

# THE PARISHES OF ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST AND ST MARY MAGDALENE

35 Brighton Place, Edinburgh EH15 1LL

Bingham Avenue, Edinburgh EH15 3HY

*Parish Priest:*

*Fr Jock Dalrymple:*

*0131 669 5447*

*Deacon:*

*Revd Eddie White:*

*07986 015772*

*Sacrament of Reconciliation: after the Vigil Mass (7.30pm on Saturday) or any time by appointment*

*Pastoral Team: Jennifer Morris and Chris Vinestock*

*Shared Parish House: 3 Sandford Gardens, Edinburgh, EH15 1LP*

*Parish Administrator: Enrico Fertini*

*(Office Hours: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday: 10.00am to 3.00pm & Friday 11.00am to 4.00pm)*

*Web address:*

*<https://sites.google.com/view/stjohnsandstmarymagdalenes/>*

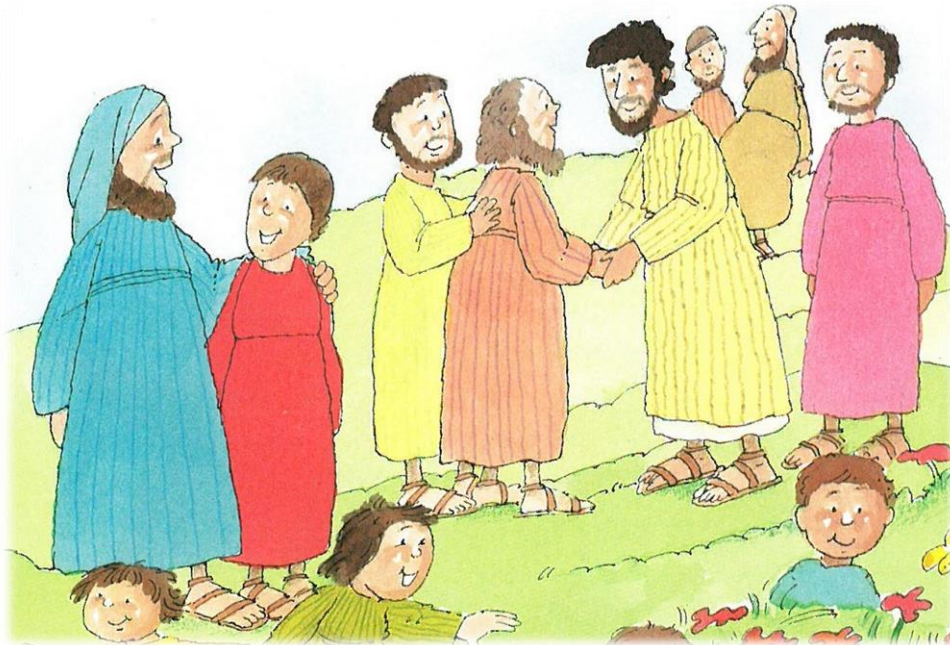
*Joint Facebook page:*

*<https://www.facebook.com/StJohnsandStMaryMagdalenes>*

*Joint e-mail address for our sister parishes:*

*[stjohnsandstmarymagdalenes@gmail.com](mailto:stjohnsandstmarymagdalenes@gmail.com)*

## 10 SEPTEMBER 2023 TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR



All the commandments are summed up in this single command: You must love your neighbour as yourself. Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour.

(from today's Second Reading, Romans 13:9)

**Season of Creation** - The Season of Creation began on Friday 1 September and concludes on 4 October, the Feast of St Francis. This year's theme is *Let Justice and Peace flow*. Find out more news and event details at [www.seasonofcreation.org](http://www.seasonofcreation.org)

**This week is Vocations Awareness Week**, 'a week in which we're encouraged to pray for an increase in vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate and the consecrated life.' With this newsletter is a **pastoral letter** from the Bishop of Paisley, Bishop John Keenan. **Archbishop Leo writes:** 'The Archdiocese will be hosting a Vocations Mass at St David's in Dalkeith this Tuesday (12 Sep) at 6:30pm in which people are invited to come along and pray for vocations to the priesthood and religious life.'

**The September Charity Coffee Morning will be held this Monday, 11 September**, in the Parish Hall after Mass. Donations will be shared between Stella Maris (Apostleship of the Sea) and Lifeboats (RNLI). Please come along and enjoy tea, coffee and home baking, together with the friendly company of other parishioners.

There will be a sale of preloved clothes accessories, raffles, tea & coffee in aid of the **Gathimba Edwards Foundation**. The charity is based in Aberdeen. Its volunteers provide children in Kenya with an education by supporting school, college and university; by supplying school uniforms, books, shoes & access to school meals; by giving these children a safe place of shelter; by building houses for them or improving existing homes; by bringing them and their families closer to self-sustainability with help to grow their own food; and by caring for them through providing access to psychosocial support.

*(In last week's newsletter, there was an account by Ros MacKay's daughter, Caroline, of her visit to Kenya in support of this charity.)*

## THIS WEEK

### Saturday 9 September

12.30pm - St John's – **Baptism of Luca Kelly-Rao**

6.30pm – St John's – **Vigil Mass** - livestreamed

### Sunday 10 September

9.30am - St John's - **Mass** - livestreamed

11.15am – St Mary Magdalene's – **Mass** – livestreamed

### Monday 11 September

10.00am – St John's – **Mass** – livestreamed

10.30am – St John's Hall - **September Charity Coffee Morning (for Stella Maris & Lifeboats)**

7.00pm – Zoom – **Gospel Sharing** – please click [HERE](#) (or type <https://bit.ly/460j46Q> in your browser)

### Tuesday 12 September

7.00pm – Prayer Room – **Mass** – livestreamed

7.45pm – Parish House – **RCIA 2022/3 Get Together**

### Wednesday 13 September

10.00am – St Mary Magdalene's – **Mass** (Fr Jim) – livestreamed

10.00am – Our Lady of Loretto, Musselburgh – **Requiem Mass for Sandy Ferguson** (Fr Jock)

### Thursday 14 September – FEAST OF THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

10.00am – St John's – **Requiem Mass for Violet Paterson** – livestreamed

7.15pm – Parish House – **Livestreamers' Get Together** – not livestreamed!

8.00pm – Parish House – **Meeting of Sacramental Preparation Co-ordinators**

### Friday 15 September

9.15am-9.50am – St John's – **Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament**

10.00am – St John's – **Mass** – livestreamed

### Saturday 16 September – FEAST OF ST NINIAN

9.30am-1.30pm – St John's Hall – **Gathimba Edwards Foundation Fashion Sale**

6.30pm – St John's – **Vigil Mass** - livestreamed

### Sunday 17 September

9.30am - St John's - **Mass** - livestreamed

11.15am – St Mary Magdalene's – **Mass** – livestreamed

View the **links for the Masses** by visiting our webpage:

<http://bit.ly/2023Mass> - or by scanning the QR code → → → →



**A Prayer from the Parent of a very sick Child**

*Dear God, when I am afraid,  
 help me to remember that you are with me,  
 nearer than my breath, closer than my beating heart.  
 You understand my worries better than I do  
 so let me trust you and your peace.  
 Let calm overcome my fears. Amen*

**From Archbishop Leo’s Weekly ‘Ad Clerum’**

**Altar Servers Day** - A Day of faith, fun, and friendship for altar servers takes place at the Gillis Centre, 100 Strathearn Road, Edinburgh on **Saturday 16 September** at 10:30am to 3:00pm. Please speak to Father Jock for more information.

**Margaret Sinclair Pilgrimage** - The 2023 National Pilgrimage to pray for the Beatification of the Venerable Margaret Sinclair is on **Sunday 17 September** at St Patrick’s Church, Cowgate, Edinburgh, EH1 1NA. 12:30-1.50pm Refreshments and sale of candles & goods; 2:00pm Holy Hour with Rosary, Confession, Silence, Hymns & Benediction; 3:00pm Reflection & Novena Prayers; 3:30pm break for refreshments and sale of candles & holy items; 4:30pm Holy Mass.

**Free2Pray** - The Scottish Parliament is considering a proposed Bill to ban peaceful prayers and offers of help near abortion clinics in Scotland. Join a webinar titled ‘**Free2Pray**’ to find out what you can do to make your voice heard. It takes place on **Tuesday 3 October** at 7:45pm and is organised by the Scottish Catholic Parliamentary Office. Register at [bit.ly/free2pray](http://bit.ly/free2pray)

**A View from Within** - Those with experience of what life is like inside Scotland’s prisons – including prison chaplains – share their stories at this free event to mark Prisoners’ Week. It takes place on **Saturday 7 October** from 10:00am- 3:30pm at the Gillis Centre, 100 Strathearn Road, Edinburgh, EH9 1BB. Details and registration at [bit.ly/aviewfromwithin](http://bit.ly/aviewfromwithin)

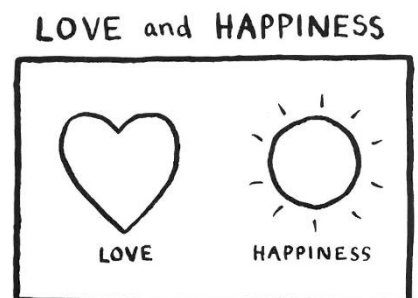
**Teams of Our Lady** - Teams is a worldwide lay movement within the Catholic Church that aims to help married couples grow in their love of Christ and each other, recognising that Christian marriage is a precious gift that we need to nurture. Teams consist of four to six couples and a spiritual counsellor, often a priest, who meet roughly once a month in each other’s homes becoming, over time, a strong supportive group. If you would like to find out more there will be an open information evening on **Tuesday 10 October**, 6:30pm-7:30pm in Ss John Cantius & Nicholas church hall, Broxburn, EH52 5RJ.

**NOTICEBOARD**

Date		*** St John’s Eucharistic Ministers rota ***		
September	9	<b>Tracy Burgess</b>	John Lawler	Chris Vinestock
	10		John Lauder	Gena Gallagher
	16	<b>Jim Roarty</b>	Rossana Velazco	Pat Whyte
	17		Angela Preston	Anna Tanzi

**The Pamoja Fashion Sale Team writes:** ‘Last week we raised **£372.00** for **Twende Pamoja Charity**. Thanks to the whole community’

Let us remember that in this RICH and BEAUTIFUL world, there are only 2 things worth living for: *LOVE* and *HAPPINESS*\*



\*ok, and maybe CHOCOLATE

## SAINT OF THE WEEK (1)

### September 5 – Saint (Mother) Theresa of Calcutta (1910-1997)

#### *Founder of the Missionaries of Charity*

*"To show great love for God and our neighbour we need not do great things. It is how much love we put in the doing that makes our offering something beautiful for God."*



On September 10, 1946, the woman who would become Mother Teresa was traveling on a train to Darjeeling, a hill station in the Himalayas. At the time she was simply Sister Agnes, a thirty-six-year-old Loreto Sister of Albanian extraction, who had spent the past twenty years teaching in her order's schools in India. Though she was a devoted nun, beloved by her mostly middle-class students, there was nothing to suggest that she would one day be regarded as one of the most compelling Christian witnesses of the twentieth century. But on this day she received *"a call within a call."* God, she suddenly felt, wanted something more from her: *"He wanted me to be poor with the poor and to love him in the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor."*

So, with the permission of her congregation, she left her convent. In place of her traditional religious habit, she donned a simple white sari with blue border and went out to seek Jesus in the desperate byways of Calcutta. Eventually she was joined by others including many of her former students. They became the Missionaries of

Charity. And she became Mother Teresa.

With time Mother Teresa would establish centres of service around the globe for the sick, the homeless, the unwanted. But she was particularly identified with her home for the dying in Calcutta. There, destitute and dying men and women, gathered off the streets of the city, were welcomed to receive loving care and respect until they died. Those who had lived like *"animals in the gutter"* were enabled, in Mother Teresa's home, to *"die like angels"* - knowing that they were truly valued and loved as precious children of God.

It was not Mother Teresa's way to change social structures. *"We are not social workers,"* she said, but *"contemplatives in the heart of the world. For we are touching the body of Christ twenty-four hours a day."* It was this mystical insight, which she obviously lived, that made Mother Teresa such a widely inspiring figure. She did not simply practice charity; she embodied it.

*God has identified himself with the hungry, the sick, the naked, the homeless; hunger, not only for bread, but for love, for care, to be somebody to someone; nakedness, not of clothing only, but nakedness of that compassion that very few people give to the unknown; homelessness, not only just for a shelter made of stone, but that homelessness that comes from having no one to call your own.*

For many years Mother Teresa toiled in obscurity. But eventually she was *"discovered"* by the world. She became the subject of documentary films and biographies; she received honorary degrees from prestigious universities and countless honours, including the Nobel Peace Prize for 1979. Widely regarded as a *"living saint,"* she nevertheless remained remarkably unburdened by such adulation. Nor did she have any exalted sense of her own vocation. *"We can do no great things,"* she said, *"only small things with great love."* Often when people begged to join her in her *"wonderful work"* in Calcutta she would respond gently but firmly: *"Find your own Calcutta!"* As she explained,

*Don't search for God in far lands-he is not there. He is close to you, he is with you. Just keep the lamp burning and you will always see him. Watch and pray. Keep kindling the lamp and you will see his love and you will see how sweet is the Lord you love.*

In later life Mother Teresa travelled widely around the world. In the affluent West she had no trouble finding poverty - both the material kind and a no less destructive impoverishment of the spirit. The answer in both cases was love, a love that would begin with persons and ultimately transform the world. But before we tried to love the entire world, we should start by trying to love one other person - someone apparently unlovable, unwanted, or rejected. *"You can save only one at a time. We can love only one at a time."* That, she believed, is what we were put on earth to do: *"Something beautiful for God."* Mother Teresa died on 5 September 1997.

*See: Eileen Egan, Such a Vision of the Street (New York: Doubleday, 1985); Mother Teresa of Calcutta, My Life for the Poor (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).*

**Traditional African saying**

*Talk and laugh together,  
enjoy life together;  
but never call it friendship  
until we have wept together.*

## **SAINTS OF THE WEEK - (2)**

### **Blessed John Duckett and other English, Welsh, and Scottish Martyrs (Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries)**

This selection covers a number of those martyred on various dates during the month of September. They are considered in chronological order of the year of their death. **Thomas Johnson** was a priest at the London Charterhouse and one of the earliest martyrs in the Tudor persecution. The prior and three monks were executed in May 1534, and three more monks in June, after the prior had told all his monks that they could not assent to the Act of Supremacy, making Henry VIII supreme head of the Church in England. Thomas, with nine others, refused and was arrested, imprisoned in the Marshalsea prison, and left to starve to death. They seemed to stay alive for a surprisingly long time; this was found to be due to St Thomas More's adopted daughter Margaret Clement bribing the gaolers and bringing them food. She was prevented from further visiting, and one by one the ten died, Thomas on 20 September 1534.

**George Douglas was a Scotsman born in Edinburgh.** He was ordained abroad, but does not feature in the Douai lists, which has been taken to suggest that he was a Franciscan, but he does not feature on lists of Franciscan *beati*. Whoever he was, he was hanged, drawn, and quartered at York on 9 September 1587 for persuading the queen's subjects to embrace the Catholic faith. **William Way**, born in 1562, studied at Douai and joined the English mission in December 1586. He was arrested some six months later in London and imprisoned in the Clink Street jail. He was taken before a magistrate charged with being a priest ordained abroad and exercising his ministry in England, but he refused to be tried by a layman and so was referred to the bishop of London; he refused to recognize him as *a* valid bishop; the authorities lost patience and condemned him at the next quarter sessions. He was executed in the usual brutal fashion on 9 September 1588.

The following year **William Spenser**, ordained at Reims in 1583, was hanged, drawn, and quartered at York on 24 September. Nothing is known of his ministry before his arrest. **Robert Hardesty**, a layman arrested for sheltering him, was arrested and executed at the same time. They and the two previously named were all beatified among Eighty-Five Martyrs of England, Scotland, and Wales on 22 November 1987.

A layman named **William Brown** was hanged, drawn, and quartered at Ripon on 5 September 1605, but apart from the fact that he came from Northamptonshire and was arrested with two other - executed that August for "*being zealous Catholics, and industrious in exhorting some of their neighbours to embrace the Catholic faith*" - nothing is known about him.

**John Duckett** was born in Yorkshire in 1613, studied at the English College at Douai, and was ordained there in 1639. He studied for a further three years in Paris, where he became known for his cheerful disposition, then prepared to go on the English mission in Flanders, where he was directed by a "kinsman", Fr Duckett, who was the son of Blessed James Duckett, a bookseller whose bookshop in the Strand survived until the 1970s. He was arrested after a year's mission in Co. Durham, admitted to being a priest to save two lay helpers from further interrogation, and was sent to London for trial and imprisoned in Newgate. He was condemned to death for being a priest ordained abroad and ministering in England and was executed at Tyburn on 7 September 1644.



**Ralph Corby**, who was sent to London, imprisoned, tried, and executed with Duckett, was born near Dublin but came to England when his Durham-born family returned there when he was five. Every member of the family entered the religious life: his father with the Jesuits, his mother and two sisters with Benedictine nuns in Belgium and his two brothers, like himself, joining the Jesuits. He studied and was ordained in Flanders and was sent back to England in 1632 and so had ministered for twelve years by the time he was arrested in Newcastle. The English Jesuits tried to exchange him for a Scots colonel held prisoner in Germany; he offered the reprieve to John Duckett on the grounds that he was the younger man, but the death sentence passed on both of them put an end to the negotiations.

# A REFLECTION ON THE GOSPEL FOR THE 23<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

## Matthew 18;15-20

*(The author of this reflection is a friend of Fr Jock who lives in Northumberland)*

Joanna and Ian, her husband, have decided to sell their house. You might recall that a few months back I asked you to pray for Joanna. Having received a worrying diagnosis of serious breast cancer, things did not look good. Things are brighter now, and they have decided to close this particular chapter of their life. Both children away at university are unlikely to return home, so downsizing and relocation is the order of the day. Selling and buying houses is one of the most stressful episodes in our lives. I would agree with Joanna, that she has a lovely house. She has good taste and an equally good eye. Property viewers need to be alert and on their guard. Joanna is no exception to most of us, in that she neither enjoys nor relishes correction or criticism. Joanna loves her house but recognises the need to move. It's too big for two, expensive to run and, with leaden hearts, she and Ian instructed an estate agent. Viewings have started. Viewers and potential buyers speak of the need of modernisation, new bathrooms, perhaps a new kitchen but 'perhaps this one will do for the time being!' - removing this wall, opening up the picture window and making patio doors leading to a barbecue area. (Such latter viewers know little of the breeze searing in from the North Sea with the energy of the Flying Scotsman chasing another record. Barbecues are only possible during a window of 87 minutes per year.) The comments stung. In her mind there was nothing wrong with her house. How dare these strangers make such ill-informed comment? They had no idea how chill the easterly wind blew, nor the care and attention that was lavished on the bathrooms as they shone and sparkled like new and a kitchen that was so clean, plates were superfluous. How dare they? Joanna's fury was visible from Space, and it was a struggle not to laugh, but discretion being the better part of valour, I remained silent.

Her anger, however, was as nothing as mine on Tuesday when I stumbled across the tabloid that masquerades as a newspaper – allegedly Britain's most popular. Apparently, I am languishing on State Benefits. In my time I admit that I have languished among the detritus of rampant alcoholism but have never languished on State Benefits. My main income is my state pension and, like many, making ends meet is a struggle but, still, I am much more fortunate than others, for I can still work to eke out my budget. I certainly don't languish. In my opinion, much of the British print media is equally reprehensible. Joanna struggles to remain silent in the face of criticism of her taste and style, but she needs her sale. I will not be a silent witness to Christ's Gospel. Letters fly off, left, right and centre. I will not join in the journalists' game, I will not let politicians lie and exploit the people they are elected to serve.

One of the easiest questions I am asked is 'Do you think I have a drink problem?' People who know my back-story often ask my opinion. My answer? 'Yes. You already suspect that you have, and that is why you ask. You know alcohol controls you and your mood and not the reverse.' Not everyone enjoys my answer. I am grateful for my recovery, and the AA movement insists I do not keep that recovery to myself. I share it. Freely, willingly. God has graced me with recovery, and I will and must share that gift.

This is the message of today's Gospel: *go and have it out with him alone...* Staying quiet is not an option. Joanna needs her sale, so must bite her tongue. I am charged with my own salvation and that of others, so I must speak out. A silent Christian is of no use to God and Jesus Christ. A silent Christian is as much use to God as the proverbial chocolate fireguard. *Go and have it out with him alone.*

# PARISH REGISTER

*Warm birthday greetings to Mary Iannarelli, 70 last Thursday, 7 September*

*Many congratulations to Charlotte Lauder, or rather Dr Charlotte Lauder, who passed her Viva last week, and so completed her PhD in English at the University of Strathclyde and National Library of Scotland.*

*Please pray for those who have died recently:*

*Revd. Mike Marsden - Lorraine Syme  
Mary Bannister*

*Please pray for those whose anniversaries occur around this time:*

*Daphne de Freitas - Gerry Wynne  
Hugh Shannon - David Tippett  
Evelyn Oldershaw - Caroline McTighe  
Moira McConville - Sylvia Berry  
John Speedman*

*Please pray for those Parishioners who are sick:*

St. John's:

Donna Buchan, Ronnie Carroll, Charlotte and Fred McGregor, Frank Phillips, Ann O'Brien, Kathie Gallagher, Diane McCarthy, Raymond Walker, Margaret Duffy, Mike and Patricia Lawler, Mike Burns, Harry Allan, May Thomson, Carol Simpson, Kenny O'Connor, Gerry Gallagher, John Cregan, Rose Thornton, Kathleen Brown, Mike Noonan, John Whyte, Maria Pacitti, Fiona Connel, Ann Dobie, Sheelagh Dobson, Chloe Sutherland, Norah Bruce, Ruth Vizor, Mary Grady, Pauli Walker, Anna Butler, May Flynn, Vincent Knowles, young Saoirse Golden, Frances Cunningham, David Reid, Betty Dougal, Anne Thomson, Sarah McManus, Sr Jennifer Lindsay, Maureen Low, Mary Slight, Norman Telfer, Erin Corbett, Roz Byers and Marie Angela Crolla.

St Mary Magdalene's:

John Cunningham, Monica Gorman, Allan Guthrie, John McLaughlin, Mary McGovern (jnr), Carolynne McCann, Tom Bauld, Sam Burns, Jacqueline Marinello, Sandra Watt, Chris English, Andrew Farmer, Maria Scott Jnr, Louise Gorman, Bridget Malone, Charles Malcolm, Margaret Ryan, Jacqueline Hannan, Julie Keegan, Annie Watson, David O'Donnell, Jude Ferguson and Mary and James Muir.

*Offertory 3 September 2023*

St Mary Magdalene's, £181.57 total, including £99.57 Offertory and £82.00 Gift Aid

St John's, £1421.30 total, including £433.90 Offertory, £239.40 Gift Aid and £748.00 online donations.

*Anniversaries:*

St John's: Sept.9: Nan Doig (2022); Evelyn Oldershaw (2021); Lucy Valente (2020); Caroline McTighe (2017); Mary Gilchrist (2005); Thomas Molloy (1996); Jeannette Kempton (1993); **Sept.10:** George Malcolm (1997); Kenneth G Bevan (1996); Alexander Baird (1986); **Sept.11:** Moira McConville (2021); Jimmy Maughan (2016); James McGrory (1997); **Sept.12:** Alec Gilroy (2016); William and Theresa Morrison (1991); Bridget Service (1979); John McCann (1976); **Sept.13:** Neil Griffin (1991); Annie Mouat (1991); Margaret Huntly (1988); Margaret Hartnett (1949); Thomas McDonough; **Sept.14:** Hugh Shannon (2020); John Smith (2009); Janet Gilroy (1956); Agnes Devlin; **Sept.15:** Gerry Wynne (2017); Sylvia Berry (2016); Alessio Lanni (2006); John West (2000); Joseph Waugh (1993); Veronica Haller (1969); Bridget Meehan (1958);

St Mary Magdalene's:

**Sept.13:** Jimmy Henry (1982); **Sept.14:** Samuel Hay (2001);

*Please pray for sick friends and relatives of our Parishioners:*

Brian Gurney, Alec Robb, Mike Nelson, Tommy McPake, Kathie Duffy, Dave Cook, Richard Reid, Richard Plummer, Anne Morris, Alison St.Clair Ford, Shirley Robertson, Elaine Connolly, Miranda McDonnell, Mary Madden, Neil Boyle, John Wiggins, Lucy Pagett, Jim Gray, Angela McKenna, John Curran, Saramma Samuel, Margaret Troupe, Caitlin Mair, Robert Clark, Peter Robinson, Stuart Goddard, Win Veitch, Peter Hanley, Kate Titterington, Ann Currie, Chris White, Douglas Edington, Helen Robertson baby Josh Simpson, Desire Bascon, Janet Haring, Shona Killin, Tom Heaney, Mary Whyte, Tish Deacon, Elizabeth McGrath and Granny Elizabeth, Andrew Muldoon, John Havard, Mary Wallace, Ellen Green, Sophie Robinson, Louise Young, Tricia Scott, Harriet Wingfield Digby (aged 9), Alan Proudlock, Evelyn Walsh, Grace Stuart, Stephen Norwood, John Miller, Agnes Clarke, David Fenwick, Maurice McAllister, Rita Noonan, baby Lucas McCourt, Ellen Dow, members of the McGrath Family, Hans Zaunbrecher, Judith Franklin, Clare Johnston, Mary and Derek Lamarque, Keiran Smart (aged 16), Michael Doherty, Carol Turnbull, Jean Wylie, Angela Khan, George and Ann McDermott, Tara Kuppinger, Jessica Haggerty, Charlotte O'Brien, young Martha Moyes (aged 6), Jennifer Kay, Seval and Kazim Kazimoglu, Ann Watt (Mgr Rae's sister), Jan Meise, Mary Taygarth, Roger Bromley, Tony Rigg, Stuart Falconer, Elizabeth, Elizabeth and Gordon Marron, Katie McAnenny, John Kellagher, Ann Thorp, Dani Miniette, Peter Millar, Joan Murray Hamilton, Sr Margaret Mary, Betty Blyth, Lauren Fitzpatrick, Michael Igoe, Clare Richardson, Laura Anderson, James O'Rourke, Tommy Muir, James Shepherd, Andrew Franklin, Jamie Mitchell, Edward Caulfield, Igor Rekowski, Joan Brooks, Mary Turnbull and young Ray Donovan Syme.

## **A Reflection on Responsible Thinking – by parishioner Colin Davey**

As a child, I was often told to think for myself, to use a bit of common sense. In one ear and out the other of course. Boring grown-up stuff. It remains good advice nonetheless: thinking for oneself is never wrong, provided it takes us no further from the truth. But what does it actually entail?

If God made us purposefully just the way we are, then that very much includes the way that we think (including an inability to fully grasp the mystery of God – but that’s another story). So, we should be able to figure out what to do by thinking through the problem properly, using the gifts that we have been given for this very purpose. But that’s only half the story. We each have an individual perspective that has been shaped by our life experiences, its everyday norms and challenges. This is our moral conscience – our own personal compass for common sense in the world that we see and have seen. That we are given the capacity, and acquire the compass, for thinking for ourselves is fully in tune with being part nature (God’s design, our thinking tackle), part nurture (our experiences and learning, which form our memory and conscience). In reality, we function from the bit where nature and nurture overlap, so it’s important that these are in balance. Placing conscience before basic human nature can, though, be the very stuff of saints, and we can recall Blessed Franz Jägerstätter from a recent newsletter in this respect.

There’s nothing in the bones of what I’ve said above that is uniquely Catholic or even Christian. What’s decisive in this context is the degree to which our conscience is prepared to concede our thinking to others. The Church undertakes much discernment and reflection on contemporary issues, and does so with our best interests at heart. Formulating a clear Catholic position – an anchor if you like – in what can be very muddy waters can only be a good thing. And there’s the Holy Spirit, prodding away at the corners of our conscience, if we’re open and receptive to that guidance.

Issues around entrustment of thinking might also underlie fears concerning artificial intelligence (AI). AI controls much of the modern world on our behalf, and in one sense could be said to be reading the signs of the times as it mines our data landscapes. AI has hit the headlines recently because of new consumer creative tools – notably ChatGPT – that appear to think like us. Something that was very clear from visiting the 2019 National Museum of Scotland exhibition on robots is that it’s those machines that look and behave most like us that are the scariest. Not the silver giants from outer space but the humanoids, the emulators, the soulless life-size marionette that might turn on us any minute – all design and no conscience, you see. Even if we could give AI a conscience, whose ethical or moral framework would we choose to impart? Highly technical, computational applications aside, for now we had better exercise caution if we are to delegate God-given reason and insight to the dispassion of algorithms, especially as a lazy proxy for everyday good judgement. Admittedly, it’s a huge leap from asking Alexa the silliest question you can think of (can you come outside to play?) to AI one day deciding to press the big red button. Having said that, our washing machine persistently lies about the 15-min super quick cycle, which it never is. I guess we all have to start somewhere.

My simple conclusion is that we are built to think for ourselves. But this also means keeping our reason and moral conscience in a good place, empowered by faith, reconciled with the word of God, and in tune with our community. We can then form an opinion from what we see and hear, not pluck a convenient reality out of thin, conspiratorial air and then go look for the ‘evidence’ to back it up (because you will always find it somewhere). The popular sit-com perception of Catholics as racked with guilt, stifled by restrictions, is far from authentic. Rather, we are as open-minded and free to think creatively as anyone else, and we can do so with great responsibility. Next time my kids ask for my opinion, my first response will be: ‘Well, what do you think?’ As long as we think of others when we think for ourselves, then I reckon we’ll be ok.