

## GAUDETE

*My soul glorifies the Lord,  
My spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour.*

Rejoice! We have much to thank God for. In this Christmas season, the time we celebrate the birth of our Saviour: Our Lord and our God, we know that God is with us. By his birth through the virgin Mary, He became one with us. Unfortunately, there are many who do not know or understand the true meaning of Christmas. Our society is becoming more and more secular. The advertisers start promoting their Christmas wares in September with fairy tales and silly animations with little or no mention of the birth of our redeemer.

Last year, 2023, was been a very difficult and challenging one. The war in Ukraine is still raging with little sign of it coming to an end. Its capital Kyiv and other eastern cities have become bomb sites and the people of Ukraine and Russia are suffering. In the Middle East, Israel and Palestine are at war and thousands of people, including innocent children and babies are dying. In Europe, criminal gangs are becoming rich by taking advantage of people who are trying to escape terror in their own country and fleeing to countries where they hope to be safe and able to build better lives. Men, women and children are risking their lives to do so. Many are dying. In our own streets, knife crime is increasing and children are killing children. Our planet is retaliating against the way we have abused it. Climate change is creating havoc in every part of the world yet world leaders who come together to debate the problems do little or nothing to resolve them. They put their own personal and national interests before others. They fail to see the urgency of working together and making personal sacrifices to bring about a better world.

Saint Paul tells us, "Be happy at all times, pray constantly; and for all things give thanks to God, because that is what God expects you to do in Christ Jesus." (5:16 Thessalonians). I know that I can do little to influence World affairs but I can try to have a positive influence in my own little world. To those who do not believe in God, I cannot prove his existence but nor can they prove his non-existence. I know that God is with us for I recognise little signs every day that he is watching over me. I can try to be kinder and more helpful to those around me and I can pray more often and more earnestly, and encourage those around me to do the same, that God will help us to bring about a better world; To bring an end to war, violence and hatred between nations: To help us feed the hungry, heal the sick the, shelter the homeless and protect the vulnerable.

*Lord, when I hear of bomb blasts that kill so many, of the destruction of whole villages, of ethnic cleansing, of collateral damage that accepts as inevitable the deaths of so many innocent women and children, I fear for the world.*

*Lord, let your peace abide, may your spirit of love and forgiveness help our world to become a better place for everyone. Amen. ( The Prayer Trust) Taken from a beautiful Christmas card I received from Fr. Jim*

## AWARENESS

*It is good to give thanks to the Lord  
To make music to your name, O Most High,  
To proclaim your love truth in the morning  
And your truth in the watches of the night. (psalm 92)*

I am reading a book written by an astronomer who is also a roman Catholic Priest, Fr. Douglas McGonagle. The book is entitled "*The STAR of BETHLEHEM*" and he asks the question, "What did the Magi see?" He puts forward a few possible explanations. Although it is very well written, I must admit that I am struggling to get through it as I know nothing about astronomy or astrology and my failing eyesight prevents me from reading fluently. Also, my attention span is not what it used to be, so, it will take me longer to get through it but I will get there.

Fr. McGonagle points out that in only one of the gospels, Matthew's, are the Magi and the star mentioned. He only began to really study the phenomena after reading a book written by Doctor Michael Molinar who claimed that there were four types of explanations for the star. The categories are supernatural, natural, mythical or astrological. In other words, it was a miracle or an Angel of God; a natural event such as a comet or a supernova; something the wise men read in the stars for they were astrologers or, did Matthew include the star to underline the importance of the birth of Jesus?

I am not knowledgeable enough to answer these questions but it made me recall some of the questions I have asked myself in the past. The Magi were wise and learned men and obviously rich for they brought valuable gifts with them. Although they were not Jews, they proved themselves to be familiar with the scriptures. What inspired them to make such a long and arduous journey and when they arrived in Bethlehem and found a poor new-born baby lying on straw in a manger, in a shed that housed cattle, why did they immediately fall on their knees to worship him? Why were Herod and his advisers unable to see the star?

I began to think of my own life. Almost every day, some little thing occurs which I interpret as being a sign that God is present in my life. Others would say they are just coincidental. I believe that in recent years, as I have aged, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, I have become more acutely aware of the presence of God in my life, not just in the big things but also in the trivia. I am not claiming to have a hotline to God nor am I better than the next man for I have also become more aware of my own failings and my shortcomings. I know that I am still a sinner but I pray that with my new found awareness I may become a better person. My mother used to say, "take care of the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves." I think that if we are aware of the little temptations and can resist them, then when the greater temptations confront us, we are more able to overcome them. I think that, perhaps, the wise men, after studying the Universe, had become aware of the presence and the magnificence of God, and recognised in the configuration of the stars at that time, the signs that something lifechanging was about to happen and I am sure they were guided from above to that stable in Bethlehem.

O Jesus help me. You have given me so much and I have so little to give to you in return. I have only myself and I offer my self to you, all that I have, all that I do and all that I am.

*We bless you, Father, Lord of Life,  
To whom all living beings tend,  
The source of holiness and grace,  
Our first beginning and our end.*

O Lord, may I approach you to receive you in the Blessed sacrament with absolute faith, hope and love; complete trust; utter humility, gratitude and devotion.

**SAINT JOSEPH**  
*Foster father of the Son of God*

A few years ago, I wrote about the Quiet man, Saint Joseph. He was indeed quiet. There is not a single word recorded in the gospels spoken by him even though he played such an important part in Jesus' life. Silence is often seen to be a sign of weakness but it can also be a sign of immense power. Elijah, as he sheltered in a cave, did not become aware of the Almighty God in an earthquake nor in thunder and lightning but in a soft and gentle breeze. Saint Joseph was a quiet and gentle man. He was obviously a very holy man for he lived with, loved and watched over the Son of God for nearly thirty years. With Mary he brought Jesus up. He taught him his trade and worked with him.

Recently, I have been thinking about him and praying to him a lot for after Mary he is the greatest of all the saints; a faithful and loving husband and a wonderful head of the Holy Family and an obedient servant of God. He was honourable and discrete. When he found out that Mary was with child, he must have been shocked but he did not scandalise her but decided to separate quietly. When the angel asked him in a dream to marry Mary and take the child as his own, he did not question but quietly obeyed the will of God. When they arrived at Bethlehem and were refused accommodation, he did not rant and rave, but simply managed to find some shelter, humble though it was, and made it as comfortable as possible for Mary and her newborn baby. When shepherds and foreign men came to find the child, Joseph did not bar them nor chase them away. He simply stood with his staff watching, guarding and ready to defend his charges. When he was directed to take his family to Egypt, he did not complain that he would have to leave his home in Nazareth and all he owned and face a long and hazardous journey to another country, a different language, and a different culture where he would find it hard to set up a new home and to find work to support his family. When Jesus was about twelve and went missing for three days, Mary and Joseph were desperately worried but it was not Joseph who chastised him. Saint Joseph did all these things obediently not because he was weak but because he was so strong and had great faith and such an awareness of God.

At Christmas we lost our elder sister which means that all my elder siblings have now gone before us and I am now the most senior of those still alive. My younger brother playfully refers to me as the Dom. I am not sure I can live up to that title but I will ask Saint Joseph to help me. I will try hard to be like him, kind and gentle, loving and caring, considerate and discrete and as good an example to those around me as I can be.

Prayer to Saint Joseph recommended by Pope Francis which he has recited every day for more than forty years: -

*Glorious Saint Joseph, whose power makes the impossible possible, come to my aid in these times of anguish and difficulty. Take under your protection the serious and troubling situations that I commend to you, that they may have a happy outcome. My beloved father, all my trust is in you. Let it not be said that I invoked you in vain, and since you can do everything with Jesus and Mary, show me that your goodness is as great as your power.*

Saint Joseph, pray for us.

## I BELIEVE IN GOD

*O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder,  
Consider all the works thy hand has made,  
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed,  
Then sings my soul my saviour God to thee,  
How great thou art.*

I have lived quite a lengthy life and a happy one but I feel that, perhaps, for much of it I have taken my faith for granted. Four months after my thirteenth birthday, my father was killed in a fatal accident. That event changed and has affected my whole life. I was very close to my dad, he was my hero, and I have never doubted that he was in Heaven watching over me. In my twenties, I was married and our children were born and I thought deeply about how much my faith meant to me. I felt that I had a duty to pass on to them the faith that my parents passed on to me. I determined to be a faithful and loving husband to my wife and as good an example to my children as I could be. In my earlier years I worked hard and often long hours to provide a happy safe and comfortable home for my family. Although I remained faithful to the mass and to the sacraments, I think that my focus was on family and my job rather than my religion.

In my late thirties and early forties, I went through a phase of reassessment. It was not a midlife crisis, more a reappraisal of what was important. I realised how blessed I was having a lovely wife, a happy marriage, three wonderful children and comfortable home. I wanted to give something back to God for all his gifts to us. I became more active in parish affairs. I discovered a gift I previously did not realise I had and I became a regular reader at mass. Soon I was asked to join a group of catechists preparing children for confirmation and later I was invited to train as an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion. In the following years I experienced moments of overwhelming joy, moments when I felt so full of love my heart could not contain it and was overflowing.

As I approached retiring age, I began suffering in some small way what St. John of the cross called "The dark night of the soul" when I had doubts and felt that God was impossible and even tried to not believe. My head asked how could there be a being that could create such a vast universe while my heart would not allow me to dwell on these thoughts. I confessed my fears to a priest and he helped me to realise that I was not losing my faith but beginning to understand and appreciate the greatness and wonder of God. I began to read and learn more about my faith and I am very grateful to the Catholic Truth Society. I can understand why people find it hard to believe in God but to me now it seems more logical to believe in an almighty and eternal being than to believe that the Universe began with a big bang where before there was nothing. I think that once we accept God as being the supreme creator of all that is and realise that He is a merciful and loving father, then the incarnation, the virgin birth, the death, and the resurrection of Christ makes sense.

I am now in my final years and I have discovered another gift that God has blessed me with. I found that I could write down my thoughts in an intelligible way that others can read easily and seem to appreciate. Fr. Ravi encouraged me to start writing my reflections and he published them on the parish newsletter. I no longer take my faith for granted and I thank God that I am now able to recognise the signs that He is present in my life. I pray that I will always be faithful to Him.

I believe in God The Father and The Son and The Holy Spirit, As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. Amen.

## TIME

*Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on  
When we shall ever be with the Lord  
When disappointment, grief and fear are gone,  
Sorrow forgotten, love's pure joy restored.*

To me time is a great enigma. As children, we have no conception of time. We do not understand that because the earth spins on its axis, the sun rises in the East, sets in the West and another day has passed. Nowadays, children are encouraged to measure the passage of time by the number of sleeps. I, myself, have very little memory of the first ten years of my life. Now that I am old, I find it difficult to remember what day it is. They pass so quickly; I rely on little reminders. When we were in our youth, we took little notice of time for we had the whole of our lives before us. We were impatient, we wanted to get on with it. It is only when we reach our middle years that we become aware of the passage of time; when our own children are now adults and we have grandchildren. We ask ourselves, where did all those years go? We tell ourselves that we are too young to have grandchildren. When we reach the age for retirement, our minds tell us we are still young and we are going to enjoy doing all the things we never had time to do before. However, before long our bodies tell us a different story.

A few years ago, a very dear friend who is a few years older than I am told me how he gets up early every morning and tries to make time slow down. I think that what he was trying to say was that we should live in the present moment; the past is just a memory and something we cannot change; the future does not yet exist. Jesus told us to stay awake, be ready for we know not the hour (*Matt 24:42*). I too get up early and try to have an hour of silence and reflection but it is difficult to avoid the distracting thoughts that come into my mind. During morning prayers, again, I find it hard to focus for my mind is inclined to wander and I have to keep praying "Lord, help me!" It is not easy to live in the present moment but I think it is important for I think that sometimes, without thinking, I say or do things that others may interpret in a different way to what was intended. They may take it in a negative way and feel offended when no offence was meant. Sometimes our actions can affect someone for a very long time. So, I try to think before I say or do anything.

Eternity is beyond our comprehension. God created time for humanity but to Him there is no time. He has no beginning and no end. The other day, another dear friend introduced me to a beautiful poem he had recently discovered. It is called, "When tomorrow starts without me," by David Romano. It is a poem of love from a person who has just died to a loved one(s) who is now grieving. In it the poet describes Heaven and how as he entered the gates of heaven, God greets him and smiles, telling him,

*"This is eternity,  
And all I promised you.  
Today your life on Earth has passed  
But here it starts anew.  
I promise no tomorrow,  
  
But today will always last  
And since each day's the same way,  
There's no longing for the past."*

To film goers, this may sound like groundhog day, but the difference is that we will be living in the presence of God and He will be smiling at us. There will be no regrets, no sad memories, just perfect peace, complete happiness, and a joy that is beyond our imagination. I pray that I will one day be smiled upon and given pardon to enter through those gates.

## DECISIONS

*We bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and Earth, for revealing the mysteries of the kingdom to mere children.*

We are living in a very troubled and confused world, through a very difficult and violent era which seems to be heading for a terrible conflict between East and West; between tyranny and democracy, between freedom and dictatorship. I grew up in a similar era but at that time, only a few countries had nuclear weapons and artificial intelligence was unheard of. Then, most people, whether they practised their religion or not, seemed to believe in God. They turned to God in prayer in times of stress. Fr Paton, an American priest, toured the world promoting the family rosary. People gathered in thousands, at venues, to hear him and join him in prayer. Each evening, my mother gathered the family together to pray the rosary. When the Berlin wall fell and the Iron Curtain no longer seemed a threat, we thought our prayers had been answered but instead of praising God and thanking him, people have turned away from God. Climate change is destroying our world yet heads of states are ignoring the warnings. The need for prayer has never been greater.

There are too many distractions in our societies today which interfere with our prayer life and the decisions we make every day. Our world today has become very materialistic and money and possessions are what people crave for. Those who have enough are not satisfied and those who have plenty use their riches to gain even more. There never has been a time when so much information was so easily available. How much we can rely on that information I dare not to consider. People are being manipulated by the media. It has become a god to many people. Instead of praying to the one true God, they choose to turn to their android phones and their i-pads. From the moment we first wake each morning, we are making decisions all day long. Some decisions are serious and some more trivial, but all are important for every decision we make, every word we utter, every action we take has a consequence. Every time we become lax in our determination to be good, we make it easier to be lax another time. Every time we make a bad decision it seems to lead to more and worse decisions.

This week, I have been moved by the readings from the second letter of St. Peter, *“May you have more and more grace and peace as you come to know our Lord more and more.*

*By his divine power, He has given us all the things that we need for life and for true devotion, bringing us to know God himself, who has called us by his own glory and goodness. In making these gifts, He has given us the guarantee of something very great and wonderful to come: through them you will be able to share the divine nature and to escape corruption in a world that is sunk in vice. But to attain this, you will have to do your utmost yourselves, adding goodness to the faith you have, understanding to your goodness, self-control to your understanding, patience to your self-control, true devotion to your Patience, kindness towards your fellow men to your devotion, and to this kindness, love.*

As I write, it is the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. When I was a child, my parents instilled in me a devotion to the Sacred Heart. When I enter our beautiful church, I look up at the Sacred Heart statue and pray the prayer that they taught me so many years ago, *“O Sacred Heart of Jesus, I implore, make me love you more and more.”* Oh, how we need to turn to Jesus now.

## UTILITARIANISM

I have a nephew who was born forty-eight years ago just three weeks after my mother died. He was born with Spina Bifida. At that time there were no scans during pregnancy that could predict such a condition so it came as a great shock. The doctors told his parents it was hopeless and he had only days to live and should be left at hospital to die peacefully. My sister told them if he was going to die, she would take him home, care for him and he would die in her arms at home. Joe is still alive and throughout his life has never let his disability hold him back. He has been a great source of inspiration to me and the whole family. He attended the same school as his two brothers, Chester Catholic High School, and attained a place at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. Although he has need of a wheelchair, he also drives a car and has always been in fulltime employment. He is also a talented musician. Some years ago, Joe married a wonderful lady, Stacey, who is also severely disabled. She has been unable to walk since she suffered from a rare disease when she was a teenager. She also is in full employment. They are a wonderful couple and although they have no children of their own, they have nephews and nieces who love them and look up to them almost as parents. I do not like to refer to them as disabled for they have heroically achieved far more than I, who am nearly twice their age, can claim to have achieved in my whole life. I am, at times, inclined to take for granted the graces and blessings that have been bestowed upon us. In the case of Stacey and Joe, their life is one of daily heroism.

Utilitarianism is a word I have only recently come across. I remember utility furniture from when I started work in a furniture shop. That was a scheme introduced during the war to cope with a shortage of raw materials and rationing of their usage. Utilitarianism is a philosophy that dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I think it is one that is destroying our society. I do not have a degree in philosophy nor theology. In fact my only qualifications are a few "O level" passes so, I can only speak from my heart. Briefly, "utilitarianism maintains that the human person has value only inasmuch as they are economically productive and prosperous. The ultimate goal of life, therefore, is to produce so as to acquire, accumulate and possess material things." (Fr. Ed Broom.OMV) Following this philosophy, the child in the womb has no value until it is born whole and healthy; Those who are disabled are a burden to society; those who are past retirement age and can no longer contribute to the economy are not needed and should be encouraged to accept assisted dying. These things are not yet wholly part of our law but there is a strong movement trying to introduce them. To me, this goes against all Christian ethics. There is a strong lobby trying to bring in abortion on demand at any stage up to birth and another to legalise euthanasia. Surely, this is contrary to all that Jesus taught us. He told us to be servants to one another; to give to the poor, heal the sick and to protect the vulnerable.

If Joe had been left to die, what a loss that would have been to the community and to all the people he has served. I believe that every child in a mother's womb has great potential to benefit our society and by terminating its life we are denying the world of that potential. It also leaves a mother with a heart that is broken and a scar that she will carry for the rest of her life. In 1965 in the UK, the death sentence for murder was suspended yet, today, it is legal to terminate the lives of the most innocent and most vulnerable, unborn babies in a mother's womb. Up until I was forced to give up driving, due to a problem with my eyesight, for about thirty years, I served as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion and over the years, took communion to many people who were aged and infirm. They were wonderful characters, full of knowledge and experience. They were people of great faith and powerhouses of prayer. I think they gave me far more than I could give to them. How can these wonderful people be considered a burden?

O Lord, help me to use the talents you gave me to serve those around me.

## BE STILL MY SOUL

*Be still my soul, the Lord is on your side;  
Bear patiently the cross of grief and pain;  
Leave to your God to order and provide;  
In every change he faithful will remain.*

A few of us stood chatting outside after mass. We wondered what on earth the Old Testament readings of late were all about. They were from the first and second Books of Kings mentioning characters and places we had difficulty pronouncing. After reading it again on my own, I think they describe a period in the history of God's chosen people when they turned away from their true God and chose to worship false Gods. Many prophets were sent to warn them of the consequences of such actions but they were not listened to and were persecuted. At that time, Israel was a strong and rich country and was ruled by wealthy and powerful men who had little regard for the poor and the needy. I think we are living in a similar period of time when the world has turned its back on God and is disregarding the warnings of the consequences of doing so. I think the whole world is in great danger. It too is being ruled by the very rich and powerful. Can they not see that war solves nothing. It only brings death and suffering and destruction and creates a wasteland of fallen buildings and ruined industry. The poor get poorer and are starving, the multitude of people exiled and homeless gets even greater; there is nowhere to care for the sick and the dying and generations of men, women and children are used as cannon fodder and killed. The only one who benefits from war is Satan. When a country invades its neighbour, it is not just the peoples of those countries that are affected. The consequences affect the whole world.

There are many things I do not understand. The greatest problem in our world is poverty. There is a great divide between the rich and the poor. The rich are very, very rich and the poor are very, very poor! The financiers tell us to spend more to boost the economy, but I do not understand how that can work for it makes the rich even richer. It may improve things a little for the middle earner, only because they gain more possessions, but not for the poor and the needy, and the gap gets wider. How does it make things better for the third world countries whose peoples are desperately trying to escape to find a better life elsewhere. Surely, war only makes these problems worse. We have seen recently how reliant we are on IT and how vulnerable we are when it goes wrong or is used by malevolent people. In the election of our new government, there was a lot of talk about change, but the change must be worldwide. World leaders need to start talking of peace and not war; of love and not hatred; of sharing and not possessing. If we in the richer countries shared with those poorer countries the world would be a better place. As pope Francis says, "It may sound naïve and Utopian, yet we cannot renounce this lofty aim".

Since the age of sixteen, I worked until I was seventy. I have never been out of work and have never needed to claim unemployment benefit. God has always provided for me and my family. I am now retired with a nice home and a comfortable lifestyle for which I am truly grateful. Lately, before buying anything, I have asked myself, "Do I have what I need? Do I need what I have? Do I have more than I need? Can I give more to those in need?" I am an ordinary man living an ordinary life but so too were Jesus, Mary and Joseph until Jesus began his ministry. I think the change must start with us ordinary people.

*Glory and praise to our God who alone gives life to our days.*

*Many are the blessings he bears to those who trust in his ways.*



## GROWING OLD

*Happy the people the Lord chooses as his own.*

There is a saying that I and, I know, some of my contemporaries are quite familiar with. It states that growing old is not for the faint-hearted. It is very frustrating when I have finished with something and put it away in a safe place so that I know where to find it when I need it again but then I have to search the house because I cannot remember where that safe place is. There are other silly things I do like putting the sugar in the fridge rather than the cupboard. I prefer to put it down to absent-mindedness or foolishness rather than senility, but who knows? When I was young, everything was a challenge but something I could face. I told myself, "I can do this!" As I matured into middle-age I became more cautious and asked myself, "Can I do this?" Now that I am old, I find it hard to admit that I am no longer a young man and I ask myself "Is my mind and my body up to doing this and what will be the consequences if I fail?" I find it very hard to admit that there are things that I should no longer attempt to do. That decision to not do something that I was once able to do automatically is a very hard one.

A few days ago, the first reading was from the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians 1:26-31 where he tells us that it was to shame the wise that God chose what is foolish by human reckoning, and to shame what is strong that he chose what is weak by human reckoning. It gave me cause to reflect on my own situation. Due to my visual impairment I decided to not drive and surrendered my licence and as I am no longer able to read fluently, I can no longer carry on as a minister of the word nor a minister of Holy communion. These decisions were very hard to make but I have come to realise that I have other God-given talents which I can use to serve. I have been told that I have a nice singing voice so I can use it to sing God's praises when I attend mass and can participate in the service as sincerely as I can. I can offer up the mass and my prayers for all those in need asking God to comfort and console them and, if it be his will, to heal them. I may be foolish and weak but if my prayers are sincere, He will listen. I have also learnt that I have a talent to express myself by writing down my thoughts and feelings in these reflections.

In the gospel that day, Jesus related the parable of the rich man who was going abroad and left some of his wealth in the charge of three of his servants Matt. 25:14-30. Two of the servants served their master well by doubling the amount of which he had left them in charge. The third servant did not please the master for he failed to put his talent to good use. He did nothing but bury it and gave it back to the master just as it was when he first took charge of it. It made me wonder how I will be Judged. The Lord has given me so much throughout my life. He has always been there for me and never let me down. Have I been faithful to him? Have I done enough?

*Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord?*

*Who shall stand in his holy place?*

*The man with clean hands and pure heart,*

*Who desires not worthless things*

I pray that my weakness will make me strong and my foolishness will make me wise so that I will be able to climb that mountain with clean hands and a pure heart.

## HOLINESS

*Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives; the one who searches always finds; the one who knocks always has the door opened to him.*

My parent's faith was very strong and they were very devout. They were also devoted to one another. My mother was an incredibly strong character, she gave birth to eight children of which I was number five. She was widowed at the age of forty-four with five of us under the age of seventeen and still to be cared for and be prepared to be sent out into the world. I think she did that very well for I am proud of all my siblings, those who are still living and those who have gone before. My mother was not one to quote chapter and verse but she guided us gently along the right path. Her faith was a simple one. She believed in an almighty and loving God who would always provide and his only son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, who lived here on Earth and died to redeem us. She had a great devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to Our Lady, his mother.

On Sundays, she would be up early and walk two miles to our parish church, Saint Annes to celebrate mass and then walk the two miles back to make sure we were all ready to go to the later mass while she prepared the Sunday roast. She also attended Mass most days of the week. She helped out at the school, minding the children during their lunchtime break. She loved having little ones around her especially her grandchildren. She believed it kept her young. Each evening, she would gather us together in the living room to pray the rosary. In those days cars were few and far between so if my mother wanted to go somewhere she would have to walk or use the bus service. It must have been quite a struggle for her after dad died and I wish I could have been more comfort to her but I realise now that I myself was also grieving. She believed that God would always provide and she put all her trust in him.

In his pastoral letter recently, Bishop Mark brought our attention to the witness of holiness shown by a young teenager, Blessed Carlo Acutis, a remarkable young man who, although he has not yet been canonised, is truly a saint of our time. The bishop quotes Carlo as saying, *"You, too, can be a saint. But you need to want it with all your heart, and if you do not yet desire it, ask the Lord for insistence."* Bishop Mark encouraged us all to strive to be holy. When I was young, life seemed less complicated than it is today. We knew what was right and what was sinful. Nowadays, there are so many issues that I do not fully understand and am unsure how I should react but I try to keep an open mind and recall the old saying, *"hate the sin but love the sinner."*

My prayer now is,

O Lord, let me see only what you want me to see,  
Hear only what you want me to hear,  
Understand what you want me to understand,  
Say only what you want me to say,  
And do whatever you want me to do.  
O Lord, may I be what you want me to be.

When my father and mother died, I have always believed that they had attained a level of holiness. I know that I have not yet reached that level but I will take Bishop Mark's advice and keep striving.

Blessed Carlo Acutis, pray for us.

## HOLY SOULS

*O Lord, come to our aid,  
O Lord make haste to help us.*

The night before he died, after sharing a meal with his disciples and being a servant to them, Jesus went to the garden of Gethsemene to pray. He knew what was going to happen to him and he anticipated the torturous and agonising pain he would have to endure. He, in his humanity, did not want to experience such a humiliating and terrifying death and he asked his heavenly father to “take this cup away” but he finished his prayer saying, “not my will but thine be done.” As he hung on the cross, his agony was so overwhelming he called out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus was divine. He did not have to humble himself to share in our humanity nor did he have to suffer and die for us but he chose to do so out of his infinite love for us. He lived, suffered and died so that we could have a life after death with him.

I have lost three sisters and a brother who were exceptionally good people. They each had serious health problems before they died. My sister Therese was a member of a religious order which cared for orphaned and disadvantaged children. She died at quite an early age with Hodgkin’s disease. As she had always been a very active and joyful person, it was distressing to see her body gradually deteriorating and watching her dying slowly and painfully but she was well cared for by her community. My brother Gerard was well known throughout the Shrewsbury and Liverpool dioceses. I was often approached by people who introduced themselves as a friend of Gerry and who had recognised me as being so like him. He died after being exposed to asbestos during his life as an electrician. He, too, suffered a slow and painful death. He was also well cared for and I visited him as often as I could. I have treasured that time I was able to spend with him before the end. To me, all the circumstances of the deaths of my immediate family members, my parents, sisters and brother have been a source of inspiration; the way they were cared for and the courageous way they accepted their conditions.

There is a debate taking place in parliament and throughout the country as to whether we should bring in a law to legalise assisted suicide. It is a movement that is spreading around the world. I believe it is a negative one for it denies the existence of God and the promise of a life with him after death. If we truly believe in God then we must believe in an after-life. When a person dies, the soul leaves the body and, I believe, it then goes through a process of purification. The mortal body of that person is lifeless and can no longer feel pain but the soul is still alive and can certainly still suffer. Therefore, ending a life prematurely may not end that person’s suffering and, depending on the choices that person has made throughout its life, may even increase the suffering. For those who have helped or encouraged that person to end that life, their loss and bereavement will be no less and there may even be added to it, a sense of guilt.

I have much sympathy for those who are suffering with a terminal illness and I understand the heartache of those loved ones who have to observe it but I think that bringing in a law to legalise assisted suicide would be dangerous and wrong. I pray that members of parliament will think hard about it and will vote with their consciences.

*May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ  
enlighten the eyes of our minds,  
so that we can see what hope his call holds for us.*

## ADVENT 2024

*Without God we are too poor to be able to help the poor. (St. Teresa of Calcutta)*

I love Christmas but I hate all the commercialism that leads up to it. It starts months before with ghoulish adverts that make a mockery of Halloween, the eve of All Hallows which, of course is the feast of All Saints. This is a wonderful feast which celebrates the lives and deaths of all the holy and courageous saints who lived and died in outstanding service to God. The following day is the commemoration of all the faithful departed, All Souls, when we remember all the ordinary people who lived good and ordinary lives but whose souls may still need our prayers. Why do we have to spoil it with all sorts of monsters and teach our little ones to trick or treat. After the fire works on Guy Fawkes night, we have all the so-called Christmas adverts which seem to get more nonsensical every year and have nothing to do with the real meaning of Christmas.

Towards the end of the last liturgical year, the daily readings, from the book of the Apocalypse, I found were disturbing. It takes those who are more learned than I am to really understand their meaning but they seemed to me to be a mixture of warnings and promises. The warnings seem to reflect what is happening in our world today. Climate change is affecting the whole world and causing dreadful floods terrible earthquakes and devastating fires. So many nations are at war and we seem to be on the brink of another world war. There is a growing conflict between east and west, despotism and democracy. On the other hand, there are the promises of what we can look forward to after death. In the Gospels, Jesus tells us we have nothing to fear if we remain ready and faithful to him.

I think our society has become more materialistic, utilitarian and less spiritual. The world today is so filled with noise people have little opportunity to experience silence; they are so busy they have no time to reflect on what is important; many have forgotten how to pray and as Mother Teresa says without God, we are too poor to be able to help the poor. Our world is in such a troubled state that only through prayer can we bring justice and peace. That is why I love my early morning routine. I get up a little before seven, make a cup of coffee and sit for an hour in silent prayer and reflection. I then get ready and go to church for morning prayer before the Blessed Sacrament after which Mass is celebrated and Holy Communion is received. I call this my pilgrimage each day for it is not always easy. These cold dark mornings make it harder to get up and I do not always have a lift to church but I try to be strong and make my own way to church. This is not a boast, more an acknowledgement of God's beneficence for each morning when I first wake, I ask my Lord to give me the strength and the will and the means to carry out this pilgrimage.

*I believe that man cannot be fulfilled without silence and prayer. What is most lacking in our time, in this civilisation is the spirit of prayer. David Maria Turolo (1916-1992)*

We are now into Advent, a time of preparation to celebrate the birth of our saviour; a time to be ready for his coming. Let us pray, but not just with words, let us close our eyes and ears to all the noise and hype that surrounds us and let us sit in silence and listen with our hearts and minds to what Jesus is saying to us. Let us look forward to his first coming and ever ready for his second coming. May he bless us and grant us a happy and joyful Christmas.

**Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to stand with confidence before the Son of Man**