

the
Connection

December 2021



MASS TIMES

St Nicholas': Carrickfergus

Vigil Saturday 6pm

Sunday 11.30am

Tuesday and Thursday 10.00am

Holy Days : As announced

Our Lady of Lourdes: Whitehead

Sunday 9.30am

Monday and Wednesday 10.00am

Due to Covid-19 normal times for Liturgical Services are suspended temporarily. Please see Parish Website for current arrangements.

BAPTISMS

The Sacrament of Baptism is celebrated in St Nicholas' on the second Sunday in the month and in Our Lady of Lourdes on the first Sunday.

Contact the Parish office giving a minimum of one month's notice.

WEDDINGS

Arrangement. 3 months' notice required

SACRAMENT OF SICK

Father Owens attends the sick and house-bound monthly as announced in the Parish Bulletin or as required.

CONFESSIONS

Carrickfergus : Saturday 5.30pm to 5.50pm

Whitehead : Sunday before Mass

“And there in front of them was the star they had seen rising..”

Christmas message 2021

On 1 December 2019 Pope Francis issued an Apostolic Letter entitled “*Admirabile Signum*” (Latin for “*The Enchanting Image*”) – it is an exquisitely beautiful meditation on the “Meaning and Importance of the Nativity Scene”. Significantly the Holy Father signed this document at the Shrine of the Nativity in the ancient Italian hill town of Greccio, where on the 25 December 1223, St Francis of Assisi established the first (moving) crib.



Pope Francis writes:

“When, at Christmas, we place the statue of the infant Jesus in the manger, the nativity scene suddenly comes alive. God appears as a child, for us to take into our arms. Beneath weakness and frailty, he conceals his power that creates and transforms all things. It seems impossible, yet it is true: in Jesus, God was a child, and in this way, he wished to reveal the greatness of his love: by smiling and opening his arms to all.”

This Christmas 2021 edition of “The Connection” is a celebration of “the greatness of his love” in which we explore some of the ways God’s presence takes flesh among us today in the active faith and humble service of so many within our parish family of Carrickfergus and Whitehead and the wider community. In the pages of this issue we read stories of faith and service which are a source of encouragement and inspiration as we continue to journey through the time of pandemic with all its disruptions and uncertainties.

Who would have thought last Christmas that every aspect of our lives would still now be profoundly affected by Covid-19? This time of crisis has brought untold suffering, both private and public, but it has also generated a spirit of resilience and creativity and an abiding trust in God’s presence, of which this edition of “The Connection” is a most moving testament. As Parish Priest, I pay tribute to all our parish volunteers, especially the Parish Pastoral Council, the Covid Teams and the Communications Group, who, over the past year, have given so much of their time and shared so many of their gifts and talents in the service of our parish family of Carrickfergus and Whitehead and the wider community.

As we gather around the crib this Christmas, we are reminded by Pope Francis in “*Admirabile Signum*” that it “speaks to us of the love of God, the God who became a child in order to make us know how close he is to every man, woman and child, regardless of their condition.”

Christmas Blessings to all.

Fr P. J. Owens, P. P., V. F.

**the
Connection**

The Parish Pastoral Council

Christmas 2021

2021 has certainly been a year with a difference. The members of the PPC started the year mastering 'Zoom' meetings, closing churches for the second time, managing Covid-19 risk assessments to keep parishioners safe and getting to grips with webcam technology to stream Mass on Sundays.

Now at the end of the year we are meeting again, in socially distanced groups. Mass is now open to all parishioners on an alternate week cycle and we have been able provide Family and Friends around the world with the opportunity to see Mass in the Parish of Carrickfergus and Whitehead.

Father Peter and the members of the PPC are very grateful to all the volunteers and quiet background workers who have continued to support many areas of Parish Life. To those who help to keep Mount St. Nicholas and Our Lady of Lourdes Churches open each week for worship this has been a big task through the past months, and we thank everyone involved and to all the parishioners who are involved in parish groups where this support is so vital for the smooth running of our parish.

In Spring 2022 the PPC is going to prepare a review of the Parish Pastoral Plan, endorsed by Bishop Noel in September 2017. We have started to request feedback from parish groups on the current Plan and Annex and look forward to meeting with as many parishioners as possible in the coming months. We welcome any comments that people may wish to make.

There are some groups in the parish that have not been able to function over the past 20 months because of Covid-19 restrictions. We will try and support these groups to get started again in 2022 and maybe welcome some new members. You can see a list of Parish groups in the Parish Directory which can be accessed on the Parish Website.

The Parish Pastoral Council would like to wish all our parish family a very Happy and Holy Christmas and we look forward to meeting you all again in 2022 to be able.

Fr Peter Owens President PPC

Mary McCormack Chair PPC

Paul Smith Vice Chair PPC

Julie Elliott Secretary PPC

Stephen Lavery

Patrick Quinn

Siobhan Gilmore

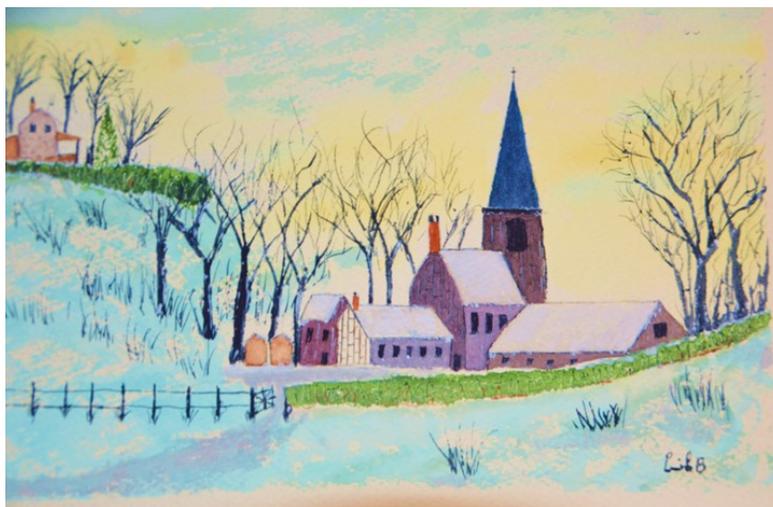
Patrick Arkins

Robert Sweeney

Petar Segó

Thomas Moore

Faith, Hope and Love in a Pandemic



“ A small Church for a small community” A painting by Patsy Bell

As I have always had an interest in painting I finally began to dabble a little when lockdown was thrust upon us in 2020. This particular watercolour was inspired using several different photographs I have taken over the years. It gives the impression that even though everything is covered in snow, the Church and its adjoining buildings are clearly visible and have a welcoming look about them.

Just two decades into the twenty-first century the human race has found itself in a terrible Global Pandemic called, Coronavirus, (Covid 19) which has resulted in unbelievable changes in the way we live. Covid 19 has put the human race on hold. In other words, we have had to stop the fast pace of living and take stock of ourselves, our neighbours and how we move, work, and wor-

Faith

As Covid 19 began to spread, countries, airports, offices, schools, cinemas, restaurants, cafes, public transport, and non-essential shops were all closing by order from the world's Governments. Churches were not spared either. So what was going to happen to devout Christian Catholics especially on Sundays, as not attending Mass on the Sabbath day is seen as a terrible sin? Modern technology came to the rescue and we could attend Mass on-line. Better still, it was declared that this way of attending Mass meant we were fulfilling our Sunday obligation which was fantastic. Also we were given a Spiritual Communion Prayer to say at every on-line Mass we attended. So things were looking up and Faith was continuing.

There was a little light at the far end of the big tunnel and our faith was going to carry us to that light. Little did we know how long that tunnel was! The Jewish people, over 5,000 years ago, had that same faith to follow Moses into the seabed (Ex. 14: 21-22) and finally came through the great persecution of the Pharaohs in Egypt to the freedom God had promised them. (Ex. 6: 2-8) But their journey did not finish there; it was only beginning as we can read in Exodus Chapters 14 to 40. This Covid 19 tunnel was only beginning for us.

Faith, Hope and Love in a Pandemic

Hope

Scientists around the world were working frantically to produce a vaccine to fight this pandemic. This gave us a glimmer of Hope at the end of the tunnel. Hope is what gives us the reason to keep going through life regardless of what we have to endure. That same hope that Bartimaeus had when he shouted with a loud voice and called upon Jesus, the Son of David, to let him see again, and Jesus let him see again and told him that his faith made him well. (Mk.10: 46-52). It wasn't long before Science came to the rescue and we had several Vaccines that were going to make us safe, or at least safer, from this Covid 19 virus.

The Bible mentions the words "Fear of the Lord" quite a lot, especially in the Old Testament. The book of Proverbs mentions it 14 times. The Psalms, the book of Job and Chronicles all mention the Fear of the Lord. Acts and 2 Corinthians also mention it. One could say this Covid 19 gives us a certain aspect of what it's like to fear the Lord. We all know that Covid 19 is there but we don't know when it's going to strike. Therefore, vigilance is needed at all times. Jesus tells about the Son of Man coming down from Heaven, but no- one knows the day or hour, only the Father. (Mk. 13: 32-37). But Jesus gives hope to all who believe in Him. Anyone who believes in Him will ascend with Him to Heaven when He comes again.

Love

Human beings are, by their very nature which comes from God, designed to be loved and to love one another. God loved us so much He gave us his only Son. There is nothing more comforting to hear than the words "I Love You". We love to love and we show love in so many ways. Depending on which version of the Bible you read, the word and references to love are mentioned between 600 and 1,000 times. The first reference to love is made in Genesis 1 and 2 when God created the world. The New Testament is full of the word love. John's Epistle refers to love over 50 times. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthian Church puts the three virtues of faith, hope and love together and emphasises that love is the greatest of all three. (1Cor. 13:13) Chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians gives us a great insight to love, and it's well worth reading and contemplating upon.

Faith, Hope and Love in a Pandemic

Meanwhile a new kind of love has been thrust upon all humanity which is very strange and difficult to adhere to. As a matter of fact, it could be described as being a very heart-wrenching love. No longer is an act of love measured in the close contact we have with each other but rather, love is now measured in keeping apart, and staying away from loved ones.

The words “I Love You” could be the most difficult “Goodbye” one has ever had to say, especially for those essential workers on the front line of the caring profession. They, like Jesus who laid down His life for us and felt completely abandoned (Mk.15: 34-37), are now putting their lives at risk, albeit in a different manner, for the love of others. They have been described as heroes and some have paid the ultimate price showing that love and lost their life, just like Jesus. People in hospitals in danger of death don’t have loved ones around them, just doctors and nurses who give as much love and comfort as they possibly can.

Conclusion

Sunday Worship in Churches is gradually getting back to normal but it wouldn’t be possible without a whole cohort of people who put themselves out to make sure the Church is clean and sanitised thus making it a safe place for the whole community to come together on Sunday mornings. We are told in Hebrews Chapter 11 that our faith is an assurance of things hoped for. Without faith would we have Christianity at all? Hope keeps us striving forward in the face of impossible challenges and keeps us running that race to the finish line. Love, which is the greatest virtue of all, is the foundation of every good thing in our lives. In 1 John chapter 4; 8 we are told that God is love. It was love that moved God to send His Only Son in an act of Sacrificial Love.

If anything, this pandemic has exacerbated the plight of loneliness. So spare a thought for the elderly who sometimes never see the face of anyone for weeks on end. When we read about Jesus feeling totally abandoned, do we really know how that feels? As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians, love is the greatest virtue of all and should be given freely by everyone no matter what we are doing in life or faced with in life. Amen.

Patsy Bell

The Eco Council in St. Nicholas' Primary School.

In St. Nicholas' Primary School we are an 'Eco School'. We work hard to keep our school a place that is kind to the environment. We try and limit the amount of plastic we use. We recycle lots of things including books, paper and even use recyclable materials to make fun and interesting projects to display around the school. The 'Eco Council' pupils make sure lights are turned off and try to ensure water is not wasted. We work together in our school to keep our playgrounds tidy and safe for everyone to enjoy. We love our school and our community and we want to continue to make it a place where everyone respects the environment and the beautiful world God has given us.

The Pupil Council



Mr Austin speaks to the Eco and Pupil Council



The Eco Council in St. Nicholas' Primary School.

Encouraging pupils to respect our environment

Collecting paper to recycle

Only using reusable water bottles

Constantly picking up litter

Organising food into the right bins.

Understanding how to respect our school

Never ending compost

Caring for our school is so important

Involving every single pupil.

Lifelong recycling.

By Nicole P7



We work together in our school to keep our playgrounds tidy and safe for everyone to enjoy. We recycle lots of things too.



A selection of children's reflections on St. Paul's First letter to the Corinthians

"When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and see things as a child does, and think like a child; but now that I have become an adult I have finished with all childish ways."

I don't think I have finished with all my childish ways. I can still be silly and immature, but I have developed self-discipline and become more independent. I know I still need guidance to make good decisions but I feel I'm less selfish and try to think about how other people feel.



Written by Reuben Clarke – Year 10

"Love is always patient and kind."

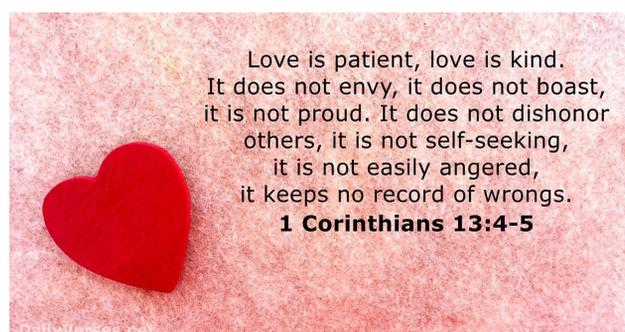
'I was going out on a family day trip to Newcastle and was looking forward to it so much and was so excited. During the journey my little brother started to sing very loudly and out of tune. I had to be patient as I didn't want to cause any stress or upset to the family day out. It made me feel angry and frustrated. To overcome this I asked my parents to have a break stop so I could gather my feelings and calm down.'

Written by Cara Haveron age 12

"Love is not unkind; love does not keep a record of wrongs."

In play group there was a boy who was very mean. He was very disruptive, would throw sand into my eyes, and hit me in the playground. I don't think he intended to be unkind to me but just wanted attention so I would forgive him and ask him to play with us.

By Orlaith O'Mahony - Year 8



A selection of children's reflections on St. Paul's First letter to the Corinthians



Written by Calum Pollard.

My name is Calum Pollard I am 11 years old. I am in Year 8 in Carrickfergus Grammar School. I love playing rugby and sailing. I am the captain of my school rugby team and I also play for Carrickfergus Rugby Club. I sail for Northern Ireland and I am ranked 1st in Ireland.

“Love is always patient and kind. Love is never jealous.”

To me this means that love is the strongest and most powerful emotion there is. It is our love for things that makes us dedicated to them. My family show me everyday they love me by encouraging me to be the best I can be. If I make mistakes it is their love and patience that helps me realise that there is nothing in life that cannot be fixed. I strongly feel you should always be kind to others as you have no idea what type of day they are having, and a kind word to someone is absolutely free!

Written by Rory Pollard

My name is Rory Pollard I am 13 years old. I am in Year 9 in Carrickfergus Grammar School. I love playing rugby and sailing. I am the captain of my school rugby team and I also play for Carrickfergus Rugby Club. I am on the Topper Northern Ireland Team and I compete all round Ireland.

“When I was a child I used to talk like a child, and see things as a child does, and think like a child; but now that I have become an adult I have finished with all childish ways”

I feel that I have matured over the last year, although due to lockdowns it has been a very strange time. As I have a younger brother and sister I still love messing around with them and we can have great fun together. This was a great benefit during lockdown as we all played games in the garden. However, at times I feel I can be more mature and I like having more independence. I am lucky that living in Whitehead means I can have some freedom, while still being close to home. I know my parents trust me and I always know to make good choices. I think it would be really sad to “finish with childish ways” as



The Power of the Holy Rosary in My Life

During my 58 years in this life there have been three significant moments where the power of the Holy Rosary or, more specifically, the Mercy of Our Lord, has been graciously granted to me. Below, I have recounted three incidents that have transpired in my life to clearly illustrate how the Power of the Holy Rosary can manifest itself.

It was the early 1970s, the troubles were making the headlines in the local news and the Bay City Rollers and Abba were fighting for Number 1 in the charts. As a boy 10 year old lad, I was quite ill with breathing difficulties which manifested in a lack of breath, low energy levels and constant wheezing (the illness was similar to Asthma but not diagnosed as such). Doctors struggled to make a diagnosis and provide a cure. Finally, exasperated by the lack of progress made by doctors, my mother took matters into her own hands. One evening, after returning from yet another unsuccessful trip to our local GP surgery my mother, carrying a small plastic vial of Holy Water, took me into my bedroom, set me on my bed and instructed me,

“Take three small sips of this Holy water, kneel by your bed and pray a decade of the Rosary. Ask the Holy Mother to ask Our Lord to heal you of this illness and then, go to sleep.”

I did as my mother asked. I prayed that single decade with the deepest fervour I could muster. I then climbed into bed and went to sleep.

Next morning when I awoke, to the astonishment of the whole household, I had no symptoms of the illness – my breathing was clear and my energy levels were fully restored. It was a miracle! Since then, I have never been bothered to the same extent with breathing problems. Sur-

prisingly, and to my shame, I quickly forgot about Our Lady’s miraculous intervention. I kind of excuse myself from this ingratitude because, “Hey! I was 10 years old and there was football to be played!”

So, with new energy levels at my disposal, the next 30 years of my life were spent in a fairly typical, unexceptional manner – football, school, football, university, football, work, football...., you get the idea. I never looked back on the illness and thought nothing more of it. “God is God, it’s what he does.... right?”

Well, that was my shameful attitude to our Lord’s gracious benevolence shown me – I had developed an ‘attitude of ingratitude’ and continued—to the exclusion of God— a life vainly focused on what this world had to offer me. But, God wasn’t giving up on me

One evening, as my wife, Diane, and I were retiring to bed, I lay down and suddenly I felt a tightness in my chest accompanied with a radiating pain travelling through my jaw and my neck. It felt as though an elephant was sitting on my chest! I frantically mentioned these pains to Diane and we immediately set out for the Royal Victoria Hospital’s (RVH) Accident & Emergency (A&E) department. At A&E, with reported chest pains, I was quickly triaged and attended to by a doctor. ECG read outs showed abnormal heart rhythms but, thankfully, blood test results (the next day), showed that I hadn’t had a heart attack. Phew!

However, the ‘irregularities’ reported by tests warranted further investigation. Subsequently, I was confined to a-week-long stay in hospital for further tests; the end of which the consultant in charge of my case reported he was confident I had 2, possibly, 3 blockages in my arteries; an Angiogram would verify his diagnosis; and, most likely, I’d require a few stents and medication to put me right.



The Power of the Holy Rosary in My Life

It had been years, but, I too started praying and thoughts drifted back to that time as a lad when I fervently called upon Our Lady's intervention in my hour of need. I needed her help, again, so I prayed the Rosary, again; albeit very clumsily and very hesitantly as I struggled to remember its format, the Mysteries and when each should be prayed. But, God had my attention, again.

On the morning of the angiogram I was taken to theatre. The artery in my leg was punctured and a substance injected into my blood stream to reveal the inner workings of my blood vessels, heart and valves for



the attending medical team to examine. I remained conscious throughout. The procedure only lasted a few minutes, because once the dye had reached my heart it was clear to all that there were no occlusions and certainly no need for stents or any other form of medical intervention. My heart was healthy! It was a miracle! Thank God! (Again)

The consultant was certain stents were required; all the tests undertaken had pointed to a firm diagnosis. But, lying there on that theatre table with my inners lit up like a Christmas tree for all to see, the consultant was at a loss to explain the absence of the blockages he was so sure were there. The incident was over as abruptly as it started and is now fondly remembered by all my family as, "My Fake Heart-Attack".

The medical team may have been clueless, but I am certain that the faith of others and access to Jesus through Mary via the power of the Holy Rosary had played a significant role in my fortunes and I was grateful – again – for yet another while...

Free of any serious heart defects, I went back to my life and picked up where I left off. Sure, I attended Mass for short period while the sense of gratitude and appreciation for my miraculous reprieve remained with me. But, life goes on, incipiently impinging on one's time and priorities and, once more, I started to lose the sense of gratitude for the blessings bestowed upon me by our ever patient, loving and merciful God. Eventually, I lost focus on God all together (again) and found reasons not to go to the sacraments, relegating God to the lower divisions in my life.

Time travelled on; but, thankfully, God NEVER gives up on us and, in His infinite mercy He had yet another plan to get my attention....

In July 2019, our eldest daughter, Kristina, at the age of 33 was misdiagnosed with an abdominal complaint and quickly fell into multiple organ failure from Sepsis. To all their best efforts, the Antrim Area Hospital's Intensive Care Team could do nothing for Kristina and our deepest fears appeared ominously close to becoming an unthinkable, horrific, reality. There was, however, one outside chance – an intervention treatment known as, Extra Corporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO). ECMO is a machine which takes over the function of the heart and lungs to reconstitute the body's blood make-up, affording the patient (with antibiotics infused) valuable time to fight a fast moving infection such as Sepsis. However, there was no ECMO machine, nor similar service, in Northern Ireland. Only 5 centres in the UK supported ECMO recovery but no flights were available to get the specialist team and equipment to Kristina on time; and, Kristina was too ill to travel! We did learn of a single ECMO Service centre in Dublin (100 miles away - so close, but impossibly far for Kristina!) but they did not provide recovery services! Our eldest daughter; a wife and mother to three beautiful children under six years old had only hours to live and it looked like we were out of options.The family were called to the

The Power of the Holy Rosary in My Life

Only after much soul searching and re-tracing my steps through the sands of my life have I come to realise that I have been truly blessed with family & friends who have been Heaven sent.

As I mentioned earlier – I wasn't much of a 'churchy' person. I left that sort of thing to my wife, daughters and my ever devout, faithful, mother who had taught me the Rosary as a lad ...

On that dreadful night, in the corridors of Antrim Area Hospital as I busied myself playing the Fatherly role of tending to others in distress, the Lord grabbed my attention one more time and shook me to the core. Whilst Kristina lay ventilated at 100% oxygen fighting to stay alive, both families (Kristina's in-law family and our family) engaged in worship and prayer.

Although I was putting a brave face on it and, I suppose, denying the seriousness of the situation to myself I continued playing the stoic father. But, the strain was starting to take its toll on me – I needed to get some space for myself. I slipped off to the toilets; found an empty cubicle and closed the door. It was at that point I broke down and cried – no, wailed – from utter despair and hopelessness. Once I'd finished revelling in my own self-pity, I began to receive flashbacks to those times in my life when the Mercy of Our Lord had delivered me.

I immediately composed myself, left the bathroom, gathered my family about me and asked my mother to lead us in a single decade of the Rosary. In a moment, I was a 10 year old boy, again, wholly dependent on my two mothers and the mercy of God. We all prayed the Rosary as a family and asked Our Lady to intervene with her Son on Kristina's behalf. Job done!

Now, I'm not saying that the Rosary, exclusively, was the answer in this third event in my life: it was ALL the prayers, worship and supplications of the faithful that night, both within the corridors of the hospital and across the world via family & friends (Ireland, England, America, Malaysia, Australia & Carrick), that ultimately saved our daughter – and me. But, the Holy Rosary, none-the-less, formed a constituent part of those prayers offered up during that dreadful time and, yet again, it proved to be momentous, not only in my life, but in the lives of all who love Kristina.



To finish off this miraculous story, a strange, unimaginable, turn of events occurred that evening which resulted in Kristina receiving the help she so desperately needed ~ Hollywood couldn't dream this up!

Read on

In the continued efforts of the Antrim Area Hospital's ICU team to find an ECMO machine, a last pitch telephone call to a hospital in Sheffield, England, was 'accidentally' over-heard by a passing RAF doctor who 'just happened to be' in attendance at that hospital. The RAF doctor stopped in his tracks when over-hearing the desperate plea, he immediately placed a call to commandeer a helicopter from RAF Valley, Wales, ordering it to fly to London and pick up the St Thomas' ECMO specialist team, who, - it should be noted—had been speedily police-escorted to the helicopter rendezvous site in London's Hyde Park for a James Bond style pick-up and rescue mission. I told you, "Hollywood couldn't make this up!". With only hours to spare the helicopter landed at Antrim Area Hospital and the ECMO team intervened to give Kristina the much-needed support in her fight for life.

That was over two years ago and (with all praise, glory and thanks to God)

The Power of the Holy Rosary in My Life

Well, I've heard it said, that Jesus visits a dying person three times to offer that soul His extended hand of Mercy and reconciliation. I suspect, given my blatant obstinacy and ingratitude I had shown Him through-out the years He decided to start early with me ,

"Special effort required for this one",

I can just imagine Him saying to Himself with gentle shake of His head and a chuckle...

It may have taken Him three attempts, but I have finally allowed Him to reach into my soul and awaken me to His true presence in my life. Every morning, I give thanks for His unrelenting Love and graces. I now pray that His will – not mine – be done for the glorification of His kingdom and the salvation of wayward souls like me.

In closing, I'd like to re-emphasise the power that the Holy Rosary has had in my life. Our Lord continues to lavish graces upon me and I now consider myself both humbled and privileged to answer His call to participate in leading (along with Jim Mullan & Eamon Grant) the recital of the Holy Rosary in St. Nicholas' Parish Church every Wednesday evening at 6.30 PM – just before Mass.

Please forgive the shameless plug, but I would strongly encourage all readers of this article to say the Rosary—and say it often— for it has power and graces just waiting to be bestowed if we take the time to ask.

All are welcome to join us for the Rosary recital each Wednesday evening. Please come along, and worship Our Lord, Jesus Christ, and implore Our Mother Mary to intervene for you and your loved ones.

What a wonderful Mother we have in the Blessed Virgin Mary; what a truly awesome God we have in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Stephen Lavery



Thoughts on COP26

My name is Aisling Cowan, and, if I am honest, I may not be what you might call a regular Mass goer, but I find there are many ways to worship, connect and live out my values and ideals through what is happening in the world. These past 10 years I have been an active member of Friends of the Earth NI and have got involved with many community campaigns across NI.

Something that got me excited again about how faith can help support our efforts here, was Pope Francis' incredibly strongly worded Encyclical on Climate Change back in May 2015.

The title *Laudato Si'*, or **Praised be you**, is a reference to St. Francis of Assisi's 13th century poem. In it St. Francis reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share a common life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.

The Encyclical is not just about climate change, it is much broader. It explains climate change as a largely human-made symptom of what is wrong in the world today, including economic and social injustice. The key, as stated by Pope Francis, is "integral ecology" that is **people and the planet are part of one family where the earth is our common home**.

With the Cop 26 talks having recently finished, most activists and particularly indigenous peoples and poorer countries concluded that they did not get what they were asking for- which was access to key finance to help them transfer technologies faster and help them to transition away from fossil fuels sooner. The other big 'ask' was a complete commitment that no new fossil fuel infrastructure should be funded or built. No new coal mines, oil fields or gas but to put full attention to funding cleaner alternatives and transition away from fossil fuels in a way that brings everyone along, not just penalising poorer countries.

What about us?

When talking about the Climate crisis and other issues of pollution, biodiversity and habitat loss it is easy to feel overwhelmed and feel like they are global issues that are just too big for us to handle. In NI our two biggest emitters of carbon pollution are **agriculture** (from Land use/diesel/animal feeds, cattle) and **transport**- we have one of the highest rates of car ownership in the EU and some of the most choked roads in the UK- despite our tiny population! There are often issues happening in Northern Ireland that bring the issue home to me in much more real terms. In Ireland we have our pick of issues at the moment...Vast expansion of factory farming (Newtownabbey), Say No to Cloghan Oil point (Whitehead), No Gas Caverns (Islandmagee), New road projects, illegal quarries, illegal dumps and sand mining in Lough Neagh..the list goes on and on.

These structural issues will not be changed by compostable cups or tweaking around the edges- we need regulation and change at every level- energy policy, building, travel, farming etc.

Thoughts on COP26

You might remember a few years ago they did a test drill up at Woodburn Dams and we were part of the community that came together to voice opposition to it. It was one of the few stories that turned out to have a happy ending!



Photo: Saoirse, Mum and I at the Woodburn drill site

A campaign close to my heart...

In the name of God, I ask the great extractive industries -- mining, oil, forestry, real estate, agribusiness -- to stop destroying forests, wetlands and mountains, to stop polluting rivers and seas, to stop poisoning food and people. Pope Francis October 2021.....

To me the biggest untold environmental story happening at the minute is in the heart of the Sperrin mountains where a community at Greencastle Co. Tyrone has come together to try to stop Dalradian Gold, a Canadian mining company who want to dig out the Sperrins and extract gold fragments. This is a low grade mine- there are no big gold nuggets waiting to be found which means roughly **1 tonne of our Mother Earth** must be processed and chemically rinsed to get 3grams of gold. The waste, water use, diesel requirements, pollution (cyanide is needed for the process) and carbon released will be enormous, as will be the impact on the local community.

They have been using every means possible to unite people against this mine, and in doing so have uniquely brought their faith into the campaign.

Thoughts on COP26

Our Lady watches over events at the intended mine site, Greencastle



A centre place of the campaign is an ancient shrine on the top of the hill that now has a statue of our Lady at it. In the month of May for the past few years they hold a Rosary on the “Green Road” every night to come together and pray for their land and for the strength to keep going. I have attended a few times, and it is very ,very special.



Let us dream together...

As depressing as the current situation may be, something wonderful also happens when people come together to stand up for nature and our common home. People often find what they have lost along the way. As stressful as it is for the people of the Sperrins, beautiful things also come. The people there tell me they have found community where before they had lost it, they have friends they didn't know they had, they feel alive, and a deep sense of purpose and shared meaning in their life. www.dontmineus.com

I, too, feel a sense of great honour to have met the people I have along the way. There is a saying now in the environmental world- **No more Heroes**. No individual can do this on his/her own, but we can act together and support each other along the way.

Thoughts on COP26

In my 'day job' I am a therapist and I see people mostly with anxiety and other emotional issues. It strikes me again and again that the changes that would help our climate and our beautiful planet will also make our lives better (if they are done in the right way). People are having to work too hard for too little money, young people feel a great pressure to succeed, people feel like they are on their own with no support, that their lives are out of control or too busy, or that there is no meaning to their life.

The best things in life are also **low carbon**, caring for others, safer roads, walking, resting, hugs, good quality local food, raising children, chatting, laughing, loving other people. Another world is possible, and it is coming.

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/20211016-videomessaggio-movimentipolari.html>



Ad Jesum Per Mariam



To Jesus through Mary

As a landscape gardener, I believed that the ideal time to create a beautiful garden dedicated to Our Lady was during the period of Covid-19. And so began the project in our Church grounds.

Initially I was approached by Paul Smith, the Vice Chairperson of the Pastoral Council, to discuss the plan. Paul and I spoke to Father Peter who approved the project and so work commenced. The garden was to be situated in the back car park in a secluded corner, peaceful and removed from the noise of traffic. Paul supplied a beautiful statue of Madonna and Child from Italy which was to be the focal point of the garden.



My good friend, Paul Rooney, known to some as “Tiny”, is a stonemason from the Mourne. He supplied a large granite rock which was transported all the way from Annalong, Co. Down. Once the rock was in situ, a portion of it was hewn out to form an enclosure for the statue. Local parish member, Connell Lafferty, assembled some spotlights to illuminate the garden during hours of darkness. The light, centred on the statue, draws us inwards, inviting us to pray to Mary and her beloved Son for all our intentions.

Rooney Stone is a family business set in the heart of the Mourne Mountains. They have been in the stonemasonry business for over a hundred and twenty years, and are renowned for the superior quality and craftsmanship of their family stonemasons down through the years.

They provide Irish craftsmanship at its best, which has been passed down through five generations of Irish Stonemasons.

Ad Jesum Per Mariam

Overall the surrounding garden consists of a small selection of perennials, acers and an archway of japonica adorns the rock and statue. There is also a seating area available for anyone who may wish to sit in quiet reflection. Why not enjoy a few moments gazing on the statue in meditation?

On August 15th, the Feast of the Assumption, Father Peter invited the congregation at 11.30am Mass to join him for the dedication of the shrine. It was a beautiful service when everyone had the opportunity to see the completed work and read the inscription at the base of the rock.



Father Peter chose the inscription which is taken from St. John's Gospel, Chapter 19 Verses 26-27. It reads,

“Seeing His Mother and the disciple He loved standing near her, Jesus said to His Mother, “Woman, this is your Son.”

Then to the disciple He said, “ This is your Mother.”

Mary, our Mother, our helper and our guide is there for us in all our cares and worries. She is the Mother of God's only Son and our pathway to Him in glory.

We hope that many children and adults will come along to place flowers at the shrine. We would like to express our thanks to Father Peter for blessing the garden and to all parishioners for their gratitude and kindness.

Kind regards,
Eamonn Grant.

Year of Saint Joseph



The Liturgy Team

As we write this article for the Connection magazine, we are finalising the preparations for our three Parish Advent Services on the theme of Saint Joseph. When we were thinking about what aspects of the life of Saint Joseph to focus on, we drew inspiration from Pope Francis and his recent Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* (with a father's heart).

The insights from *Patris Corde* truly helped us to plumb the depths of who Joseph was and what he achieved during his lifetime. Joseph the father, Joseph the husband and Joseph the ordinary working man, doing what God asked of him quietly, discretely and without fanfare. It led us to thinking about the high esteem in which God must have held Joseph when He placed His only beloved Son in Joseph's care. What a major part Joseph played in God's plan for our salvation! No words spoken by Joseph are recorded in the Scriptures, he was a man of actions.

We would encourage everyone who hasn't already done so, to read *Patris Corde*. It is not a very difficult Apostolic Letter to understand; however, it packs a real punch.

We pray that Pope Francis' hopes in writing this Letter for the faithful will be realised – that we will all increase our love for this great saint, be encouraged to implore his intercession and to imitate his virtues and his zeal.

Stonehenge Trek 2020



My Granny Pat was diagnosed with Alzheimer's a few years ago and although there is no cure, I wanted to do something to help, so my Mum, my other Gran and my Aunt decided that we would challenge ourselves and walk a marathon to raise funds for the Alzheimer's Society.

We signed up for the Stonehenge 26 Mile Trek and arrived in Salisbury on the 12th of September 2020 ready to walk. Thankfully, we had prepared ourselves by going on long walks in the months beforehand. We were still all quite nervous. The route was really lovely. It started off in playing fields in the north of Salisbury and we walked past Salisbury Cathedral which was very impressive. We then passed meadows and woodland areas. We walked on Salisbury Plains, along the River Avon, and past the famous Stonehenge.

The weather all around was good but really hot and most of us ended up with sunburn. It was tough at times, but we managed to encourage each other to keep going. The atmosphere was great and helped us get through the day. We all felt a deep sense of achievement at the end of the walk. We had helped a great cause and walked a marathon too. We even raised over £2,600 for Alzheimer's Society and have decided to walk again next year in June 2022 in the Lake District, again for Alzheimer's. Fingers crossed we manage okay!

Libby Woods

Eilish Degan Cancer Foundation

Kilroot Business Park, Carrickfergus

It's been an interesting time for the Foundation. Owing to a flood we lost all our household furniture and other items, only to be hit by Covid -19 and lockdown. What else could possibly go wrong?

The Foundation has been supporting children with cancer and their families for twelve years. We work in collaboration with the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children, supporting both the children and their families. We have sponsored children and families to Disneyland and, throughout the year, also organise nights out for family units. We hold a variety of events at the Children's Hospital including Superhero Day. This allows the children and their families to enjoy a host of activities all funded by the Foundation. This year's project was the Hospital garden where we have added new life and lots of colour for both Staff and children to enjoy.



Where does Kilroot Business Park feature in all of this?

Every project depends on money. That's where the store comes into play. We depend on donations of household furniture and other items which we sell. The only deduction from the proceeds is the rent for the unit itself. All work is done voluntarily. We are totally dedicated to the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children.

We have worked hard during Covid -19 to keep going. Has it been stressful? Yes, but the people in Carrickfergus and beyond have been fantastic in their generosity. We have our 'regulars', customers who like everyone else are looking for a bargain. However we are always meeting new customers which is great.

When people ask who was Eilish Degan I am proud to give my explanation. She was my Mother who bravely fought stomach cancer for fifteen years, supported by my Father, John Degan, who endured and battled lung cancer for twenty years. In telling the story behind the Foundation, people who have been affected by cancer often open up, telling their own story. As the saying goes, 'It's good to talk.' So I hope that not only are we supporting the Children's Hospital but, by talking and sharing, we are helping others in the community.

When are we open?

Currently due to other work commitments, the store is only open on a Saturday morning. We are, however, searching for other premises around Carrickfergus where we can extend our opening hours and undertake more planned projects.



Eilish Degnan Cancer Foundation

Kilroot Business Park, Carrickfergus

Can you help?

YES !

If anyone would like to support the Eilish Degnan Cancer Foundation, then please contact me or check out our website.

Gerald Degnan



Love in the time of Coronavirus

A Nurse's Perspective

When I was asked to provide a piece on the theme of Love as it relates to my role as a nurse I have to admit to being a little flummoxed.

Clearly the idea of romantic love is not to be encouraged but Professional Nursing is based on caring. Care is a combination of love and respect in interacting with others and therefore love and care in Nursing are complementary to one another.

As a nurse working in our local GP practice my colleagues and I have had to adapt to the changes in our way of working during the pandemic. In the first few weeks of lockdown patient contact was kept to a bare minimum with most of our elderly or vulnerable patients being advised to shield or isolate.

The emotional and social impact of this has been devastating. Confinement, loneliness, death of loved ones and uncertainty about work have all affected the emotional health of our patients,

When the weekly clap for carers started I have to admit to feeling that the applause wasn't really meant for me but rather for those of my colleagues in Covid centres or Intensive Care Units-those on the real frontline.

As the weeks went on it became apparent that the normal work of the Treatment Room had to recommence because ordinary life and illnesses go on even during a pandemic.

Although things are not back to normal, and quite possibly never will be, our appointment lists are full and days are busy.

However the national applause has stopped and GP practices are being vilified in the National Press and Social Media.

So it can be hard to feel the love sometimes. As a nurse I hope that I can continue to deliver patient care with a sense of responsibility, attention and concern. It's a two way street and we can only hope that respecting and understanding one another will take us all forward.

Catrina Austin, Treatment Room Nurse



Life in a Nursing Home during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

I am delighted to be able to share with “The Connection” readers what life has been like for residents, staff and families in a local Nursing Home.

Back in March 2020 life for everyone changed so much and that, certainly, included all working and living in a Nursing Home. We all had to understand what words like “lockdown, social distance, PPE and virus” meant. Sadly this can be so difficult for people suffering from cognitive impairment.

Friends and families were not allowed to visit in order to prevent the spread of the virus. Instead staff had to become family to our residents. Many old hobbies came to light again to ward off boredom. Knitting, solving crosswords, building jigsaws, word searches, reading and good old- fashioned letter and card writing were all rejuvenated. On the other hand our residents acquired new skills such as using mobile phones, Face Timing with loved ones, making virtual calls and texting.

As the months progressed, restrictions slowly started to lift and person to person visits in the garden (weather permitting) occurred. This was such a wonderful time for our residents and visitors. The staff watched, with tears in their eyes , as families were reunited. When the Northern Ireland weather did not permit garden visits, a specially built “pod” was put in place indoors to facilitate visits. In the past few months we are now back to appointment only visits in the residents’ own bedrooms.

Sadly after nine months of keeping our Nursing Home Covid free, an outbreak took place in December 2020. This proved to be a very challenging time for all of us living and working in the Nursing Home. Unfortunately during this outbreak we lost a number of residents.

Thankfully in early January 2021 we were declared Covid free. Since then our residents and staff have been doubly vaccinated and booster jabs have also been given.

Life is slowly getting back to “normal” in our home and we are all looking forward to a happy, joyful Christmas with those we love.

Mary Grant.

Nursing Home Activity Therapist.



Working as a Paramedic during Covid 19 – A Difficult Time



During the time of Covid I have been working as a NIAS Paramedic in Belfast and I have experienced some of the most difficult times in my career.

As a paramedic I am generally called on at the worst times in peoples' lives. Trying to manage the Covid pandemic whilst continuing to manage the other pandemics that have been plaguing our cities and towns, without the same publicity or media interest, has been a major challenge. Alcohol and drug issues, along with mental health problems, continued throughout this period and in many instances were exacerbated by it. We tried our best to manage these calls for help as well as those for the many other illnesses and injuries that require ambulance response.

Calls were having to be prioritised more than ever due to unprecedented demand on ambulances and emergency departments. I was aware that seriously ill people were having to wait for ambulances and that even on arrival at hospital they were having to wait in some cases, for hours, to just get into the hospital for treatment. Neither of these is acceptable but we were overwhelmed with calls for help, hospitals were struggling to cope and there was nothing we could do.

On a human level, some of the most difficult calls I attended during lockdown were to lonely elderly persons, who had seen no-one for weeks or months. They were crying out for some company, descending into depression and feeling life was not worth living if they were to spend it completely alone. They were relying on calls to Emergency Services, just to provide some human interaction and a break from the loneliness.

Patients who were extremely ill with Covid 19 and needed hospitalisation did not want to go as they had to travel alone, terrified they might not see their family again and saying tearful goodbyes as they were wheeled to the ambulance, which for many was their last journey.

Dealing with so much fear and grief on a daily basis was emotionally draining. You do not get 'used to it' and it is not something you can shake off as soon as your shift finishes and at some points it felt never-ending. I found my release in my running and I'm not sure how I would have coped during this time without it.

I also worried for my family. I was attending to patients who were seriously ill with Covid 19 on a daily basis, to then return home to my wife and children after each shift, hoping I had done all I could to reduce the risk of infecting them.

The gratitude of the public and the support from colleagues and family was what got us in the Ambulance Service through a very dark time.

Now as we move into winter, the pressures are building again. Hospitals are becoming overwhelmed and our ambulance shifts are busier and longer than ever. My hope is that as more people are vaccinated, we will not go back to a time we would all rather put behind us. However as I see more people become complacent regarding wearing masks and social distancing, and worse, speaking out against vaccinations, I am concerned and quite often frustrated. If only these people could see what I have seen.

I love my job as a Paramedic. Even during the most challenging times I wouldn't change what I do. There is no better job satisfaction in the world than saving a life.

As we move towards the Christmas period, I hope that everyone will do what they can to save lives and help our NHS.

Brendan Rice



Hope House is located at Browns Bay Islandmagee. It's a tranquil place of respite for families affected by cancer. It offers a place of solace, free of charge to enable people affected by cancer to take time away from their treatments, their home and daily struggles and allow them time to relax and unwind, soaking in the beautiful sea views.

Dawn and Roy Mc Connell are the founders of Hope House. They have been married for 33 years and have both had their personal experience with cancer. Out of their personal battle with cancer came their ambition to help others going through the same. They have great faith in prayer, and this has helped them both remain strong and courageous in their darkest times.

Hope House relies completely on charitable donations, and these donations have grown their charity throughout the years. Starting with a rental apartment overlooking Whitehead promenade and a small team of volunteers, the demand for much needed solace for so many people going through cancer became apparent. With lots of coffee mornings and fundraising, Dawn and Roy's family and friends succeeded in building enough funds to purchase a beach front location in Browns Bay. They have been overwhelmed with the encouragement and support to date, and many local businesses have helped to provide, furnish and renovate the first house, landscape the gardens, and transform the garage into more ground floor accommodation for more people to stay.

Of course, all this comes at a cost. Dawn's team of Hope Heroes has expanded more over the years helping to raise much needed donations to ensure this amazing place can continue to provide a place of solace for people affected by cancer, to have a much-needed break without the worry of having to pay to stay. More and more people are being diagnosed daily with cancer. It's a lonely, scary process. Hope House instantly invites you in. The building wraps its arms around you and gives you a reassuring hug that your time there will be tranquil. The symbol for Hope House is the lighthouse, a symbol of Hope to help people cope during their stormy time. A beacon of light in the darkness.

I chose to support Hope House because my family has been affected by cancer in the past. I know the love, care and support Dawn and her team of Hope Heroes give to their guests who come to stay, and that is why last Christmas I decided to fundraise for Hope House.

If you are currently undergoing treatment for cancer and would like to enquire about staying at Hope House, complete the form at <https://hopehouseireland.org/stay-at-hope-house/>

If anyone would like to offer some support or get more information please contact.

Tel: 077 6440 6646

Email: info@hopehouseireland.org

Christina Baker

Behind the Front Cover

"Faith, Hope & Love" by Shellz-art



This year's Christmas cover theme is love.

A quote from St. Paul's First letter to the Corinthians guided my work; "these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."



I originally sketched out a scene from the 'Prodigal Son', where the father is holding his son in a warm embrace, showing a strong sense of love and compassion, regardless of what the son did.

But, after much consideration, I decided to repaint the cover. It didn't feel quite right, nor did it suit the Christmas theme. The last line in St. Paul's quote mentioned 3 main principles. I wanted to depict these as best I could through 3 people; Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Without losing the original meaning, I still wanted to paint a father's love, but this time of a child that wasn't his own.

1. Sketch and colour. All about keeping it loose as I try to get my thoughts onto paper quickly.

2. Render. Here I block in shadows and work around with my final idea to create a better composition and overall theme.

3. Details. I wanted their halos to merge faintly into The Star of Bethlehem, to create a subtle nod towards their connection with Heaven and Earth.

4. Once I was happy with everything, I went into finer details like fabric textures, rim light, hair strands and stars. With a final colour pass and detail check, I have a finished painting!



shellz.art.com

Detail of image on front cover by parishioner Jim Mullan's talented daughter, Shelly, who has provided us all with an exquisitely beautiful image of the Nativity. In Shelly's words, " Mary and Joseph are relaxed, resting against the barn after a long night, with everyone settled and sleeping. They can bond with their newborn child together."