

# THE SYNODAL TIMES



“Synodality is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium” – Pope Francis

## INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT OF THE UISG, IRISH SISTER MARY T BARRON

HOW SYNODALITY IS A RENEWED CALL TO HOPE

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## DEATH IN VENICE

PENELOPE MIDDELBOE HAS AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER WITH THE MAGIC OF VENICE AND CHRIST'S VIOLENT DEATH

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## Church in Ireland calls on Church organisations to assist faith development

The Irish Synodal Pathway Steering Committee has urged Church organisations to become involved in the faith development of Catholics and explore what they might have to offer in terms of training and skills development in the future.

The call forms part of the recommendations submitted by the Steering Committee in its latest report ‘What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time?’. The report acknowledges that there is a “growing appetite for faith development that has been emerging from the synodal process” and recommends that the Church maximise the use of its services in order to cater to this demand – thereby relieving some of the strain on the parish system.

Other recommendations included in the report cen-

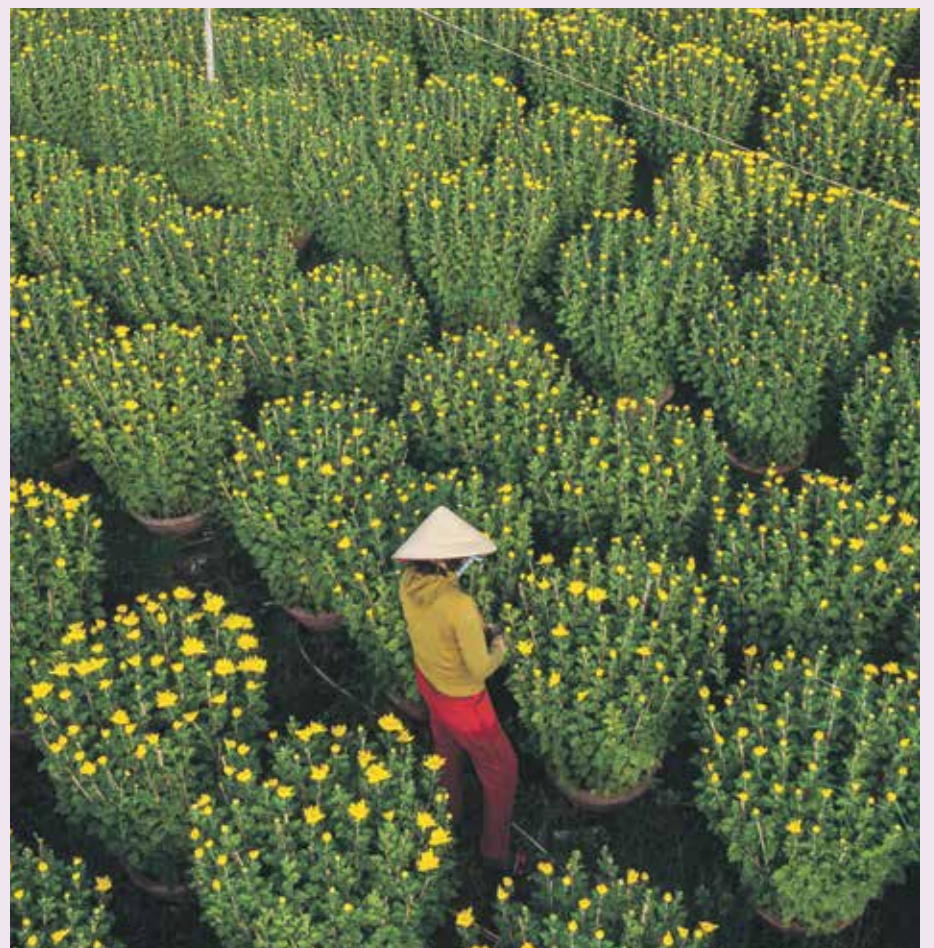
tered on the development of a pilot programme to be promoted at local level to current and emerging local leaders, greater clergy-specific elements to the training undertaken by clergy and laypeople, a focus on the welfare of priests, creating a series of national assemblies extending beyond the initial 2021-2026 timeframe of the synodal pathway, a three year multi-disciplinary process to be held that will continue to be predominantly volunteer-led at national level and to further the work being done by parish and diocesan pastorals councils nationwide by establishing leadership teams at diocesan level.

Co-chairs of the Synodal Pathway Steering Committee Dr Nicola Brady and Fr Declan Hurley highlighted that the research undertaken with the local leaders “dem-

onstrates clearly that for those in local leadership the spirituality of the process is central. There is a diversity of views among them about what the future of the Church will look like, but a shared sense that the experience of synodality is helping to shape our thinking and planning for that future in a positive way”.

Recognising that the totality of the work has yet to be completed, the two chairs stressed that “many more people are still to be reached” and that in spite of the “many challenges before us, the engagement with the process to date affirms that for many people in Ireland today, faith and experience of being part of a worshipping community are important and much-valued parts of their lives”.

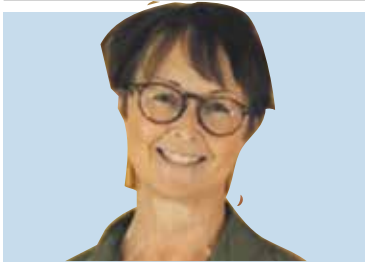
## Asia prepares for Year of the Dragon



A Vietnamese flower farmer with traditional Têt chrysanthemums used to celebrate the Lunar New Year

NEXT WEEK: INTERVIEW WITH THE ARCHBISHOP OF LAGOS, NIGERIA ON THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

# Death in Venice



Penelope Middelboe

**Y**ou have to keep inside the dolphins in the Venetian lagoon. These tall groupings of two or three wooden pillars, set a short distance apart, mark the outer edge of deeper water. The locals call them *bricola*. There are apparently 90,000 of them creating sea-lanes like railway tracks to steer clear of the oncoming marine traffic and the wintry mud flats and tidal shallows. Our *Alilaguna* boat sped ever closer to the tiny island of Venice silhouetted against a setting sun. *La Serenissima*, my husband said, pointing. Its old name. The Most Serene Republic of Venice. An appropriate destination for recharging our spiritual batteries.

We arrived on Friday afternoon, and on Sunday morning went to Mass in nearby San Salvador, the Church of the Holy Saviour, on the main shopping street in San Marco. It's a grand 'large hall church', begun in 1508 and formed from three Greek crosses placed end to end. Each has a dome with a lantern. There's a Titian on the south wall, and another on the altarpiece although we didn't notice them. There were fewer than 20 of us, which might have been nice had the priest held an informal Mass and gathered us around. It would have suited the handful of excited Italian children on their best Sunday behaviour, allowed unaccompanied in the front pew. We couldn't have been more disappointed. Nor could they. The church dwarfed the three-man choir made up of the organist, a seminarian altar server and one other man obscured by the pillars. The liturgy (which we tried to follow in English on our app) dragged on interminably, wordy and lifeless. The first child to admit defeat scurried back a few rows to sit on her father's knee. This set off a chain reaction, leaving a deeply symbolic abandoned front row. This wasn't *La Serenissima*. It was more like *Somniferum* (excuse the Latin).

## Aperitivo

Emerging into sunshine, over a lunchtime *aperitivo*, we filled our own little echo chamber, telling each other the plainly obvious - that Jesus will not have recognised a single thing in that Mass. If only 19% of Italians go to Church regularly then we're not alone. There are apparently 87 Catholic churches in the 2.9 square miles (7.5 square kms) of Venice, most of them

**“Sit on the front pew and you can almost feel as if you're lying collapsed in horror, like Mary his mother, amongst the rocks and weeds of the wasteland of Golgotha”**



vast, dark, cold, decked with priceless treasures, all of them built before 1738. There used to be 107 but some have been deconsecrated. Our morning experience made us wonder how many more will soon follow.

At a Venetian friend's advice we had booked tickets to an art installation curated by a Spaniard, Alvaro Blanco, based on his 15 years study of the Turin Shroud. It was a couple of hours away by boat, bus, ferry, and another boat, on the seaside island of Chioggia, which is also criss-crossed by canals. The exhibition was so popular we'd been advised to book weeks before to secure a slot. An indication perhaps of how the search for spiritual enlightenment is moving away from church buildings? In the modest harbour filled with fishing boats - not a gondola in sight - we crossed to a tiny island and the church of San Domenico which was hosting *The Mystery Man* exhibition.

**“Surely Pilate, fearful of crucifying Jesus, was hoping he'd done enough to satisfy the crowd, when he said 'Behold the man!'”**

Now it's some time since either of us had given much thought to the mystery of the Shroud. Nobody has been able to prove how the negative

image of the front and back of a man with possible thorn marks on the head, cuts on the back and bruises on the shoulder came to be imprinted on a piece of linen 14 foot long without the use of pigment. The mind-bending thought that a radioactive photographic impression of Jesus was somehow created at the moment of the Resurrection was sadly quashed when carbon dating carried out in 1988 estimated the Shroud at only 700 years old. The Catholic Church has never claimed it as a holy relic.

Nonetheless it's priceless. It's kept in a special vault in Turin Cathedral and, to protect it from ultraviolet damage, is only exhibited a couple of times a century. The next time the Turin Shroud will be exhibited will be 2025. I'll never see it. So we were up for an artistic experience, combining forensic research with cutting edge *son et lumiere*. We were not prepared for its profound effect. Besides, we might easily have missed the item that most affected us, as we jostled with other visitors. It was a small Roman whip, with three or four short thongs at the ends of which had been embedded sharp pieces of sheep's bone, metal balls and nails. Officially called the *flagrum* or *flagellum*, it gives us the English word 'fillet' - since this is what it was designed to do to the body.

## Scourged

It had us pondering deeply on the statement "then Pilate took Jesus and scourged him" John 19:1 (also Mark 15:15, Matthew 27:26). Flogging was standard practice before a crucifixion. The prisoner was tied naked to a pillar, or between two, and two soldiers systematically whipped the body up and down. Greek Palestinian historian Eusebius of Caesarea (300 AD) recounts a scourging so

brutal that "the hidden inward parts of the body... were exposed to view." Surely Pilate, fearful of crucifying Jesus, was hoping he'd done enough to satisfy the crowd, when he said "Behold the man!"

**“Jesus has never been depicted like this. And yet every single wound on the sculpture corresponds accurately to a mark of blood on the Shroud.”**

In the final room you come face to face, on the altar, with a man. Not *that* man, they carefully say. But the man who left his mark on the Turin Shroud. The hyper-realistic sculpture is about 1.78 meters tall (5ft 8inches) and weighs 75 kg. He's naked and lies on his back in a slightly concave position caused by *rigor mortis* - head looking towards his raised knees. His head hair is tied back in a ponytail. There are huge holes in his feet and wrists. His shoulder is dislocated, his nose deviated by blows to the face and head. Most of all you're struck by the way his entire body is covered with the marks of the flagellum. Jesus has never been depicted like this. And yet every single wound on the sculpture corresponds accurately to a mark of blood on the Shroud.

Back in Venice we felt obliged to seek out a Renaissance painting of the Flagellation. We ended up west of the Rialto bridge, at San Cassiano. John Ruskin described "*The Crucifixion of Christ*" by Venetian born Tintoretto as 'the finest [example of a Crucifixion painting] in Europe.' Sit on the front pew and you can almost feel as if you're lying collapsed in horror, like Mary his mother, amongst the

rocks and weeds of the wasteland of Golgotha. We'd gone to examine the painter's knowledge of the effects of the flagrum. Instead we lay at the foot of the cross and contemplated Christ's suffering and his humanity. Nailed to a simple piece of wood.

I was reminded of Tintoretto's extraordinary painting on our way home, as the *Alilaguna* boat emerged from the Grand Canal and slowed to enter the channel taking us out towards the airport. As we passed within inches of the first of the wooden navigation *bricola* I remembered Tintoretto's Roman soldier, leaning his long ladder on Jesus's cross and attempting to fix the I.N.R.I sign above his head. Flanked by the posts of the two thieves, the artist had created a four-posted *bricola*.

## Bricola

Gaining speed now between the numerous *bricola* guiding us across the lagoon, I found the painful image of the hyper-realistic, tortured man at Chioggia combining with these timeless wooden structures flying past. We'd been told that 'without wood Venice would not exist'. We now knew that as well as supporting marine navigation, millions of wooden posts - like the cross on which Jesus died - support the very structure of the buildings. Whether oak, alder or conifer wood, these timber pilings have petrified throughout the centuries and replaced the natural bedrock missing in the soft Venetian marshland. The Venetian waterways and beautiful buildings had suddenly become a symbol. They revealed to us how Jesus's death on a wooden post both supported and, like the *bricola*, guided each one of us.

*La Serenissima* had worked her magic.