

MONITOR

What the other papers said . . .

Irish Times

THE media has been criticised at a conference in Boston for contributing to the decline of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Speaking in Boston College at the weekend, Baroness Nuala O'Loan said "in a country in which the media was once sympathetic to the Catholic Church, it is now aggressively hostile".

"Papers like *The Irish Times* now run columns in which things are said about and imputed to Catholics which would not be tolerated in the context of Islam or Judaism, or of homosexuals or humanists," the former police ombudsman for Northern Ireland said.

"Journalists seem, on occasion, to have abandoned the careful, nuanced use of language in favour of wild sweeping assertions which fuel the lack of understanding of what Catholicism is about, and encourage virulent anti-Catholicism," she said.

She was at the *Faith in the Future: Religion in Ireland in the 21st century* conference organised by Boston College's centre for Irish programmes.

"Easy assumptions are made and generalities are the order of the day. For the most part people do not challenge some of the wilder statements, such as those about paedophile priests or widespread savagery in Catholic schools, possibly because they do not want to be seen to do so," she said.

Washington Post

ARCHAEOLOGISTS have found a stone slab covering the tomb of one of the first Catholic priests in Mexico, a grave sunk into the floor of what appears to be an Aztec temple.

The discovery suggests the extent to which the Spanish reused the temples of the Aztec capital in the first years after capturing it in 1521. The huge slab was uncovered in recent days at the site of the first cathedral of Mexico City, built in 1524 yards from the current cathedral, which replaced it in the 1620s.

The slab, more than six feet long, lay on the same plane as the stucco floor of what appears to have been an Aztec temple. The cathedral was simply built over the temple and seems to have used the same floor. The Spaniards apparently gave the floor only a thin coat of lime whitewash before using it for their church.

The name of Miguel de Palomares, a prominent priest at the time, was found carved on the slab. Archaeologists must still confirm it as his burial place, and hope to find his remains when they lift the piece of stone in coming weeks. De Palomares died in 1542.

The Northern Echo

VISITORS to a popular North-East attraction are being given extra time to enjoy an exhibition which explores religious devotion in the aftermath of the notorious Gunpowder Plot.

Plots and Spangles at Auckland Castle, in Bishop Auckland, had been due to finish earlier this month after a six month run. But the exhibition has been extended to give the thousands of visitors expected to flock to Bishop Auckland Food Festival this weekend the chance to see it. There will be free entry to the castle on Saturday and Sunday for one weekend only.

Plots and Spangles centres on the terrible fate handed out to one devout Catholic family caught up in the failed 1605 conspiracy to murder King James I and his government.

Created by Helena Wintour, these are 13 lavishly embroidered priest's vestments brought together for the first time in nearly 350 years, telling the compelling and tragic tale of her religious devotion in the years following the brutal execution of her father and two uncles, for their part in the Gunpowder Plot.

They are displayed alongside other 17th century artefacts, including the preserved eyeball of a Jesuit priest who was hanged, drawn and quartered after being found guilty by association of being involved in the Gunpowder treachery, which more than 400 years on is still marked every Bonfire Night.

Time for helping poor and improving society

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME

Anita Boniface

THIS year – the Jubilee Year of Mercy – Pope Francis is calling on Catholics to reach out to those on the margins of society. It is something members of the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) in England and Wales have been doing as volunteers since 1844. SVP members are motivated by the Holy Spirit and inspired by the call of the vulnerable themselves: hundreds of thousands of people who are poor through loneliness, illness, disability, financial hardship or addiction. Recognising their needs, SVP members offer a non-judgemental listening ear and the loving hand of friendship and practical help to people in their homes or on the streets, in prisons or in hospitals – wherever they may be.

The core work of the Society's members is visiting and befriending the lonely. As families become more fragmented people are becoming increasingly isolated. The Society's chief executive, Elizabeth Palmer, says: "SVP members are able to help people on a very personal basis through the weekly visit, developing strong and lasting friendships, as well as providing practical support where necessary. Through befriending, members gain the trust of those they visit. It is not uncommon for a chat over a cup of tea to lead to a disclosure of a real need which previously may not have been mentioned. Members gain a unique insight into the lives of many people in different situations of hardship. Our members can act like family where this kind of support is missing in someone's life."

An example of this is Josephine, an asylum seeker who moved to Cardiff with her two year old child. On a bitterly cold November day, SVP members went to visit Josephine. They found her living in dilapidated housing with no heating and no means of cooking apart from a microwave donated by friends. There was one egg in the fridge for the baby and nothing else. Josephine had been unable to get all the benefits to which she was entitled, and the two of them were living on a single person's income support of £70 a week to cover everything. SVP members provided immediate relief on the day with £100 for food and essentials including basic cooking utensils. They befriended Josephine and over the weeks provided her with furniture



Members of Immaculate Heart of Mary SVP Conference in Hayes, Middlesex, with Vinnie Packs they helped assemble – The pocket-sized packs contain cold weather essentials like a foil blanket, woolly hat and gloves) which distributed to the homeless

and other necessities including a washing machine and clothes for her and her child. Members spent hours making phone calls on her behalf to the tax credit and child benefit offices until she was awarded the correct amount. Such a case highlights the value of SVP members' friendship and practical assistance to people struggling without other support networks.

The men and women who visited Josephine are part of an SVP membership of nearly 10,000 people – all of them volunteers. They meet regularly in local parish groups known as Conferences, and pray together as well as doing practical work such as running soup kitchens, foodbanks as well as the weekly visits to people's homes.

SVP National President Adrian Abel describes the unusual nature of being a member of the Society. Adrian likens members to "ambassadors". He says: "Our members are not just followers, not

just disciples, not just apostles, they are ambassadors for Christ. An ambassador is sent out by the leader, and puts their own thoughts and point of view into their work. Our members are called to go out and seek those in need and put their own personalities and life experience into the friendships they develop."

One such member who has brought her creativity and personal passion into her voluntary work for the SVP is Siobhan Garibaldi. Motivated to join the SVP as a new mother who wanted to change the world in which her son grew up, Siobhan was particularly moved by the plight of the homeless. As well as doing core visiting and face to face befriending, Siobhan helped create the Vinnie Packs, (pocket-sized packs containing cold weather essentials like a foil blanket, woolly hat and gloves) which are put together and distributed to the homeless by SVP members

and schools. The packs have become a huge success and are a collaborative effort. Siobhan says the moral she learned through her volunteering is that "if everyone helped a little bit, together we would make a huge difference to the lives of people who are suffering. No one is asking us to take on the world single handed. God is just asking us to do our own little bit for our brothers and sisters. If we all do our own bit then together we can achieve a lot."

Like Siobhan who wanted to improve the world for her young son, people join the SVP for a variety of reasons. Paul Hume from St James Conference, Peckham Rye, witnessed the work of SVP members when as a young lad his family lost their home and suffered a financial crisis. The SVP provided temporary accommodation and organised a caravan holiday for his family. He says help received from the SVP "meant me and my sister and brothers never had to feel insecure

or like we were missing out when we were growing up". As an adult he says "my motivation to join the SVP was because they helped us as a family. The SVP means a lot to me personally".

Former National and International Vice President Jim O'Connor joined the SVP after experiencing a health scare that forced him to contemplate his mortality: "I realised that if my life came to an end and I wound up facing God and being asked what I had done for Him, I wouldn't have much to say." So he spoke with a family friend, a Sister of Mercy, who suggested he join the SVP. "It was my desire to serve God, rather than the nature of the work that drew me to the SVP." He says that helping the poor is not unique to the SVP but he was inspired by the charisma of translating faith into action. "Faith must come first," Jim says. SVP Patron John Battle, a former MP and government Minister

said he became a local SVP member because he wanted to have "a personal relationship with people who are suffering". As Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche Community believed, "the poor liberate us rather than the other way round. We think we are helping the poor but in the end they liberate us. I get more from the people I meet than they get from me".

Another important consideration for people wanting to join the SVP is the valuable role members play in helping society as a whole.

A recent report by economists from Oxera found that the SVP's members helped isolated people improve their mental health, increase their skills and confidence, and enter or re-enter employment. This in turn equated to reduced costs to the NHS and savings to Social Services which amounted to £11 million a year in England and Wales.

This contribution by members to society as a whole is highlighted by Adrian Abel who says: "We now expect the State to play a role that previously friends, relatives and neighbours played in helping each other out. As the State withdraws their support, the SVP has a bigger role to play . . . The State has many resources which can help people when they need it such as Social Services and the NHS. However, the staff of these bodies do not have time, and it is time that is needed for people who may be isolated and have needs that go beyond their medical or financial conditions. The SVP gives people time. It is an organisation where those with needs become friends in every sense of the word."

In this Year of Mercy, patron John Battle, like Pope Francis, encourages people to volunteer a bit of time to helping the poor and improving society. He says to anyone thinking of joining the SVP: "Don't hesitate. Make time for it. We can all make a bit of time. It might mean less telly watching. But we will meet people who pull us through."

■ To find out more about volunteering with the SVP visit www.svp.org.uk, telephone: 0207 703 3030 or e-mail: info@svp.org.uk

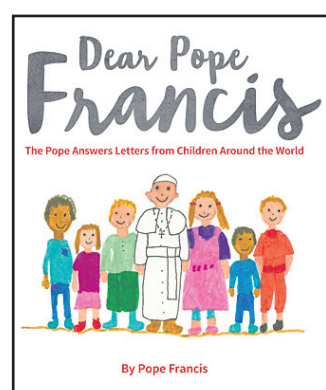
■ The SVP is part of CSAN (Caritas Social Action Network)

Pope's most tender answers from kids' hardest questions

BOOKCASE

Michelle Donnay

DEAR POPE FRANCIS by Pope Francis (Loyola Press, £9)



THE car was always the place for the hard conversations when my sons were young. The questions would come from the back seat when I least expected it. I can still remember the rainy night I was driving down the road when my oldest son, then 12, asked me why God let evil things happen.

That remains the toughest question my children have ever put to me, bar none.

In *Dear Pope Francis*, the Pope takes on the tough and direct questions that children will ask. There is nine-year-old Michael from Nigeria wondering: "How can you settle conflicts in the world?" and Thierry, who wants to know why so many people are poor and hungry: "Can't God feed them?"

The book lists the authors as Pope Francis and the children of the world, and it's clear from the start that this was a collaborative work between the leader of the Church and its members. More than 250 children from 26 countries sent letters and drawings to Pope Francis. Jesuit Fr Antonio Spadaro met with the Pope and recorded his answers to the questions posed in the letters. He then transcribed and edited the responses. The children's drawings are reproduced alongside the Pope's answers,

which truly bring the young writers alive.

Fr Spadaro writes that he found transcribing the conversation an extended meditation, and I found reading the book to be a similar experience. I ended up reading it in a few sessions, stopping when I wanted to spend time with an answer – or a question.

I don't have young ones at home any longer, so I couldn't try it out on its intended audience. But I do know that my sons would have appreciated the Pope's directness and humour, and I would have treasured his wisdom when faced with tough questions from my passengers.

Some of the questions are poignant. One young boy wonders if his mother in heaven has grown angel wings. No, Pope Francis tells him. She is still your mum, but she is beautiful and full of light and love for you. Others wonder about who gets

into heaven and whether bad people still have guardian angels.

We learn a lot about Pope Francis and his job as we go. He can pray in a dentist's chair. He loves to play football, but hasn't a nimble foot, so he's not very good at it. We learn he is happiest in his job when he is with other people, and why he needs such a tall hat. But in each answer, the Pope takes the children, and us, a bit deeper. Would that we could all learn to pray wherever we were, and to more fully express our joy in God.

I sense Pope Francis' awareness of the parents and other adults who are listening in the background to these exchanges, nudging them to think again about the tough questions, the questions that as adults we fear have no answers, that we might long ago have given up even asking.

I found myself returning again and again to the Pope's answer to young Thierry about poverty and hunger. "The real problem is that some of those who have plenty do not want to share it with others." What do I have more than enough of? Where am I unwilling to share?

Reading this book I was struck by Pope Francis' tenderness. He is never saccharine, he never speaks down to the children, he is direct and firm. Above all his joy in the Gospel and his deep love of God comes through in every response.



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