ecumenical event," said Bishop Erik Varden of Trondheim.

"It invites us afresh to engage with the entirety of Scripture, to read each book as part of a whole, attentive to the symphony of voices that join in proclaiming a single, undying and saving Word. It is my hope that many Catholics will discover the immense fascination of the scriptural text, learning to love and revere it, letting their lives be renewed by it."

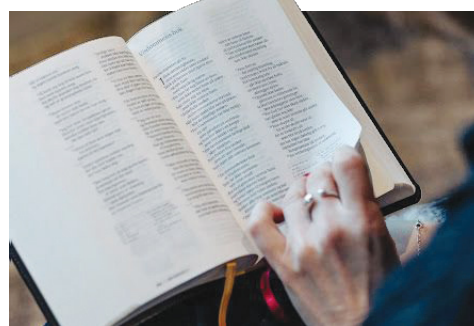
Varden, 49, is a Trappist monk and spiritual writer. He was consecrated bishop of Trondheim, in central Norway, in 2020.

Published March 15, this Norwegian edition is notable not only for its inclusivity toward the Scandinavian nation's Catholic minority, said Catholic editor Heidi Haugros Øyma. The project saw linguists and Scripture experts collaborating with poets and other literary authors, including Nobel laureate Jon Fosse.

The Bible is now available in both official written languages of the country, Bokmål and Nynorsk.

Pål Johannes Nes, co-founder of *EWTN Norway*, said: "This is also a very important element in the re-evangelisation of Norway toward 2030 through Mission 2030, which *EWTN Norway* together with the Diocese of Trondheim are working on."

"It is also a great joy for me to be able to read the Bible to my children in Norwegian,"



he added.

What makes this Norwegian Bible Catholic?

The distinction between Catholic and Protestant versions of the Bible in Norway hinges on the inclusion of several additional texts in the Catholic Old Testament. Specifically, the Catholic canon incorporates seven extra books: Tobit, Judith, the First and Second Books of Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (also referred to as Ecclesiasticus), and Baruch.

Furthermore, it contains extended passages in the books of Esther and Daniel. These additional books and passages, known collectively as the Deuterocanonical books, are recognised and revered within the Catholic tradition but are not included in the Protestant version of the Old Testament.

Øyma, who was deeply involved in the project said, "The inclusion of the Deuterocanonical books represents a move toward a more inclusive, ecumenical approach to Scripture in Norway."

"It is a way of saying that we belong here, we are a part of the cultural and Christian landscape." — By AC Wimmer, *CNA*

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