

Post haste

NOTHING is more highly prized by philatelists than printing errors, which tend to increase the value of the stamp involved.

The Catholic Church has, inadvertently, conspired with the Isle of Man Post Office to feed this demand by issuing a new commemorative sheet of stamps marking the visit to Britain of Pope Benedict XVI, wrongly listing its centrepiece – the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman on 19 September – as taking place at Coventry Airport. The error, which features on the body of the sheet, rather than on the stamps themselves, occurred because the series was sent to the printers before the beatification venue was switched to Cofton Park, in Birmingham, last month.

The man who came up with the idea for the stamps, Peter Jennings, press secretary to the Bishop of Birmingham, Bernard Longley, thinks the mistake will add to their “philatelic interest” for collectors across the globe. The Isle of Man Post Office agreed to produce the stamps, which will be released on 11 August to coincide with the 120th anniversary of Cardinal Newman’s death, after the Royal Mail turned down the opportunity when asked by the Church.

Blair can’t wait ...

HE RUFFLED feathers in the Vatican last year when, in an interview with a gay magazine, he suggested the Pope should “rethink” the Church’s position on homosexuality. But Tony Blair is looking forward to Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to Britain.

“It is exciting, I think it’s fantastic he’s coming,” Britain’s most high-profile Catholic convert of recent years told us at an awards ceremony for a film competition for young people, run by his faith foundation, at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts in London’s Piccadilly. Mr Blair did not say whether he would be meeting the Pope, although it is believed that he will be among former prime ministers invited to a private audience in London.

The Faith Shorts 2010 ceremony was compered by TV presenter Adrian Chiles, who like Mr Blair is a convert to the Catholic faith. Among the winners was Esteban Pedraza, 20, a student at the New York University Film School, who showed how Christianity had inspired his mother and best friend to transform their lives. Mr Blair, echoing comments he once made about keeping quiet about his faith for fear of being labelled a “nutter”, applauded the winners, adding: “The truth is that it is very difficult to talk about faith without appearing to preach at people and so on. I get asked, is faith important? Of course it is to a person of faith, but it’s difficult to describe that.”



No food for Mixa

THE 13 elderly nuns at the Franciscan Convent of Maria Stern at Fünfstetten, not far from Augsburg, in southern Bavaria, are not at all thrilled about their new lodger. Bishop Walter Mixa, who earlier this year faced allegations that he had brutally beaten children and misappropriated church funds, is to retire to their convent, where he will rent two sparsely furnished rooms. The bishop stepped down from his post in the Diocese of Augsburg and as German military bishop last April.

“We didn’t invite him but were merely asked to take him in,” Sister Superior Beda Rauch told the German daily *Hamburger Morgenpost*. The decision to take him in had led to quite a discussion among the nuns, Sr Beda said, and the question of where he would take his meals had still not been solved; nor whether Mixa could use the nuns’ kitchen. The nuns would not require his pastoral services, she emphasised.

The two rooms with “just a table and a bed” don’t compare with the luxurious Bishop’s Palace at Augsburg but Bishop Mixa will still be comfortably off. He is to receive a monthly state pension of £6,700 (€8,000) from German taxpayers, according to a spokesman for the Bavarian Ministry of Culture.

Family guy

IN MOST CASES a cardinal who had grandchildren would do all he could to conceal the fact. But there was one English cardinal in the nineteenth century who had no fewer than six grandchildren and delighted in showing them off. According to a new book by Michael Walsh, Cardinal Thomas Weld (1773-1837) was in the habit of driving around the city in his cardinalial carriage accompanied by his grandchildren.

Weld belonged to an ancient Catholic family whose seat was Lulworth Castle in Dorset. He married and had a daughter, Lucy, but when his wife died became a priest.

After he moved to Rome for the sake of Lucy’s health, he was created a cardinal by Pius VIII, possibly as a gesture of thanks to the British Government for Catholic emancipation. Cardinal Weld lived in a *palazzo* with his daughter, her husband and their children. As he was married as well as ordained, he was known as “the cardinal of the seven sacraments”, receiving the last of the seven as he lay dying.

(The Cardinals by Michael Walsh is published by Canterbury Press on 2 September, price £20.)

The big question

BATTLE LINES are being drawn up for a London debate about obligatory priestly celibacy two days before the Pope arrives in Britain in September. Leading the team in favour of it will be the Bishop of Nottingham, Malcolm McMahon. He was once thought to be sympathetic to the ordination of married men but clarified his views in a letter to *The Tablet* in 2008, writing that he was “rather conservative” on the subject. He will be supported by Jack Valero, communications director of Opus Dei and coordinator of Catholic Voices, and Fr Stephen Wang, dean of studies at Allen Hall seminary.

The debate takes place on 14 September at the Odeon, Leicester Square, after a screening of the 2004 film, *Conspiracy of Silence*. The film features the true story of a seminarian torn between his religious vocation and his love for his girlfriend. Those arguing that celibacy should be voluntary include theologian Tina Beattie, human rights lawyer Helena Kennedy and Carmelite priest Fr John McGowan. Special guests include comedian Frank Skinner, a Catholic, who believes priests should remain celibate.

Elles sont magnifiques!

THE OFFER of a major record deal posed a dilemma for a community of Benedictine nuns living in a remote area of France.

“At first we were worried that it would affect our cloistered life, so we asked St Joseph in prayer. Our prayers were answered, and we thought that this album would be a good thing if it touches people’s lives and helps them find peace,” said the Mother Abbess of L’Abbaye de Notre-Dame de l’Annonciation in Le Barroux, near Avignon.

The sisters will record *Voices – Chant from Avignon*, to be released in November by Decca following a worldwide search to find the finest female exponents of Gregorian plainchant. Decca executives have been barred from entering the convent, so the sisters will record their own TV commercial and photograph their own album cover to avoid contact with the outside world.