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THE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC QUARTERLY FOR YOUNG ADULTS

inspire

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Welcome to the second issue of *inspire*

AT OUR first *inspire* webinar in May, we asked our panellists what it means for them to be Catholic. What drew you to faith as an adult? What does it mean to you now? The Benedictine tradition understands conversion as a life-long activity at the heart of the Christian life. Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* spoke about the need for an ecological conversion, and Eleanor Margetts from the journey to 2030 campaign explores how the time of the pandemic has become a catalyst for all of us to take up this challenge. A conversion to Christ always entails learning to see the world and our fellow human beings as Christ sees them.

If you have received *inspire* with *The Tablet*, we invite you to pass it on to a young person. And look out for our new inspire website at inspire.thetablet.co.uk

As ever, we would love to hear from you. Tell us what you think, what you would like to read about in *inspire*.

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Lisa Abbott discusses the life of the icon and the icon-maker animated by faith

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'MARY CAUSE OF OUR JOY', BY LISA ABBOTT

'THERE is a gaze and a heart that penetrates to your very marrow and loves you all the way to your destiny, a gaze and a heart that no one can deflect from His course.' ***Fr Luigi Guissani***

I painted my first icon in a community for recovery from drug addiction. I was not suffering addiction myself but journeying through a dark period in my life, and the community had embraced me as one of their own. I had very little exposure or attraction to icons before this experience of my first painting, and it was quickly swept up in a torrent of other life experiences. Yet two years later, in 2016, I found myself once again facing an obscure crossroads in my life. As the figurative doors closed around me, and in dialogue with a close friend, I discovered a little portal of freedom from which arose the utterly surprising desire to paint icons. Within two months, I had moved to England to study with liturgical artist Aidan Hart, as a diploma student for the Prince's School of Traditional Arts.

Painting icons has not been so much a choice of mine, as a small light gifted to me in times of darkness, the direction of which I have followed step after step and that now weaves together many experiences and desires of my heart. Aidan often said to us: 'Love your materials, love your subject matter, and love the people you are painting for.' What are my materials? I paint using earth pigments, an egg yolk mixture and natural-haired brushes. My canvas is a wooden panel whose surface is made of many layers of gesso, water and rabbit skin glue, dried and sanded smooth. I may use gold leaf laid on a fine film of clay and burnished bright. My materials are simple, natural and beautiful. The process of painting is like any other artistic work: messy, utterly absorbing, fraught with problem-solving, agonising lows and thrilling highs, each new layer of pigment both a death and a resurrection.

What is my subject matter? Ultimately, my subject matter is the Incarnation of Christ, His gaze of love and our destiny of eternal life. In design and making, I strive to be relevant to time and culture, while also studious of, and obedient to the tradition and history of liturgical art. The secular artists in my studio ask if I cannot be 'freer' to express myself in my painting: my freedom is in obedience and in 'essentiality' (the paring down of things to reveal their essence). My subject matter is my faith, the personal prayer life that I live in the heart of the Church, nourished by the Word and the Sacraments. My life has long been animated by cherished relationships with the saints; the stories of saints and a living relationship with them became the food of my early independent and vivid prayer life. The icon offers that space of dialogue, where their lives are told and relationships are forged.

Who are the people I paint for, who commissions icons? I didn't realise when I began what a gift it would be to enter into prayer with the icon for the one who has commissioned it. The commissions I have been blessed with have all been for personal devotion: an unemployed teacher saving up just enough to commission an icon for his classroom in thanksgiving for his new job, a woman struggling to relate to the Virgin Mary in her prayer life commissions an icon of the Mother of God; a grieving son commissions an icon in memory of his beloved mother suddenly lost to him as he journeys towards the priesthood; a single mother struggling with bills and raising her child, commissions Our Lady of Joy; a priest asks for an image of Our Lady carrying a stole in memory of the moment of his ordination. I seek to tread lightly and humbly in this sacred space, as I am caught between the gaze of Heaven and the gaze of the human heart.

Lisa Abbott is a graduate of the Camberwell College of Fine Art and studied icon painting at the Prince's School of Traditional Art. She now works full time as an artist and iconographer based in Shrewsbury. www.lisasacredicons.com

Madoc Cairns considers the future of the Catholic Church through the lens of futuristic literature

What does the future of the Church look like? The answer might be 'cyberpunk Maoism'…

CLIMATE change, economic chaos, corruption in high places. And then the fiction starts. Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* is a classic of cyberpunk, a far-fetched near-future science fantasy. But the novel's grimly realist resonances reverberate underneath us.

In Stephenson's future, the centralised, monolithic, broadly peaceful human societies of our epoch are dead: what remains are fragments; shards of once-greater wholes. They're called 'phyles'; a deliberate archaism on Stephenson's part. The ancient Greek word for 'tribe' shares a common root with *philia*, love: and *The Diamond Age's* phyles are united by the loves they share. There are phyles for race, class, gender, religion: there's a neo-Victorian merchant phyle. There's even – yes – a cyberpunk Maoist microculture. With guns.

It sounds like chaos. For chunks of *The Diamond Age,* it looks like it too. But the phyles don't play the role you expect: object lessons in the failure of the societies they inhabit. Our expectations are subverted – the phyles are demonstrations of their societies' success. The corporate overlords of *The Diamond Age* were giving their underlings exactly what they want: belonging within limits, community without communion. Love to keep them satisfied – and hate to keep them separate.

Apocalypse is boring. What happens when the world ends – when you lose a common culture – would have been an easy, generic premise for Stephenson's book. He chose to ask a far more interesting question: what happens when your world ends, but you don't?

It's the same question Matthew Arnold asked in his masterpiece, *On Dover Beach,* mourning the 'melancholy long withdrawing roar' of the once world-girdling 'sea of faith'. 200 years later, the sea of faith is now something closer to a puddle: Christianity, once the foundation of British society, occupies somewhere near the same level of public recognition as the Marvel cinematic universe.

We could expose bishops to radiation in the hope they become as talented or as popular as Spiderman (and I'm sure many in the Church would welcome the attempt). But in the quotidian world most Christians inhabit, the decline of the faith is a tricky, intractable reality. Most years, in most parishes, the pews get emptier no matter what we do.

Due to a parallel explosion of religious illiteracy, most seculars struggle to understand what Christians are on about when we talk about the resurrection, let alone the trinitarian ontology of being. Disputes within the Church about whether to go with the flow or swim against the current are often complicated ways of avoiding an unpleasant truth: the river doesn't care.

So much the worse for the river, some bold souls respond. Quibbles and qualms notwithstanding, I'm with them. But formulations of the Church as 'counterculture' strike me as relics; yesterday's solutions to today's problems. They share an assumption of a common enemy, or at least a common battlefield: a shared cultural and political landscape to contest. What if none of that exists?

Richard Hoggart, cultural theorist, literary critic, and socialist, surprised many of his atheist friends by mourning, in his last published book, the passing of serious religious commitment from Britain. *The Way We Live Now* is a strange, melancholic book: Hoggart is looking back at a lifetime of critique and concluding it had roughly the same impact as King Cnut's contretemps with the Atlantic Ocean.

His books had followed the pattern of a minority of post-war thinkers who saw consumer culture as entrapment, not liberation. Hoggart charted the entry of 'popular culture' into working class homes. He discovered that, even in the mild forms of radio and pulp literature, it annihilated older, organic cultures of literacy. A disaster was in progress. A disaster so pervasive that a common culture wasn't just degraded. It was, Hoggart argued, destroyed. 'Hedonistic but passive barbarians' levelled the citadels of working-class culture; raising in their stead the 'slick and hollow puppet-world' of consumerism.

Here's where the cyberpunk Maoists come in. One possible outcome for the future is something like *The Diamond Age's* phyles. Mix polarisation with consumer culture, weak social bonds with a hunger for roots, and you get – well, a world hospitable to Christianity, at least in certain ways.

Christianity can provide a strong sense of identity, a clear system of ethics, an explicit Us, and an implicit Them. In an increasingly lonely world, those attributes are attractive ones. One problem, however: those qualities don't constitute Christianity. They aren't even unique to it. So a bunker Church – a Church of cyberpunk maoist *manqués* – could revive Christianity. But only to the level, and on the model, of a whole array of secular sects: subcultures that substitute for the real thing.

Hoggart suggested salvation might be found in an unlikely part of our culture: the outside. In a mischievous volte-face, the staid, besuited Hoggart broke from fulminating against the 'corrupt brightness' and 'spiritual dry-rot' of cinema and detective stories – to put in a word for the beatniks. Drunks, dropouts, dopefiends: these they were. But they 'resist the worst drugs,' said Hoggart. 'They stand for something.'

Should we all smoke ganja now, Father? Not quite, but Hoggart was on to something, I think, if not about a demographic, then an attitude. The future of the Church in an era of subcultures might be to reject the status of subculture entirely; to glimpse, across the particular rooftops of our present age, the high, bright spires of the republic of the world.

Building a universal culture in a particular age is a daunting prospect. The work itself would be slow, more akin to creating a language than winning a war. Avoiding unnecessary conflict and premature peacemaking, speaking to consumer culture without capitulating to it, all these would make the process a slow and seemingly fruitless one. In the eyes of the world, it would look like a failure. But not in the eyes of God.

Madoc Cairns is a former Newman intern at The Tablet, a postgraduate student based in Oxford, and a journalist with bylines in The Tablet, Tribune Magazine and CathNews.

Fergus Butler-Gallie suggests that humour is serious business for the Church

Divine comedy

WHERE have all the jokers gone? Christianity used to be full of them. Now, I don't mean parish priests making ill-advised gags at the start of homilies, nor do I mean crackers of insider, churchy jokes, with punchlines only coherent to an elect. I mean those figures – clergy and laity – whose senses of humour arose specifically from their faith. From Dr Johnson to G. K. Chesterton, St Basil the Holy Fool to Sydney Smith – they transcended eras and denominations. They were the funniest figures of their generations, their jokes still known and repeated today: yet all of their humour had Christianity at its core.

You might have thought that the changes wrought across global Christianity over the previous half-century or so would be conducive to the raising up of jokers. Surely our departure from a world of clerical thought police, enforcing a pantomime conservatism, would be a good thing for jokers of all faiths? Yet Rabelais, a monk, wrote under the threat of the Inquisition, Dr Swift, a dean, wrote whilst in religio-political exile and both of them wrote better (and more theologically informed) jokes than anyone knocking about today. In fact, in my anecdotal experience, it is liberal Christians (of all denominations) who today seem most likely to chastise those who would make light of the human condition – perhaps because they buy, ironically, into a Hobbesian view of humour: that it must arise from a feeling of superiority over another, and so is therefore necessarily unchristian. Perhaps it is because they are now in positions of power across many Churches, where jokes are more dangerous than on the edges.

The reality is, of course, that Christianity has long understood a part of the beatific vision to entail exactly that – from Dives and Lazarus in Luke 16 to Aquinas's assertation that the saints look upon the condemned 'so that their beautitude may be more pleasing to them'. Yet I would suggest that this – so distasteful to modern sensibilities – comes not from an outmoded theology of superiority but from a supremely relevant, although also deep and ancient, anthropology of folly. We know that this world can be preposterous and monstrous in equal measure and that this is in stark contrast to the world as envisioned by the Kingdom of God – so why not say so? Put another way, the Church has a crucial ministry in pointing out the ridiculousness of a world that increasingly views the here and now as the be all and end all. Humour, I would suggest, has long proved to be a more effective weapon in the arsenal of that ministry than pious pomposity.

I think – I hope – that there is a distinctly Christian sense of humour that avoids the potential hubris of the elect chuckling at the expense of the damned. To acknowledge the folly and ridiculousness of the human condition on account of its humanity is both levelling – for the potentate or president or pope is just as much as an erring and straying lost sheep as the pimp or prostitute or peasant – and also the first step towards reconciliation. It's also the root of much humour – from Dr Swift to Basil Fawlty. If we insist on taking ourselves or our human nature seriously, we are less likely to see that we are fallible and our nature is fallen. We are, in turn, then less likely to seek conciliation with Christ. In short, laughter and liberation – true liberation, to quote Aquinas again, 'endless length of days … in our true native land' – start from the same source. If Christianity wants to rediscover its rich sense of humour again, then I can think of worse places to start.

Fergus Butler-Gallie is an Anglican clergyman who has served in London and Liverpool and is the author of 'A Field Guide to the English Clergy' and 'Priests de la Resistance! The Loose Canons who Fought Fascism in the Twentieth Century'.

REJOICE: Youth 2000 plans four days of faith, fellowship and fun for young people

YOUTH 2000, an international spiritual initiative, exists to draw young people into a real and lasting relationship with Jesus, present in the Blessed Sacrament. Established 30 years ago by Ernest Williams, Youth 2000 has since hosted hundreds of retreats and festivals, reached over 30,000 young people, and impacted the vocations of countless people across the UK.

As with many other festivals, Covid-19 disrupted Youth 2000's plan for events, however, it also offered an opportunity to innovate and trial online mission. Since April 2020, Youth 2000 have hosted three online retreats, three mission schools and four online Alpha courses along with so much more! This online mission has reached over 2,000 people from across the UK and highlighted new ways of evangelising and building Catholic community in the twenty-first century.

Exploring opportunities for online mission also offered a solution to one of the biggest questions faced by Youth 2000: how can Youth 2000 offer support to young people between events? This has resulted in a significant change to Youth 2000's ministry moving forward: a two-fold ministry of both in-person events, where young people are invited to meet other young Catholics from across the country and deepen their relationship with Jesus, and online ministry to offer continual community for these in-between times.

This summer, Youth 2000 is excited to be recommencing in-person events. The first event, REJOICE, will be held at Ampleforth College over the August Bank Holiday weekend (27–30 August 2021). REJOICE is open to anyone aged between 16–35 years (and for those young at heart). Youth 2000 national director Annabel Ward says: 'We are so excited to welcome you back to Youth 2000 with our first in-person event since February 2020. Let's celebrate the Bank Holiday weekend with faith, fun and friendship!' REJOICE will mark the beginning of this new two-fold ministry and will be an exciting time for young people in the Church to gather together once again after an 18-month hiatus.

For more information, see www.youth2000.org/rejoice/rejoice.

Eleanor Margetts writes that now is the time to hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor

What better time for reflection than lockdown?

CAN YOU remember life before lockdown?

We could easily see the last year of pandemic-related restrictions as a wasted one, where we were forced to sit at home and wait it out until life returns to 'normal'. Have you thought about what 'normal' was like before Covid-19? But what have we learnt during this time?

Pope Francis reminds us that the pandemic has 'has made visible the throwaway culture' (*Let us Dream*, p. 17) in which our people and planet have been suffering long before the virus. Greed and indifference had made global injustices 'normal', often supported by our everyday actions and choices.

Right now, we are at a turning point where we can decide now whether we are going to invest in a better future or to sink back into our old ways of being. All of this, in the context of the G7 and UN Climate Talks being held in the UK this year, presents an opportunity for us to truly listen to the cries of the earth and the poor, and to build a better world.

We can do this in multiple ways – campaigning to influence our politicians, working with our communities and parishes to start local initiatives, and in changing our own behaviours to better align ourselves with our values. Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* calls for an ecological conversion at all levels of society whereby the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ are reflected in our relationships with the world and her people; to live with integrity in a way that acknowledges that all people are linked by an integral ecology, which in turn requires us to act and make decisions to protect our global family.

We are aware, now more than ever, of the interconnectedness of our global family. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a visible example of the positives and negatives of this, both in the way it indiscriminately spread throughout the world, and in the way it opened our eyes to our local communities and invited us to help and support each other in new ways. We cannot forget this and must not return to the 'old normal' of indifference.

We are all invited to undertake an ecological conversion, and what better time to embark on that journey than now? We must all reflect on what has been most important to us over the last year, and what that might mean for the way we choose to live our lives going forward.

There are plenty of examples out there of personal lifestyle choices you can make to help you on this journey. The pandemic has shown us an alternative way of living. Take, for example, flying – one long-haul flight produces twice as much emissions as a family car does in one year (Lund University 2017). If you've managed to go a whole year without flying, why not see how much longer you can go? Or fast-fashion – 70 million barrels of oil are used each year to make the world's polyester fibre (Forbes 2015). Do we really need new clothes every season?

Other things to consider include supporting small businesses recovering from the pandemic. Buying from small, sustainable businesses not only reduces the risk of funding unethical corporate giants, but also is a way to buy more eco-friendly products.

And last but not least, could you spend more time appreciating nature? How many of us have taken the time to complete our daily walks? What did you discover? Many people during this time have taken up gardening, bird watching, forest bathing and all sorts. Keep on loving nature – just because we are no longer in lockdown, doesn't mean we have to stop appreciating the little things around us.

In the words of Pope Francis: 'One of my hopes for this crisis we are living is that we come back into contact with reality. We need to move from the virtual to the real, from the abstract to the concrete, from the adjective to the noun. There are so many real, "flesh-and-blood" brothers and sisters, people with names and faces, deprived in ways that we have not been able to see, listen to, or recognize because we have been so focused on ourselves. But now some of these blindfolds have fallen away, and we have a chance to see with new eyes.'

Eleanor Margetts writes for The Journey to 2030 campaign, a movement working to mobilise the Catholic Church into action for our global ecological and social crises. Visit www.journeyto2030.org.

Reviews

A gentleman thief returns to Netflix

Season 2 of *Lupin*, the latest TV adaptation of the French novellas written by Maurice Leblanc detailing the escapades of gentleman thief Arsène Lupin, has recently started streaming on Netflix. For those who missed the first series, it's a powerful mixture of light-hearted con-artistry and tense, darkly sketched drama. The modern Lupin (played by internationally successful French film star Omar Sy) is black, a father, divorced and has a lot of revenge to take out on French society. But far from a predictable caricature of a troubled hero, Lupin is a cool, charming, relaxed protagonist, whose hidden anger is gradually unsheathed over the course of the series.

In terms of structure, the series manages to cover everything from the day-to-day life of Lupin, his gradually unfurling backstory and a huge network of corruption amongst the French elites, all whilst delivering a highly satisfying episodic structure of brilliantly executed cons. The programme has something of *The Count of Monte Cristo* about it, with our criminal hero seeking revenge for his dead father and his own blighted life, bringing down leading lights of Parisian society in the process. The second series ratchets up the intensity, with the quest for revenge driving Lupin further down a difficult and ethically hazardous road.

What sets *Lupin* apart from other 'anti-hero' TV shows is its sense of charm, high stakes and moral centre. No character is ever treated as disposable, and the sense of danger both physical and moral is ever-present. It's rare for a Netflix drama, let alone one about a con-artist, to achieve moral seriousness, but *Lupin* manages it.

Lupin is now streaming on Netflix.

Fortress Romance

Bernardo Bellotto. More amateurish art appreciators may be asking ourselves: who? But the eighteenth-century Italian urban landscape painter, who was both student and nephew of the better-known Canaletto, is becoming a lot more familiar to the public thanks to an extraordinary new exhibition at the National Gallery. It consists of five of his paintings, all of the same location – Königstein Fortress in Saxony – each from different angles and approaches. Five paintings may not seem like much to get

excited about, but this exhibition provides a fascinating window into an underexplored artist, and an important moment of transition in the history of art.

Bellotto's origins in Venice and the studio of his uncle Canaletto are clear in that use of light, but what sets him apart is his move north to Germany, Austria and Poland, where under a variety of patrons he applied his Venetian instincts to northern subject matter. The blend of northern and southern sensibilities gives air and light to dramatic, sometimes gothic scenes of the vast, heavily modernised hilltop fortress. In one painting the cool geometry of one the fortress's buildings terminates in a mushroom-like mass of gloom of a roof, peppered with shadowed windows.

The muted sense of menace and awe of the genteel figures parading round the terrible mass of the fortress, always at risk of being absorbed by the naked rock beneath, seems to anticipate Romanticism and its love of the sublime and the Gothic. In Bernardo Bellotto we discover not just a brilliant artist, but a vital geographical and historic confluence, a living channel of culture.

The exhibit runs till the 31 October 2021 and entry is free. Details can be found at www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/bellotto-the-koenigstein-views-reunited

Events

The Proms are back in town

Glastonbury may be cancelled, but tickets for the Proms are going on sale from the 23 July 2021, and the concerts will be going ahead without social distancing; however, proof of double-vaccination will be required. Whether you're enjoying the Proms from the Royal Albert Hall or your sofa, it's an especially rich banquet this year, but take especial note of the First Night of the Proms on the 30 July, which features a world premiere from Catholic composer Sir James MacMillan.
Go to www.bbc.co.uk/events/ rcc6v2 to see times and book tickets.

Holy Ground: Art, Faith and the Natural Environment

For those looking to avoid the crowds don't overlook Art and Christianity's three-day conference and retreat at Berwick Church in Sussex from the 17–19 September 2021. The event is celebrating the restoration of murals painted by the Bloomsbury artists. It features talks by experts and newly commissioned artists and ends with a collective hike along the Cuckmere Pilgrims Path on Sunday. It's a great chance to mix with artists and those engaged with religious art in a beautiful corner of the English countryside.
Tickets and information can be found at www.artandchristianity.org/upcoming-events/holy-ground-art-faith-and-the-natural-environment.

Young Christians Relay to COP26

And for those who really want to stretch their legs (and save the planet), the Young Christian Climate Network (YCCN) is staging a 1,000-mile relay walk from Cornwall to Glasgow, where the COP26 – the United Nations Climate Change Conference – is being held this year. Don't worry though, the walk is a relay and is being broken up into stages, and walkers are free to do as much or as little of the walk as they feel able. The relay started in June, but will be continuing until the 31 October, the day before COP26 begins. The YCCN is looking for both walkers and volunteers to help out in the coming months, and details of how to get involved can be found at www.yccn.uk.