

The Presbytery, Abbeydorney. (066 7135146; 087 6807197)

[abbeydorney@dioceseofkerry.ie](mailto:abbeydorney@dioceseofkerry.ie)

8<sup>th</sup> January, Feast of the baptism of the Lord.

Dear Parishioner,

My Irish teacher in Saint Brendan's College used to say to us, especially in the latter half of the school year, *'Tá an bhliain go léir imithe agus níl puinn déanta again.'* (The whole year is gone and we have nothing done!) He was overstating the case because he was pushing us fairly hard and we had a lot done in the course but he wanted us to get that sense of urgency, so that we would try harder. I thought of his statement, as I began to write this piece because last Sunday, we welcomed 2023 and already week has gone. Well if it feels like nothing has been accomplished yet, at least we have 51 weeks left to do, at least, some of the things we would like to do in 2023.

Earlier in the week, I had thought about giving a mention to one of the senior priests in our diocese, Fr. Pat Ahern, who had the satisfaction towards the end of 2022 to have his book launched. On Thursday morning a much younger priest's name was being mentioned but, sadly, it was because he had died unexpectedly the previous day. Fr. Donal O'Connor who had been the chaplain to the Institute of Technology (now known as Munster Technical University – MTU instead of ITT), Tralee. He was a native of Rathmore and had served as a curate in Listowel and Castletownbere and serving as Parish Priest in Beaufort, before taking up his chaplaincy role. At a time when ordinations were less frequent events – in the latter half of the nineties and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Rathmore Parish had four priests ordained, three of them for the diocese of Kerry. The exception was Fr. Sean Cremin, from Knocknagree, Co. Cork (in the diocese of Kerry), ordained as a Saint Patrick's Missionary priest (Kiltegan Fathers). Donal's two fellow diocesan priests are Michael Moynihan, Parish Priest of Dingle and Gerard O'Leary, chaplain in University Hospital, Tralee.

Fr. Pat Ahern's name is synonymous with Siamsa Tíre (The National Folk Theatre) based in the theatre of the same name in Tralee. His book **'Forging the Dance'** is his own story but very much the story of Siamsa Tíre, which has achieved world-wide fame. For those very familiar with different shows presented by the members of Siamsa Tíre over the years, as well as for those not so familiar, the book is a wonderful read. **(Fr. Denis O'Mahony)**

### **My Sense Of The Spiritual Has Helped Me Cope With My Dad's Death By Margaret Graham (Reality, December 2022)**

The November 2021 issue of Reality focused on grief and loss and explored Irish rituals and traditions, including family experiences during Covid-19. I, too, have written about my personal and professional experiences of the death of my dad, Jim, from hospital-acquired Covid-19. I now wish to share my experiences surrounding my dad's death and how an understanding of spirituality ripples forth and sustains me. Such reflective writing is beyond traditional journal constraints, so I write here. I begin with a glimpse of Jim, a treasured dad, brother, grandfather, and friend. My parents, Jim and Nuala, were married for over 60 years until Nuala's death in 2018. Jim, 91 years old, lived alone and kept a positive outlook. Yet, his sadness was reflected in comments such as, *'The walls can't talk to you,'* a view akin to CS Lewis's, *'I dread the moments when the house is empty.'* Jim followed isolation rules. He communicated with us via the world wide web as his hearing loss became challenging. He had a deep Christian faith and signed off many emails with, *'God bless, take care.'* In the bleak midwinter Christmas 2020, Jim was hospitalised following a fall and there contracted Covid-19. No visitors allowed. He kept in touch via email until a final: *"The nurses are fantastic; enjoy yourselves. Don't worry about the old codger; will keep fighting this. Love you heaps, Jim."*

**Dreaded Phone Call:** Christmas 2020. I help as an usher at Mount St Alphonsus church, Limerick. It is a simple task, welcoming and reminding people about Covid-19 safe practices, mask-wearing, and guiding people to designated seats. Every day I walk with my husband, Dan, across Limerick's three bridges. We notice the Christmas hustle and bustle, twinkling lights, ever-changing skylines, the birds, the sounds and flow of the river. Walking on New Year's Eve, the dreaded phone call from my brother, Gerry, tells us Jim is struggling and has made his choice. No more interventions. Jim is dying. Gerry is permitted to stay with him. During Jim's last hours, the hospital chaplain administers the Last Rites. WhatsApp messages flow to and fro, sending last calls from family across the world. Slowly, quietly, time passes. We wait as dusk falls, and Dan and I visit Mount St Alphonsus. The soft glow cocoons as we light candles at St Gerard's Shrine, a family tradition. Later at home, waiting for the inevitable, a candle lights the night. Strange times, strange happenings, running counter to my beliefs as expressed by

Irish philosopher Richard Kearney (2021): **'The last thing we do when dying is to reach for another hand, something that the pandemic has made impossible.'** Jim reached his 92nd birthday early on New Year's Eve; his final words: *"Nuala is waiting for me. We will pray for you all. God bless."* We find comfort in the limited celebration of Jim's life at the funeral Mass and crematorium service, ending with Ode to Joy, composed by Beethoven when profoundly deaf. I was reminded of this music from Fr. Gerry Moloney's reference in his Christmas homily to hearing loss, hence the choice. In my work as an educator, I facilitate learning about death and dying. Margaret Haughton, writing in *Reality* (2021), likens responses to grief to a tsunami of emotions such as anger, bargaining, and denial. In my grief, I don't have such feelings but rather a calmness, a sense of my spirituality as a touchstone for life. I have learned, as Irish scholar John O'Donohue, notes, **'You lose the balance of your soul if you do not learn to take care of yourself.'** Self-care sees me acknowledge emotions but without distress and is life-enhancing. Becoming more mindful guides this process. Eastern philosophies hold mindfulness at the core of spiritual practice. A Celtic spirituality of the divine as revealed in nature, weather, and seasonal imagery, creates a space for stillness and calmness integral to my spiritual being. The beauty and peace of the soul space at Mount St Alphonsus is a newfound wonder. **Working through my grief, I am aware of taking a moment to pause to see nature in daily life, integrating mind, body, and spirit to take care of self. I am at peace.**

I find solace in writing. I did not know how this article would shape up. Thinking and writing help me craft ideas. I am privileged to be connected at Jim's death and dying from afar. I know that Jim was one of over 6,500 people who have died from Covid-19 in Ireland. Others may have different experiences and are without a voice. I am privileged to have been a bystander to dad's serenity and faith during his last moments on this earth. **Writing about my understanding of the concept of spirituality sustains me as part of a healing process as ripples of sadness, joy, and memories ebb and flow.**

**Acknowledgements** I am grateful to my friends at the Redemptorists who stood beside me, asked about Jim, prayed for him, and rang me. All these simple acts of kindness help my grieving. **(Margaret Graham is a lecturer at the Department of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Limerick)**

**Points to Ponder:** Today's Gospel passage emphasises that, when Jesus had received baptism from John in the river Jordan, *'the heavens were opened'* to him. (Matt. 3:16) This fulfils the prophecies. If the heavens remain closed, our horizon in this life is dark and without hope. Instead, in celebrating Christmas, faith has once again given us the certainty that the heavens have been rent with the coming of Christ. On the day of the baptism of Christ, we continue to contemplate the heavens opened. The manifestation of the Son of God on earth marks the beginning of the great time of mercy, after sin had closed the heavens, raising itself as a barrier between the human being and his Creator. With the birth of Jesus, the heavens open!

God gives us in Christ the guarantee of an indestructible love. From the moment the word became flesh it is, therefore, possible to see the open heavens. It was possible for the shepherds of Bethlehem, the Wise Men of the East, for John the Baptist, for Jesus' apostles and for St. Stephen, the first martyr, who exclaimed: *'Behold, I see the heavens opened.'* (Acts 7:56) Does it seem that, in our own time, extra fraternal sharing and love is needed. Does it seem to you that we all need extra love? Not the sort that is content with extemporaneous help which does not involve or stake anything, but that love that shares, that takes on the hardship and suffering of a brother or sister. What flavour life acquires, when we allow ourselves to be inundated by God's love! (Pope Francis in *Intercom*, Dec. 22/Jan.23)

**Thought for the Day:** After the joyous celebration of Christmas, culminating in the Epiphany, we turn now to the start of Jesus' public ministry, which begins at his baptism. When we celebrate the baptism of the Lord, we recall with joy and gratitude the amazing, sanctifying grace of our own baptism. It is fitting to spend time pondering the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism, while at the same time, engaging in rituals to claim again our own baptismal call on this holy day. In short, we can celebrate, not only by reflecting on the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism and pondering this great mystery, but also by reflecting on and celebrating our own baptism.

**Trócaire warns of hunger crisis in the Horn and East Africa continues deteriorate:** Trócaire advised the Irish Bishops Conference that the hunger crisis, in the Horn and East Africa, has further deteriorated in recent months, with the U.N., warning that a famine may be shortly declared in parts of Somalia. (*Intercom Magazine, December 2022/January 2023*)