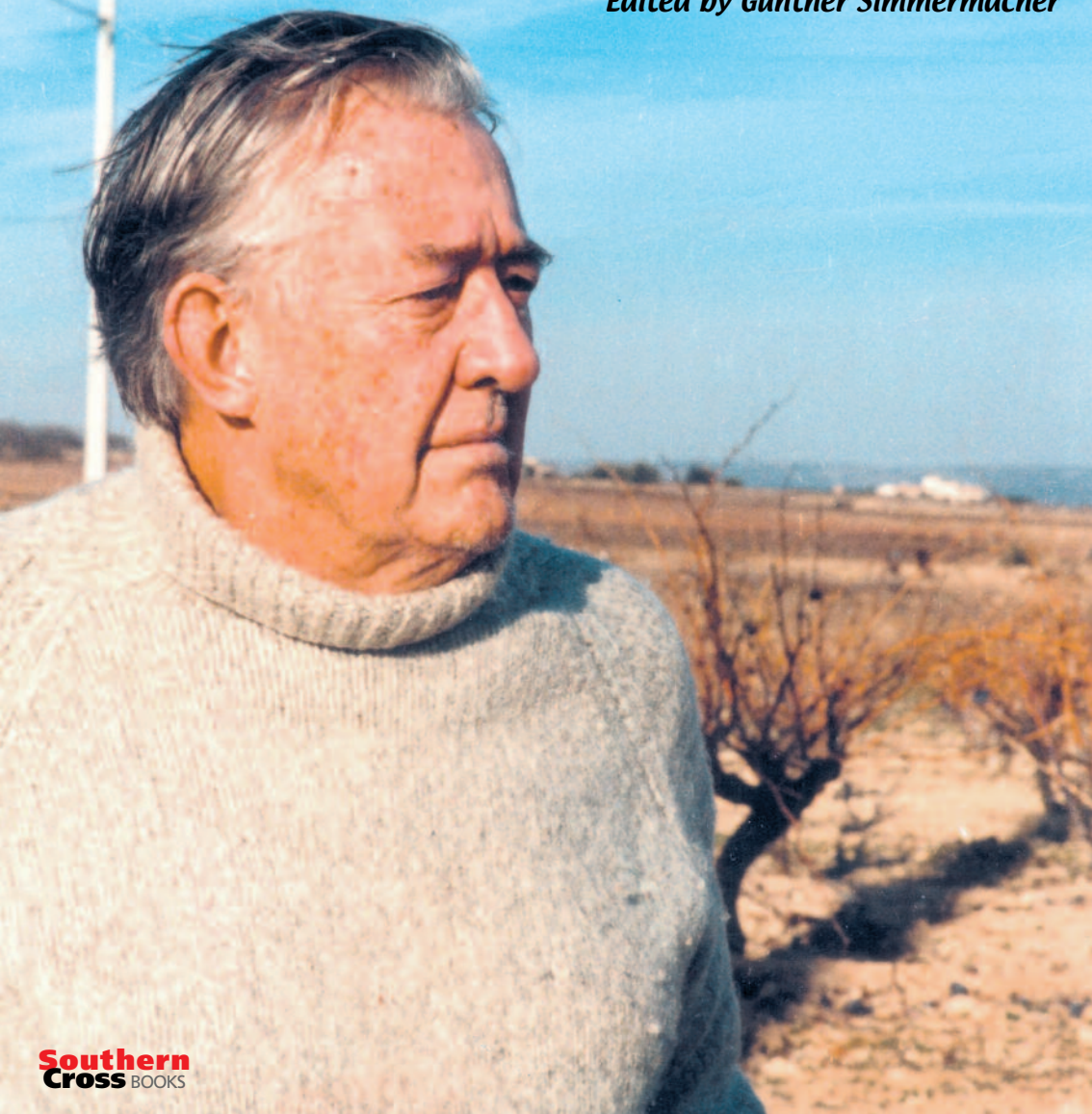


Owen Williams

Any Given Sunday

— An Anthology —

Edited by Günther Simmermacher



**Southern
Cross** BOOKS

OWEN WILLIAMS
ANY GIVEN SUNDAY – AN ANTHOLOGY

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Foreword.....	5
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SNAPSHOTS

1,000 columns and counting.....	9
I laugh in the morning.....	11
The Rabbi Jesus editorials.....	13
'Calvary incident' vexed <i>Times</i>	17
Nuns smashed school apartheid.....	19
I nearly made cricket history.....	21
The Church and the Nazis.....	23
Bing repels mall yobbos.....	25
It is rude to hoot.....	27
An operatic monument.....	29
Endangered philosophy.....	31
We should be dead right.....	33
Les misérables were outside.....	35
Charity for muggers.....	37
Instead of Mandela, hate.....	39
Fined for being cruel to a tree.....	41
Fly the flags for a great newspaper.....	43
A new millennium dawns.....	45

VILLEVEYRAC

My village is now world class.....	49
The Villeveyrac Affair.....	51
A party in the street, just for fun.....	53
We get a new priest.....	55
An unlikely story, but all true.....	57
A festival for the Virgin Mary.....	59
Monsieur François is dead.....	61
Our policeman is a millionaire.....	63

LIFE IN FRANCE (Part I)

Owen Williams, writing from France..	67
The cartoon guy exists.....	69
Je suis 'Monsieur le Springbok'	71
In adversity, launch <i>le système D</i>	73
Where the vine grows.....	75
Carnival in France.....	77
No question of race.....	79
The racist hijacking of God.....	81
Honesty saved two days.....	83
Confessions of a shoplifter.....	85
A story from the land of stories.....	87

AT THE MOVIES (Part I)

Stool-pigeon propaganda.....	91
In defence of a controversial film.....	93
Critics rave about a religious film.	95
Last Temptation fails to tempt.....	97
Angels over Hollywood.....	99
Depardieu, a powerful priest.....	101
Dracula through the ages.....	103
Dead Man Walking.....	105
Elizabeth, a distorted history.....	107
The Lord of the Rings on screen.....	109
And now to Harry Potter.....	111

PEOPLE (Part I)

JP2 is indeed da man.....	115
Dislodging Marmaduke.....	117
The atheist who met God.....	119
Vagabond in Zimbabwe.....	121
Archbishop Mohamed is dead.....	123
A hero's heartbreak.....	125

GOING PLACES (in Europe)

The church off Red Square.....	129
Tuscany: Bathroom with a view.....	131
Enchanting Prague.....	133
Vienna: Place of music.....	135

DOGS

Blanche, mon Booldog.....	139
A canine mystery.....	141
Goodbye to two saintly dogs.....	143
Of humbled dogs and cats.....	145

BEING CATHOLIC (Part I)

Surprising stranger on the train.....	149
Flowers in unlikely fields.....	151
A saintly killer.....	153
The blessing of the cars.....	155
Ten Commandments updated.....	157
A synchronicity of angels.....	159
Nuns' part in Springbok glory.....	161
What did Jesus look like?.....	163

continued overleaf

CHRISTMAS

The three wise tycoons.....	167
A French Christmas carol.....	169
Too old to be Santa Claus?.....	171
A seasonal end to hostage drama.....	173
A real Christmas miracle.....	175
Boy to Santa: 'You're drunk'.....	177

PEOPLE (Part II)

Whatever became of them?.....	181
An vagrant for God.....	183
The Jewish cardinal.....	185
Priest of the world's largest parish.....	187
Age is nothing but a number.....	189
The pope's a nice chap, y'know.....	191

HUMOUR

In search for Catholic humour.....	195
More on Catholic humour.....	197
And then there was the one about.....	199
One more for the road.....	201
Popes: a bundle of laughs.....	203

AT THE MOVIES (Part II)

Hitchcock's revenge.....	207
A forgotten masterpiece.....	209
Gary Cooper, a nice guy.....	211
A tribute to Alec Guinness.....	213
War on celluloid.....	215
Put a halo on these movies.....	217
Make 'em laugh: Best of comedy.....	219
Hollywood goes West.....	221
Even educated fleas do it.....	223

BEING CATHOLIC (Part II)

Story of an African princess.....	227
Respect: Pick a nun up with a spade..	229
It's a miracle.....	231
A miracle amid utter horror.....	233
Love beyond the grave.....	235
Priests and Celibacy.....	237
The Catholic press in France.....	239
Mystery of the spiral staircase.....	241

GOING PLACES (in France)

St Germain, Paris.....	245
Marseille's main drag.....	247
La Camargue's wild horses.....	249
Albi: Glory, harmony and heresy.....	251
Intense in Lourdes.....	253
Notre Dame, Paris.....	257

THE WRITERS (Part I)

Jesuitically Sherlock.....	261
The spirituality of TS Eliot.....	263
The pain of Virginia Woolf.....	265
Fellow-feeling for Márquez.....	267
What if Jesus met a scientist?.....	269
King writes royal junk, for once.....	271
Future pope bailed out Greene.....	273
Will catcher in the rye grow old?.....	275

LIFE IN FRANCE (Part II)

Where food is religion.....	279
Priest, mayor and volunteer.....	281
A steel town with heart.....	283
A time to party.....	285
Sound the trumpets.....	287
Scenes from a French restaurant.....	289
The man in red.....	291
A happy school.....	293
Return to a drowned village.....	295
Hairy, scary angels.....	297
Au revoir France; hello SA.....	299

THE WRITERS (Part II)

A world of man before the fall.....	303
Scruffy poet's good deed.....	305
Sin in good literature.....	307
Smiling pope's famous letters.....	309

THE INTERVIEW

This is Owen Williams.....	314
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Foreword

Some time ago, the *Cape Times*, the English-language morning newspaper in Cape Town, carried a retrospective article on its 125-year history written by its former editor, Tony Heard. He wrote: “There were famous men and women, sometimes with their genius not fully appreciated by the *Cape Times*. One [was] Owen Williams, whose [film] criticisms blossomed later at the *Argus*,” referring to Cape Town’s evening newspaper.

Just how he blossomed was borne out in a conversation I once had with a stalwart representative of the film distributing company Ster Kinekor, a mastermind of movie minutiae. Apropos something or other, I mentioned that Owen Williams wrote a column for *The Southern Cross*, South Africa’s national Catholic weekly of which I was then managing editor. “*The Owen Williams?*” exclaimed my interlocutor. “Now, he is South Africa’s greatest movie critic.” Indeed, Owen is widely regarded as the doyen of movie critique. And theatre critique. And restaurant critique. And in his time he also has read a book or two.

Owen’s record at *The Southern Cross* is equally grand. His column has appeared in *The Southern Cross* every week without a break for two decades, amounting to more than 1,000 articles. This includes the first few years of its run, when Owen wrote from France. This in itself is a noble track record. The measure of a great columnist, however, is the devotion of his or her readership. The statistics from two readership surveys (1992 and 2000) are impressive: in both polls, Owen Williams scored readership ratings in excess of 90%.

Owen’s brief at *The Southern Cross* is a specifically Catholic focus. It is a mark of his genius that even within these confines, he has reflected on a vast diversity of subjects – not all necessarily of an inherently religious nature. His worldview is indeed Catholic and catholic. This book, despite its specific focus, should therefore be of interest to many readers who are not Catholic, Christian, or even religious.

The idea of publishing an anthology of Owen’s columns in *The Southern Cross* took on concrete forms about three years ago. Somewhat foolishly, I agreed to “drive” the project. This meant that I had the agreeable though time-consuming task of reading every one of Owen’s columns,

and the difficult task of selecting and rejecting articles for a shortlist. *The Southern Cross* introduced a process of digitally backing-up its content only in 1996. As a result, older articles had to be photocopied from the heavy, bound annual volumes of the newspaper, a cumbersome task. I am grateful to *Southern Cross* staffer Elizabeth Cozett for undertaking this decidedly unglamorous task. The photocopied articles, after a rough pencil edit, were then transcribed by my wife, Gail Simmermacher, and Karen Fowler.

This was followed by further editing, typesetting, yet more editing, proof-reading – in the latter task I enjoyed the assistance of Michael Shackleton, my predecessor as editor of *The Southern Cross* – double-checking minute details, and finally preparing for print (using some software I was unfamiliar with). Therefore, should the hawk-eyed reader pick up errors in text or presentation, I ask forgiveness: this book was produced by a novice at the task. It was also produced in my leisure time, with all the interruptions and disturbances this involves. Here I must thank my understanding and supportive wife Gail, without whose constant encouragement this book would not have appeared, and my remarkably patient son Michael, who had to sacrifice many evenings of “reading together” so that the world of literature might be enriched by the volume you are presently holding in your hands.

Since the articles in the book had appeared in print before, their original sub-editors merit mention, especially Gene Donnelly and Alex Economou.

While the articles in this book are virtually verbatim reflections of what has appeared in print over the past 20 years—give or take the occasional rephrasing for the sake of clarity—the headings are all new; simply because newspaper headlines make poor (and often wordy) book headings.

The title of this book, *Any Given Sunday* (borrowed from the Oliver Stone movie of the same name), is a nod not only to Owen’s fascination with the movies, but also is a play on the fact that *The Southern Cross*, and with it Owen’s column, is traditionally bought by most readers on Sundays.

A final note of gratitude is due to *The Southern Cross*’ dedicated board of directors, who backed and financed this project.

*Günther Simmermacher,
Cape Town, October 2003*

Snapshots

1,000 columns and counting

*I have never missed a week for The Southern Cross
and I have never been late with my material.*

This is the 1,000th consecutive column I have had published in *The Southern Cross*. Yes, dear reader, you are quite right: there is a note of vainglory in those words. But my boastfulness does not spring from any merit all those words might or might not have had. That is not for me to say.

In any case, it is a familiar experience for anyone who writes for a living that one cannot sit in one's own cause, as lawyers say. In other words, no one can judge his own writing. Take two high examples. Ernest Hemingway was convinced that *Across the River And Down to the Trees* was his best work. It read at times like a parody of the writer at his worst. And George Bernard Shaw said in his mid-thirties in a sincerely meant letter that he had no talent for writing plays. This was before he entered the world's repertoire as one of the leading dramatists. I'm not try to compare myself to those luminaries, of course. Simply, I am pleased at having passed what seems to me to be a test of endurance, and possibly of fidelity.

There is nothing much really in having written 1,000 columns. I have written quite a few columns for various publications. What pleases me is that I have never missed a week for *The Southern Cross* and I have never been late with my material since that day, August 28, 1983, when my first item appeared, written then from France.

In enabling me to keep this up, I owe a debt to Gene Donnelly, who has edited my often unfortunately untidy copy from the outset with unfailing courtesy and efficiency. The imperturbably reliable Gene and I have been friends and colleagues even before *The Southern Cross*, in those dim and distant days when we were both sub-editors on the morning daily newspaper, the *Cape Times*.

The actual idea of writing the column came from Edmund Honeyman, once the chief sub-editor on the *Cape Times*, and a journalist of great flair and style, who included *The Southern Cross* on the many newspapers on which he worked since leaving his native Ireland. Edmund was spending a holiday with me at my house in Villeveyrac, in southern France, when he made the suggestion.

I was appointed by the late Monsignor Donald de Beer, who by an odd coincidence was my parish priest in Sea Point, Cape Town, twice. He brought the same qualities of learning, intelligence and warmth to his parochial duties as to the newspaper.

I think that if I had known at the time that I would have been bound to have written a column to appear remorselessly once a week for about 19 years and three months, I would have retreated from the task, as an inadequate marathon runner might balk at the start of his race.

I am also pleased at the number of countries I have managed to write from. These include France, Russia, the Holy Land, England, Italy, Austria, and the Czech Republic. The most enjoyable of these was France. Indeed, the characters of the Midi have so vivid a life in themselves that they seem to spring from the pages. No imagination is needed. All one need do is to note what they are, what they do and how they describe it. The great writer Pagnol knew this well, and devoted his life to it.

The editors who have tolerated my idiosyncrasies after Monsignor De Beer were Cardinal Owen McCann (a Christian gentleman and Prince of the Church, if ever there was one), Father Bernard Connor, a Dominican; Michael Shackleton, an urbane scholar; and now Günther Simmermacher, a man of formidable journalistic talent combined with a Herculean capacity for work.

Most important, of course, are the readers. I have regarded these columns as an on-going conversation with them. I have tried to express my pleasure and happiness at being a member of the most significant and important organisation ever to grace human history, the Catholic Church. No one else can ever say that they radically changed human nature itself by divine grace, and the conquest of original sin. This is a stupendous claim to make; it has stood the test of two millennia. As a Catholic one owes loyalty to this. That is perhaps my first consideration. I was received into the Church at Easter nearly 33 years ago. Without doubt, it was the most significant event in my life, but I have written about that before in these columns.

If I have managed in all these words to convey even a little of the sense of light, of radiance, of truth, of transcendental splendour that this event brought into my life, then I will have succeeded.

November 13 to November 19, 2002

I laugh in the morning

*My failing (or a virtue?) irritates many,
although most are too polite to say so.*

We are all different, a fact for which great praise should be given, for imagine the grey uniformity of a life without diversity of character, even if it were a uniformity of greatest virtue and piety.

The saints, for example, as I have often thought, were a most diverse bunch indeed. To take four French saints: one can see very little in common (except, of course, sanctity) between the peasant girl Bernadette of Lourdes and St Louis, who was a king. St Joan of Arc seems hardly to belong to the same order of human being as St Thérèse of Lisieux.

I find that in day-to-day life, most people do not allow for that diversity enough, and tend to think of others as copies of themselves, They judge others' reactions by their own, and make sweeping generalisations from their own experience. Often if the "others" fall short or behave differently or think otherwise, they are judged harshly and put in error.

Descartes said: "I think, therefore I am". He was logically right, but the attitude, which can be read into the framework of his Discourse on Method, can be taken as a trifle egotistic.

These reflections were brought about by a failing (or a virtue?) of my own which I notice irritates many, although most are too polite to say so. Nevertheless, they tend to become terse, fidgety and defensive. It is, quite simply, that I always feel very cheerful in the morning. If necessary, I, also defensively, justify this by "Joy cometh in the morn". I do not know why, but just about everyone I have ever known, some dramatically so, is the opposite.

Recently a friend from London came to spend two weeks with us here in the south of France. We had arranged to meet her at Montpellier railway station, and she wrote to say that because of the inflexible timetables she would be there "at the ghastly hour of 6:45am". When I told her that I thought it was ridiculous to talk of this as a "ghastly hour", that in summer I normally got up between 5 and 6am, and that in fact it was the best time

of the day, I could feel a certain frigidity. Still, that's par for the course, as PG Wodehouse said.

Resolute cheerfulness seems to be taken as a censure of the others' haunted feelings of still being pursued by the black beasts of the night or perhaps the irritations of having to adapt to the censorious demands of the new day. I do not know what it is, but I do know that there are few who want a happy, smiling face around them at first light.

I certainly do not want to sound unctuous or sanctimonious, but is it not an appropriate feeling to be thankful for a new day, and is not pleasure a part of thankfulness? Try telling that to a friend who has been, say, carousing with other friends until late the previous night.

A retired banker, who lives, as I do, in the village of Villeveyrac, obviously agrees with me, although we have never discussed the matter. In summer I often meet him on the hilltops when other hills in the distance are touched by the rise of the rising sun. This is usually accompanied by what the locals call the wind of St Peter, a soft, cool breeze, welcome because the weather here can be ferociously hot for about five months of the year.

"The best part of the day," Monsieur Allié always says with a smile, his two Alsations cavorting around and playing with our white bulldog. And if you see M Allié later in the day, you might find him quite a severe man.

September 9, 1984

The Rabbi Jesus editorials

The Jerusalem Sun admonished Rabbi Jesus to “Belt up, Rabbi!”

I noticed the other day in a back number of that excellent Catholic weekly *The Tablet* an amusing and pertinent satire on contemporary British journalism. The article purported to consist of extracts from two imaginary newspapers, “*The Jerusalem Times*” and the “*Jerusalem Sun*” of approximately AD 31. There were two leading articles, which dealt, in the manner of the British newspapers of similar names, with Jesus and his attitude to the Samaritans.

The Times pontificated in a cloud of words, weighing this and weighing that and coming to the heavily weighted conclusion – as far as there was a conclusion – that there were rights on both sides, but that on balance it would appear to be probable that the authorities knew best and should be listened to. Or words to that effect.

The *Sun* was more direct. It advised “Rabbi Jesus”, if he was so fond of the Samaritans, to join them, and ended robustly with the admonition: “Belt up, Rabbi”.

The Tablet’s article was presented poker-faced, with no introduction or explanation, and at first glance it may have puzzled one or two readers; I have often noticed that irony is a dangerous weapon, in that people are apt to take one’s would-be delicate ironical thrusts as cold facts.

The interpretation of the *Sun* and *The Times* was so devastatingly accurate that it went beyond parody. It caused me, however, to think how South African newspapers might have commented on the same events. One can imagine, for example, an “enlightened” Afrikaans newspaper running something like this:

The Samaritans, historically, are on a different level to us. That is not so say they are intrinsically inferior and, indeed, there is much of value in their traditions. It is just this point, though, that we must remember. Those old and valuable customs, the

beliefs and practices of their ancestors, are best served by a policy which allows them to develop separately, in peace and without unwanted outside interference.

There is a stage where good will becomes sickly humanism, a danger and a menace to the very things it seeks to promote. There is a certain preacher whose words have recently attracted some attention, and might even be interpreted as attacking, and bringing into menace with threats, the established order, brought about in line with our national heritage.

We would not go as far as that, but we ask ourselves if this preacher has not become a tool of outside powers, and if his words are not damaging to the national self-interest, the national pride, the folk feelings of the Samaritans themselves; for by word, and perhaps even by deed, he can be taken as encouraging a dangerous policy of assimilation, a perilous and foreign tendency towards the abnegation of racial pride and identity.

This is not the South African way, and we say so with pride, and also with humility.

Perhaps an English-language South African newspaper might have said something like this:

There is a delicate balance, a network of sensibilities which have evolved between us and the Samaritans. A certain preacher has recently acted in such a way and made such statements as might upset that balance.

In no way do we question his sincerity. He is manifestly an upright man, a man of honesty, even if sometimes we feel that his views are a little extreme for the times we live in, and that the expression of his views could profit by a little reflection.

Our objection is not to his honest opinions and their expression (to quote a worthy predecessor, we might not agree with what

he says, but we would fight to the death for his right to say it), but pragmatically, to his wisdom and timing.

Society, after all, is a matter of checks and balances. Often these are expressed not in tablets of law, but are worked out carefully over the years, day by day, as a matter of custom, of usage, indeed, of good neighbourliness. And a good neighbour allows those next to him their freedom. He does not try to exert undue influence.

But, and this is a very big BUT, he prefers his family to his neighbour's family, just as he prefers his country to another country. All have their place in the divine order, but it is just, right and proper that we prefer our own. We would not be so presumptuous as to say that it is a divine order, but is ours, we like it, and we have the right to like it.

We wonder if it is not just that preference, indeed that moral judgment, which could be undermined.

May 6, 1984

‘Calvary incident’ vexed *Times*

He concocted a story about events in Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago written in the style of newspaper “cabelese”.

Claud Cockburn, who died in his late 80s during the last years of the 20th century, was described by Graham Greene as one of the two greatest journalists of the past century. The other was GK Chesterton. Both, Greene said, were more than journalists.

Of these three names, two were influential Catholics. Cockburn was of the English left. At one stage he was a foreign correspondent for *The Times* of London, which he left to take a very reduced salary for *The Daily Worker*, Britain’s communist newspaper. He achieved much fame for his own weekly newsletter, *This Week*, which pioneered this form of journalism. Later he left the Communist Party and made his living on many publications, including *Punch*. He gives credit, incidentally, to the Magnificat as one of the factors which inspired him in his life-time fight for social justice.

He was indeed a very good journalist. He wrote very well and clearly, and he had an instinct for political affairs, particularly those of central Europe. His analysis of the early days of Nazism, the rise of Hitler, the Anschluss, and the rapturous reception of Hitler in Austria were among his penetrating studies of the time. He was also aware of the potential dangers of Nazism in England, and, in fact, coined the phrase “the Cliveden sect”. They were a group of right-wing English wealthy people of potential Nazi sympathisers situated around the Astor Cliveden mansion.

Greene’s ranking of him as one of the best is in the introduction to the autobiography *Cockburn Sums Up* (Quartet Books, 1981). The epigraph is: “If God lived on earth, people would break his window.” Much the same sort of thing, only much worse, did happen once.

This book includes a most amusing anecdote (particularly to anyone who has ever been a journalist) which is also instructive. It is a simple message of news distortion in the interest of objectivity, so-called, which is not in the least exaggerated.

At this stage Cockburn was working as a junior correspondent for *The Times*

in Berlin at the time when Hitler was making his moves. There was fighting in the streets, which came to a climax on May Day when many thought the Prussian police were trigger-happy. Pugge, the chief correspondent, thought it was a straight clash between law and order and the licentious mob, and so he reported it as such.

Cockburn thought differently. He concocted a message about events in Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago as he conceived Pugge would have written it. He wrote it in the style of newspaper “cabelese”, using the accepted clichés and formula.

Under dateline Jerusalem, it read in part:

A small disposition here attach undue importance protests raised certain quarters result recent arrest and trial leading revolutionary agitator followed by what is known locally as “the Calvary incident”.

The report took the view that, far from acting harshly, the government has acted with what in some quarters was criticised as undue clemency. It pointed out that firm government action had definitely eliminated this small band of extremists, whose doctrines might otherwise have represented a serious threat to the future. The source was not revealed, but Cockburn later said he meant to imply that it was an interview with Pontius Pilate.

Cockburn placed the dispatch (the best story in the history of humanity, incidentally) on the desk of Pugge, who gave it a cursory glance, and probably hypnotised by the crisp *Times* style, passed it for dispatch with his own Berlin copy.

It would have gone straight to *The Times* and might even have been published had the telephonist not been vexed by the extra work. He said he protested at having to handle dispatches from Jerusalem as well as his given work. He noticed nothing odd.

The copy went back to Pugge who read it carefully this time and waxed exceeding wrath. It was in the worst possible taste, he said. This was not in view of the content, but because Cockburn had attempted to play a joke on *The Times*, an august body guarded from any flippancy.

There is no blasphemy or even irreverence in this. It is a lesson in how to read the news, from one who has had much to do with that perishable commodity.

January 8-14, 2003

Nuns smashed school apartheid

“Photographers were in trees getting front page pictures of black children entering the ‘white’ schools.”

“Irish nuns smashed apartheid in South African schools.” So reads a headline in a recent edition of *The Irish Catholic*, a newspaper published in Dublin. The heading was that over a regular weekly column of Father Tom Stack.

The work of the old-style nuns goes largely unrecorded, in obscurity. This is how they would want it, for they have removed themselves from the often ignoble preoccupations of a bustling world, in favour of good works and prayer. Their very presence in the world is of enormous importance, because they show that materialism and the seeking of self-advantage is the way to neither fulfillment nor happiness.

I have never met groups of women who show such happiness and contentment. They also have an amazing way of looking much younger than their calendar years. The way to youth, in other words, is not by way of the beauty parlour or cosmetics. For proof of this, glance at the frantic faces of women plastered with goo and under hairdriers, and then to those of nuns in a chapel at prayer. Often, though, when the nuns do step into the world for some good purpose or other, they are astonishingly effective. Their role in the apartheid struggle is one example.

Father Stack quotes Nelson Mandela, whom he describes as “this most exceptional moral figure”. Mr Mandela had spoken of the important part played by Irish nuns and priests, who as he put it, first opened the doors of education to the black population of South Africa. Father Stack comments that the story of what was nothing less than the prophetic intervention of the Irish religious sisters breaking the apartheid system in South Africa in the 1970s is one that must not be forgotten.

He says that the two women who brought about the change were Dominican Sisters Marion O’Sullivan and Genevieve Hickey. In the early 1970s the South African government in terms of what they called a rapprochement policy opened diplomatic relations with several black African states. This involved, of course, schooling for the children of the embassy and consular staffs.

The South African foreign affairs and education departments approached the Catholic schools. When the Catholic authorities pointed out with some irony that this would be illegal, the government replied: “They are not black. They are diplomats’ children.”

The leader of the Irish (Cabra) Dominican Sisters, Tipperary-born Sister Genevieve Hickey saw her opportunity and admitted the first batch of local coloured children to the Dominican convent of Springfield in Cape Town. This was of course both dramatic and unlawful. She was backed though by the late Cardinal Owen McCann, of whom everyone who knew him has fond memories.

In 1977 Sister Marion O’Sullivan of Cork took over the Dominican schools in South Africa. Speaking to Father Stack from Wicklow, where she now runs an organic farm at the Dominican convent there, she said she could still recall the tension and excitement as she decided that all their schools should henceforth be open to black children.

“It was on the morning of January 12, 1977, and I waited for the government reaction. Black children started in white schools all over the place. All hell broke loose immediately. The media were full of the news. Photographers were in trees getting front page pictures of black children entering the ‘white’ schools.” The government told Sister Marion that unless the nuns’ decision was rescinded they would close their schools. The nuns replied: “You close our schools, because we won’t.” This called the government’s bluff. They backed off, and the process of racial integration in schools began to be accomplished.

The Dominicans were followed by the Irish Mercy Sisters in defying the apartheid education policies. In all, 150 schools were involved. The bishops, led by Archbishop Denis Hurley of Durban, immediately backed the nuns. This was followed by the courageous and memorable anti-apartheid pastoral letter of the Southern African bishops entitled *A Call to Action*, which advocated the opening to black people of all Catholic institutions, including hospitals, children’s homes and parishes.

Father Stack mentions two other Dominican nuns, Sisters Aine Hardiman and Clare Harkin, who were imprisoned for leading a demonstration calling for the freeing of Nelson Mandela. There were of course many other nuns who went about their work with quiet heroism, for which they deserve all honour.

July 23, 2000

I nearly made cricket history

In the late '50s I talked cricket heroes into the idea of a cricket match as an anti-apartheid demonstration.

The old and eccentric English game of cricket has been getting much publicity lately with the World Cup in South Africa. This prompts me to recall an incident in the long ago, never before published for reasons which will become clear. It involves a famous Catholic player of that game, Basil d'Oliveira; Owen Wynne, another prominent player of his time; and myself.

Basil was later to play a historic role in the sporting boycott that was part of the anti-apartheid struggle, but at the time of which I write he had not yet achieved such fame. As some may need reminding, Basil was a so-called coloured man, and though he was of considerable ability in his chosen sport, any number of artificial barriers were put before him in the place of his birth. So Basil sought his fortune in England, and he found it. Eventually he was chosen to play for England against South Africa in a touring team.

The Nats would not have him, and the British team insisted on his inclusion in the team. That dreadful man BJ Vorster, prime minister at the time, then announced to a crowd of hysterically cheering and dancing Nats in Bloemfontein that the tour was cancelled. National Party sycophancy knew no bounds, but still it was strange, overriding as it did the great love of organised sport for which our country is known. It obviously would mean sporting isolation.

Before all this happened, Basil was a modest, good-looking lad who had made a formidable local reputation in Cape Town. As a cricketer he was clearly worthy of the highest honours, but the law put a stop to all that.

The late Owen Wynne was another famous cricketer, but he was technically white, so he was a Springbok. He was also, though, a democrat, with a dislike of colour prejudice and the laws deriving from it.

Owen and I worked together as sub-editors on the *Cape Times*. He was also a farmer; he worked hard at cultivating his farm by day, and as a journalist by night, roaring off home on his motorbike at two o'clock every morning, 120km away.

Once during this period Owen reluctantly returned to cricket after an absence of some years, to play in a test match at Newlands in Cape Town. During the five-day match he continued working every night. I vividly remember his running into the sub-editors' room one evening still in his cricketing togs, arm outstretched and shouting: "Give me some work!" Though aged about 40, he had performed prodigies of batting that day. All in all, a most extraordinary man, and a likeable one too. Sadly, he was later drowned in a boating mishap.

In the late 1950s I talked Owen into the idea of a cricket match as an anti-apartheid demonstration: the Basil d'Oliveira XI versus the Owen Wynne XI. Both men were famous.

It was not the political nature of the game that bothered Owen, he was all for it, but he was modest, and balked at idea of a team bearing his name. But once I had persuaded him that it was important, he put all his formidable energy into the project. Basil, a charming and pleasant young man, agreed to cooperate.

Owen then got the required number of white cricketers, all big names, to join, and Basil selected some from his own side of that absurd racial divide. A condition was that both teams would be racially mixed, to make firmer the protest. If whites were to be playing blacks, it would simply emphasise racialism.

Everything seemed set to go. The coloured players required assent from their union – a formality, we thought – so Owen and I went to see its chairman. His answer was "No", and he would not budge. His players, he said, simply wanted to play cricket, and he wanted to avoid trouble at all costs. He said that any player under his jurisdiction who joined in this game would be barred from further cricket.

We spent a long, fruitless evening of argument. The man was like obdurate, obstinate elephant, refusing to budge.

So, that was one potentially very interesting game of cricket that was never to be. Happily, things are better now.

April 2-8, 2003

The Church and the Nazis

Monsignor O'Flaherty has been described as one of the bravest non-combatant heroes of World War 2.

The Catholic Church, headed by Pope Pius XII, did not flinch in its opposition to Adolf Hitler and Nazism. It is worth remembering and emphasising that fact in view of the repeated calumnies, which still persist, to the general effect that the Vatican made a sort of unholy pact with Hitler in the interests of right-wing Catholicism as a result of which thousands, if not millions, of Jews died who might have otherwise have survived.

A clear and influential exposition of this distortion was given in Rolf Hochhut's play *The Deputy*, which had a big success in the 1960s and represented the "Theatre of Fact", a new school. I happened to be a drama critic at the time – before my conversion to Catholicism – and it fell to my lot to review the play. I was not impressed, finding it mainly turgid, ponderous and tendentious. Nevertheless, it influenced many people.

A new book has recently appeared which sets forth these facts. It is not the first to do so, but this is described as being clear and racily written, with the built-in readability of a good and literate adventure book. I have not yet read it, but I have read two extensive reviews which tell the story and analyse the book in some detail. The title is *A Vatican Lifeline '44* by William C Simpson, published by Sarpedon.

Simpson was a British soldier, a major, who was one of the 70,000 held as prisoners of war by the Nazis in Italy. He escaped and was helped by Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty of the Holy Office, who risked his life many times. Simpson is not a Catholic, but he is full of gratitude to the Church.

It is said that what is most revealing in this book is the length to which Monsignor O'Flaherty went in defying the Germans and helping the Allies, particularly in regard to the awkward situation of neutrality within a hostile country occupied by Nazis in which the Vatican found itself. The Catholic Church did not flinch, writes Major Simpson. An estimated 800,000 Jews were saved by the Church in World War 2.

This and other facts have been overlooked by many historians, and to this

day the opposite view surfaces frequently in the media. As Israeli prime minister, Golda Meir said: “During the 10 years of Nazi terror, when our people passed through the horrors of martyrdom, the pope [Pius XII] raised his voice to condemn the perpetrators and commiserate with the victims.” How often have we read that the pope remained silent? What more authoritative voice from the Jews could one hope for than Golda Meir?

Albert Einstein went further: “Only the Catholic Church protested against the Hitlerian onslaught on liberty. Up until then I had not been interested in the Church, but today I feel a great admiration for the Church which alone has had the courage to struggle for spiritual truth and moral liberty.”

The background, and in a way the central figure of Major Simpson’s book, Monsignor O’Flaherty, is described as one of the bravest non-combatant heroes of World War 2. He was a tall beefy priest, with a lilting Irish brogue, friendly blue eyes and an irregular, ample nose. At great risk he used the somewhat shaky neutrality of the Vatican to help prisoners and refugees escape the Nazis, at a time when Rome was infested with spies, and the appalling Gestapo itself. A film was made about him in 1983 called *The Scarlet and the Black*, starring Gregory Peck.

The situation was complex after the Italian fascist government fell in 1943; there was a brief period when 75,000 Allied soldiers were suddenly free. Then the Germans took over and things were worse than before. A motley crowd of many thousands made their way to Rome hoping to take advantage of Vatican neutrality. These included refugees of many kinds, soldiers and Jewish civilians.

Monsignor O’Flaherty, aided by others, including priests and Italian resistance workers, took themselves to the end of exhaustion trying to help this human flood. The author of the book worked with him, disguised as an Italian. He described Monsignor O’Flaherty’s “network of hope and succour”, with financial aid by way of Switzerland, from within the Vatican itself.

One hopes that this vivid book will help in establishing totally the truth.

November 30, 1997

Bing repels mall yobbos

These mall rats would have had enough feeling to flee the gentle and melodious voice of Bing Crosby

A new kind of yobbo-repellent has been tried with success in a shopping mall in the United States, I read the other day. This is simply to play recordings of Bing Crosby singing. This frightens them away as effectively as the cross and garlic would get rid of an old-time vampire.

This is not really surprising, as the smooth, relaxed and melodic tones of the great Bing could not be further removed from the loud, battering heavy beat of, for example, heavy metal and hip hop. One can almost hear him singing *Going My Way* and the metal-studded oafs fleeing the other way, clutching their ghetto blasters.

The shopping malls, particularly in the United States, have become hanging-out places for this type of person, where they are not welcome. They are noisy, often obscene and obstreperous. They don't spend much, and tend to frighten away and antagonise the serious spenders, mostly middle-aged decorous people.

This encapsulates a great change in social attitudes and tastes. For many years, Bing was king, with not only a universal appeal but also a smooth line in romance which appealed to the youthful. His music was easy to dance to as well, before the days when one was required to jump around like a monkey without a stick, while being assaulted by a hideous cacophony which would make jungle drums sound like an old-style string quartet.

This sea change, as Shakespeare put it, has strongly influenced films to their detriment. Youth gets older and it changes, and that is the nature of things. It could hardly be otherwise. Still, what is happening, and particularly in the United States, which totally dominates the world film market, is that the young have got the upper hand, and that movies are generally made to their measure.

Also the type which seems to be bred in the United States at the moment is peculiarly brash and vulgar, loud and foul-mouthed. Crude, physical humour is typical of adolescence, and it is neither a new nor an alarming trend.

The main cause in unleashing this flood of brash vulgarity is that the standards of permissible viewing have changed enormously. As long as it is not visually explicit, more or less anything goes. As well as this, the youth has more money to spend, so a whole genre of films has grown up made specifically for this market. This is, of course, not true of all youths. For example, millions of young people will attend Pope John Paul II's Mass in Rome as part of World Youth Day next year.

The vulgarity and crassness of some of the movies really has to be seen to be believed. Duty has compelled me to see some in my capacity as a film reviewer. Apart from the abysmally low and coarse standards of the humour, there is superficiality in the treatment to the extent that the characters seem at times to be barely human, simply the products of trashy comics aimed at a market of semi-literates bred on the lowest common denominator of television.

There are many such movies, in fact glancing at the advertisements, there seem at times to be no others. One that comes to mind that it fell to my unfortunate lot to review was *Mall Rats*, precisely about those shopping centres and the denizens that lurk there. The kindest thing I can think of to say about them is that they would have had enough feeling to flee the gentle and melodious voice of Bing.

Another, a horror film, called *Urban Legend*, was aimed at the youth market and was of simple pasteboard crudeness of construction and characterisation.

There have been several films about drug taking. Generally speaking, these are deplorable too. I am thinking not only of the moral content but also of slipshod, self-indulgent techniques and lack of artistic merit. The popular *Trainspotting* was typical.

These youth market films ignore not only any real morality but all spiritual elements. The United States is a secular society, but there must be some of those rampant, clowning teenagers with abysmal lavatory humour who have some spiritual feelings. They would not be human if they did not. These screen caricatures, though, are not really human.

August 8, 1999

It is rude to hoot

Few of us who would walk along a crowded street shouting rudely at passers-by – the equivalent of hooting.

In the developed countries the car has become a part of life to the point where, as a writer once said, a new mutation has produced a new species of man, no longer *Homo sapiens* but something like homobile, which is an awful compound word combining man and automobile. *Sapiens*, of course, connotes wisdom, a quality in which fallen man is often sadly lacking, and, too often, never more so than when behind the wheel of a car.

I have been in quite a few countries, incidentally, and I have found that without doubt South Africans are the most aggressive drivers. For some reason, their aggression seems to be regarded as a necessary and essential part of driving a car, and behaviour that would not be tolerated in a pedestrian becomes the desirable norm in a car.

There are not many of us, for example, who would walk along a crowded street shouting rudely at passers-by – the equivalent of hooting – waving clenched fists, jostling for position on the pavements, pushing and running. A polite person will stand back to let another pass; that same polite person on a South African road will push and edge into passing traffic. Ordinary courtesy on the roads seems to be regarded as effete. I suppose the explanation in Freudian terms is that the car becomes an extension of the id, the lower part of man's desires.

I am writing this in a holiday period in France when all the main roads are crowded with traffic either going on holidays, long or short, or returning from them. Even with courtesy, this involves danger in which alcohol can play a part, but which in France comes mostly from speed because the French, although I have found them courteous on the roads, like to drive with a certain dash and verve.

So I was impressed by a neat little series of reflections placed outside a church on one of the main French national roads. Here is my translation. The words can be of profit to anyone anywhere who drives a car. The figures, of course, are in kilometres an hour.

Long live the holidays.

What does one sing, in a car?

At 90: "Here is the good wind."

At 120: "Let us march to combat, to glory."

At 140: "Nearer my God to thee."

At 160: sing no more. Others will take care of that.

The doors of the kingdom will open for you.

On the subject of holidays, Bishop Guy-Marie Riobé had some pertinent things to say, too. "Long live the holidays," he said too. "Must we, though, although we live in a consumer society, become while on holiday total consumers, devouring beaches, mountains and the services of others, leaving them only money?"

The Christian, he added, is a part of this society, but he had learnt to go further. He profits by it but he must search to give something of himself to those who receive him, to those whom he meets on the roads. "One never relaxes so well as in helping others, and in relaxing in a climate of faith," he said.

Those are not just pious, meaningless works. They are a statement of fact, and a way to happiness, even on a simple, daily level.

October 13, 1985

An operatic monument

The opera has been described as the most original musical event of its kind since Parsifal.

In the Middle Ages, artistic and religious events were almost always the same thing; they sprang from the same source. One thinks not only of soaring symbols of the human spirit such as the Gothic cathedrals of France, but also of modest diversions such as the morality plays.

From a purely artistic point of view, this was by no means a bad thing, as the spirit of belief reinforced and gave impetus to those feelings of wonderment, sometimes awe, which are inspired by great works of art. There is no doubt at all, for example, that the effect of Notre Dame-de-Paris was qualitatively and quantitatively greater on an illiterate mediaeval worker than on a camera-slung American or Japanese tourist, hurrying to keep up with a schedule and to photograph the next item in his itinerary. Of course, one must not be condescending. Some of those same tourists undoubtedly feel both awe and reverence. But it cannot possibly be of the same quality as that of a man whose daily world is infused with God, and who sees devils and demons all around him – one to whom life is a daily, evident and obvious struggle between good and evil, in which, fortunately, the good are favoured.

“It’s battlefield,” as Graham Greene wrote in another context, and the daily life of the ordinary man certainly was then, both spiritually and physically. So this fusion – once an everyday matter – of automatic belief, spiritual purpose instinctively felt, and art, does not occur very often these days.

There has just been, though, a great exception to this, and it is worth recording and thinking about. That is the première in Paris of Olivier Messiaen’s opera *St Francis of Assisi*. This is a great work of art in the opinion of nearly all the experts, and a major cultural event in many senses, among them being it is the longest and the purest opera which has been given a first performance this century.

It is also a work purely, simply and avowedly of faith. Messiaen is like the artists of the Middle Ages in that he is inspired by and he thinks and creates within the framework of Catholic belief. This is the structure within

which he works. He is 76 now, but his whole life's work has been of that source and nourishment and outlook.

His opera lasts for nearly five hours. Musically, it is of an extraordinary complexity. It took him seven years to write. The production at the Paris Opera is on a grandiose scale. There are something like 200 musicians, and a choir of 250. The eight scenes are of visual simplicity but considerable lighting virtuosity and technical skill.

Yet underneath it all the opera, described as the most original musical event of its kind since *Parsifal*, is simply a hymn to St Francis, one of the most appealing of saints. The major French writer Julien Green has just published a book called *Brother Francis*, in which the claim is made that Francis is perhaps the greatest of the saints.

Whatever the status of Francis, it is evident the Messiaen is infused with the saint's spirit. The Japanese conductor Seija Ozawa, who is the orchestra chief of the opera, said so, adding that he felt the identification of Messiaen and Francis was almost complete – that Messiaen, in a sense, was in love with Francis. It was moving after the performance to see the aged but still obviously vigorous and sprightly Messiaen embrace Ozawa, with tears in his eyes, while the applause of the huge audience rose to crescendo.

One of the eight scenes shows this link between composer and saint very well. Messiaen listened to the birds, as St Francis did, and wrote a whole long scene based directly on bird song.

Messiaen summed it up succinctly himself; his works are meant to illuminate the truths of the Catholic faith. "There," he said, "is the first aspect of my work, the most noble, without doubt the most useful, the most valuable, the only aspect perhaps which I will not regret at the hour of my death."

A monument in sound of complexity reduced to simplicity; another worthy tribute to a simple and profound man.

February 12, 1984

Endangered philosophy

I've read that most English-speaking people are philosophically and theologically illiterate.

I have a friend, an Englishman, who will keep asking me how many angels can dance on a pin's head. He asks this in a sort of interrogative beetling-brow manner, as if to say: "Ah, there now I have you."

My usual reply is something along these lines: "Angels are spiritual, non-substantial entities. They do not belong to the material aspect of being, but to the infinite. Therefore the number of angels who can dance in such a place is infinite." The answer could be none or so many that you cannot visualise it. I usually add that this old medieval conundrum was probably first posed to illustrate the difference between the temporal, corporeal world and that of spiritual intangible infinity.

This does not deflect my friend, who is wont to reply somewhat along these lines: "Yes; yes, but how many of them? Don't they get pricked? Ha, ha, ha." Guffaws and roars of laughter.

I think that inability to grasp abstract reasoning and concepts is often a fault of the English educational system. The French are fond of saying that the British are pragmatic, whereas they are Cartesian. In other words, those who have English attitudes and systems of thoughts are apt to be practical, emphasising the everyday working of things; the French placing the emphasis on reason, often in a abstract way, after the master philosopher Descartes.

The result, as I read somewhere, is that most English-speaking people being philosophically and theologically illiterate. In France, philosophy is a school subject, so that most French people, certainly those who have more than a primary education, have an easy familiarity with philosophic concepts. The familiarity, which is universal with the doctrines of the Catholic Church, also brings an ease in this type of discussion. One is certainly familiar, for example, with concepts such as mystery and eternity.

Matters in England itself have been made worse recently by actions of the government of Margaret Thatcher. Broadly speaking, the attitude there is

that as philosophy is of little “practical” value, that is, of the market place, it should be phased out of university teaching as uneconomic.

I happened to be having dinner in Paris with a group, all of them professors of philosophy (except two wives), and one, commenting on this, as he called it, example of British philistinism, remarked wittily that they were all now members of an endangered species.

My friend of the angels, to revert, is a disbeliever, who seems to veer between atheism and agnosticism. A quality I have often come across among such people is an extreme dogmatism, such as I have never met among the ordinary Catholic, who, I have found, tend to keep dogmatism where it belongs – in the universal truths. There is a tendency among disbelievers to be dogmatic about absolutely everything, while at the same time claiming that it is us, Catholics, who have the fault. It is a common human tendency to lay on others our own most tenacious errors.

This friend will have it that I, in common with other Catholics, believe that God and the devil are engaged in a continual boxing match (his words). No matter how often I explain that this concept is most crude, the worst type of anthropomorphism, he will not be deflected.

I think he saw a film once in which a homicidal fundamentalist preacher, brilliantly played by Robert Mitchum, gave an illustrated sermon along those lines. The film incidentally, was *The Night of the Hunter*, the only one every directed by Charles Laughton.

He insists that the boxing match is not a metaphor but a real physical combat, in place and time. No amount of reason will shake him from this odd belief about a belief.

It seems to me curious, as I have implied, how easily extreme and obstinate dogmatism can take root and flower profusely what is supposed to be a garden of reason.

March 8, 1988

We should be dead right

The huge cemetery of Père Lachaise in Paris virtually is a city, with intersecting alleys and street maps.

It has been said that the measure of a civilisation is its respect for the dead. I thought of this when reading the other day of a decision to exhume those buried in the cemetery of St Peter's in Observatory, Cape Town, to dispose of the monumental works and to "develop" the property. While I obviously cannot take sides in the legal aspects of this curious business – indeed, I know little about it – this decision seems cursory materialistic, and at least a little macabre.

A protesting correspondent to a local newspaper said aptly that burial ground should be regarded as park-like recreational spaces rather than casting agencies for Bram Stoker, referring to the author of *Dracula*.

Apparently this particular cemetery is to be sold to an unknown buyer for "development". It is also said that undertakers charge more than R500 an exhumation. The remains will be disposed of elsewhere. Monumental masonry in the form of tombstones, sentimental angers and so on is rarely of much aesthetic merit. They are often picturesque, though, and they have an immense sentimental value to the living. To treat such things as rubble shows at least a gross insensitivity.

One of the protesters against this move said there were more than 9,000 graves there, and on a recent walk "through the grass and the weeds" he had notices such well know family names as Moffatt, Elton, Hoggo, Cranko, Hopkins, Starke, Clement, Lambert and of many others.

Dorothy Parker, the well-known wit, once suggested as her epitaph: "excuse my dust". This is amusing, but not really a subject for flippancy. It might though be wryly used by the shades of the residents of St Peter's.

If it is true that respect for the dead is a measure of a country's civilisation, then France must rank very high. I remember thinking of this a few years ago when travelling by train through south-eastern England on my way back to France, where I was living. The train, oddly enough, passed alongside graveyard after graveyard, all melancholy, all untended, all rank and gross with

weeds, the occasional bouquet of flowers looking rather ragged and pathetic.

What a contrast to France! On a small scale there was the graveyard at my home, the village of Villeveyrac. It is enclosed by cypresses and a high wall and is kept most meticulously neat, the stone paths being raked every day, the flowers, carefully cultivated and with fragrant bouquets, making their appearance daily. Of course, the sculptures, the monumental masonry are not of the highest order and neither are the inscriptions usually great poetry, but there is always an air of reverence.

A dapper elderly gentleman was there every morning. He told me once, with tears, that this was his daily custom since the death some years before of his “poor wife”. He was far from being the only daily visitor. To many widows it is a ritual. I know of one old lady who won the equivalent of millions of Rands on the national lottery. The Mass and the visit to her husband’s tomb remained her only regular daily occupations.

In contrast there is the huge cemetery of Père Lachaise in Paris, virtually a city, with intersecting alleys and street maps, vast mausoleums alternating with simple tombstones all under the shadow of cypress trees. The cypress, being evergreens, is the symbol of eternal life.

The place is very beautiful, quiet and peaceful. As I say it is virtually a city of the dead, a place of elegance, varying from the baroque to the simply elegant. There are family vaults the size of small houses, elaborately sculpted, and there are plain and simple slabs, such as the one bearing the name of the great writer Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette. Many of the famous are buried there, including, oddly enough, the rock star of erratic life, Jim Morrison of the Doors, whose grave is a place of rock pilgrimage.

The great mourning period, of course, is the feasts of All Saints and All Souls, November 1 and 2 respectively, when every graveyard becomes a huge mass of chrysanthemums and just about everyone on France pays a tribute to those who were loved in this life.

January 22, 1995

Les misérables were outside

Just opposite the literally glittering theatre a sort of small impromptu squatters' camp had sprung up.

On the opening night of *Les Misérables* at the Nico Malan Opera House in Cape Town, I was part of the full-house audience of 1,200 people, dressed to the nines, most of whom had paid a fortune for their tickets (not me, in my function as drama critic, mine were on the house) to see what was undoubtedly the main theatre event in South African history.

A little irony seemed lost on most of this expensive and well-fed audience. It was a cold, wet and miserable night and on the pavement just opposite the literally glittering theatre a sort of small impromptu squatters' camp had sprung up, with a few people in rags and tatters inadequately sheltered by more rags and corrugated iron.

Now *Les Misérables* can roughly be translated as “the wretched of the earth”. That is what Victor Hugo’s vast and sprawling novel is all about and he signals it in the title. So while the story of some of the wretched of 19th century Paris was being enacted on the stage before an affluent audience, plushily seated, the real thing was outside in the rain.

Part of the play, and the book too, is set among the barricades of the Communard revolution of the mid-19th century. We have had our own barricades here – in Manenberg on the Cape Flats, for example. The play is actually full of significance. One of the main characters, for example, is Gavroche, a street child whose death is one of the saddest parts of the novel. So vivid a character is Gavroche, in fact, that he has given his name to the French language as a word. Here, appropriately, he is played by a young local coloured lad.

Wearing my drama critic’s hat, I can say that this production is almost certainly the most theatrically accomplished ever put on in South Africa. Although the actual producer is Sir Cameron Mackintosh, the show owes its being to Pieter Toerien, a man of theatrical vision and hard work, wedded to professionalism and high standards who does not give up easily. It has taken years of hard work to get the play to the local boards, and it is also a huge financial gamble, with no expense spared and no corners shaved.

From a Catholic point of view *Les Misérables* is an interesting and rewarding work. It is a work of great universal significance but, if it comes to that, Catholic means universal. One of its complex themes is the very Catholic one of redemption, through love, through suffering, through understanding. This is exemplified mainly in the central character, the great creation, Jean Valjean, who is condemned to life of hard, backbreaking labour on a harsh penal settlement for stealing a little bread.

Free, escaped, he is embittered beyond measure. A very strong man, both physically and morally, all his force is concentrated on revenge against society, the world and its peoples. He is given food and shelter by a saintly bishop. He repays this great kindness by stealing from the bishop his candlesticks of great value. He is arrested, but the bishop tells the police the candlesticks were a gift. This saintly act to a grimy, tattered stranger sets Valjean on the path of redemption.

Taking another identity, he becomes wealthy, but is ever remorselessly dogged by the malevolent Javert, a detective who has sworn his ruin. Valjean's life is marked by repeated acts of self-sacrifice and valour. Tormented by his past and his conscience, he still contrives to reach an almost saintly dimension.

A great deal of this is played against the Communard revolution when the cry "To the barricades" echoed through Paris. Victor Hugo's humanitarian feeling for the wretched of the earth is shown most in these scenes, which in this production are captured brilliantly.

The remarkable set, a visual triumph, seems to have a life of its own, dominated by a huge, elegantly draped red flag. The songs have a fiery splendour, set off by the pathos of the deaths and destruction. In many ways, the set is the star of the play. There are no spoken words. The music has subtlety, a lilt and a range of moods which drive the action forward.

Victor Hugo is certainly one of the most honoured men in France. Every town and village has something named after him, this august, Olympian and bearded figure with a kind heart. Once again, one is reminded of his great qualities of the heart and of the creative spirit.

September 1, 1996

Charity for muggers

If it had been less criminal, one could have admired more the military precision of it all.

Strolling peacefully down Cape Town's Adderley Street the other day, I was suddenly confronted by a reeling drunk, tottering in my footsteps. He did not look very drunk to me, only a trifle glazed around the eyes, the kind of thing which could have a variety of causes. Well, this man lurched into me. Such a thing could, I thought, have been a tactic. A man in front distracts the victim's attention, while the one behind goes through the victim's pockets. So, instinctively more than by forethought, I wheeled round – just in time to catch by the wrists another man who had his hand in one of my hip pockets.

Now I don't usually carry much money, but that morning, for various reasons, I had about 400 Rand on me. All of it scattered like the autumn leaves upon the pavement. I have rarely seen such briskness of movement as that which followed. From all round, men swooped on the pavement like starving pigeons, gathering up the money and disappearing through a neighbouring department store looking more like contestants for the Olympics than humble pickpockets.

If it had been less criminal, one could have admired more the military precision of it all. But this was the work of an organised gang. I subsequently heard of other such incidents at nearby places. The whole incident was in broad daylight, among the bustling crowds. Naturally, no one took any notice of it. They were wise. Gangs such as this are always armed with knives, and it is better simply to hand over what money one may have.

My reflex grabbing of the man's wrists was foolhardy. Indeed, an elderly acquaintance of mine (he is 91) has not been the same since an attack, to which he responded with courage. A gang accosted him and told him to hand over his money. "That will be the day!" he said disbelievingly. So they beat him up, took the money in any case, and left him more or less for dead.

The man managed to crawl to the Sea Point Main Road, ask for help, and was taken to hospital, where he slowly recuperated from his extensive injuries. He had been fond of long walks, but was never the same after that.

These two incidents I have told are not intended to be scare stories and to alarm you, whom the rising crime rate has probably already alarmed. I often think the world of cowboys and desperadoes is not as far away from us as we might think. In many ways we are also a frontier society, though the frontiers are drawn up differently and the weapons are both more sophisticated and just as crude.

I was thinking more of the Christian, Catholic view we should adopt to this, which was put to me most cogently by an elderly Jewish lady, a friend of mine, Rivka Harris, who runs a small hotel in Sea Point. Mrs Harris, originally from Poland, has had a long and troubled life, packed with horrific events, including such things as the loss of her family and the murderous depredations of Hitler, from which she has emerged with a singular sweetness of disposition and an enviable belief in the efficacy of prayer.

I told her of my little pick-pocketing episode. She looked concerned, and then replied with words which Christians could take as a model. "You are lucky to have money on which to live and work to do. These people have nothing, mostly they are starving. People do not rob and steal to amuse themselves. It is dangerous. Perhaps there are starving children at home. Think of the money they stole as a gift to charity. You must not resent what they did but understand it, and you must pray for them. This is your gift to charity this week. Give with an open heart."

The more I reflected on the words of Mrs Harris, the more I realised she was quite right.

Perhaps the system here will be put right. The new government is dedicated to this end, and has been in power for just a year. The stables to be cleared out make light of the labour of Hercules. Enormous inequalities exist, and the goods of the world are not distributed with fairness and justice.

It should be clear then that the crime rate is a result, very largely, of this injustice. There is crime, true and it will always be with us. But it should never be necessary to steal in order to eat. Things are getting better. May it continue to do so.

May 7, 1995

Instead of Mandela, hate

Xenophobia is an unfortunate fact of the South African life, though it is entirely against the country's declared spirit.

Among the most appealing of the parables of Christ is that of the Good Samaritan. One should not forget, though, that it is a story of the overcoming of the evils of xenophobia and that Samaritans and the Jews hated each other.

Which of us can honestly say that we have never been in the position of the priest and the Levite who passed by the wounded man, fallen among brigands? Not many of us, either, can say that we not only tended the wounds of a member of a despised race, as that Samaritan did near Jericho, but saw to his nourishment, lodging and cure as well.

The lesson is profound: not only help your neighbour, but help him if you think of him as not only an enemy but a member of a despised and alien race.

The Redemptorists recently wrote in their *Catholic Link* newsletter: "As human beings we have learned to be afraid of people who are different. Rather than rejoice in their diversity of cultures and languages, we are fearful and threatened, and we cower behind the cosy protection of our own cultural *laager*." In other words, reach out to those who do not love us, who are our enemies.

Xenophobia, the dislike and fear of strangers or foreigners, is an unfortunate fact of the South African life, though it is entirely against the declared spirit, in the creation of which Nelson Mandela played such a large part. The struggle, though, goes on and at least a part of it is being fought at St Joseph's Marist College in Rondebosch, Cape Town, with its adult literacy programme.

A fruit of the work of many dedicated people has been a handsome book entitled *We Came for Mandela: The Cultural Life of the Refugee Community in South Africa*. The book is compiled and edited by Keith Adams, and the journalist Julia Landau played a big part in its compilation and production.

Archbishop Lawrence Henry of Cape Town in a foreword writes of a very special book and of the "sad phenomenon which in recent years has surfaced in our midst." Refugees, Archbishop Henry writes, are made to feel anything but

welcome. They are seen as a threat, they have been subject to deplorable attacks, some have even been killed. “All that the refugees really ask of us is to be accepted. They wish to be made to feel that they belong,” Archbishop Henry writes. He recommends the book and wishes to commend those who have done so much to aid the plight of the refugees.

The book is well written and glossily produced, with many vivid and evocative illustrations. There are paintings which emphasise the vivid cultural life many of the refugees bring with them and the photographs attest to a pulsating love of life.

In an introductory poem, James Matthews sums up much of the feeling in his ironic metaphor of multi-coloured flowers threatened by a pestilential plant with poisonous thorns.

The writing of the book often has a simple, effective poetry, although clothed in prose. The title of Part I, for example, is “Exile, under a different sun, covered by a new moon”. Those simple words say a lot. The final, Part IV, is titled: “Reality – Stairway to nowhere”. The sad resignation of that is disturbing.

The tone is mixed. There is much joy and affirmation of life in simple tasks such as cooking, clothes or a wedding. There are also grim passages of nightmare incidents in their countries of origin and hostility, sometimes brutal, in South Africa.

There is much to stir the conscience, the more so because of the total lack of self-pity, the simple statements of people who should be desperate but who appear to find the faith and nourishment in their mere humanity. Some of the vivid paintings show they have much to offer, not only in artistic ability but also in spirit, in sheer élan. Keith Adams has done an excellent job.

Fred Bidandi, one of the contributors, writes: “Initially many of us came to South Africa because of Nelson Mandela.” Work must be done to justify this trust in a man who the late president of France, François Mitterand, called “the conscience of our age” and one of the beacons of hope of our times.

August 22-28, 2001

Fined for being cruel to a tree

*I would manfully apologise to a tree
for deprivations man has made on this earth.*

A man in New York was recently fined \$1,000 – which at the present ridiculous rate [in 1999] is more than R6,000 – for parking a bicycle on a pavement. So I read in an American newspaper.

Surely an excessive punishment for such a venial offence, even if the offender had in so doing blocked a doorway or a fire-escape. So might one well ask. And so did New York City delicatessen owner Daniel Malpeli when he received notification of the punishment. “What planet am I on?” he asked.

His offence, though, went rather further than, for example, negligently creating an obstruction. He had done a really heinous thing: he had chained his bicycle to a tree in front of his delicatessen. To be more specific, the charges elaborated that he had abused a tree.

The offender’s night of anguish was not to last, though. Dawn came soon. The *New York Post* reported that Henry Stern, parks commissioner for the city, offered Mr Malpeli amnesty if he gave the tree “a hug and an apology”. The culprit wondered how the tree would accept his apology for abusing it. After all, an apology, to be valid, does require acceptance.

All this sounds rather like an exercise in satire, and a far-fetched one at that. But there is more to it. Ed Skyler, spokesman for Commissioner Stern, expressed his horror at this offence by elaborating a little. “Strangling a tree with a bicycle chain can cause it to weaken or snap.”

In the tradition of the strange American legal custom of plea bargaining, he went on to spell out the terms of the amnesty. “I would be satisfied if he apologised to the tree, gave it a hug, and promised to keep the chain off its trunk. That might save him \$950. If he promised to take good care of it, and to water it, he would have complete amnesty.”

Mr Malpeli duly apologised to the tree. I personally would manfully apologise to a tree, or any other piece of inanimate creation, for deprivations man has made on this earth, not just to save myself \$1,000.

The newspaper does not record whether witnesses were required to Mr Malpeli's act of expiation, including hug, or whether his unsupported word as a gentleman, as in the good old days, would suffice. The apology would certainly be worth a \$1,000, but I must confess that I would feel rather an ass doing so, in particular if there were photographers and – horrors! – a television crew around to record the event.

It is so obvious that it is trite to say it, that priests, nuns and concerned laymen have gone to jail for protesting against liberalised abortion, and that there is many a serious criminal whose crimes were more dreadful than abusing a tree who has walked as free as Mr Malpeli.

A concern for the environment to which man is rapidly causing much damage, some of it irreparable, is, of course, legitimate. No one wishes to be smothered by man-made effluents, such as smog, and there cannot be many who wish for noble animals, such as the tiger and the elephant, to disappear simply because of greed. The trouble is that the march of the New Age beliefs, largely a combination of ageing heresies, has brought about a climate of opinion in which this sort of excess is regarded as praiseworthy, some sort of step forward into a numinous future.

An irony is that while the sufferings of the New York tree have been alleviated by hugs (and probably kisses), the vital rain forests of South America continue to be devastated at an appalling rate. There will be no hugs for those trees.

Presumably the tactile response of hugging a tree is gratifying to the hugger. I try, if possible, to avoid reading anything about the British royal family, but I have a vague memory of coming across somewhere that it is a habit of Prince Charles to hug trees. Perhaps it does him good. It is certainly less harmful than the hugs that are part of an adulterous relationship. Somehow, though, one doubts the response of the tree.

Robin Hood was said to have loved Sherwood Forest, but I cannot imagine him going about embracing the component parts of it.

August 30, 1998

Fly the flags for a great paper

*Even during the paper shortages and disruptions of war,
the newspaper never missed an issue.*

There should be carousing in bunting-bedecked streets as *The Southern Cross* celebrates its 80th birthday. This is a great occasion for many reasons, including upholding the faith so consistently *in partibus infidelium*.

St Patrick has been described as a “steadfast man”. So has *The Southern Cross* been faithful, expressing what is sadly a minority set of beliefs, though paradoxically they are universal, catholic and apostolic. Within that there is room for controversy, often vigorously expressed in the correspondence columns. (The name VG Davies comes to mind as one whose trenchantly expressed letters over many years must constitute some sort of record.)

Nevertheless, the sturdy barque sails on through storms such as a world war in which civilisation trembled, a continuous state of political upheaval which lasted many years, the rise and all of the monstrous doctrine of apartheid, such phenomena as general strikes, states of emergency, many massacres, to say nothing of a long period in which the newspaper expressed the views of what the ruling hegemony was wont to call *die Roomse gevaar* (the Roman danger).

All this has been done without missing one single issue, even during the paper shortages and disruptions of war. No other local newspaper can claim that.

I have been a long-time faithful reader of *The Southern Cross*. For many years, during my residence in France, it was the only English publication I read regularly, and I found its coverage of South African events extensive and satisfying. It was my only source in English for events in South Africa, and it kept me in touch.

For my own part, I have contributed a regular column to *The Southern Cross* for more than 17 years, up to the present. My association with the newspaper has been a most happy one, and I have constantly been surprised at the influence and extent of its readership. Through a complicated set of circumstances my brother Michael was reunited with his long-lost daughter Debbie.

Michael is a naturalised Dane, but lives partly in France. While still living in France, I wrote an article mentioning his addiction to Sherlock Holmes, about whom he is an authority. This was read by a friend of Debbie's who passed it on to her. She then wrote to me care of *The Southern Cross* in Cape Town. I replied that her father was at the moment staying near me. The reunion took place in France.

I was once astonished in London, when introduced to a blind priest at Westminster cathedral after a Mass to discover that he recognised my name because he regularly had *The Southern Cross* read to him. He was English too, and I don't think had ever visited South Africa.

Of the editors the first one I knew was Father Louis Stubbs, a rigorous but kindly man whom I knew as my parish priest in Sea Point. I was not working for the newspaper at that time, but had an amicable association with him.

Then while in France I was appointed columnist by the recently late Monsignor Donald de Beer, whom I had known personally before that. We had friendly relations for many years, and I greatly respected him in many ways, for among others his incisive intellect, his steadfast faith and his human warmth, which he tried vainly to keep well covered. At his death he was also parish priest in Sea Point, where I live. I have a vivid memory of him lost in the vast monastery at Melck on the Danube calling in the endless corridors: "Ich bin Monsignor de Beer. Ich bin verloren!" (I am Monsignor de Beer. I am lost.)

Then of course there was Cardinal Owen McCann, who was editor twice, during one of which times I was contributing my columns. A very dear, saintly gentleman, he was beloved by all. The present editor is of course Michael Shackleton, a man of courtesy and distinction who continues this fine tradition.

It is impossible not to mention Gene Donnelly, formerly managing editor and now editorial consultant, whose hard and unstinting work over the years has provided a sturdy backbone in difficult times. Günther Simmermacher, the present managing editor, has many valuable qualities, which include a consuming energy and a capacity for work, combined with an innovative flair. His vitality and knowledge are valuable to the newspaper.

At 80 *The Southern Cross* is still a youngster, and a bounding, vigorous one.

October 15, 2000 (supplemented by the column of June 8, 1997)

A new millennium dawns

The 20th Century has been violent, bloody, marked by wars and clashes of an almost cosmic dimension.

Welcome to the 21st Century, so nearly upon us. Welcome also to the Jubilee Year, as to the thought of 2,000 years of grace. That's a long, long time since a certain humble birth in Bethlehem.

Centuries are in a way arbitrary divisions of time, which a poet called an old gypsy man. Nevertheless, each century does have its defining characteristics. The 17th century, for example, was dubbed the Age of Reason, although in retrospect it does not appear entirely reasonable in what at times seemed a frenzy to overthrow the establishment thought-patterns, traditions and beliefs of the past. The transcendental Gothic cathedral, Notre Dame-de-Paris, for example, briefly became a "temple of reason".

The 19th century was marked by colonialism, technical advancement, often the brute enslavement of the working man, with industrial slums spreading like a horrible blight over Europe, while a few people became enriched beyond dreams of acquisitive wealth. Although it brought comfort and wealth to the few, and the opportunity to indulge in civilised pursuits which led to a flowering of literature, the prevailing images are of the bloated, rapacious capitalist and the wage slaves, if not unemployed, then imprisoned in what Blake called the dark satanic mills.

Inevitably there was a reaction. As Hegel, said, every force has its counter-force, the most spectacular being the Russian Revolution in the early 20th century, and the spread of international communism.

The 20th Century has been violent, bloody, marked by wars and clashes of an almost cosmic dimension, but its most marked characteristic has been the amazing, incredible advance of technology. Things such the Internet, which little more than a decade ago belonged in the realms of science fiction, are now commonplace. The now commonplace facsimile – fax, in modern jargon – would have seemed miraculous at the time when newspaper dispatches were sent by telegram. But that too, in its time, was surely an extraordinary facility. Not so long ago, newspapers used to byline their hot news "By air mail", also a revolutionary advance from the pony express era.

The 20th century was, at its close, the age of the microchip: those little scraps of plastic in which are “grown” millions and millions of transistors. This is, though, only one aspect of technological advance. It has manifold practical advantages, but it also encouraged an easy-going, lax attitude to life, when everything comes too smoothly, where an aim is to minimise effort.

In a way, this nurtures prevailing beliefs in the primacy of the self, which is the antithesis of Catholicism. Among other things, this is the attitude of mind that leads to easy acceptance of abortion as a handy convenience and, less seriously, elevates normal strain and fatigue to “stress”, now a notifiable illness. Our ancestors were never “stressed out”. They simply got on with the job, as does many a noble worker in those vineyards of our Lord.

Probably of more basic importance from a transcendental point of view is the dark work being done in genetic engineering, which interferes with the very stuff of life and the essence of creation. A sophisticated Frankenstein beyond the dreams of his creator, Mary Shelley, is working in laboratories of enormous complexity and the beings created (or “modified”) are more deadly and basically dangerous than the pathetic monster so unforgettably played in film by Boris Karloff. O brave new world, that has such creatures in it – words, of course, from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which in the context are ironic.

What brave new world do we face in this virgin century, in this virgin millennium, and what creatures will inhabit it? There is really no certainty, except that we are in need of the prayers of Mary, the Mother of God, whose day appropriately, New Year’s Day is, and to express the fervent wish that her spirit permeate not only the 21st Century but also the whole of the 3rd Millennium. Our Holy Father, John Paul II, is the most suitable supreme pontiff to lead the faithful on these first faltering footsteps. There have been many difficulties and not a little dissension, but I think the Barque of Peter is set fair on course.

The most remarkable feature of the previous two millennia has been without doubt the durability, the influence, the endurance and the spiritual leadership of the Most Holy Roman, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

December 26, 1999

Villeveyrac

My village is now world class

There was a party for everybody, a dinner for 200 guest, and television cameras and photographers abounded.

There were high jinks in Villevyrac in the week of writing this column. Readers of this little contribution of mine over the past four years or so will be at least slightly familiar with the name of the small southern French town in which I have lived for some years. It is a town of some charm, built on a hilltop, as are so many of the towns near here (as protection against the Barbarians, originally). Between Marseilles and the Spanish border, it is near the Mediterranean, and the inhabitants, about 2,000, live mostly from the cultivation of grapes for wine.

The excitement was caused by the fact that we are to have our very own AOC wine. This means it will conform to the highest standard set by the government, officially classified as a wine of great quality. The AOC means roughly that the labelling and the name of the wine is controlled and checked for the greatest merits.

Anyone who takes any interest at all in these things knows that French wine is by far the best in the world, so the humble little place of Villevyrac has with one jump entered the world stage.

Of course, one does not have to tell readers of *The Southern Cross* about the sacramental significance of wine, but there are other elements of Catholic interest in this venture, which was far from being a rough-and-ready money-grabbing fight for exploitative profits. On the contrary, it was at least partly a work of far-sighted Christian charity in action, in the broadest sense.

The mayor, Monsieur Jean Vié, and his charming, kindly and pretty wife Marcelle are staunch Catholics, as befits the mayor of a staunchly Catholic town which houses only one cranky family who are different, the members of a sect. The ranks are solid.

Monsieur Vié, who is large and quiet and modest, apart from being a wine-farmer (retired but active) is also president of the agricultural commission of the local intercommunal wine producers. He has been the driving force behind this project, which among other good things will anchor some of the young to the land.

The choice of the cultivated vineyards was by lottery, and several youths took part and gained their stake in the vineyards. A hundred hectares of land has been cleared and planted. A rocky terrain covered with bush and shrub known locally as garrigue, at first glance bleak and unpromising, has been cleared and planted with carefully chosen vine stock. The soil meets the requirements for a superior wine, though so do the aspect, sunshine and climate. The combination of these factors and the careful supervision of the work, must result in a high-quality wine worthy of the best in the high French tradition of viticulture.

The area of Languedoc-Roussillon, in which Villeveyrac falls, is the largest producer of ordinary table wines in the world, and already has several high-quality vintages. As Monsieur Vié remarks, though, there is a growing tendency in France for people to drink a higher-quality wine, and less of it.

“At Villeveyrac,” Monsieur Vié, says, “we are very attached to this earth, which sticks to the soles of our shoes. And, furthermore, we are courageous.” A historical monument, the old 12th century Cistercian monastery of Valmagne, is within the municipal boundaries of Villeveyrac. For centuries the monks there kept themselves going by making wine, and they chose Villeveyrac precisely because of its potential for the manufacture of good wine. And all those old monks knew a thing or two. They were not only spiritual men but craftsmen, artisans and workers as well. So in a sense, Villeveyrac is returning to its origins.

Villeveyrac was truly *en fête* the day the ceremonial ribbon was cut, and with pomp and fanfare, done with typical French elegance, the vineyards were inaugurated. High officials from far and wide attended, and as a necessary corollary the police were everywhere. There was a party – a *vin d'honneur* – for everybody, a dinner for 200 guest, and television cameras and photographers abounded. Two days later the minister of agriculture himself arrived by helicopter and said he was most pleased with the work.

The cost of the vineyards, about a million Rand in South African terms, was raised by loan. The dividend will be high, not only in material terms but also in creative satisfaction.

November 8, 1987

The Villeveyrac Affair

*The man hesitated, put the gun in his mouth
and blew his head off.*

If the following story has any moral at all, it is the manifest advantage of being a practising Catholic in a Catholic environment, even apart from the spiritual aspects. There might or there might not also be an element of strange filial love. In any case, it is an interesting story in itself, if sad, even tragic. It happened in Villeveyrac.

The events were featured on the national television news, on all six channels, and two television teams visited our small village of 2,000. The national newspapers carried the story, as well as all the provincials I saw and heard of, and it was the cover story of a scandal sheet, with the banner headline: "The Villeveyrac affair." Of course, we have our scandals here, such as a baker suspected of demonology, but this affair was more clear-cut, and it had a most decisive end.

After the death of his wife, an elderly man had apparently become reclusive and was put into the devoted care of his son, himself verging on old age and a bachelor. The house is just round the corner from me, and I knew the son slightly, enough to exchange civilities about the weather and a certain amount of small talk. He was a slightly cherubic, rather insignificant man, what the French would call Monsieur tout-le-Monde, or Mr Everybody.

Every evening he was heard reading the local newspaper loudly to his father, who, he explained to neighbours, had gone slightly deaf. The son was a non-smoker, but went to the tobacconist twice a week to get his father's favourite tobacco. At his regular visits to the butcher, he always asked for a specially good cut for the old man. The old gentleman's rocking-chair was heard continuously by the neighbours.

Then one fine day the mayor took round to the house the Medal of Verdun, which had been given to the old man as a veteran of that heroic battle of the First World War. As is usual in France, the mayor had intended to make a little ceremony of this. He also had with him a hamper containing champagne and a selection of those unbeatable French delicacies.

The son seemed nervous and said his father was too tired to receive visitors or to undergo such excitement, but he would take charge of the goods. This aroused the suspicions of the mayor, who said afterwards he thought the old man could have been being held in some form of duress, and he got in touch with the two doctors, a married couple who have been in the town for about nine years. They had never seen the old man. Then he inquired of the pharmacist. No medicines had ever been bought.

The next stage, obviously, was the police, who turned up with a search warrant. The old man was not there, and they retired after being told he was temporarily staying with relative – a story they did not believe. They left, to consult with their superiors on the next step.

A little later, the son, realising the game was up, ran into the street holding a hunting rifle and an exercise book and excitedly called the next door neighbour, a sensible woman. He told her the exercise book was his “testament”, that his father had been dead for 10 years, and that he had buried him in his basement. He then went among the vines avowedly to kill himself. The neighbour telephoned the police, who found him in the vineyards with his gun.

He shouted: “Keep off, or I fire.” The leader of the police, a brave man, advanced on him with outstretched hand, saying: “Give me that gun. Don’t do anything stupid.” The man hesitated, put the gun in his mouth and blew his head off.

In his “testament” he said he had loved his father so much that when the old man died he could not bear to be separated from him. So he had kept up this charade for 10 years, an incredible feat in a village where everybody knows everybody else. Throughout that time he had also drawn the old man’s pension, so there are many who think he killed him for the money. I prefer to be charitable. The son did not look the type, and it is easy to imagine a weak-willed person being caught in this web or circumstance.

After 10 years an autopsy would have been difficult. The police took no action. The two are buried in a common grave. One does not wish to sound overmoralistic, but if the old man had been a practising Catholic, the parish priest would surely have noticed, and been able to help.

September 11, 1988

A street party, just for fun

It struck me at once how impossible it would have been for this to have happened at all in South Africa.

The first Mass on Sundays here in Villevyrac is at 9:30. It is the one I usually attend. A few days ago, after that Mass, I was strolling past one of the local cafés (or bars or bistros – the terms are interchangeable here), a jolly place with the unusual name of L’Avenir (the future).

It was, of course, relatively early in the morning, a particularly bright and sunny one even for this area of “cloudless climes” and the benign beams fell gently on a jovial sight.

A group of about 16 men had taken over some of the tables and chairs of the bar which were, as is usual in France, placed outside. They had also set up a barbecue fire, on which one was grilling the sausage of the area (called saucisse de Toulon, pure pork with nothing added), mussels and lamb chops. Raw mussels and oysters were already on the table in profusion. There were also quantities of grilled fish, caught that morning, and many bottles of wine, all of high quality. There was a marvellous special apéritif, 30 years old, made locally and privately, a rare delicacy from the private cellar of one of the roisterers, a wine farmer. One of the red wines, too, was vintage Villevyrac, of exceptional quality, far removed from the ordinary table wine on which this area lives, both literally and figuratively.

They asked me to sit down and join them, which I thought courteous as I was not part of the group. I learnt afterwards that each one had brought something, as his share.

The desserts were in the form of pastries, ordered from the excellent pâtisserie opposite. Cheese was provided, and with the coffee there was cognac and a local spirit, very strong, which is not sold to the public but supplied by the co-operative to the wine farmers. It was heady stuff.

In short everything was of a very high quality, and the little feast had just sprung up spontaneously. It was in celebration of nothing, except good cheer itself.

It struck me at once how impossible it would have been for this to have happened at all in South Africa, or in England for that matter. The patron or boss of the bar did not mind at all that his tables were being used, and that the only order made from his establishment was for coffee. Bar owners pay a high tax to the municipality on tables placed outside. I cannot imagine a South African pub-owner looking kindly on a group of people taking over a part of his establishment for their own party, and ordering practically nothing from him.

One of the people who took part was a black man (one of the two who live in this town) who had his little son, aged about five, with him. The child did not sit down, but behaved impeccably. I am sure that none of the others even noticed the colour of his skin, and if they did they certainly put no importance on it.

Another participant was a most charming man, small of stature, slightly crippled, a former farm worker who gets an allocation for life as a result of an accident. He is perhaps a little too fond of the bottle (he says so himself), but is most kind and generous and happy soul, almost radiating bonhomie. He told me (not for the first time) that he was a good Catholic, but not practising.

“In any case,” he jested. “I live nearer to heaven than anyone else, I am the closest neighbour of *le bon Dieu*.” His small house is immediately opposite the church, and in that sense indeed he is God’s closest neighbour. He said he liked the parish priest very much, a very good type who never nagged him, he said, and with whom he had had many a pleasant talk. He would go to confession “one of these days”.

In short, we were a motley bunch. Most of the locals get their living from wine, and there were more wine-farmers present than any other group, of varying degrees of affluence. The time of the repast was most unusual. The French, as everyone knows, breakfast not at all or only lightly, so anything as Homeric as this was certainly not breakfast. The road, incidentally, called rue Turenne, is the main street of Villeveyrac, so there was much exchange of banter with passers-by.

All in all, an example of how thoroughly refreshing and invigorating an impromptu fête can be.

November 20, 1988

We get a new priest

There was a fanfare, and the village ceremonial band marched in, preceded by the mayor and town councillors.

The installation of the new priest in Villeveyrac was an occasion of some pomp, marked by that typical French sense of style and elegance.

Between the departure of Monsieur l'Abbé Toiron and the arrival of Monsieur l'Abbé Baumel there were about five weeks. Father Toiron had been parish priest (or *Monsieur le Curé*) in Villeveyrac for just short of 20 years. In the month or so between the two, we had two temporary replacements of widely differing types.

One was a distinguished looking elderly gentleman who, he told us, had been a priest for more than 50 years. Notwithstanding his venerable years, he looked pretty hale and hearty, and he preached a robust homily in a strong voice. Then there was a young man who looked like a film star. In particular he looked like the current French screen breaker of hearts, Bernard Giraudeau, who has a warm smile and a melting look.

This young priest was a great favourite. He had the advantage of coming from Villeveyrac, and by request he was ordained here in the vast grape market – the church, which is quite big, being too small for the occasion.

I remember the late Madame Yvonne, who ran a little food and drink shop here for more than 50 years, telling me about this event about a week before it happened. Perhaps thinking I would not understand the work “ordination”, as an ignorant foreigner, she gave a sharp glance at me and explained: “They are going to make a priest out of him.”

This priest is a young man of bubbling humour and great warmth, with a vivid way of expressing himself. Talking for example of the promise of Christ, he gestured towards the holy Eucharist and said: “Fidele au rendez-vous, il est là”, which means: “Faithful to the appointment, he is there”. But it sounds better in French.

One could hardly have asked for two more varying examples of servants of the universal Church.

Then the great day arrived. In a community such as this, which is entirely Catholic (although with regard to Mass attendance both Ireland and Poland set us an example), a new parish priest is an event of major importance. The ceremony met the occasion. Before the Mass, the doors of the church were locked, so hundreds of the faithful began to collect outside. Then there was a fanfare, and the village ceremonial band, preceded by the mayor and town councillors, came in procession up the road with the flag of Villeveyrac, which bears an emblem of the Virgin Mary, under whose protection the town is placed.

The procession was met on the church steps by Monsieur le Curé, a large and imposing figure in white. The music stopped. Monsieur le Maire read a speech of welcome, Monsieur le Curé replied in a confident, vigorous voice, saying that if the bishop had asked him his preference, he would have chosen this parish. He said a priest was not a hermit, and the doors of the presbytery would always be open.

This little ceremony took place in the vivid Mediterranean sunshine, a light of particular clarity and intensity. Then Monsieur le Curé unlocked the doors of the church with a huge key which seemed to belong to the Middle Ages, and entered the building, preceded by the cross and followed by the mayor and councillors and then we ordinary parishioners.

After the sung Mass, embellished by Father Baumel's resonant deep baritone, he announced that everyone was invited to a *vin d'honneur* (more prosaically a drink) in the gardens of the presbytery. These gardens are in the formal French style very beautiful and elegant, sloping downwards with a view over the vineyards and plains to the Mediterranean. The drinks consisted of pastis, the local potent aniseed spirit aperitif, and a milder drink of the martini type called muscadet.

After a short speech, presiding jovially behind the trestle table, Father Baumel raised his burly arms towards the sky and said: "C'est la fête. Que la fête continue", which again sounds better in French, and means: "This is a festival. May the festival go on."

It was a good festival.

September 22, 1985

An unlikely story, but all true

On Christmas Eve the POWs made pathetic attempts to be cheerful

The people of the Midi, who are known as the Meridionales, love to tell stories. Particularly appealing to them is Christmas, a time so specially able to engender stories, even on a purely secular level.

There are so many elements of universal appeal: the divine baby born in such humble circumstances, the long voyage, the attendant two animals, the star, the shepherds, there being no room at the inn, then the visit of the mighty kings with their gifts, also led by a star, the message of love and peace and goodwill to all people. All that too in the very heart of winter, when people like more than ever to talk and to tell stories.

The stories of the Midi, of course, are often tinged with a certain hyperbole, for what good raconteur does not exaggerate a trifle, for effect? Also, some are often folklore, groping back into the mists of time: the oral tradition before television, before even universal education and literacy.

The story that I am about to tell, though, happened quite recently and I know the people to whom it happened: one well, the other two acquaintances. One day three men met in a house in the south of France, in a village. The guests were strangers to each other, the host knew them both well.

All three are people well in their 60s, those who knew the Second World War, and who in this part of the world were often scarred by it. Their host, Charles Plasse (known everywhere as Papy), for example had spent a large part of what the French call “the black years” in the German prison camp of Buchenwald, where he thinks his trade of master carpenter saved his life.

One of the others had been a prisoner of war in a German camp in Belgium, was a retired high police officer, now doing a retirement job for the United Nations.

The Frenchman who had been in the Belgian camp, Jean-Luc, has, incidentally, a pronounced stammer, which often stems his otherwise most articulate flow of reminiscence and philosophical conjecture. In another way it gives

his words emphasis, for he has a quick mind and one rarely knows what is coming next.

They fell to talking of Christmas, for it was near: the holy season and the various memorable and unusual Christmases they had passed. To Jean-Luc it was his Christmas in the Belgian camp. He told the story with his oddly precise stutter, adding emphasis to the words, but which I will not attempt to reproduce. (He is quite unselfconscious about it, incidentally, and even laughs without strain when people good-naturedly imitate him.)

The weather was bleak, with an icy wind roaring, and clutching the flimsy wooden hut he shared with about 20 other men. The time was Christmas Eve, the *reveillon*, when the festival is traditionally celebrated in France, and the men made pathetic attempts to be cheerful, for example by singing traditional songs around the few candles they had for light. Their food for some time had been little but greasy soup, stale bread and, for a treat, a few scraps of usually rancid boiled meat.

Then suddenly there was a hammering on the door and a Belgian officer, not a collaborator but a man with some influence in the camp, appeared with some others.

The other man listening to our story, whose name was, appropriately, Christian, broke in. "It is I who will tell you what happened next," he said.

"That Belgian officer had some food parcels from the Red Cross. He and his friends had carefully wrapped them in the most festive paper they could find, all your names were on the parcels, and each one of you got something. Then all of you, some with tears of joy in their eyes, put them all together and with a little wine and cognac that man had smuggled in, you had a repast you thought was fit for any king. You sang and you told stories and you toasted your families and friends and the Prince of Peace until dawn."

Jean-Luc gaped. "That is exactly right! But now did you know?"

"Don't you recognise me? It is I, that Belgian officer, and all that happened 45 years ago!"

December 23, 1990

A festival for the Virgin Mary

*'I don't want to flatter you, but I think
the Blessed Virgin is very happy with this occasion.'*

The annual festival of Villevyrac takes four days and it is a votive festival for the Virgin Mary, under whose protection the town is placed. All the street names, for example bear a picture of her wearing a crown, against a background of blue.

The fête takes the usual form that these things do in France – the country fair of *fête foraine*, with sideshows, merry-go-rounds, improvised bars, restaurants and so on and the *bals populaires*, the dances, each night which start about 10pm and go on until dawn are boisterous occasions which are free of charge. In short, there is a lot of sun-burnt revelry, for the summer here can be fierce and at the recent fête it was usually 40°C each day (the summers are hotter here than in Cape Town, which is said to have a Mediterranean climate, the winters colder).

The main street is barricaded off and traffic barred, tables for the revellers, supplied by the local bars, taking the place of the ever-intrusive automobile. The local shopkeepers also take advantage of the occasion to display their fares in the street with particular inventiveness. For four days, in fact, this normally tranquil little place takes on a little of the air of the night-life of Paris. Day and night it is alive. The bakers, for instance, normally open about 6am. At this time during the festival period they are crowded with people who have just left the hall, buying croissants for their breakfasts. (Although the word “ball” might sound a trifle pretentious for these robust and bucolic occasions, that is what they are called here and it does not sound incongruous).

What has all this got to do, you might ask, with the Blessed Virgin? Well, two things really. The festival is given in her honour, it is a joyful occasion and a part of Christianity is joy. Then, of course, the fact that the occasion of the festival is the Blessed Virgin and her assumption into heaven, is present in all minds, though with varying degrees of intensity. Still, there is no one who could possibly be ignorant of that fact.

Then there is the Mass, which starts the fête, an occasion of both joy and

solemnity. Above all, though, there is the torchlight procession, an event of great beauty.

A few hundred metres outside the town, on a knoll, there is a shrine to Mary under the name of the Blessed Virgin of Thau. There is a statue placed on top of a replica of the grotto at Lourdes, the whole about 10 metres high. The sanctuary is in a glade of Mediterranean pines with a view over many kilometres of valleys and plains, planted with vines, to the Mediterranean sea.

The time of the procession was a hot summer's night, just after sunset. The noise of the crickets and cicados in the glade was intense and penetrating, mingling with the resinous smell of the pines and the strangely luminous darkness, to form a purely Mediterranean sense-pattern. The replica of the grotto was filled with lighted votive candles and the Blessed Virgin herself, soaring into the sky, was floodlit. The torches were formed of candles, the tops of which were enclosed in cardboard guards in which were written the Creed in Latin and praise to Mary in French.

The French are an admirably practical people and once the candle is lit, the torch-bearer can read the words in the darkness. Not that they needed to. The hundreds of people there said the Creed in Latin, in perfect unison and without hesitation.

Led by Monsieur le Curé, the parish priest Jean Baumel, a decade of the rosary was said as an act of penitence. Father Baumel also spoke briefly on the importance of these processions, dedicated to Our Lady, instituted by Louis XIII as part of prayers for France. The procession then wound among the trees and alleys of the grove, the singing voices mingling with the crickets, the many small flames flickering lights of hope among the pine trees.

Before his blessing Father Baumel said: "I don't want to flatter you, but I think the Blessed Virgin is very happy with this occasion."

September 20, 1987

Monsieur François is dead

*He knew everyone by the sound of
their footsteps – even my Bulldog Blanche.*

A good man, an immediate neighbour of mine, died suddenly just recently. The first I knew of it was late one afternoon on seeing the table swathed in black outside his little house, with a book, pen and nothing else. This is a French rural custom on the occasion of a death. Mourners are simply expected to sign the book as an expression of sorrow and condolence. I was one of the first to sign, in view of my proximity, but the following day (the Requiem was at 6pm), the fairly thick book was almost filled, before it was removed by his sister, who lives in an adjoining road.

Monsieur François was very well-known and highly respected for his courage and kindness. The church was packed for the Requiem. Although Monsieur François had been ill for a long time, suddenly seeing the black-swathed table was an unpleasant shock and sorrow for me. This was although I had not seen him for some time – few people had – and that in spite of living directly next door to him.

His is a sad and exemplary story, and I shall tell it to you. It is more than sad – it is deeply tragic. Monsieur François was a man in his early 80s (people often live to great ages here) and he had been blind since youth. He adapted himself to this with cheerfulness and courage, did what work he could, and in his latter years retired with adequate means and a pension to live comfortably enough, but hardly in ease and luxury.

His great pleasure in life seemed to be to sit in the street outside his house in the sun, and to exchange snatches of conversation with the passers-by. My little daughter, Marie-Thérèse, formed a strong friendship with him, and it was a touching sight to see them sitting next to each other, often for hours, absorbedly chatting away about nothing and everything, two human beings at the opposite end of the age scale who would seem superficially to have nothing at all in common.

The old gentleman, though, did retain a certain charming child-like quality, shown in his open engaging face and his innocent interest in everything around him. He knew everyone by the sound of their footsteps. He knew even

my Bulldog Blanche, among all the other dogs of the quarter and when she passed would call out: “Ça va, Blanche?”, a polite greeting, something like: “How are you, Blanche?” A staunch Catholic, he knew the hours of the Mass and if I should pass on my way there, he would always call out: “You are going to the Mass? Very good, very good.”

Then about two years ago an appalling thing happened to the old gentleman. He developed gangrene. The case was hopeless. There was no alternative. Both his legs were amputated. This left him helpless and immobile in permanent darkness. It is difficult to realise what that must have been in terms of suffering. The free French medical services attempted to help, and provided him with artificial legs and daily two helpful young women arrived to try to teach him to walk. Gamely, with help, he tried to shuffle on the street, but he did not seem to be able to manage it, perhaps because of his age. So he simply retired to his room and was never again seen in his favourite place outside his front door.

A nurse visited regularly, twice a day, and his sister took him appetising trays of all sorts of delicacies. An old friend, a cheerful, small man always wearing a beret and smoking a pipe, let himself in with his own key every day promptly at 11am. There were also, of course, visits from the parish priest.

I heard from his sister and his friend that he kept up a brave front, made his devotions, but he felt that this latest deprivation left him indeed with little to live for. His heart, too, was not good. So he simply seemed to fade away.

All say he was completely lacking in self pity and he made no complaints. That is why I have called his life exemplary. Most of us can learn from it.

September 15, 1991

Our local cop is a millionaire

*There is a certain Christian humility in Jean-Marie,
the millionaire, directing the traffic.*

It is not every day that one sees a millionaire on point duty. Perhaps there might be a few philanthropically inclined who see school children across roads as a civic duty, but I mean the man with the load of money who works as a humble policeman, doing routine tasks.

Yet there is such a person in Villevyeyrac. Everyday you may see him if you are so fortunate to visit the enchanting region of Languedoc, adroitly guarding the traffic at the peak hours, when the lorries thunder down the road from the big cities and the *benes*, the little lorries carrying grapes, bearing their harvest to the wine-makers.

His name is Jean-Marie and he works in one of the more humble ranks of the complex police hierarchy of France. He is a *garde-champetre*, in other words a country policeman, and he is about 50 years old. In fact, Jean-Marie is the village policeman. There is no other in Villevyeyrac, so undoubtedly, along with the parish priest, he has a considerable knowledge of the foibles, the tribulations and the pleasures of his fellow villagers. He has lived in Villevyeyrac all his life.

It was a stroke of great good luck that brought him his fortune. His mother, a dear old lady whose only pleasures seemed to be to attend Mass and to place flowers on her late husband's grave, won almost exactly a million dollars in the national lotteries – that was about 6 million Francs eight years ago. She was nearly 80 at the time. The old lady, who normally dressed in black and walked about in slippers, did not change her habits at all. She lived in the same minuscule house near the church, she wore the same clothes and her only extravagance was to buy a large colour television set. As it was she was quite comfortably off, but she made no display of it. The old lady died recently aged nearly 90, mourned by all. Her daughter-in-law, the policeman's wife, collapsed overcome at the graveside. Many tributes were paid to her, primarily to her quiet goodness of behaviour.

Being a village, everyone knew of her fortune and everyone knew what would become of it. Under the French laws succession, started by Napoleon,

the children must inherit. There is no possibility, for example, of cutting an erring daughter out of your will. She had two children – the village policeman and a married daughter who lives in an adjoining village. Through the years the old lady had invested the money and spent next to nothing, living even far below the income she had had before her fortune. So the amount of interest was considerable.

What I think is interesting and instructive about this story, is that the son also spent nothing. He keeps on with his job, including point duty, he lives in the same very modest house with his wife and two children, and he has the same battered old car. He is exactly the same person, doing his mundane, routine tasks ever conscientiously. One sees him every day in the same smart uniform, going about various humdrum affairs.

There is not much excitement in his police life. Once a maniac (quite literally) from Spain created a tremendous disturbance in the village square, mounting the war monument, shouting obscenities, and violently striking anyone who came near him. This was too much for Jean-Marie to handle. The gendarmerie from nearby Méze were summoned, and they pacified the man, quite gently, and placed him in a police car, next to Jean-Marie. The policeman's wife jumped out of the crowd and wagged an admonitory finger at the poor man through the car window. "Don't forget that's my husband next to you," she shouted with much menace.

French country people do not believe in conspicuous consumption. Very rich people walk about in clothes that would mark one as a tramp in South Africa. They buy nothing on credit and such things as mortgages are an anathema to the people of the old school. If they cannot pay for a house, for example, in cash, they will not buy it.

So families accumulate their money, which is passed on to the next generation. There is a certain Christian humility in Jean-Marie, the millionaire, directing the traffic.

January 26, 1992

Life in France
(Part I)

Owen Williams, from France

*The column of August 28, 1983
that started it all*

An immediate effect of living in a Catholic country is that one feels at home, even if the surrounding structure is not very obvious, even if it is low-keyed, as it were.

An instance of this, which struck me immediately when we moved here more than four years ago, was the importance given to saints' days. Every newspaper, for example, publishes the name of the saint whose day it is on the front page. This applies even to the communist newspaper of this area, *la Marseillaise*. The television channels (there are three of them) similarly name the saint at the beginning and end of each day's transmission.

This is a small thing, but it is significant in a way. France is perhaps not a shining example of the Catholic way of life, but it is a country firmly rooted in the great Catholic tradition. When Pope John Paul II made his visit here, he used a famous phrase. France, he said, was the eldest daughter of the Church, adding, in all humility, that France should ask itself whether it had lived up to this heavy responsibility. When he left he made a gesture which seemed to embrace the country as a whole and said: "My respects, my respects."

This tour, incidentally, was covered on television almost totally, live, and, apart from his evident spiritual qualities, the pontiff impressed everybody by his tirelessness and his command of French, his literary as well as his everyday colloquial style.

Nevertheless, although perhaps not an over-dutiful daughter, France is the eldest daughter, firmly within the family, and at least the outward signs are everywhere.

In Nice, where we spent the first six months in France, the impressive cathedral, Notre Dame-de-Nice, is in the elegant Avenue Jean Medecin, the city's main street. About 300 metres away there is a cinema specialising in hardcore pornography. The porn cinema ran to almost empty houses (only 1% of French filmgoers visits cinemas of this type) while at least the Sunday Masses of this huge church were crowded. And daily, in considerable numbers, the Nicois

demonstrated their preference for the Church rather than pornography.

In the Mediterranean village of Villeveyrac, where we have lived for more than three and half years, as is common elsewhere the attendance at the daily Mass is not vast, though the Sunday Masses are always crowded. Indeed, a few days ago I found myself in the strange if perhaps privileged position of being the only person at the daily 8am Mass. This is most unusual, though. Normally there is a fair attendance.

The basic adherence, though, is shown by the fact that almost every Catholic, whether practising or not, is married and buried with liturgical rites, that all the children are baptised, and that the first Communion is a vividly attractive ceremony, with processions of white-garbed girls crowned with flowers and boys in elegant suits, bought or made for the occasion, parading through the streets. The feasts of the Assumption, Corpus Christi and others are celebrated with parades through the streets, headed by Monsieur le Curé (the parish priest), the mayor, the town band and local dignitaries.

Religious occasions, if not on the surface, are given its due religious more than a secular significance. One notices this particularly at Easter and Christmas. While Good Friday is not a holiday in France, Christmas has not the gross commercialisation of most English-speaking countries.

There is a different feeling on the great secular occasions, notably July 14, which is Bastille Day and the French national day, and May 1, which obstinately remains Workers' Day rather than the feast of St Joseph.

Christmas in South Africa I remember as being hectic, often with a hysterical undertone and with a great deal of drunkenness and often the highest murder, assault and accident rates of the whole year, a time of frenzied overspending, often marked by family quarrels. Reading accounts of murders and assaults, one is tempted to think ironically: "Hardly the festival of the Prince of Peace".

The atmosphere in this region at Christmas is one of calm, peace and tranquility, emphasised by the fact that people do go out: cinemas, theatres and bars are open, and there are many sporting events on Christmas Day. If subdued, the true spirit is usually there.

August 28, 1983

The cartoon guy exists

Here is a good description of the Frenchman, with a baguette under one arm, and a cigarette drooping from his lips

Early the other morning I turned the radio on just too late to hear much of what sounded like a fascinating interview. (On glancing at that statement I have just written, it seems to be one of the most negative and uninteresting things I have ever read, but let's hope things will get better.) A priest, who had written a book, was just finishing being interviewed, and I was too late to get the name or the subject of the book. At any rate, he told this story:

One astronaut met another somewhere in the outer reaches of space. One of them looked a little lost, but purposeful.

"Can I help? Are you looking for anything?" asked one.

"The Catholic Church," came the reply.

A humorous little tribute to universality.

The following little story, which I've just read, is not strictly speaking a joke, but it has its funny as well as its serious side. It is written by the French Catholic writer Henri Fabre-Colbert, and I will translate it, in part.

I saw a man who lives but who does not count. He counts for nothing, and no one takes any account of him. This man is in good health, he works. He is officially married, his wife loves him well. They have a daughter of 12 who is not yet pregnant and boy of 15 who does not snatch bags from the hands of old ladies. They live with a grandfather who is a handyman, a grandmother who makes good jam, and one old female relative who likes to sugar strawberries.

The height of subversion, this man is neither black, nor red, nor swarthy nor even white, because he has become bronzed by working outdoors. He is neither homosexual nor handicapped. He has never been to prison. He does not think of divorcing. He smokes heavy French cigarettes, drinks wine, has not got a carburetor in the place of a heart, has never presented himself for

election, has never asked for any assistance, and goes to the barber before his hair becomes a bun at the back of his neck.

You will understand that under these conditions, one has never even suspected his existence and that he counts for prunes. Confess, however, that such a person when found is worth an invitation to take part in a ceremony with you, a wedding, or a baptism.

‘To take part’ – those are the words which suit a species which is in the process of vanishing.

Later he writes:

No refuge for old people, though it be air-conditioned and stuffed with television, can replace the presence of grandchildren whose laughter and game alone can illuminate the last days before an apotheosis of eternity.

Well, in Fabre-Colbert’s story there is a good description of the average, ordinary Frenchman, so often drawn by British cartoonists with a baguette of bread under one arm and a cigarette drooping from his lips, perhaps carrying a litre of wine too, and with a beret crowning his unshaven face. Perhaps he is an endangered species, but he still exists, mostly in the villages, and I should know because I live in one. He is basically a loveable fellow, although he can be a little intolerant and conservative. Aspects that don’t show in the cartoons are that he is a good Catholic, loves a joke and the Mass.

September 28, 1986

Je suis ‘Monsieur le Springbok’

*“I believe you are a rugby Springbok.
I am a Scottish international.”*

An unusual and very beautiful Mass was celebrated recently in Paris at the old and magnificent church of Saint Germain-des-Prés, on the Left Bank. It was in honour of two dead Romanian rugby players, Durbac and Morariu, who died in the December insurrection.

For many years Romania and France have played annual test matches against each other. France is the current vice-champion of the world and, as is to be expected, the usual winner of these encounters. Still, the Romanians have a rugged team which always puts up a good struggle.

The rugby players of the world are a big fraternity, with strong ties of friendship, and they stick together. A journalist at the Mass even said that it was a religion in itself, so this occasion was entirely fitting!

The Mass was instigated by Jean-Pierre Rives and the almost as famous Robert Paparemborde. It was celebrated just five hours before the kick-off in a test match between France and Ireland at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris. (France won.)

Rives is famous in France. Years ago he played in South Africa where he became for a time equally well known, if not more so. In France he is known as Casque d’or (golden helmet) because of his long, flowing, shoulder-length bright blonde hair. He was the captain of France for many years, and perhaps the best rugby captain the country has ever had. He was a forward, and his play was characterised by an amazing courage and a total disregard for personal injury. Almost invariably he left the field flowing with blood, and his blood-stained test jerseys are treasured souvenirs to his friends. Now retired, his handsome face bears testimony to many hundreds of close and untender encounters.

Paparemborde, who has also been seen in South Africa, is a forward of the classical type – burly, rugged and powerful, his battered face also vivid testimony of many a titanic struggle. [He died of cancer in 2001.]

The Mass, in fact, was crowded with battered faces. It could have been a mas-

sive reunion of past and present boxers. Many were familiar, but many also were known only to limited circles, the small players of small clubs come to pray and to pay tribute to fallen comrades. The golden locks of Jean-Pierre Rives, plus his impressive physique, would make him conspicuous in any gathering and he was there. So were many of the team playing that afternoon.

Coming from rugby conscious South Africa, I was mildly surprised to discover that the part of France I live in is just as rugby inflamed, if not more so.

Once, in a very small and insignificant way, I played rugby myself, and unwisely I happened to mention that fact to some charming fanatics who run a restaurant in a resort town near where I live. I emphasised the humble nature of my rugby days.

Here evolved an illustration of how rumours can get around. In spite of all my denials, I was frequently embarrassed by being addressed by total strangers and without irony as “Monsieur le Springbok”.

The most embarrassing incident was when a rugged-looking gentleman approached me with hand outstretched and said: “I believe you are a rugby Springbok. I am a Scottish international.” Of course I instantly denied any even remote connection with the Springbok rugby team, but all my denials counted for nothing.

These encounters did teach me, though, that in the South of France a rugby Springbok is someone of importance and consequence indeed.

May 6, 1990

In adversity, launch *le système D*

*A tramp found a baby girl, only a few hours old
and abandoned in a frozen field*

The French have a way with things which they call the D System (*le système D*), a phrase of two possible derivations, one of them rather coarse. The phrase escapes a ready definition, but means something like resourcefulness, the ability to make unexpected solutions with handy objects to awkward problems. It is a very French characteristic, proper to a practical and hard-headed people thoroughly imbued with common sense, which they more logically call “good sense”.

I thought of that the other day during the recent grip of freezing weather, so untypical of the south of France. One day there was a snowstorm, followed by a week in which the temperatures hovered around -10°C. There were Siberian blasts of 160km/h, and snowdrifts piled up to a metre and a half deep in some places. After the snow had stopped falling the roads froze so that, in an often made local comparison, they were like skating rinks.

Such weather has never been seen in the south of France, and rarely Paris, where it was said to have been worse in 1640 when the sacramental wine froze in the chalices.

This weather, and the harsh conditions it brought in its train, gave rise to many examples of the D System, but one that struck me in its homely simplicity was related to the local daily early-morning Mass. This Mass attracts here, as everywhere, its coterie of the faithful, most of them women who have left the springtime of youth far behind.

It is not the way of these doughty people to be daunted by a little bad weather, nor by an unheated church the temperature of which resembled the inside of a refrigerator. The trouble was, though, the frozen roads – like ice-rinks, extremely slippery and a real hazard for legs and bones which have lost their youthful strength and resilience. Also, as the normal climate around here hardly lends itself to skating, most of the people have no experience of the techniques necessary.

One of the regulars hit upon a simple but most ingenious solution, an excel-

lent example of the D System. She slid her boots into those flat, ridged kitchen utensils used for grating cheese. These made a perfect grip on the snow and ice, and thus she made her way through the unaccustomed ice to the Mass. Soon her example was followed. These unconventional snow boots made an amusing sight, but they carried many a faithful soul to the holy Sacrament in relative safety.

The cold was so severe that it claimed more than 100 lives. But it also gave some illuminating examples of charity, one of which involved a Muslim and a Catholic. The Muslim was a tramp, *un clochard*, as they are called in France, in the country illegally without papers and living in a shelter of cardboard. He found a baby girl who had been wrapped in plastic when only a few hours old and abandoned in a frozen field, in a temperature of -20° . He trudged through the snow with it to a hospital, at some risk to himself because of his illegal status. The baby lived and was named Violette by the nurses. The tramp went back to his cardboard dwelling, possibly to die of cold.

There was a happy ending, though. The story was picked up by the news media. A retired policeman, a Catholic, was moved by it, opened a bank account with a substantial donation in the tramp's name. Others hearing of this sent more contributions, and he was provided with a flat and a job as a labourer (he has no training whatever and can't even speak French). He was received by the prefect himself, the administrative head of the region, and given official papers. Violette, when she grows up, will have reason to remember her courageous benefactor.

Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, the archbishop of Paris, ordered Parisian churches to stay open to welcome the homeless at night, in spite of the dangers of robberies, thereby fulfilling the Church's ancient role of refuge and shelter.

A common adversity often brings out the best people.

February 22, 1987

Where the vine grows

*Here wine is very cheap, it is good, it is of the earth;
people drink it with meals as a matter of course*

In common and uniquely English usage, Claret means the wine of Bordeaux. The reasons for this curiosity are complex and historic, and no one really seems to know what they are.

Unless you are in one of the great restaurants, and one specialising in English, to boot, if you ask for a claret, you will get not a red Bordeaux but a more modest wine from the area in which we live in the south of France, which is called...Claret. It is odd how few English-speaking people know this, even among the arrays of the wine connoisseurs and the bigger armies of wine snobs.

There are few people from what the French call the Anglo-Saxon world who know anything at all about wine – it is too expensive, and it is not a part of tradition and daily life. So its eucharistic significance has an unfortunately exotic note.

Here wine is very cheap, it is good, it is of the earth; people drink it with meals as a matter of course, it is as common and as essential as bread, and furthermore it is the source of livelihood for very many people – nearly all, in some regions. Naturally, pilgrimages and religious festivals and prayers have grown up around its cultivation. There is a sacramental value and a daily worth. Not much could be nobler than that.

One of the most deeply felt of those traditional pilgrimages is that of Claret – the real Claret, not the blended wine of the region of Bordeaux. The wine ceremonies are rooted in the history of Claret, in the minds of the farmers and peasants. They go back further than anyone can remember, and there are no records of the beginning.

The farmers there, as usual in the south, are not usually farmers of huge estates with baronial houses, their vineyards worked by many labourers. Mostly they are tough people, hardened by work and bronzed by the fierce sun, who own a few hectares, work them with their families and live somewhere else – probably in the nearest village, because the vineyards are for

vines and are too precious to be cluttered up with houses. As one local saying has it, they cling to the earth as tenaciously as a baby to the breast. Logically enough, for it is their source of life.

At the right times they want “pearls” of rain, indeed more precious than pearls to them. In one picturesque village called Aleyrac, there is an old church surrounded by the usual plan trees. Dedicated to Notre Dame, part of it dates from the 11th century. The pilgrimage they say is to remind *le bon Dieu* that water is as necessary to the vine as sunlight. There are prayers and Masses, of course, but there is also a day of good fellowship, with the typical bowls game, cards and inevitable gastronomic lunch, well irrigated with the local wines.

There is a procession of the Blessed Sacrament, led for 24 years by Father François Delmas, who is 86. The procession goes to the church of Notre Dame, which according to legend was established by St Germain himself. He is said to have been surprised by a downpour while hunting and to have taken shelter under a giant oak. In gratitude for being kept dry – the rains can be drenching here – he built the church. The oak still serves as shelter to those who lunch outside as part of their day of pilgrimage and friendship.

People from neighbouring parishes come in large numbers to Aleyrac, many on foot as in the old days, bringing flags and crosses for blessing. One such is a man of 78, who has made the pilgrimage every year since he was a small child.

“One day when I was small I thought I saw Christopher Columbus there, back from discovering America,” he said with a reminiscent chuckle.

Does it work? Does the rain fall suitably? Almost always, they say, and point to their vigorous wines as evidence.

March 17, 1985

Carnival in France

The Turk had never heard of an Easter egg, and had little idea what Easter was – but I know as little about Ramadan.

One of the many advantages of living in a Catholic country is the universal observance of traditions. The liturgical calendar is a part of life. The great festivals are observed in what is often a simple, matter-of-fact way; the saints' days appear on the front pages of all the newspapers, as well as in the television programmes.

Life alters, even if sometimes not very perceptibly, according not only to the time of year but also to Christian observance, factors which often coincide. After Christmas, for example, the sun begins its return from the dark cave of winter. At Easter the earth is reborn too, as spring touches all growing things.

I once fell into conversation with a young Turk in Nice, where he was taking a degree in economics at the university. To my surprise he had never heard of an Easter egg, and had only the most nebulous idea what Easter was. In a way this was a salutary lesson in humility, because it occurred to me that I know as little about Ramadan. It was also a lesson on the great gulfs that, unfortunately, separate people.

In France, one knows when Lent begins. It would be impossible not to. Apart from anything else, the lively tradition of the pre-Lenten carnival would see to that.

I still remember reading in Cape Town an announcement that “the Fish Hoek mardi gras will take place on Saturday this year.” A cavalier way indeed to deal with the days of the week, apart from ancient Christian tradition. *Mardi*, of course, means Tuesday, and *gras* means fat. Fish Hoek's “mardi gras” was to take place during the Christmas season; but Mardi Gras, of course, is the Tuesday before the Lenten fast begins on Ash Wednesday, and really, with respect both to language and traditions, it can be nothing else.

Mardi gras is a sort of release of high and animal spirits, a brief explosion of pleasure before the rigours and austerities of Lent. There is a well-entrenched belief, possible true, that the Tuesday was fat because all lard was used up on that day before the austere Lenten cooking.

The French call days of abstinence *jours maigres* (thin days). Evelyn Waugh was once in a French train at the same time as General Charles de Gaulle. He noticed in the dining car that only he and the general were observing the thin day, a Friday; Fridays then were more thin than they are now.

Many people would say that is a pity. I would. Individual abstinence is somehow reinforced if one thinks that many other people have a spirit of solidarity. This of course is not a reflection of the highest spirituality, but sadly human nature is like that; and the Church has always taken account of human weakness. An example is the tacit indulgence of the pre-Lenten carnivals, which sometimes take the most robust, not to say deplorable forms. Or they used to. In general, things are quieter and more formalised now.

One of the biggest of such carnivals in the world is at Nice. I spent one there not long ago. It can last for as much as three weeks, ending with a huge fire-works display on the beach and the burning of the King of the Carnival, the medieval Lord of Misrule. This huge papier mâché figure going up in flames is impressive, sad, and it does give one an impression of “so passes all earthly glory” – a good Lenten reflection.

Before this, the streets are alive with people who dispose of hostility in such ritual fashion as throwing fire-crackers and sticky plastics (difficult to dislodge from clothes and hair) at passers-by, as well as handfuls of confetti, hurled with abrupt ceremony into the face.

There is also the Battle of the Flowers in Nice when much mimosa is thrown back and forth, not always with evident peaceful intent. It is all the sort of behaviour which in other circumstances, as PG Wodehouse said, would bring a stiff letter from one’s solicitor with a request for appropriate damages.

The villages of Languedoc, where we live now, have similar occasions of unbridled festivity, on a smaller scale of course. But firecrackers and viscous plastic and flour are still thrown about with considerable abandon, and people dance in the streets. On any scale, the deeper meaning is there, and clear.

March 4, 1984

No question of race

Malou's temporary permit had run out and he was a prohibited immigrant, liable to instant expulsion.

Jean-Pierre, a black man, has taken over a bar in Villeveyrac with resounding success. There should be nothing surprising nor remarkable in that; indeed, within the context of the south of France, there is not. There is no condescension, the colour of his skin is quite irrelevant and determines no social or other attitudes whatever, which, of course, is just what it should be. In the context of South Africa under apartheid, unfortunately, this takes on the form of a moral lesson. It is a good and cogent one, but it is sad that it has to be said.

There is, of course, an extreme right-wing in France, as in other places, and the wild words and actions of this very small group get an amount of publicity which grossly exaggerates their importance.

Although the only black man in Villeveyrac, Jean-Pierre is treated as neither an exotic rarity nor an object of racism. He is simply a smiling, likeable fellow. There is also one Arab, Moustafa, living here, who is also well liked. He is a retired soldier (with the rank of sergeant) in the French army, a dignified, elderly man, with charm, a ready smile, and a picturesque sense of humour.

What racial prejudice there is in France is usually directed at Arabs from Morocco or Algeria, who are often thought to be intractable and who, if they are strict Muslims (which forbids the drinking of any form of alcohol), do not fall readily into French patterns of behaviour and conduct. The importance of anti-Arab feeling, too, I find has been exaggerated, and often is related to the problem of unemployment among the French and Arab rivalry for work.

As an instance of all this, I will mention some events in another region of France, which I came across the other day, which are more dramatic than the simple opening of a bar.

A black man arrived out of nowhere, it seemed, into the cold, snow and ice of the Haute Savoie. He said he had been wandering around and he simply liked the look of the village and oddly enough, because few do it, he took to the snow in contrast to the blazing heat and bright sun of his native Africa.

He had very little money, but he found himself modest accommodation and set to with a will doing any odd job the locals might want, always with a willing smile and a ready and cheerful heart. The evenings found him playing cards at the local café, chatting and joking with the villagers. In other words, he was the very model of integration, the ideal, the French always say, to be aimed at by immigrants.

The village was one of the very few in France that gave a majority vote to Jean-Marie Le Pen, the far-right National Front candidate in the presidential elections. Then it turned out that the temporary card of Mol Malou, which was the cheerful man's name, had run out and he was, in fact, a prohibited immigrant, liable to instant expulsion.

The village was too small to have its own police station but the gendarmerie from a neighbouring larger town came round several times, searching for Malou.

The villagers simply hid him, and denied any knowledge that he was there. It was conspiracy of silence, unbroken by anyone. The gendarmerie, of course, knew quite well that he was, but one of the things the French peasantry is best at is a stone wall silence in the face of officialdom. Naturally, though, this couldn't last and eventually Malou was caught and incarcerated, pending deportation.

I am glad to say there was a happy ending. The priest, the mayor, all the important villagers, petitioned the ministry of the interior, all saying what an acquisition this man, so honest, so sound, so French, would be to France.

An exception was made, Malou got his vital identity card and more than ever integrated in France, he lives happily on.

October 15, 1989

The racist hijacking of God

*Asked what he thought of Le Pen,
Cardinal Lustiger replied: 'Not much'.*

“To vote Le Pen is to vote for God.” This curious slogan has been launched by the National Front in France, a political party on the far right, the head of which is the smiling Jean-Marie Le Pen. He proclaims traditional values, or so he says, and starts most of his meetings with a Mass in the Latin Tridentine rite (which was commonly replaced by the Mass in the vernacular after the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s). This has led some Catholics to make the simple deduction: Le Pen, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre = the same struggle.

However, what concerns most of the opponents of Le Pen is not his religious views, but the racism which has become associated with him and his movement. He says he is not a racist, adding that among his close supporters he has a Jew and a Muslim. Nevertheless, there is a strong racist bias in his speeches and in the attitude of most of his supporters. This racism is directed mostly against immigrants from North Africa, who are nearly all Arabs.

The French bishops are beginning to worry about this strange alliance between God and racism, which one priest said was against nature. There is a fear that the attitudes might spill over from the pure far right to ordinary Catholics.

The bishops here very rarely enter questions of political controversy, but the matter of racism is judged to be non-political. Bishop Jean Vilnet, who is head of the episcopal conference and thus, in a sense, the figurehead of the French Church, has denounced the “rise of elitist, ideologies” which he said were “the antithesis of the Gospel”. These ideas were held and promulgated, he said, by people now as others had done some decades before who claimed that “there were superior beings, and hence inferior beings, and that there were races of unequal value.”

In some ways the views of Bishop Vilnet and other bishops have been translated into action. When the National Front organised public meetings at Lyon and Belfort, Catholics, Protestants and Jews joined in a “fast of spiritual protest against racism and for friendship”. At Belfort, the day after a meeting of the National Front, Bishop Lecrosnier of Belfort-Montbéliard, the Rev

Jean Tartier of the Lutheran Church, and Rabbi Yehouda Bergudo made a common declaration titled “The good use of the Bible in politics”, underlining “the fundamental equality of all men in that they are created in the image of God.”

In Lyons, Archbishop Albert Decourtray explicitly condemned “a political party” (he did not name it, but everyone knew he meant the National Front) of whose policy “certain theses are incompatible with the teachings of the Church.”

“We have had enough”, said the archbishop, “of watching the growth in our country of contempt, mistrust and hostility towards immigrants. We have had enough of ideologies which justify these attitudes... It is not possible to be in the least equivocal about the attitude of Christ in regard to foreigners, to immigrants, to those on the fringe of society, and to outcasts.”

Most immigrants to France are Arabs and blacks, and when right-wing politicians talk about immigrants, they mean Arabs and blacks. Racism is illegal in France, and this is a way of getting round the law.

The archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, when asked on a television programme what he thought of Le Pen, replied: “Not much”. In fact, the Church in France has placed itself resolutely and with no possible ambiguity against racist thought and practices, which makes the proclaimed alliance between God and Le Pen a rather difficult one to uphold for anyone who describes himself as a devout Catholic.

April 28, 1985

Honesty saved two days

*Keeping up a strong record of unintelligent behaviour,
I again lost my sacoche.*

One rarely reads stories of honesty in the newspapers. Perhaps that is because they don't make good copy, as journalists say. The account of a nasty crime is certain to make large headlines, just as most books that sell well in the usually ephemeral world of the bestseller have contents of a lurid nature of one kind or another.

So here in contrast are two stories of honesty, both of which I found impressive in a minor key and both of which happened to me. The point is that they were both disinterested actions of total strangers towards an unknown person.

Like most men in France, I carry what is known as a *sacoche*, that is a sort of little handbag, usually made of leather and with several compartments. They are very useful, particularly in a country where you are obliged to carry all sorts of papers with you – identity card, driver's license, "grey card" on which all the details concerning your car, if you have one, are inscribed, and so on. This system of easy identification works well, and the French are used to it as part of their way of life. Also, in the hot weather in the south, one does not want to wear a jacket, and in any case it is much simpler to put things into a sort of all purpose little bag that one carries. I know an Englishman who has lived in the Midi for 15 years, who absolutely refuses to carry one because he was brought up to think of this habit as effeminate, and he can't get rid of the idea. An Englishman with a handbag – what next?

Well, one fine day my wife and I set off for a modest little holiday in the Pyrénées, and our destination was Albi, which has a magnificent cathedral and is also known, for those learned in Church history, as the centre of the Albigensian heresy, one of the dualistic heresies.

We left early and stopped for lunch in a delightful little mountain place called Lacaune, where the food is good and of an amazing cheapness. After lunch we hadn't driven very far before I noticed that my *sacoche* was not among those present. Horrified, I remembered that I had put it on the roof of the car – not the most intelligent thing to have done – and had driven off, leaving it there. We returned at once to the parking place in the central square and there was no sign

of it. As it contained not only all the vital papers but all the money I had and my cheque book, we were forced to come back. The most important thing, although the loss of the money and the ruin of a holiday were irritating, was the vanished identity card, particularly important for a foreigner. I reported the loss immediately to the local town hall.

Next day the police of Lacaune telephoned me. The sacoché had been picked up by a most honest gentleman who had handed it into them, with all the money intact. Nothing could have been more simple for him than to have taken the money and, if he had felt qualms, to have pushed it into the police letter-box.

Keeping up a strong record of unintelligent behaviour, only the other day I went, by myself this time, to a nearby beach resort called Cap d'Agde. After about two hours of the Mediterranean sun, I realised again that present company did not include the sacoché.

Warily, I returned to my parked car. Tucked behind the windscreen wiper, I found the following note (in French, of course): "Monsieur, I have found your sacoché on the roof of the car. I have taken it to the bar, La Piscine, opposite the swimming bath and next to the restaurant. L'Horizon, V. Mungo."

I wasted no time in getting to the bar, La Piscine. As soon as I came in, the owner, a dapper and elegant man, very French, held up the sacoché with a smile. Thanking him profusely, I asked: "Do you know this gentleman, V. Mungo?" "It is not a gentleman," he replied, "but a demoiselle and she is a friend of mine. She is in the swimming bath at this moment."

The swimming bath is in the open air and we went together to the wall overlooking it. A charming and pretty girl rushed up smiling and shook hands. I thanked her, and she said it counted for nothing. Then she asked if there had been any money in the bag, as when she had found it there was none. I replied that there had been some. She said: "It was not me," and I, of course, replied that I was sure of that.

Walking away, feeling relieved again at the recovery of the papers, I opened the sacoché and found the money was indeed still there, but in a different compartment, which she had not opened. Naturally, I returned to say that all had been found. There were more smiles, more bonhomie. A very honest man, and a very honest girl – both incidents left me with a glow of pleasure.

June 28, 1987

Confessions of a shoplifter

The woman offered to make reparation for the value of the stolen goods. She had kept an accounting.

I am not sure whether this is a moral story or not. Although it is simple enough, fairly complex issues are aroused, as they are in the series of films by the Catholic filmmaker, Eric Rohmer, which he called “Moral Tales”. His are fiction, mine is fact. The story does at least illustrate, in a way, the Christian virtue of forgiveness.

A woman in France wrote to the manager of a supermarket saying the business he controlled was near to where she lived and that she had often stolen from it, very often. She had never been caught and, in fact, with practice she had become an expert thief.

Furthermore she intended to go on stealing from him. She was not repentant and she was totally unapologetic. The reason she gave, though, shed a different light on the actions of someone who seemed to defy morality, law and even common sense, in writing this extraordinary letter, which she had signed.

She was an unemployed woman, living with five children and no husband. Apart from some social security payments, which did not cover the rent and adequate food for the children and herself, she had no income. One of the children was ill, all needed clothes, none had what anyone could describe as an adequate diet. As well as this, she had reached the age of 40 which is an age at which it is extremely difficult to get employment, for reasons, among others, of compulsory pension payments. Also she had no real qualifications.

The good-hearted and kindly manager was non-plussed by the letter. Did he owe it to his employers, to the shareholders, to the other customers, to report this woman? Should he set the store guards to watch her particularly? It would be easy to identify her. She had made no secret of who she was. Should he – in the interest of public morality, as well as the profits of the store of which he was the custodian – make a public example of her? It is well known that pilfering from these stores costs them a great deal of money, which, in turn sends the prices up so as to keep an acceptable level of profit.

He was and is a charitable man; he thought of the children and he thought of the woman herself, who certainly did not lack courage, and also had displayed a honesty of a sort, although it did not extend to the goods on display in his supermarket. So he made a wise and generous gesture. He wrote to her and told her there was no need to steal. The next time she came “shopping”, she could help herself, fill a trolley and there would be no charge.

The reply was unexpected. She did not want charity, she rejected his offer. What she wanted was honest work. She did not want things for nothing and she did not want to steal and in practice she saw little difference in accepting goods for nothing (for which in the end some people would have to pay) and in simply taking them. She had heard of the dignity of labour and she believed in it. She thought that the power to earn one’s daily bread was a right.

Of course, that caused new problems, but this woman was beginning to intrigue the manager and his superiors on the board to whom he had naturally told the whole story.

Again with some generosity of feeling, they granted her wish. There is always a rapid turnover of women at the checkout counters, and she was given a job at one; not in the store from which she had pilfered, but in one nearby. Although, of course, there are checks, these jobs involve handling large sums of money, so it was a gesture of trust.

Unasked, the woman offered to make reparation from her wages for the value of the stolen goods. She had kept an accounting.

What is the moral of this true story? That honesty pays? Well, yes, in a way. That evil should be repaid by good? Perhaps it shows that, somewhat obliquely. That there are great reservoirs of good in the human soul, and that trust is often repaid? Certainly, it shows that.

January 18, 1987

A story from the land of stories

*A good story-teller in his way is a folk artist
and plays for effect to his audience.*

The south of France, the Midi, is a land of stories. They are stories of all kinds and the meridionale love to tell them. They are also born raconteurs (the French for story is *conte*), and, like the Irish, they have a gift for words, for vivid expression, for the poetic phrase.

There is also something about the air, something in the landscape, the sloping hills and plains, the olive trees, the vines, the clear bright sunlight which seems to breed both unusual events and poetic clarity of language. For example, the region in which I live, Languedoc, was the home of the troubadours, the poetry of chivalric love, which influenced Dante, the greatest of Italian poets.

When someone starts to tell a story which is a different type of conversation to off-hand banter and gossip (also much indulged in), my attention is immediately seized. It will be a human story, it will be an interesting story, and, nearly always, it will be a moral one, often illustrating the consequences of some act of disinterested charity.

Basically the Meridional is a good-hearted person: charitable, staunchly Catholic, although there are quite a few who have guilt feelings about not going to Mass enough. Such a story or a *conte* show humanity's fair side, although, of course, they include sinners. And if there is an occasional saint, that person has not the remotest idea that he belongs in that high company.

Here is one that I heard the other day in one of the little cafés which are the haunts of those who chat, tell stories, play cards, meet friends and generally pass the time of day. They are not places where one goes specifically to drink as a priority, and drunkenness is very rare.

The teller of the story – an honest man with more than his share of love for his fellow man – swore solemnly to me that it was true. He knew the people, he said, and I believe him, although often in these stories there is a certain permissible hyperbole, an exaggeration or over-statement for effect. A good story-teller in his way is a folk artist and plays for effect to his audience.

There was a woman with the very ordinary and average name of Madame Dupont (something like Smith or Brown in English) who was living not far from here with her husband, a worker of modest means and a somewhat embittered disposition. She had a little daughter with the pretty name Jeanne-Claire to whom she was fiercely devoted, and towards whom she behaved with a sort of smothering intensity and severity which many thought was not good for the little girl. The father, as far as he could tell, ignored her.

Among other prohibitions, the little girl was strictly forbidden ever to speak to strangers, which is understandable, of course. One day, however, Jeanne-Claire saw a frail old man hesitating to cross a street against the heavy, hurtling traffic. He walked with a stick and his eyesight was not good. "Can I help you, monsieur?" the little girl asked, and took his arm. She guided him across the street. She told him her name. When he asked, she told him where she lived and showed him the modest dwelling.

Next day the old man turned up at the house with a huge parcel of those expensive delicacies the French do better than any other people.

"Your little girl was kind enough to help me yesterday," he said, looking at the woman with an odd, hidden look. "Please accept these as evidence of my gratitude for a kind action." The mother was puzzled, a little hostile, but she took them. The old man was so transparently honest. Jeanne-Claire was duly scolded, but in a half-hearted way. There was something about the old man's eyes that haunted Madame Dupont.

From time to time, but rarely, the stranger came again. He never entered the house, never gave his name. More often anonymous parcels arrived. Not very long after that Madame Dupont had a letter, from a lawyer, asking her to come to his office.

The old man was her father. At a young age he had deserted her mother for reasons which only he knew. He disappeared and was not heard from again. Her mother did what she could. When it came to Madame Dupont's turn to get married, she felt soured and did not have a good marriage.

The old man had prospered. He left all his money and possessions to his long lost daughter.

March 12, 1989

At the Movies
(Part I)

Stool-pigeon propaganda

Here is an interesting example of manipulation for the purposes of propaganda and self-interest.

The famous film *On The Waterfront* (1954) was totally dominated by a performance from Marlon Brando as the boxer Terry Malloy, who in a famous speech “coulda been a contender” but was now simply an amiable drifter, mainly because of the unfeeling treachery of his brother Charlie, played by Rod Steiger. Mainly because of Brando’s extraordinary performance, the film is constantly revived, on television shows and in retrospectives and film revivals.

Recently the movie came under the international spotlight in a context other than artistic or cinematic. In the face of protests, Elia Kazan, the director, now in his 90s, was given an Oscar for lifetime achievement. There was a violent controversy at this, with demonstrations outside, and many of the guests, notably Ed Harris, ostentatiously refusing to applaud the presentation. Millions worldwide watched all this on television, and it revived an old but ever-fresh controversy. *On the Waterfront* has a particular relevance to this.

I remember hearing Orson Welles saying that never under any circumstances would he ever speak to Elia Kazan, much less shake his hand, and that he would never even mention his name unless in reply to a direct question. The reason: in the 1950s, Kazan had supplied the infamous McCarthy House Committee on Un-American Activities a list of people he said were communists, which had the result of wrecking careers and in most cases the lives of many.

Kazan alleged there was a communist conspiracy to take over Hollywood. History has revealed that there was no such thing. Many of the victims were simply people concerned with social justice. The future of Kazan himself was assured, and he subsequently received many lucrative contracts, such was the climate of the time. The chairman of the committee, Parnell Thomas, incidentally, was subsequently exposed as a criminal and went to jail.

The point about *On the Waterfront* was that in spite of its undoubted cinematic merits, it was seen as Kazan’s self-justification, a glorification of the stool-pigeon, the traitor, under the guise of it being an exposé of corrupt gangster rule of the longshoremen of New York harbour, in the Hoboken area (Frank Sinatra’s hometown).

All this recurred to me when for the first time, in the week of the time of writing, I read the book of the same title as the movie, on which the film was based. The shift in emphasis between the book and the film shows undoubtedly that Kazan's detractors were right.

To my surprise, I found the book *On the Waterfront*, by Budd Schulberg, a profoundly Catholic work in which the most memorable and in a way the central character is young Father Pete Barry, a curate in a very tough neighbourhood, who is inspired by his ideal, St Francis Xavier, and by the social thinking of Pope Pius XI. Father Barry thinks about the martyrs Paul and the first Ignatius, Stephen, St John of the Cross, and Thomas More: "fierce, unbending men", and he thinks of what he must do to help against these evils in an overwhelmingly Catholic area. He thinks again of the slight, shabby-looking, large-minded Francis Xavier plunged into Goa in the pagan East, who had been the first to brave his way through the graft and intrigue and moral chaos, "not of the Asiatics but of the European Christians greedy for temporal riches, mocking Christ in every covetous breath".

He remembers the words of St Francis to a young priest in Goa: "Interrogate these people, by what means they grow rich on the discharge and income of their office." After the murder of a longshoreman by the Mob who suspected him of being willing to testify to a Senate committee, Father Barry makes an impassioned speech to the workers, hoping to spark a fire. He calls a meeting in the basement of the church, and things begin to move.

In the film, the priest, well played by Karl Malden, is a comparatively minor part. Religious feeling is hardly there at all – an interesting example of manipulation for the purposes of propaganda and self-interest.

The end of the movie, too, can be read as the triumph of the stool pigeon, in which Kazan was undoubtedly thinking of himself. Brando, battered and bleeding, leads the workers to revolt and to smash the power of the Mob. The book is much more realistic. The conscience of the former boxer leads him to testify. His body is found with multiple stab wounds. Gang rule continues, and the priest continues his lone fight.

Schulberg's book is a tribute to the force of Catholic feeling in general and social justice in particular.

September 26, 1999

In defence of a controversial film

Curiously, Pasolini's film was praised in the Vatican for religious feeling, and banned in Rome as blasphemous.

The Southern Cross has reported the controversy here over a film about Our Lady by one of the great masters of the French cinema, Jean-Luc Godard. The film is titled *Fe vous salute, Marie* ("I salute you, Mary", or, in the English version, *Hail Mary*).

The cinema, called "the Seventh Art" in France, is very young as art media go; many of its masters are still living. Godard, for a master, is relatively at 55, although his air and spirit make him seem younger. He was one of the founders of the French "New Wave" of the '60s: a way of filming simply, away from the Hollywood factory-type movie, which had an enormous influence and which changed the look of cinema all over the world. His dislike of the bourgeoisie, and his admiration for Mao Tse-Tung, took him far from the conventional cinema into what seemed at times to be a private, highly intellectualised world in which the most important factor was often a hostile society.

Fe vous salute, Marie is hardly a simple film. It tells a simple and wonderful story, that of the Incarnation and the virginal conception, placing it in modern times but accurately, with no criticism of the dogma. The complexities arise from the thought of Godard, and the presentation of a perceived reality in many layers, with vast philosophic implications. Godard, in spite of his evangelical first name, has never been known as a Catholic, devout or otherwise. Even now he refuses to be drawn beyond saying that he is a believer. Hence the film caused some surprise. It also caused a little indignation, among a minority.

At its first showing there was an organised demonstration in Versailles by two groups supporting the old Tridentine rite. The acting mayor banned the film in his municipality as a danger to public order. Other municipalities refused to follow suit. The two organisations then took the matter to the High Court in Paris, asking for the film to be banned, or at least cut. The judge refused to do either, saying that it was a major film by a major artist and, in any case, he found nothing in the slightest offensive about it. The mayor of Versailles took over from his deputy, and the film was unbanned there.

In court it was pointed out that the film had been released without even an age restriction, and that no bishop and not one priest had criticised it. On the contrary, those that have expressed any opinions have been favourable, some highly. The official French Catholic newspaper *La Croix* gave the movie two full pages, with several articles, all of the very highest praise. One writer described it as a poem, adding that if one wanted to know how to film a sunset, a wind in the fields of spring, a breeze on a lake, or the female nude, one should go to see the film.

One is reminded of Pier Paolo Pasolini, who described himself as a militant atheist and was murdered on a beach near Rome. He won the Vatican film prize twice – one for *The Gospel According to St Matthew* and the other for *Theorem*, about a Christ-like figure in modern Italy. The curious thing about the second was that it was praised by a member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith for religious feeling, and banned by the chief judicial official in Rome as blasphemous.

Godard's film tells simply how a girl called Mary conceives a child without human intervention. (It was odd, incidentally, how many people confused the Virginal Conception and the Immaculate Conception when writing about it.) Joseph accepts what he is told by a very rough looking Gabriel as an honour. Mary is the daughter of a small garage proprietor; Joseph a taxi driver and mechanic. There is also a contrasting female character called Eve, who, in a way, represents sensuality. The purity of Mary is very well conveyed.

Objections to film stemmed from the language, which is modern and sometimes the words are crude. There is also some female nudity, but done with as much artistry as that of just about any painter. The film gives the impression of a vast, in fact infinite creative force concentrating an act of benevolent will on two people in very ordinary circumstances. *Fe vous salute, Marie* often seems a profound and beautiful reflection of an aspect of divine will, of visual splendour and intellectual strength.

April 14, 1985

Critics rave about a graceful film

It was the most acclaimed film at the Cannes Festival, whose audiences one would not expect at Lourdes.

How long is it since you saw a film which, literally and obviously, is touched with grace? I am sure it is a very long time, if you have ever had that experience at all.

For quite a long period of my life a large part of my daily duties was film criticism. Even before that time the cinema was a great interest of mine, as it still is. And I can think of very few such films. I have seen many films which dealt with Christianity, with varying degrees of success.

At one time the biblical “epic”, pioneered by Cecil B DeMille, was enormous and guaranteed box office. In a far different, quieter vein, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St Matthews* was probably the best of them all, and there, I think, one found the quality of grace.

Grace is very obviously in a film called *Thérèse*, made by Alain Cavalier, which has just been released in France. It is so obvious that the word occurs in every review of the film I have read, and in the television and radio commentaries about it, even when the authors are sceptic. For France is at basis a Catholic country and everyone has some idea what grace means.

Thérèse is St Thérèse of Lisieux, who died at 24 in 1897 and who, with St Francis Xavier, is patron saint of missions. As Pope John Paul II said when visiting her convent in Lisieux in 1980: “In her Carmel, Thérèse felt herself specially united to the missions and the missionaries of the Church – she, the little Thérèse of Lisieux, apparently so detached from the world.”

Cavalier’s film on the life of the saint is difficult to describe. In the first place it is a work of extreme simplicity, with most of the décor within the Carmel made of cardboard and paper. It took only 10 weeks to make, in film terms it cost practically nothing, and the cast is made up of unknowns. And yet it is unforgettable. It has a quiet, yet amazingly strong force, a spirituality which seems at times to match that of its subject. The stark images and the serenity they convey linger in the mind. Peace and beauty and joy are there. Nearly everyone seems to feel this effect; that is what is so curious.

In May, *Thérèse* was the most acclaimed film at the Cannes Festival, the audiences of which are generally not the type that one would expect to find, say, at a pilgrimage to Lourdes. Yet after the first showing the audience rose to its feet and applauded for 10 minutes. The critics unanimously gave it their prize as the best film shown. One is not surprised at the applause; it is a very moving, even overwhelming film, and it achieves this with the minimum of showbiz razzmatazz. If ever there was an example of the old cinema maxim that less equals more, it is *Thérèse*. Six months later the film has gone on general release, and the effect on average audiences is the same.

The story could not be simpler. The saint, against opposition and only after being granted a papal dispensation, entered a Carmelite convent at the age of 15. She died of tuberculosis at 24. Her sanctity was proclaimed as a result of her diary, published in book form posthumously under the title *The Story of a Soul*. It is one of the most profoundly spiritual and yet simple books ever written. The noted theologian Father Yves Congar wrote that she, with Charles de Foucauld, was “one of two beacons that the hand of God lit at the threshold of the atomic age.” *Thérèse* herself did not think so.

One of the gifts of the film is the luminous presence which the young Catherine Mouchet brings to the part of the saint, in her first film part. She is aided a little by a physical resemblance to *Thérèse*, but her performance goes much further than that. She is alight with a spiritual fire which illuminates but does not burn. She also brings home the gaiety and delight of the saint amid atrocious suffering. The radiant delight she shows at her reception into the convent is truly exalting to watch, as later is the joy of all the nuns at a simple Christmas celebration.

To make a film of an interior life, with very few incidents which lend themselves to pictorial treatment and in which all the events are of a quietly spiritual nature is an extraordinary achievement. Cavalier, though, surpasses that. His film is wonder and a marvel.

November 16, 1986

Last Temptation fails to tempt

It is best to treat the film as a work of pure fiction, which it is. But even then it does not come off.

Having worked for many years as a film critic, I think I can safely say that Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* has caused more scandal than any other film, ever.

This has given it a curious sort of fame, or perhaps notoriety would be a better word. That is a pity, because it is not a good film, and often movies which cause controversies do so because they are ahead of their time, and when the dust has settled one can see them objectively for what they are.

Purely from an artistic point of view, Scorsese's film is a failure. This is surprising, as he is one of the best directors in America and he has made some outstanding movies. *The Last Temptation* is on the whole leaden and laborious and far too long (nearly three hours without an intermission), in spite of a few scenes of considerable power. With two exceptions the acting is poor and the script is plodding, when it is not pretentious, and it is far too americanised.

That is from a purely artistic standpoint. From a Catholic point of view, though, it is deplorable. Many scenes are vulgar and in very poor taste indeed, which is both a spiritual and artistic fault – in this context at least. There are several sequences in which vulgarity and offensiveness mingle, but in my subjective view the worst was at the beginning, with the young Jesus the carpenter making crucifixes for the Romans and being upbraided by Judas for collaborating with a foreign exploitative power, while he, Judas, fought for the resistance. Several sequences involving Mary Magdalene, too, are highly offensive, and the St Paul (played by the good actor Harry Dean Stanton) is quite preposterous.

The last temptation, as portrayed in the film, comes to Christ on the cross from Satan disguised as his guardian angel, a sweet-looking young girl. It is to marry, have children lead an ordinary family life. In a dream sequence, Jesus falls for the blandishments, descends from the cross and marries Mary Magdalene. She dies and he marries again, and has several children. As an old man he is recalled to his mission by St Peter and Judas and goes back to the cross. The dream is over and man is, after all, redeemed.

To those who have said this is blasphemous, the film's supporters say that it was a dream. And that, after all, the temptation was resisted. To this Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, the archbishop of Paris, made a good reply. He said that the Gospels did not fall into the public domain like the Greek myths. They were sacred texts, and no one had the right to project his fantasies on to these words.

After a court action brought by followers of the excommunicated Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, the film was ordered in France to be screened with a notice saying that it is based not on the gospels but on a novel by Nikos Kazantzakis (author of *Zorba the Greek*). That is really the crux of the matter, but it does not save the film.

Another walloping failure is the performance of Willem Dafoe as Jesus, which is stilted and wooden and without any scriptural fire whatever. One cannot imagine anyone following this pallid caricature into anything. Similarly, the Judas of Harvey Keitel is overblown and fustian – surprisingly so, as Keitel is a very good actor. Barbara Hershey, though, is splendid as Mary Magdalene, marred by the script and the direction (but those were not her fault). And there is a vivid little cameo of a smoothly detestable Pontius Pilate by the pop singer David Bowie.

It is best to treat the film as a work of pure fiction – which it is – but even then it does not come off, because of overall artistic failure. Scorsese has said that he is a Catholic of deep faith. That may well be, but on the evidence of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, it seems to me that this faith has rather gone off the rails, together with his sure cinematic instinct. There seems little or no justification for the film at all. To attempt what amounts to an alternative life of Jesus, relying on one's individual imagination, is of course presumptuous to the highest degree. That goes without saying. To try at all, one would need the talent of a Shakespeare, and even then it would not succeed.

Scorsese and Kazantzakis, though, lag far behind, and the work is a glaring example of exceeding the bounds of taste, and a due lesson in humility. If there is any value here, there is value in that.

October 30, 1988

Angels over Hollywood

The contrast of the life of the angel is so brilliantly done, it is almost painful.

Angels have always been a stock part of the world cinema repertoire since the silent days. Recently, they have come centre-stage with the popular mainstream movie *City of Angels*, with Nicolas Cage a benign presence in black, fairly oozing light from another world. Though he is an accomplished actor, he tends to overdo it. Similarly, Meg Ryan, as the mortal whom the angel Seth loves more than just angelically, seems at times overly whimsical.

Even to outline the history of angels in the cinema would take much space, but one can say their presence has been nearly always enlightening, in more senses than one. There were, for example, *The Angels of Mons* in several early war films. Later, there was the holy presence in that fine and unaccountably forgotten movie *Gabriel Over The White House*, with the splendid Walter Huston, father of John, as a president who was inspired to bring Christian action in the true sense to the American presidency.

It's A Wonderful Life, a Frank Capra film, had a wonderful angel in Henry Travers, while Cary Grant brought a touch of the debonair to the celestial in *Mr Blandings Builds His Dream House*. There was also Conrad Veidt in the pleasant little morality piece *The Passing Of The Third Floor Back*, in which the unhappy lives of the people in a grim boarding house were enriched and changed by a divine presence who clocks in. More recently, in France, there was an unusual Gabriel, a rough fellow, a garage mechanic or some such, who recognises the Blessed Virgin in Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail Mary*.

It is to be hoped that the present vogue will help to turn cinema away from the welters of gore and writhings of sex which have almost taken over the large screen. There are also any number of fairies about, but these can't be seen as having a true Christian presence, though the movies they are in do tend to have a moral basis.

Wearing my hat as a film critic, I recently saw at a press preview a pleasant little film called *The Borrowers*, about hosts of little people (Irish for fairies) who live below the floorboards and have higher moral standards than those above. It is ideal children's fare.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, angels are spiritual beings without bodies, who have intelligence and will, personal and immortal creatures that surpass in perfection all visible creatures, as the splendour of their glory bears witness. From infancy to death, human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession. The word angel literally means messenger. In *City of Angels*, one of the angels who has assumed human form calls himself Messenger. Another, asked what his job is, replies that he is a messenger.

As angels are insubstantial, I think the answer to the old medieval conundrum which asks how many angels can dance on the head of a needle, is “an infinite number”. *City of Angels* also claims – perhaps with less theological precision – that angels, having free will, can take on human form and habitation.

The film is based on two recent films by Wim Wenders, the noted German director: *Wings of Desire*, and its companion piece, *Faraway, So Close*. Wenders, one of the most eminent film directors now working, is a Catholic, so one can expect his work to be of a higher order than that of the American Rod Silberberg’s more popular and accessible *City of Angels*. I was most impressed by the Wenders films, not only by their technical excellence but also their poignancy and lambent spiritual quality. When reviewing *Faraway* at a local film festival, I gave it five stars – the highest rating, rarely awarded.

The contrast of the life of the angel who deliberately chooses, from the depths of pity and love, to take on the mantle of the flesh and all its ills, is so brilliantly done it is almost painful. His introduction to grime, squalor, sex and violence is a vivid little allegory of the fall of Adam. One feels the pain and the dirt of innocence lost. The angel Seth is not much more than a country hick, lost in the big town after his moment of momentous choice, which was made more in a spirit of eros, or carnal love, than anything else.

Some would prefer a more ethereal entity, but there are many, no doubt, who would choose the handsome and soothing presence and the dulcet tones of Nicolas Cage.

June 28, 1998

Depardieu, a powerful priest

More people are going to see the new James Bond film, but Under Satan's Sun will last. The Bond will not.

Film of a purely Catholic theme and background are extremely fashionable now, and they are usually works of a solid artistic merit. It must be admitted, though, that apologetics have not always made good art. Still, art and the Catholic Church *font bon ménage*, as they say in France. Or more wordily, they set up house well together. The literature and painting of the Middle Ages alone are sufficient evidence of that.

I have mentioned the titles of many of these films before, but two French films among them are worth emphasising. They are *Thérèse* (about the saint of Lisieux) and *Sous le soleil de Satan* (*Under Satan's Sun*), which between them have carried off practically every major award in France, and have been big-office successes as well.

Sous le soleil de Satan won the international Grand Prize at the Cannes film festival as the best film of the year from any source. This was the first time a French film had been so honoured for 20 years, since the delightful *A Man and A Woman*. A year ago the winner of the best film award at Cannes was *The Mission*, about Jesuit missionaries in South America.

Under Satan's Sun has just gone on public release. The Cannes festival is in May, and the producers often keep their major films back from release until the autumn season, because in France few people go to the cinema in summer, particularly during the long holidays, when they have other fish to fry (often literally), and the outdoor life beckons away from what the French call *les salles obscures* (the dark halls).

There was an extraordinary and unexpected reaction at Cannes when the result was announced, by unanimous decision, to the invited audience. Those applauding were drowned by an ill-mannered mixture of boos and whistles and shouts of disapproval. The director and scriptwriter of the film, Maurice Pialat, shook his fist at the audience, shouting: "You don't like me? Well, I don't like you!" It all lacked the dignity that sort of occasion should have, although some controversy is good and must always be expected.

There is no shadow of that hostile reaction at the general release. Many critics have used the word “masterpiece” to describe it, and at the box office it is among the first five most popular films in France. More people are going to see the new James Bond film, but that is not surprising. *Under Satan’s Sun* will last, though. The Bond will not.

The film is a work of strength, density and spiritual power, so essentially a film that it is virtually impossible to convey its feeling in words. It is based on an early work by the late noted Catholic novelist George Bernanos, who is also having a revival on stage at the moment. His best-known book is probably *Diary of a Country Priest*.

Briefly, the story. Father Donissan (played by Gérard Depardieu) is a young priest, powerful and hulking, who has an overwhelming feeling of unworthiness. His physical strength he sees simply as a handicap to spirituality, and he tries to mortify himself with self-flagellation. He is curate to an abbé (played by Pialat) who sees saintly potential in the rough young man. In the same somewhat bleak town in the north of France there lives a young woman known as Mouchette (brilliantly played by Sandrine Bonnaire) who, seeing herself as a superior being, uses her sensual power to seduce men, one of whom she shoots dead. Father Donissan, going for one of his long solitary walks at night, meets a strange person, banal in appearance but extremely friendly, who lives nowhere. This turns out to be the devil himself. This person kisses the priest on the mouth, giving him the gift of insight into the human heart.

Coming back, the priest meets Mouchette, whom he sees through totally. Disturbed, she kills herself, and full of remorse and guilt, the priest breaks into her bedroom and carries the body to the church, placing it in front of the altar. The bishop, thinking this behaviour deranged, moves him to the smallest and most remote parish he can find, “where Donissan can do the least harm.” There, though, he gets the reputation of being a saint, to his intense discomfit. There is a miracle. A dead child’s eyes flicker open. The priest rushes into his confessional where he dies.

The performance of the great actor Depardieu as the priest is truly superb. This is a work of spiritual strength.

November 15, 1987

Dracula through the ages

*The ghost of Lord Byron is condemned to
haunt late television shows forever.*

Dracula was conceived as the very embodiment of evil, the personification of the age-old vampire legend. So, it might seem a little surprising that the Irish post office has commissioned a series of stamps on this subject, odd anywhere but particularly in holy Ireland. This is not, though, an example of the malevolent power of the ensanguined count. The stamps are to commemorate the centenary of Bram Stoker, the Irishman and who wrote the famous vampire book.

Stoker went down in literary history with his strange, powerful and literally haunting novel, but he was, oddly, not basically a writer. He was a man of the theatre, private secretary to one of the greatest actors, Sir Henry Irving, the first knight of the theatre.

Dracula, which in itself is a good engrossing novel of the solid Victorian type, did not create the vampire nor the mythical figure of the undead sustained by human blood and living by night. That potent legend, originating probably in the Balkans, has haunted the human consciousness for many years. Stoker simply gave it a cogent and powerful expression.

This was quickly linked to cinema and it is certainly through this medium that the vampire and, particularly, Count Dracula, has become so universal a symbol. The characters who really created the image though, are a disparate and incongruous pair – a great British romantic poet and aristocrat, and a Hungarian drug addict, a revolutionary turned actor. Their names were Lord Byron and Bela Lugosi.

In a strange story, during winter on Lake Como, a group of literary geniuses had a contest to see who could create the most horrific and frightening stories. Shelley's mistress, Mary Godwin, produced *Frankenstein and the Monster*. Byron was there too, and a friend of his produced a story called *The Vampyr*, based on the man who was "mad, bad and dangerous to know." The story was forgotten but Bram Stoker read it, and so Dracula was born. So, the ghost of Lord Byron is condemned to haunt late television shows forever.

The actor, Bela Lugosi, with cadaverous features, corpse-white skin and shiny

black hair like a skull-cap, had a capacity to communicate pure evil, which, I think, has never been surpassed. His piercing eyes and smile which dripped blood were terrifying. The film, combined with *Frankenstein*, both by James Whale, created the horror film genre, a continuously repetitive cycle. Boris Karloff, the monster, is as recognisable as Lugosi. A cultured Englishman named William Pratt, under the horrendous make-up, Karloff was never really evil – simply menacing and blundering, with an odd, sometimes heartbreaking touch of pathos.

A sign of the consummate evil of Dracula was that he was totally repelled by the crucifix and sign of the cross, as well as reacting to holy water as though it had boiled straight from a blasting volcano. In his masterly satire *The Fearless Vampire Hunters*, Roman Polanski had a Jewish vampire. Shown the crucifix the creature did not recoil but said: “Oy oy oy, but heff you got the wrong vampire.”

Lugosi set the visual style, but there was at least one other cinematic vampire before him, FW Murnau’s 1922 classic of German expressionism, *Nosferatu*. Max Schreck played the fiend as an inhuman, twisted, malevolent gargoye, with long nails and a compound of humps. This was far from the debonair lady-killer to whom women are irresistibly drawn, as initiated by Lugosi and brought to some form of fruition by Christopher Lee (who was possibly too debonair and lacked that essential quality of sheer evil which came jolting from the screen in the persons of Lugosi and Schreck).

Until recently, Catholicism has played a strong part in the cycle. *Nosferatu* could be killed only by a virgin, and all the Draculas were helpless at the sight of an upheld crucifix, recoiling like beasts before a blazing torch. In the major vampire films of the 1990s there has been a marked change. Francis Ford Coppola’s *Dracula* was a sumptuously produced film with many imaginative touches and a fine sense of decor and individual style, but it was rarely frightening. Perhaps it was not intended to be, but it rarely engaged the emotions either, and, surely, that must have been the director’s intention. Although the theme of repentance figures strongly (Coppola is a Catholic), the crucifix has lost its potency, being effective only against lesser demons.

In the most recent, Neil Jordan’s *Interview with the Vampire*, all notions of good or evil disappear. The vampire, Lestat, is simply a nihilist, and vampirism is simply another way to live, a bit deadening perhaps of the spirit, another form of immortality in a mortal world, certainly not good but not evil either.

January 25, 1998

Dead Man Walking

The arid deserts of the murderer's being seem to bloom – late, but still a flower or two.

The appalling strangeness of the infinite mercy of God. That phrase in one form or another has been used through the centuries to express a basic Catholic conception. In recent years, for example, it was a favourite of Graham Greene's. Before that, the noted French writer Charles Péguy used it. In whatever context, the words have a mystic resonance, arousing as they do something divine and almost out of human comprehension.

The concept is extremely well realised in the film *Dead Man Walking*, the story of the remarkable relationship between a thug, murderer and rapist condemned to death, and a nun. It is a very powerful film, worth seeing – for Catholics almost essential viewing, in spite of the grim treatment of its unpleasant theme and its harsh and unrelenting realism.

It is rare for a film, particularly an American film, to convey spirituality in a pure state, just as it exists, without sentimentality. In many ways it is a movie which grace has touched.

In this way it reminded me of Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse*, a movie of the greatest simplicity. In that movie, the first sign of the coming sanctity of Thérèse was when as a child she prayed repeatedly for a man condemned to the guillotine, a particularly vicious human being seeming beyond redemption. Thérèse's exultant expression of joy when she read that he had asked for the sacraments before his execution set the tone for the rest of the film.

In *Dead Man Walking*, the outward signs of inner grace are well shown by Susan Sarandon in a performance of intense spirituality worn lightly and lit by humour, for which she well deserved her Oscar as best leading actress. In fact, she gives one of the best performances from an actress that I have ever seen. It is surprising that Sean Penn, who gives a brilliant performance as the murderer, was not even nominated.

Briefly, Sister Helen Prejean, a St Joseph of Medaille nun, whose apostolate is uncloistered social work, is asked by the condemned Matthew

Poncelet to be his spiritual adviser, in place of the Catholic chaplain. Sister Helen really exists. In fact, the film is based on her book of the same title, and she was technical adviser to the film.

As the director and writer of a film against the death penalty, Tim Robbins does not take the easy way out. If ever there was a suitable candidate to be put to death, one feels it was Poncelet (who in the film is a composite character of two death row inmates counselled by Sister Helen). To start on a low key, he is a liar and a cheat. His real motive in seeking Sister Helen was not spiritual consolation but to manoeuvre her into backing an appeal. Then he is a traitor. He tries falsely to implicate his friend for ghastly crimes he committed himself. As for his crimes, he was responsible for the brutal murder of two teenagers in “Lovers’ Lane”, and the horrific rape of the girl, shown in flashback sequences in black and white. He is also a supporter of Hitler and a racist bigot.

The father of one of the dead teenagers, a Catholic, says to the nun protestingly: “He is evil, Sister. He is not an animal. Animals don’t do that sort of thing.” In this very unlikely inhabitation, Sister Helen finds the stuff of penitence and redemption. She does this not through preaching, not through pressure in the accepted sense, but by sheer force of spirituality and love. The arid deserts of Poncelet’s being seem to bloom – late, but still a flower or two.

In his final message, after the first lethal injection, Poncelet says: “It is wrong to kill, whether the state or a person does it.” He shows belatedly the strength of his latent humanity. We are all sinners, but we all have a spark of the divine too.

The title of the movie, incidentally, comes from the words traditionally shouted by a warder in front of the condemned man on his way to the execution place: “Dead man walking.”

April 21, 1996

Elizabeth, a distorted history

In a film which claims historic accuracy, one is entitled not to expect extreme and rampant bias.

Specific anti-Catholicism is not often seen in motion pictures. I must have reviewed at least 4,000 of them, though I have long since lost count, so in a way I am in a position to say.

In fact, in the golden years of Hollywood, movies were in general quite pro-Catholic. That great actor Spencer Tracy, a staunch Catholic himself, lent his talents to the portraying of many a priest, and from the heart. Pat O'Brien, another Catholic, practically made a career of the cinematic priesthood. And Bing Crosby weighed in memorably at least twice. When a spiritual man of the cloth was needed in the script, he was almost invariably a Catholic priest.

In the historic "epics", those vast costume vistas of action and blood (from a tube), I cannot recall one in which the Catholics were the villains, and they were a Hollywood mass audience staple. The mass audiences of the United States were largely Protestant, and the money men almost exclusively Jews, so this was curious in a way. The censors in the film industry were largely Catholic, though, which was undoubtedly a factor.

So, a popular and much acclaimed movie which is anti-Catholic to the point of distorting historical fact comes as a rather unpleasant surprise. Such a film is *Elizabeth*. A British film, it had much pre-release ballyhoo, preparing audiences to expect something in the tradition of historical fact, much as it was, without American distortion.

Elizabeth was nominated for many Oscars, but did not do so well in the event. The young Australian Cate Blanchett as Elizabeth was expected to win, but lost to another young actress playing an Elizabethan, Gwyneth Paltrow, in the generally overrated *Shakespeare in Love*.

Elizabeth has been very successful at the box office, and has in general received respectful reviews – not deservedly, in my opinion. I found the film pedestrian and dull, masking a pageant and lurid pop action behind a spurious façade of historic reality which, when analysed, was no more real, but less entertaining, than the old Hollywood hokum of such films as *Elizabeth And Essex*, in which Bette

Davis emoted as was her enjoyable wont, and Errol Flynn was as handsome and dashing as anyone could hope to see or to aspire to.

The point really is, though, that in a film which claims historic accuracy, one is entitled not to expect extreme and rampant bias. This distortion is not simply in one episode or another. It is woven into the very fabric of the film. The period of Elizabeth's reign was one of the bloodiest suppression of the Catholic Church. Not for nothing was she known as Bloody Bess. Evelyn Waugh called her the vilest of her sex. Certainly, the events over which she presided showed her to be a monster of cruelty, not least the torturing to death by the most cruel hanging, drawing and quartering, preceded by long periods of torture, of the English martyrs, notably the Jesuit saint Edmund Campion.

The movie presents her as an innocent if slightly headstrong young lady, devout in her Protestant practices, and not, incidentally, a virgin. The camera bathes her constantly in light, imparting a joy and radiance. Mary, the Catholic from whom she took over, on the contrary, is a fat and bloated old hag, literally crouched in darkness, muttering with a hint of vile obscenity over heads. She lives in darkness, Elizabeth in radiant light. The point is belaboured, literally and metaphorically, in the film.

The Catholics, when they are not villains, are buffoons, as is the debauched emissary of the king of France, with designs on marrying Elizabeth. The pope (played by the now venerable John Gielgud) is shown briefly, like an aging but still malevolent Mafioso godfather in the process of sending a hitman to rub out the troublesome Elizabeth. He happens to be a priest, one of those pesky Jesuits.

The devotion of the people of England to the Blessed Virgin is briefly hinted at in one part of the film; accurate, as England was known as the Dowry of Mary.

The general feeling conveyed, though, is that the people have been put upon by a not only villainous and heretical but a foreign and traitorous conspiracy. It is up to Elizabeth to put things right, by no matter what means of treachery and duplicity, to say nothing of most barbarous tortures.

There has always been doubt and conjecture about the physical virginity of Elizabeth. It is possible, even probable, that she called herself "the Virgin Queen" in emulation of the Queen of Heaven, hoping to thus win esteem from her earthly subjects.

June 13, 1999

Lord of the Rings on screen

Sadly, in South Africa Lord of the Rings has been beaten in money terms by the lamentable Mr Bones.

A recent article in *The Southern Cross* described Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring* series as profoundly Catholic. In its broader sense this is certainly true, though the writer does not deal with the Catholic Church, nor indeed with our Lord at all. This is all in what literary critics are apt to call the sub-text.

The first film of Tolkien's work, *The Lord of the Rings*, bears this out. It is unusual and gratifying to see a mass-circulation movie with a moral message. *The Lord of the Rings*, faced internationally with *Harry Potter*, is dominating box-offices worldwide.

Sadly, as a barometer of taste in South Africa, it has been beaten in terms of money by Leon Schuster's lamentable *Mr Bones*, in which most of the alleged "humour" is on an astonishing level of crude vulgarity, largely involving excretory processes. At times this is worse even than the American "teen flick" which specialises in such things. Still, *The Lord of the Rings* will last, and *Mr Bones* will not.

Two more films will complete the trilogy, the releases to be separated by a year. So in huge effort and vast expenditure of money, to say nothing of prodigal imagination, these rival the *Star Wars* series. It may even make more money.

Of course, the *Fellowship of the Rings* series has cult status, but it is a very large cult. There are many people who are totally devoted to the books. There are those who hunger for the release of fantasy to a better world, for this one we labour and breathe in often does not seem to be doing very well at all. That is not really a feature of modern times. It has always been the way.

Tolkien, who was a Catholic, created from extraordinarily fecund and vigorous imagination, another world, an ancient place in which chivalric values were recognised and good and evil were clear cut. He was an academic, and he wrote with clarity and erudition, an unfortunately rare mixture.

He was a man of rare insight too. He wrote once, and I quote from memory,

that the Catholic Church was the most democratic institution ever known to man. A man of humble peasant stock could, for example, rise to sit on the throne of St Peter. Usually the Church's hierarchical structure obscures this fact. There is more than one form of democracy. Certainly, the Church transcends the rigid caste and status groupings always so beloved of man. To take one example, the difference between peasant and the aristocracy, with the czar as the ultimate autocrat, in imperial Russia was almost inconceivable. In any case, an institution which sees us all as equal in sin can have little of the élite about it.

To revert to Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* film, which will be around for some time. As a movie it merits such an adjective as "super-colossal", so beloved of the old Hollywood. Even in these days of high-tech special effects, when the extraordinary has become the norm, the visual impact of the film is literally near-stunning. The gloom and hideousness of the subterranean caverns are contrasted with startling vivid impact to the charming bucolic life of the Hobbits in a sort of idealised English countryside worthy of the great PG Wodehouse. There are also towering palaces, great cliffs, valleys and mountains. In fact, the visual felicities are a constant delight, without that garish vulgarity which often creeps into film "super-productions".

There is a certain Catholicism about that as the imagination is expressed often in a pure Gothic style which illumines the great cathedrals of France. There is an upward flight of fantasy into light and splendour, as well as hideous figures which would fit with no questions asked among the gargoyles of Notre Dame-de-Paris.

The basic theme of the entire series is a titanic struggle between good and evil, expressed in the ring of the title, which is very Catholic. There is no temporising. Evil is there in all its ugliness, and so is good with its beauties, but its frailties in the human form too. In one scene, evil is repulsed at the cost of a supreme sacrifice to the words of "You will not pass", which is reminiscent of the exorcism ceremony. It has the same effect of the routing of the forms of darkness as had the film *The Exorcist*.

The human actors, truth to tell, are not all that much. The special effects and the moral are the stars, and how gratifying it is to see a mass-audience film in which morality takes the lead.

February 13-19, 2002

And now to Harry Potter

Nearly all fairy stories have elements of magic. Children do not accept this as part of real, everyday life.

Film box offices of the world are dominated just now by two films of fantasy and magic. I can't recall this ever happening before; and it is the more curious when we see that it does not accord with the spirit of our times, which is predominantly materialistic, sceptical and secular. Perhaps it is a counter-reaction. It was Hegel, I think, who said that every force provokes its counter-force.

Last week I wrote of the film version of JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, a work in which one can discern a truly Catholic spirit, though not on the surface.

Then I went to see the contrasting Harry Potter film. The forerunner of a series, it is subtitled *The Philosopher's Stone*, so Harry Potter will be with us for some time to come. (The Tolkien film is also the first of a series.) Including sequels, video releases, television, T-shirts and one thing or another, the bespectacled schoolboy will be the centre of a major billion-dollar industry. The author, JK (Joanne Kathleen) Rowling, has risen in a short time from a sort of genteel poverty to immense wealth.

The book is credited with getting millions of children to read – truly a great achievement and worthy of the highest praise in an age when young minds are systematically warped by television: not so much in the sense of sex and violence, though that would be bad enough, but in an excessive and virtually mindless banality.

The film *Harry Potter* has been criticised on grounds that it can influence suggestible young minds to the acceptance of magic which can bring in its train such undesirable things as the New Age cult of witches, known as wicans. (One has even been appointed a prison chaplain in that home of the bizarre, the United States.) The practices of the occult have been condemned by the Catholic Church, not only by tradition but in the New Catechism. Occult practices can be not far off the unleashing of demonic forces, and one must be very careful indeed with such things.

A careful look at Harry Potter, though, convinced me that these fears are largely without substance as related to the film. Nearly all fairy stories have elements of magic and the average child does not accept this as part of real, everyday life. I have never heard of anyone accusing Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* as being diabolic, or the classic stories of the French master Charles Perrault.

Young Harry, it is true, is a magician who in his early childhood lives perforce among Muggles: crass, materialistic people who have no magic in their souls. He then takes his rightful place in Hogwarts School; something like a magical Eton, which trains "wizards". It has at least one moment of pure Catholicism, and it is a key scene, when Richard Harris (excellent, as usual, as the headmaster Dumbledore) speaks of the power and redemptive quality of love and self-sacrifice.

Considered as a film, whether it justifies the almost unprecedented hype is another matter. The direction, by Chris Columbus, is somewhat plodding, it is too long and the story takes a wearying time to unfold. There are, of course, excellent special effects, but these days one takes that simply for granted. There are incidental splendid moments, such as the terrifying three-headed dog who guards the stone, and consistently delightful performances by the children.

Perhaps a little more wonder could have been invoked. Often the magic cloys, becomes mundane, and there is a surfeit of it. Certainly the Judy Garland classic *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) had more to it, as did the film of *Alice in Wonderland* (1933), with Gary Cooper appropriate and marvellous as the White Knight, a part he could have been born to play.

The conception of the Quest, in this case for the philosopher's stone, a part of much Catholic-inspired literature, is a little insipid in this film. One never gets the impression of awesome power. With regard to depth, *Fellowship of the Rings* is better, almost like a Gothic palace dominating a pretty little medieval cottage.

I would say, and I know there are those who disagree, that Harry Potter is modest and pleasant enough entertainment that is not without its moral lessons. The good guys win, and they are usually very agreeable people too.

February 20-26, 2002

People (Part I)

JP2 is indeed da man

Insider tip: If you want to meet the pope, you stand with the infants and crippled.

“JP2, you da man.” Pope John Paul II read that card, sent him by a young black American, and laughed, clearly delighted by the young man’s enthusiasm.

This little anecdote shows a great deal about the Holy Father, including his most extraordinary gift for languages, and his love of young people. This incident took place when Bishop Sam Jacobs, from the diocese of Alexandria in the United States, brought the pope a “spiritual bouquet” from the people in his diocese. Bishop Jacobs spoke of what he saw as the pope’s “overflowing love” for young people, and said the pope was truly delighted by the young man’s enthusiasm.

The electronic age has shown us many examples of John Paul’s pure delight at young people from the very earliest age, and of his face harrowing with compassion at any sign of suffering and a light of sympathy that seems to come from another world.

Bishop Jacobs was speaking at a ceremony at the Franciscan University at Steubenville, Ohio, when John Paul was chosen to receive the 1999 Shepherd Award. Father Michael Scanlan, president of the university, said: “The number one hero in my life is John Paul II.” He spoke of the pope’s outstanding service as a pastor of the Church, during the 25th annual conference of priests, deacons and seminarians.

He went on: “One of the first tremendous things he did as pope was as shepherd of the people of Poland. Speaking to more than a million Poles, he said: ‘You are men. You have human dignity.’ He, more than any other person, unravelled the Soviet Empire.” Father Scanlan also praised Pope John Paul for the example he set when he faced his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, put his arm round him, and forgave him.

I vividly remember seeing that interview on television in France. It was through soundproof glass in a jail, which did not hide the extraordinary expression on the face of the pope, showing as it did total forgiveness and a

remarkable compassion. He looked not intense but rather strangely mystical. To put it simply, this was not the way the average man would look at someone who had tried to murder him, and had caused him intense pain, which probably lingers to this day.

Father Scanlan said this pope had always been deeply committed to fostering prayer in others, and had specifically encouraged the leaders of the new ecclesial communities and movements to work together to achieve their shared goals. He told a revealing story about the Holy Father, revealing his love for the least of his brethren.

“I had been to several general assemblies before, and I had learned that if you want to meet the pope you stand with the infants and crippled. Well, this time I was really convinced by the Holy Spirit when I saw some tourists nearby. They were hoping they would get a chance to see the pope. I pulled them up to my choice spot and then I left. Later that day, I returned to my room and found a notice inviting me celebrate Mass with the pope.”

The priest said celebrating Mass with the pope was an unforgettable experience. “The pope has said that every time he celebrates the Mass, it is the most sublime experience he has in life. He says that it is not only the most sacred duty he performs, but also his heart’s deepest desire.”

John Paul has long since celebrated his golden jubilee as a priest. On that occasion he remarked that never once had he failed to say a daily Mass during all those years. To watch his face as he elevates the host must bring home to the least observant the sublimity and intensity of his feeling.

January 2, 2000

Dislodging Marmaduke

This vague acquaintance turned up uninvited at my house at about 1am, with four friends and relatives.

The other day a correspondent wrote that the people I have selected to write about for *The Southern Cross* are, on the whole, a virtuous and interesting lot of solid merits. I suppose that in a Catholic journal, a few human beacons should shine. We get enough of the opposite, reading the political and police sections of the secular press. Well, in obverse, here is a character who could be described by none of those glowing adjectives and who, perforce, has been much in my thoughts recently.

In a way, he reminded me of *The Man Who Came To Dinner*, that amusing American play about a tyrant, Alexander Woolcott, who came to dinner, broke is leg, and stayed, an unwanted guest for months. The guest with a broken leg was a famous wit, though, and did provide his share of entertainment, although often of an extremely acid kind.

My acquaintance Marmaduke was nothing like that. I shall call him Marmaduke because it is nothing like his real name, although it seems in a way to fit him. There is no chance that he would read these lines because he lives in a small, faraway European country where English is not spoken. In any case, there will be nothing libellous in them.

Marmaduke is a Catholic, or he says he is, although his views seem to be on the far stretches of the unorthodox, to put it mildly. For example, he thought Communion was an individual choice, which had basically nothing to do with confession or being in a state of grace. What was important to him, for a reason I was quite unable to grasp, were “the hands” of the people who gave it.

The parish priest of Villeveyrac, l’Abbé Jean Baumel, is an extremely perceptive man, and after one brief meeting (just an introduction really), he told me he thought that Marmaduke was a very unhappy man. This he is, although he puts on a continuous act of somewhat manic silent laughter, with shoulders shaking and always, quite disconcertingly, at nothing visible – rather like one of those cats which give one the creeps by suddenly stalking an invisible object in a seemingly empty room.

This I suppose is yet another example of the fact that true Catholicism should bring joy and pleasure. Not, of course, that I would presume to judge Marmaduke in this respect. As they say in French: “The heart has its reason, and the reason knows not the heart.” In any case, one does not wish to be pharasaical. Still, when someone describes the Church simply as a refuge (from what?) and seems to put “the hands” above the sacraments, one is, I think, entitled to question a little the quality of a belief which seems very fragile.

One knows also of the duties of corporeal charity, but I did not find that Marmaduke was in need of these. He behaved as if he was, though. Although I barely know him and would describe him as a slight acquaintance, he turned up uninvited at my modest house at about 1am, with four friends and relatives. The others were polite and left almost immediately. Marmaduke asked if he could stay the night. I got the impression that his companions were rather pleased to see the back of him. He talked throughout a major television film that I told him I had stayed up especially to see.

The “night” extended to two weeks. All my hints were ignored. I took the trouble of going to Montpellier to find out the times of an excellent train which would have dropped him fast at his hometown outside France. He did not even look at it. Goaded, I asked: “When do you think you will be leaving?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said airily. “It might be in some months. I like France.”

He also had an infuriating way of helping himself to, say, coffee or a drink, and settling down in front of me without offering me anything. I might add that he is over 40, that he does not work and as far as I can make out rarely has, but has always been supported by his parents. He does not go short.

Eventually I dislodged Marmaduke by telling him that my brother was arriving the following day (true), and that this brother, Michael, was a man of violent and ungovernable rages, driven to homicidal frenzies at the sight of superannuated, work-shy hippies (false, a little white lie).

At any rate, it worked. I am an early riser, but before I was up the following morning, Marmaduke had folded his tent and gone.

December 7, 1986

The atheist who met God

Frossard was educated in atheism. His father was the secretary-general of the French Communist Party.

The death of André Frossard did not make banner headlines in Southern Africa, nor, I should think, anywhere else in the English-speaking world.

Yet he was a man of great influence, deep culture, profound piety, a household word in some parts of his native France, where he was heaped with the highest honours. In fact, he was the recipient a few years ago of what is regarded as the highest membership to the French Academy, which is restricted to 40 and who are known as the “immortals”. I happened to be living in France when he was received with pomp and splendour, dressed in the most elegant ceremonial uniform. The event was, as usual, highly publicised in radio, television and newspapers, with the main newspaper, *Le Monde*, reprinting in full the lengthy and learned speeches – one of proposals, and the other of acceptance of office.

Frossard showed his usual delightful humour. He was probably the best known convert to Catholicism in France, where there are not many converts for the simple reason that most people are baptised and have received First Communion, so that even those called “non-practisers” are at least nominal Catholics. Frossard, the son of a militant atheist, received no religious instruction whatever. He told the story of his conversion, using a striking simile.

At precisely 5:15 on the afternoon of July 8, 1935, André, aged 20, entered the Parisian chapel of Les Soeurs de l’Adoration Repatrice in the rue Ulm to get out of the rain while waiting for a friend. There he experienced an instantaneous conversion.

“I was as surprised to find myself a Catholic on leaving this chapel as I would have been to find myself a giraffe on leaving a zoo.” This phrase was a big headline in *Le Monde*, enough to catch anyone’s attention.

There are basically two types of conversion: one, like St Paul, on the road to Damascus, accompanied by a flash of illumination; the other gradual and reflective. Frossard was an example of the first kind, I belong to the second.

There are features common to both, principally a feeling of illumination. Frossard was highly articulate, of course, and he has left several vivid descriptions of this seemingly miraculous phenomenon. He described it as being of luminous nature, where truth was suddenly unveiled to him in all its glory. He said he emerged from the chapel burning to warn passers-by that they were walking on the edge of infinity.

From that moment on, his Catholicism never wavered. He kept the story of the nature of his conversion to himself for more than 30 years, until he wrote a delightful, clever and moving book called *Dieu Existe, Je l'ai rencontré* (God Exists, I have met him) published in 1969, winning him the Grand Prize for Catholic Literature. Incidentally, the entire book was serialised in *The Southern Cross*.

Born in 1915, Frossard was educated in atheism. His father, Ludovic Oscar Frossard, was the secretary-general of the French Communist Party. André said his principal influences were Voltaire and Rousseau, and he wandered through his formative years in a sea of idle scepticism on a kind of interior island surrounded by fog. That fog was to lift, to be replaced by almost blinding light.

Frossard was a man of letters and an intellectual, with a polished and urbane style and a gentle wit. He wrote several books, but was best known as a newspaper columnist, writing for an incredible 33 years a column for the daily Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* under his famous by-line Le Cavalier Seul, the Lone Cavalier. It was rarely more than about 40 lines long, written often with pithy wit in a style which has been compared to Voltaire and Swift.

He died only a few hours after writing his last words. They are worth repeating – profound, yet clearly expressed, with a concern shared by many people of the growing evils of materialism and self-interest:

Europe has more and more members and less and less soul. It used to have one, which was called Christianity and which has protected it more than once from the worst. Today, it has neither soul nor thought, and has staked everything on immediate self-interest – in profit. If self-interest is an effective agent of cohesion when things are going well, when they are going badly there is no explosive more powerful.”

January 11, 1998

Vagabond in Zimbabwe

On investigation it was found that it was quite impossible for the blood to have leaked from the body to the floor.

There is obviously a gathering devotion to John Bradburne, the “Fool of God”, an Englishman, a man of romantic good looks, who led an extraordinary wandering life of extreme poverty and ended in a leper colony in what was then Rhodesia.

He was killed, shot, in the guerrilla war, probably because the insurgents thought he was a spy. There could have been no less a militaristic man, in spite of the fact that he was a hero with the Gurkhas in Malaya and Burma in World War 2.

I have had a letter from Celia Brigstocke, who is a niece of Bradburne, after she read an article I had written about her uncle in *The Southern Cross*. Mrs Brigstocke is also the secretary of the John Bradburne Memorial Society in Hereford, England. Mrs Brigstocke corrects a common misapprehension. She writes: “A [canonisation] cause for John has not been started at all yet. It would be a fine thing if it had, but we have yet to obtain approval of the archbishop of Harare before any procedures can begin.”

Since his death in 1979 there have been many signs of sanctity, and he is becoming an object of veneration with annual pilgrimages to Mutemwa, the leper settlement in which he lived in devoted friendship with the ill people, and Chigona, the mountain to which he went to pray. At his requiem Mass a pool of blood was seen under his coffin. On investigation it was found that it was quite impossible for the blood to have leaked from the body to the floor. Also, there have been many reports of miracles and cures and answers to prayer. Many have turned to the faith in emulation of his extraordinary life.

Mrs Brigstocke also sent an interesting video, entitled *On Eagle's Wings*, being the life and death of John R Bradburne (1921-79). This forms a companion piece to another video which I recently saw and wrote about, *Vagabond of God*, made and produced by Norman Servais of Metanoia Ministries in Cape Town. Any comparisons would be invidious. The two videos are complementary. The English one is a more encompassing record of a life, the local has more vivid immediacy. Both form an invaluable film

record, suitable for religious communities, libraries, schools or simply private possession.

On Eagle's Wings has interesting footage of the places where Bradburne was born and of his early background. A convert, he was one of the children of an Anglican vicar. Both videos are human in treatment, not sanctimonious or over-reverential, of interest to lay people and non-Catholics.

On an old, almost antique typewriter in the bush, Bradburne wrote poetry voluminously, it was said compulsively. Some of it has been published under the title *Songs of the Vagabond*, edited by Professor David Crystal. One of them, appropriately, is printed on the video:

Upon the feast of Little St Thérèse
At maybe four o'clock of afternoon
Leaving the track which cattle take to graze
On higher pastures from the vale, alone,
Together with his dogs took rest awhile
Nor dreamed that there nest eagle-pair in style.

Faint echoes of the style of the great Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins can be heard there. Bradburne also wrote memorably: "God's love within you is your native land."

The Society also publishes a newsletter. The most recent says: "Many believe his legacy would lead to sainthood, and now, two decades on, the cause is gathering momentum." It goes on: "The Society is now in the process of collating relevant material for the John Bradburne cause file. We are most grateful for the letters we receive with your testimonies. Please do keep sending these in, as the written statements are vital for our records."

The best record of Bradburne's life so far is *Strange Vagabond of God*, by Father John Dove SJ published by Gracewing. The life of this eternal pilgrim, by any standard a most extraordinary character, is chronicled by his friend from Malaya onwards. Father Dove, a friend of Bradburne's, also lends his urbane and articulate presence to both videos.

January 30, 2000

* Shortly after this column appeared, Archbishop Chaikapa of Harare (who died in April 2003) sanctioned Bradburne's cause.

Archbishop Mohamed is dead

'What is that?' Molly asked.

'Only the bombs,' shrugged the hairdresser.

"Archbishop Mohammed" is dead. With that sad event, it seems to me, an era has ended and certainly a light of Christian example and practice has gone out.

More properly, of course, he was Cardinal Leon-Etienne Duval who died recently in Algiers at the age of 93. At the time of gathering fierce Muslim fundamentalism in the area, marked by horrible murders of Catholic religious, it needed courage for a frail old man to stay there. Courage was a quality Cardinal Duval never lacked. Pope John Paul II said that Cardinal Duval's life was a beacon of encouragement. He meant in the difficult task of Catholic-Muslim relations, but it was such a light in many other fields as well.

The cardinal earned his derisive nickname, which he rather cherished, at the time of the long and bloody, always horrific war of independence in Algeria, both a civil and colonial struggle, which spread from North Africa to metropolitan France. I was in France during much of that momentous time, which brought about profound changes in the society, bringing De Gaulle back to power, possibly to save France for the second time, and giving birth to the Fifth Republic as it is today. The *plastiqueurs*, the plastic bombers, were everywhere. Life, particularly in Paris, was punctuated by explosions.

I was living part of the time in a small hotel in the Rue Bonaparte on the Left Bank. Jean-Paul Sartre lived in a flat quite near (this was in the early '60s.) I was awoken one night by an explosion, but in those days one thought little of it, so I simply went to sleep again. The following morning I saw a huge blast which had torn away most of the foyer of the entrance to Sartre's flat. People hurried by. No one took much notice.

Sartre, of course, was of the Left. The bomb blasters or *plastiqueurs* were of the Right and were supporters or members of the White Algerians, known as *pieds noirs* (black feet) for reasons no one has really adequately explained.

An old friend, the late Molly Norton, wife of the former editor of the *Cape Times*, Victor Norton, was in Paris at the same time. She told me that soon after arriving she was having her hair done when a loud bang caused her to jump.

“What is that?” she asked. “Only the bombs,” shrugged the hairdresser.

It was against this background that the then Archbishop Duval became very famous, fiercely hated and fiercely loved. The White Algerians, the colonialists, were mainly Catholic, even if not all practising. The war basically was between Muslim Algerian nationalists and the whites who claimed vigorously that Algeria was not a country or even a territory, but a part of France. So, naturally, the opinions of an archbishop who was also the bishop of Algiers mattered a great deal.

Archbishop Duval backed Algerian independence and he greatly deplored the excesses of the French army there, more particularly the use of torture. Those years and the deplorable methods used have come back to haunt France ever since.

As a Catholic, Archbishop Duval could not have been more exemplary. His mien was saintly. This, of course, made him all the more infuriating to those, not all of the extreme Right, who feared for their possessions and even their lives. Many of them had never even seen France. Their families had been in Algeria for generations. The fighters for freedom they regarded as terrorists and an ill-disciplined rabble (how many times have we seen this formula re-enact itself?). Hence his soubriquet “Mohammed Duval” or “Archbishop Mohammed.”

It was not, of course, that Cardinal Duval was an Arab nationalist or a closet Muslim. He was simply a man of great and high Christian principle who had been exposed to racism and racist attitudes from being appointed bishop of Constantine soon after World War II. He began a lifetime in Algeria, after being appointed archbishop of Algiers. After independence, now in a Muslim country, he was undoubtedly responsible for the best relations between Catholics and Muslims in that whole troubled region, although three-quarters of his flock left the country. Probably to show his solidarity, he even adopted Algerian nationality, again a move which did not increase his popularity with right-wing whites.

Events in Algeria recently have not been happy, with in-fighting between Islamic groups, and anti-Catholic bigotry. All of this must have saddened greatly the late “Mohammed Duval”, but he would not have been discouraged; he would not have thought that his words and brave deeds had gone for nothing.

June 30, 1996

A hero's heartbreak

The boy was told that his father had killed Frenchmen in Germany, and had grown up believing this.

To be deported from France to the Nazi death camp of Buchenwald must have been very hard indeed. As a result of that terrible experience, to be deprived of a beloved son would make many people feel that life was having some kind of macabre joke, and would bring lasting bitterness.

This is what happened to Charles Plasse, now aged 75, of Villeveyrac. Charles, known to all as Papy (granddad, a term of endearment for an elderly man) has been marked by a lasting sadness, but he is of too good a heart to be bitter.

He started an eventful active life in the seminary, studying to become a priest, but left because he did not feel that he had such a vocation. I have always felt that this was a pity, for, along with other qualities, he has a deep compassion and a breadth of humanity that would have made him a good priest.

His son Emile is now in his early 50s, but Papy has not seen him since the boy was a baby. One of his most treasured mementos is a photograph in the register of a parish church of the boy's baptismal certificate.

Papy was deported to Buchenwald along with not only Jews and gypsies, but also many patriotic Frenchmen. He has always had a tendency to bronchitis, and in winter has always worn protective flannelling. In the bitter cold of Buchenwald, he says wryly, such things were not issued to inmates. He owes his life to the charity and solidarity of some of his companions as well as to his trade, that of master carpenter, which enabled him to work and to keep exercised.

After the liberation, he returned to France in bad physical shape and in miserable conditions; not exactly a rousing welcome. He found his wife installed with someone else, and had no alternative but to leave.

His son, young as he was, did not know what was going on and never did know. Various people, it seems, systematically poisoned the boy's mind

from that early time. The worst feature though, Papy told me literally with tears in his eyes, was that the boy was told that his father had killed Frenchmen in Germany, and had grown up believing this. Ever since, he refused to have anything to do with his father.

“Me,” Charles said, “kill Frenchmen, or anybody else? It is impossible. I hate hunting, I detest bullfights. I am reluctant to eat even rabbit.”

In southern France, let me tell you, hunting is a favourite sport, and to many people bullfights are an obsession, with huge corridas in Béziers (where Papy was born) and Nîmes, among other places.

Papy’s story is a sad and unjust affair. He is a loving example of Christian charity. He lived for many years in a town near here, a very pretty place, with the delightful name of Pont-Saint-Esprit (bridge of the Holy Spirit), where he was celebrated for his work among the poor. There were always places at his table for those who had no money, he gave shelter to many homeless. He was compared to Abbé Pierre, whom all in France consider the living French embodiment of Christian charity in action. He was asked to stand for mayor, but being a man of modest nature and hating any form of public ostentation, he refused.

Now retired, he is still an example of kindness and charity, and to my knowledge has helped many a person in many ways, always in the spirit of the Gospels, without ostentation.

A large, rugged, burly man with the face of a somewhat battered cherub, he is ever ready with laughter and tears, as is the way of the South. His dearest wish, I am sure, is to heal this rift with his son, based as it is simply on slanderous accusations. For Charles, love and human warmth are very important indeed; but I think it is paternal love that counts most for him in this world.

February 10, 1991

Going Places
(in Europe)

The church off Red Square

Under glasnost religious practices gain. Although they were never illegal, they certainly were strongly discouraged.

To attend a Mass in the heart of Moscow is not exactly an everyday experience for most of us. Happily it fell to my lot about two weeks ago when making a tour of Moscow and Leningrad.

The impressions one gets from such a tour are varied and multiple, intense and often contradictory. Russia is now in a state of excitement, it is volatile and there are many currents working in opposing directions. I will not attempt, and, not knowing the Russian language, I am not qualified to make any analysis of the political and social situation in that huge and beautiful country. It is impossible though, to avoid mentioning the phenomena known as perestroika and glasnost. Perestroika is restructuring, glasnost means transparency.

There is now what seems total freedom of speech in Russia. Everybody says what they want, and they are not limited by such legal bothers as the law of libel. In fact, I had many discussions there, and I do not remember ever meeting two Russians who thought the same thing. Criticisms of the government and the Communist Party were very common and freely expressed, often by officials such as guides and state-appointed lecturers.

Perestroika is thought by many to be too sudden, and to be introducing strains in the society, such as the development of criminal groups and individuals.

It is under the principle of glasnost that religious practices gain. Although they were never illegal, they certainly were strongly discouraged.

The pope said the Russians were a deeply religious people, and indeed, there are signs of this everywhere. So, to return to the Mass. It is very easy to find Orthodox churches, which are in the majority, but I did not need to do my favourite Sherlock Holmes impersonation to find a Catholic church and a Mass. Indeed, I simply asked at the information counter at my hotel, and the courteous young lady there glanced at her files, wrote out in the Russian script the address of the church and the times of the Sunday Masses. I have had difficulties with obtaining such information in both South African and English hotels, incidentally.

Because I had booked to go on a sightseeing tour of the Kremlin, an unexpectedly huge area, the Mass at 6pm suited me best, and I duly wended my way to a small street right in the centre of Moscow, not far from Red Square. There in a quiet street I found a church, seating I would estimate about 800 people, set back in a charming and well-tended garden.

The Mass was concelebrated by two priests, both in their thirties I should estimate, slowly and with evident gravity and piety. It was strange to hear the familiar words in Russian, naturally very easy to follow, and to see the familiar gestures exactly the same as in my French village parish church.

A feature I found particularly striking, though, was not only the obvious devotion of the congregation, but its comparative youth. Where I live in the south of France, most of the regular Massgoers, as the parish priest says, are over 50. The Moscow church was crowded and most of the people there were obviously under 40 and there were many in their 20s and younger.

It is amazing that such devotion can have found a home after so much discouragement and one does not have to look far to see the work of the Holy Spirit.

This does not mean that conditions from a Catholic point of view are perfect, indeed they are far from it. There is many a former church which is now a museum. Within the Kremlin walls there are three cathedrals, but now they are museums; one, always crowded, with the most magnificent collection of icons I have ever seen.

Nevertheless, things are improving for Catholics, whatever the social uncertainties of perestroika and the results of the most involved internal politics. A striking feature is the depth of the devotion, and the mere fact of the purity of its survival.

As the French say, the wind is in the sails, and whatever happens in the enigmatic future of Russia, one thing I am convinced of, is that the Catholic faith will survive, increase and prosper.

August 19, 1990

Tuscany: Bathroom with a view

About 700 people live here, and there are four churches. There are only two bars.

Monticello Amiata has to the non-Italian ear a beautiful, not to say celestial sound about it, mingling as it does the suggestion of mountains, heaven and love.

As it happens, Monticello Amiata is a small village in Tuscany, where we recently spent a holiday with some old friends who live in idyllic surroundings in a large white house on a hilltop on a farm. Even the view from the bathroom window, like a framed renaissance painting, is over the plains to a remote castle, perched in the upper left-hand corner.

The village of Monticello Amiata itself is on top of a hill (so common in the south of Europe), about 700 metres above sea level. It is quite near Siena and Florence. About 700 people live there, and there are four churches (all Catholic, for this is Italy). There are only two bars.

Those facts, however, are misleading. The bars are always full. One cannot, alas, say that for the churches. In fact, the four churches have only one priest, and he is in charge of two other parishes as well. This has the result that there is usually only one Mass on a Sunday, and rarely a daily Mass. The priest himself, Don Pepe, is a robust man who manages also to find time to run a farm, largely for charitable purposes.

Don Pepe does not lead a life of ease and leisure. A parishioner to whom I spoke said that Don Pepe was known particularly for his generous gifts of money and time for charitable purposes. He spoke of the priest as a saintly man of the very highest ideals, who put his faith into practice and worked hard. His three parishes are far flung, and he must cover a lot of ground in his old car. In a way this is encouraging; in another it is sad to see even Italy straining under the scarcity of priests and having to make do on the great efforts, in this instance, of one mortal man.

By alternating the churches when Masses are celebrated, all four in Monticello Amiata are still in function, but to know when and in which church the Sunday Mass will be said, one has to keep a sharp eye on the notice board in the vil-

lage square. The times vary: 8 and 11 in the morning and 5 in the afternoon being favourites.

Perhaps the most interesting of the churches is a small one in which no Mass was celebrated while I was there, about 2km outside the village. This church, I was told, was used by resistance fighters in the dark days of the Second World War when the partisans took to the mountains. Looking at the secluded place in green and the beautiful surroundings, one could imagine the secret and dangerous Masses attended by hunted men.

Right on top of the mountain, dominating town and plans, is an ornate church in Baroque style. Stopping short of flamboyance, it avoids shallow prettiness, is pleasing to the eye and refreshing to the soul. Beauty does not have to be severe, and it can contain a sort of florid charm. This church says that more clearly than words.

I was particularly struck by a Mass I attended at a church with a poetic name, which roughly translates as Our Lady of the Valleys and Fields. This is also in Italian Baroque style, almost a beautiful sugarcake confectionery of a spiritual dimension.

Don Pepe was not able to be there, so the celebrant was Don Abstemio, parish priest of nearby Arcidoso, a saintly-looking man of charm and warmth, handsome in the style of the actor and director Vittorio de Sica. Incidentally, I was told that it was whispered that Don Abstemio had asked to be moved from Monticello as more than one woman had fallen in love with him here, and had made this embarrassingly obvious.

I have rarely heard a Mass said with such warmth as this priest brought to it. At the peace handshake, for example, a radiant smile illuminated his gentle face, and with a wide gesture he seemed to impart himself and to encourage a spirit of peace and love. It was not in the least theatrical. Similarly, after the blessing he looked with a benevolent and fatherly eye at the flock there gathered, the same delightful smile appeared, he raised his hands, and in a conversational tone said simply: ‘Buona sera’, the Italian evening salutation.

“Have a good evening.” The familiar words took on a new meaning, their true meaning normally being hidden under the dull rust of usage and convention.

July 14, 1985

Enchanting Prague

An amusing painting shows the emaciated Kafka and the rotund Schwejk linking arms with convivial tankards of beer.

Prague to me is always associated with three most diverse personalities. These are (not in order) Franz Kafka, the good soldier Schwejk, and the Infant of Prague. On a recent visit to this city of enchantment, I paid my respects to all three in various ways.

The city of Prague (or Praha in Czech) is a city of considerable charm, split by the river Vltava. This is straddled by bridges which become places of endlessly shifting social encounters, where old friends meet and new friends are made.

Compared to most of the rest of Europe, and particularly England, restless consumer and acquisitive values seem to have left this gracious city relatively untouched. There are many old, twisting, winding, dark streets, the architecture is of another age; one steps back into a less garish past.

Possibly a factor in the prevailing atmosphere of art and culture is President Vaclav Havel, an international dramatist of considerable merit. It is seldom that an artist of any kind is president of a country.

Most Czechs are (at least nominally) Catholics, and the many churches, some of great beauty and antiquity, attest to this.

In short, Prague is a place in which one feels instantly at home. It is one of my favourite cities, an impression added to by the beauty of the place, the unhurried pace of living and the reserved charm of the inhabitants. This is to say nothing of the beer, which some claim to be the best in the world.

A good way to get there, incidentally, is the approach we took by coach from Vienna, about five hours through the romantic woods and forests of Bohemia, in which one can easily imagine poets, troubadours and warriors, snappish wolves and slaving boars. I am sure they are all still there in one way or another.

Now to these great personalities of Prague, to which can be added another, although information about him is a little vague – that is good King Wenceslas.

Most of us know that he looked out on the feast of Stephen when the snow was deep and crisp and even. Legend has it that King Wenceslas was a peace-loving saint who forgave his own murderers. He has given his name to the best-known thoroughfare in Prague, and the best-known statue, a noble equestrian work erected in 1913.

Franz Kafka was one of the most influential writers of this century, one of the few whose names have become a word: kafkaesque. Briefly, he wrote of the nightmares of totalitarianism before they really took shape, notably of people being arrested for unknown crimes and sentenced and tried by the logic only of dreams. His books, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, are haunted allegories, written by a master who lived in poverty.

The good soldier Schwejk was someone entirely different, a cowardly soldier who spurned any idea of military glory and whose thoughts were really only for his slovenly self. Although a fictional character, there is a bar in Prague where the original was supposed to have made wassail. I saw an amusing poster painting of the two, Kafka emaciated, Schwejk jovially rotund, linking arms with convivial tankards of beer.

The Infant of Prague is an object of pilgrimage and veneration in the Church of the Blessed Infant, Karmelicka, Prague I, a romantic twisting street which leads to the river and one of the most famous bridges. I went to a crowded Mass there one weekday morning. The feeling of devotion by pilgrims, many from Spain, was intense.

The figure, above the altar, is of a child, the Infant Jesus. The vestments are changed daily according to the liturgical need. The work came from Spain about 200 years ago. From there it passed to Margaret Vratislav of Bohemia, who dedicated it to the Discalced (barefooted) Carmelites. The veneration spread throughout the world.

After the monasteries were closed by Joseph II in 1784, the Infant became the property of the Knights of Malta. It now belongs directly to the arch-episcopate of Prague under the care of Franciscans.

Though the Infant figure could not be described as of great aesthetic value, as an object of pious veneration it has a great place, and, I found, a certain cumulative awe. Generation have received great benefit from the Infant of Prague.

August 6, 1995

Vienna: Place of music

*To borrow a phrase from an Austrian story,
the elevators are alive with the sound of muzak.*

Vienna is a city and a place of music. I can think of no other city I have visited in which the very stones seem so drenched in melody and counterpoint.

On a recent visit to Austria and the Czech Republic, I stayed for a while in a delightful hotel in the centre of Vienna in a cobbled street, forbidden to traffic, over which there was almost continuously transmitted typical Viennese music. It was mostly passages with some content: not at all like the bland and irritating American background music played in such things as lifts on the basis that they are supposed to be soothing; the stuff known as muzak. To borrow a phrase from an Austrian story, the elevators are alive with the sound of muzak.

Mighty figures haunt the past of Vienna (known by the locals as Wien), not least one of the people who changed the thought and behaviour patten of this century – Sigmund Freud. He lived in the city for 78 years before being driven out by the Nazis in 1938, to end his days in London the following year aged 83. Freud remained a Viennese. After escaping from the Nazis, he said: “The feeling of triumph on being liberated is too strongly mixed with sorrow, because in spite of everything, I still greatly love the prison from which I have been released.”

In spite of all these distinguished people, among them many musicians, including Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and the German-born Ludwig van Beethoven, who lived in what is sometimes called “the dream city”, the person with whom Vienna is for me most sentimentally associated did not even exist. He is a figure of fiction, a cinematographic fiction at that. At any rate, his ghost seems to be around every corner, and in particular the great fairground, the Prater, with its huge ferris wheel. Of course, too, the ghostly lingering melodies of Anton Karas, played on the typical Austrian instrument, the zither, drift after him.

I am speaking, of course, of Harry Lime, as unforgettably played by Orson Welles in the 1949 film by Sir Carol Reed, *The Third Man*. This was filmed in Vienna when the city was divided into four sectors by the Allies. People

in Vienna still talk about the making of this legendary film and the difficulties it posed: for example, of getting the rats, of which Vienna has a greater population than human beings, to behave suitably in the sewers, which played so major a part in the film.

In Vienna there are, of course, many superb Catholic churches, of which the major one is the Stefansdom, or St Stephen's cathedral – to most people the true emblem of the city. The writer Adalbert Stifter said more than a hundred years ago: "When you look at Vienna from a hilltop, of which there are several at a quite suitable distance, St Stephen's appears as a kind of hub, round which the spokes of the city revolve... It is said of the Viennese that they become homesick as soon as they can no longer see St Stephen's."

The cathedral dates to the 13th century. It is in a prevailing Gothic style, while Vienna as a whole is characterised by a prevailing ornate baroque. Among the cathedral's features are the Pummerin, the biggest bell in Austria, and the recognised artistic masterpiece, the Wiener Neustadt altarpiece and pulpit, built by Anton Pilgram, in the 16th century.

Another Catholic centre of enormous interest is now, somewhat misleadingly, known as the Monastery of the Scots, which can be visited as a museum. This is an old Benedictine monastery, founded in 1155 by the Duke of Babenberg, Heinrich II Jasomirgott. The monastery was reserved exclusively for Irish monks, who played a great part in European civilisation. The Latin term for Ireland is *Scotia major*, hence the name Scots. In 1488, a papal decree opened the doors to all nationalities, but the name has stuck to the present day.

Architecturally the monastery is fascinating. Originally Gothic, of which traces remain, it was renovated in baroque between 1638 and 1641. Probably the most important work of art, which is also of course sacred, is the winged altarpiece, in the late Gothic period. Another recognised masterpiece is the Altar of the Scots, a late Gothic painting now on view to the public.

A final observation: there are said to be more than 3,000 coffeehouses in Vienna. These are places often to wit and learning as well as sociability.

September 3, 1995

Dogs

Blanche, mon Booldog

*'When God had wanted to show
an example of perfect love, he created the dog.'*

We have a white British bulldog called Blanche who cuts a striking figure in the south of France. Which is not to say the bulldog is unknown here: far from it. There is a bulldog club, there are bulldog shows and there is even a quarterly magazine devoted to the breed called, rather amusingly, *Le bulldogger*. (A *bulldogger* is someone addicted to the breed and in French it is pronounced "booldogaire").

Blanche comes from England, from far-away Cambridgeshire, and it was there that we ventured across fenland to fetch her, a minute puppy with that strange look of an irritable but somehow loveable old man that very young bulldogs have.

She is called Blanche because she is white, and that is the French word for white. The British Kennel Club (she has the unusual distinction of being registered with both the British and French Kennel Clubs) added the name Marie as a distinguishing mark, so her full name has the somewhat saintly ring of Blanche-Marie de Villeveyrac.

A Greek who ran a wine shop in Cape Town, a religious man who loved dogs, once said to me that he thought that when God had wanted to show an example of perfect love, he created the dog. And indeed, looking at Blanche I often feel that in many ways and like most dogs, she is an example to all of us.

In the blisteringly hot summer of the Midi region of France, for example, she sleeps in the kitchen because it is the coolest part of the house, and bulldogs suffer greatly in hot weather. A companionable and affectionate dog who hates being by herself, she nevertheless each night waddles off to the kitchen and a lonely night. She is adept at expressing displeasure too, with a strange wail, like a muezzin call across a haunted desert, which she uses to devastating effect if kept too long at a café. Mercifully she never uses this singular and potent power of expression at night.

She will also never eat any food, no matter how tempting, which might carelessly have been left alone for long periods, and of course is overjoyed to see

one return. Like all dogs, she never sulks, and what human being who is not a saint can say that? The American poet Walt Whitman said that one of the reasons he liked animals was that they did not swear or complain about their condition.

The other morning I went to an 8am weekday Mass. I noticed that Blanche was following me, but I thought that when I reached the church (only a five minutes' walk away) she would return and find her own way home. She knows the by-ways of Villeveyrac better than I do. After Mass I found her sitting patiently under the church notice board. She had pushed her way through the heavy doors which are always kept only a few centimetres ajar, in spite of the horror of unfamiliar enclosed spaces she shares with most dogs. She had not, however, entered the church proper, which would have been much easier. Much admiration was expressed by departing parishioners. The words "*Quel chien sage*" came from all sides. That means "What a good dog", but in French *sage* also means wise, which is another good lesson, I think.

Unconscious either of her wisdom or of her goodness, she greeted me with a twitch of the corkscrew appendage that is a bulldog tail and frolicked back, pausing at one of the local butcher's for her tribute of a few scraps of meat, which she regards as her due.

December 4, 1983

A canine mystery

*Faithful Toutou will be there, though, in all weathers.
Sometimes he limps painfully through torrential rain.*

The church is not far from where I live in Villeveyrac, and I often walk to daily Mass, usually not in a spirit of penance or duty, but because I frankly enjoy it. Among other aspects I like the atmosphere of ineffable peace and the company of the *fidèles des fidèles*, the most faithful of the faithful (very often here, as everywhere else, sturdy old women). The daily Mass varies in time here, but it is usually celebrated at 9am.

There are several far more regular than I am, what one might call the irreducible minimum who never miss a Mass, who never seem to be ill, to take a holiday or have urgent business elsewhere. Even apart from those doughty spirits, though, there is one who is more regular than I am. The odd thing is that he is not even human. In fact he is a dog.

He is small, obviously very old, with his brown hair speckled with gray. He is of no determinate breed, but there was a terrier of some kind in his ancestry. He walks with the stiff-legged gait common to old dogs, his face is thin and pinched, and his large brown eyes look very sad indeed. He seems to have no particular name, or somewhere might have lost it, but he will answer (or rather respond with a slight twitch of the tail and a melancholy look of greeting) to the word Toutou, which is a nickname the French have for all dogs. You are quite safe in France calling any dog you happen to meet Toutou. You will get a reaction. Toutou seems to have too flippant a ring for this dog of grave and reverent bearing, rather like addressing a dignified old lady as Fifi (which is an affectionate term for “little girl”), but let us call him that. In the circumstances there is a certain sad and battered dignity about it.

Apart from the fact of his being there at all, there are other odd things about Toutou’s regular Mass attendance. One is that he always knows the time when it will be celebrated, and although the normal time is 9:00, this varies quite a lot. For example, in winter Monsieur le Curé, the parish priest, usually sets the hour at 9:30 in consideration for the regulars who are often aged. On first Fridays, the Mass and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament is usually at 18:00, sometimes 18:30, and sometimes, if the parish priest has a conference or some such duty, the Mass will be at 20:00. And so on. Except for

the Angelus and important occasions the church bells are not rung during the week, so it is not they which attract him. Faithful Toutou will be there, though, in all weathers. Sometimes he limps painfully through the rain; for although this is a very dry climate, when it does rain, it is torrential.

He comes from quite far, too, and he follows nobody. One can see, blocks away from the church, Toutou's stiff-legged, painful looking gait, as he limps determinedly towards his rendezvous. Once he reaches the church – and his punctuality is a model – he simply stands there, often shivering but asking for nothing. He responds with a grave dignity to the kindly snap of fingers and occasional pat of Monsieur le Curé. He does not attempt to enter the church. After Mass, he attentively watches the congregation leave, and then makes his way home, always with a slow, painful gait.

I found out a little of Toutou's sad story, which partly explains this mystery, but not entirely. He lives with a small family, but his real mistress, to whom he had the greatest devotion, was an old woman, one of those stalwarts who attend the Mass daily. She fell ill and died. Toutou, although he has a good home and is well treated by the others, was inconsolable. It was then that he started his daily tryst at the Mass. His face is both expectant and tragic. It is as though he knows she is there, but he does not really expect to see her.

Animals, on a deeper level, instinctual level, often know more than we do. Toutou seems to know something about the spirit of his dead owner. What it is, what mystery he has somehow realised, we shall never know. I think that something of grandeur has reached this insignificant little dog.

July 31, 1988

Goodbye to two saintly dogs

*The car which struck the dog was a hired vehicle,
and the sisters had to pay R3,000 in damages.*

Shakespeare wrote of telling sad stories of the death of kings. Let us tell sad stories too, but of the death of dogs. Anyone who has ever had a life closely linked with a canine will remember the great grief felt at the death of these animals. Unfortunately the dog's life-span is so much shorter than that of the human being that this can be a repetitive experience.

I do not want here to deal with my own feelings. I once described the enormous feeling of loss I felt at the death of my bulldog Paris in a village in France. (It was often described by the villagers as noble.) Dogs embody selfless, simple, total love.

I have learnt of the sad death recently of two local dogs, both of some distinction, each in his way unforgettable.

One belonged to the Dominican Sisters at St Michael's House of Prayer in Rondebosch, Cape Town. He was called, for what reason I know not, simply DJ. I remember DJ well from a period of retreat I spent with the sisters once. He was an old and amiable creature of indeterminate breed who lay about with an air of peaceful indifference. But if you looked closely, you could see at least one watchful eye cocked. DJ was ever conscious of his duties in guarding the sisters under his care. In fact, they were his whole life. He was fortunate as a dog to be able to spread his love and devotion over so many good ladies. Then, as must happen to all creation, the end came for DJ, and his benevolent eye no longer watched over the nuns, or looked with suspicion at anyone he suspected might be an intruder.

Sister Giuseppe Largey, the prioress, wrote to a friend about this sad event: "DJ got fluid on the lungs and I had to put him to sleep – a tearful time, I assure you." She went on to tell of another sad event which followed. The veterinarian who attended the sisters' animals got them another dog, a Labrador. As a breed Labradors are affectionate and gentle, and Sister Giuseppe found the new animal to be just so, and full of life. A lady on retreat used to take her for long walks, and let her off the lead in Newlands Forest. One day the dog bolted for home, ran over a dual carriageway, and was struck

by a car and killed. The car which struck the dog was a hired vehicle, and the sisters had to pay R3,000 in damages. As the nuns live in poverty and their lives are spent in prayer and good works, this struck me as outrageous.

Now the sisters have another dog, a formerly lost German Shepherd about four years old. Called Zac, he is happy in his new home, as well as he might be. One wishes him long life, of a kind exemplified by one of the sisters, who is 108 years old. "I suppose that if you change your dogs often enough, you toughen up a bit," Sister Giuseppe adds poignantly.

Unfortunately this is not so. A recent canine death was that of Georgy Boy III, beloved Pembroke Corgi of Betty and Eugene Volstedt of Sea Point, Cape Town. As his name indicates, he was third in a line, and his owners are most upset at his death. I was invited to what amounted to the dog's funeral, since I had always got on well with him in life. It was a simple and loving affair. He was buried in the garden with the two other Georgy Boys, also Corgis.

Eugene had with him some of Georgy Boy's objects, particularly his beloved ball. No words were spoken, but most of those present were in tears as the earth covered the body, which looked amazingly young and peaceful after the illnesses that had racked his later years (he was 16, old for a dog). Eugene spoke of how Georgy Boy had exemplified the great Christian virtues as summarised by St Paul in his letter to the Galatians.

Dogs are fortunate in a way. Guiltless, they have no original sin to contend with.

July 5, 1998

Of humbled dogs and cats

*'It's a pity the bikini-clad blonde
hasn't just saved a dog,' said the editor.*

It is a well-known adage among journalists that stories about dogs are automatically among the most read. I remember once, when working on the picture desk of a newspaper a long time ago, a striking picture of a curvaceous but ethereal-looking blonde. The trouble, in those days of long ago, was that she was wearing only a brief bikini. "It's a pity she hasn't just saved a dog," the editor, Eric Howse, remarked sadly in rejecting the picture for use.

I once described the death of my bulldog Paris in Villeveyrac. Paris, a saintly dog, as are they all, was named not after my beloved city, but the Greek hero. The kennel that bred this champion strain named them all after Greek heroes of legend, and Paris was one such. He was involved in a beauty contest between Venus and Diana, which must have been a risky business indeed.

I have mentioned before the Greek owner of a liquor store, who owned a bull terrier, a jovial, rakish creature, as they tend to be, whom he adored, I am sure, more than life itself. "I am sure," he would say, "that when God wanted to create an example of perfect love, he made the dog."

I have just read an account, by an anonymous priest, which reflects exactly these thoughts in the status in the creation of Saint Dog the Humble. The priest says that it is reported that a part of the Book of Genesis was discovered in the Dead Sea scrolls. He renders it into contemporary English something like this:

And Adam said: 'Lord, when I was in the garden, you walked with me every day. Now I do not see you any more. I am lonely here, and it is difficult for me to remember how much you love me.' And God said: 'No problem. I shall create a companion for you who will be with you forever, and who will be a reflection of my love for you, so that you will know I love you, even when you cannot see me. Regardless of how selfish and childish and unlovable you may be, this new companion will accept you as you are, and will love you as I do, in spite of yourself.' And God created a new animal to be a companion for Adam. And it was a good animal. And God was pleased.

And the new animal was pleased to be with Adam, and it wagged its tail. And Adam said: 'But Lord, I have already named all the animals in the kingdom, and all the good names are taken, and I cannot think of a name for this new animal.' And God said: 'No problem. Because I have created this new animal to be a reflection of my love for you, this name will be a reflection of my own name, and you will call it Dog.' And Dog lived with Adam and was a companion to him, and loved him. And Adam was comforted. And God was pleased. And Dog was content, and wagged his tail.

After a while it came to pass that Adam's guardian angel came to the Lord and said: 'Lord, Adam has become filled with pride. He struts and preens like a peacock, and believes he is worthy of adoration. Dog has indeed taught him that he is loved, but no one has taught him humility.' And the Lord said: 'No problem. I will create for him a companion who will be with him forever and will see him as he is. The companion will remind him of his limitations, so that he will know that he is not always worthy of adoration.'

And God created Cat to be a companion to Adam. And Cat would not obey Adam. And when Adam gazed into Cat's eyes, he was reminded that he was not the supreme being. And Adam learned humility. And God was pleased, and Adam was greatly improved. And Cat did not care one way or the other.

This illuminating little fable reminds me of a cat I know called Garfield, because he had the same truculent insouciance of the cartoon character; the same tough, sneering, spit-in-your-eye expression on its face. Alas, at least for the time being, no more: an inept veterinarian sheered his fleece which was deemed to be too long and matted. God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, one knows, but Garfield does not seem to think this applies to the fleeced cat.

He slinks around shame-facedly, a pathetic, rat-like creature without his magnificent, regal coat. The sneer has gone from his eyes, and is replaced by a look of abject pathos. It is, in fact, curious how he feels his debasement. He does not believe it when one says: "Garfield, time and the hour run through the roughest day. Your magnificence will be restored. All will be well, dear cat."

September 19, 1999

Being Catholic
(Part I)

Surprising stranger on the train

The student looked at the card, took a sharp involuntary breath and lowered his head in shame.

I like this story. Perhaps you know it. Coming from a highly respected priest was for me ample proof of its authenticity.

A university student, travelling in a train, found himself sitting opposite an elderly gentleman, who seemed to him to be in easy circumstances, not of the nobility, but a sort of well-off countryman. Suddenly, he noticed the gentleman taking a rosary out of his pocket. The beads slid between his fingers and he prayed.

The student could barely contain his patience until the elderly man finished, but he did, because his nature was basically courteous.

“Monsieur,” he asked, “do you still believe in those old-fashioned things which have passed away from the world?”

“But certainly, don’t you?” replied the man who had prayed.

The student burst into laughter. “No, I certainly do not believe in those things and all the other outmoded superstitions,” he replied “Let me give you some good advice. Throw that rosary out of the window, and ask science to answer you.”

“Science,” answered the old man with humility. “No, I don’t quite understand. Perhaps you can explain to me?”

The student then saw that the old man had tears in his eyes, and in a kindly way, so as not further to upset his neighbour, obviously a well-meaning but totally ignorant bumpkin, he said: “Give me your address and I will send you adequate documentation on the subject.”

The old gentleman took a card from an inner pocket of his waistcoat. The student looked at it, took a sharp involuntary breath and lowered his head in shame.

The card read: Louis Pasteur, director of the Institute of Scientific Research.

Louis Pasteur, a Frenchman, lived from 1822 to 1895. He established the validity of the germ theory of disease. The principles of vaccination and pasteurisation are his work. He was, in fact, of country origin, the son of a tanner.

On his deathbed he said to some students grouped around him: "What are you doing? You have to work."

I have another moral story from the same priest, this one obviously a fable. The devil announced that he was stopping business and wanted to sell his tools. On the day of the sale, in attractive guises, were displayed, along with others, malice, hate, envy, jealousy, sensuality, each marked with its price. Set apart, there was an inoffensive-looking, very used tool, the price higher than any of the others by far.

A prospective purchaser asked: "What is that?"

"That is discouragement?" was the reply.

"Why have you marked it so high?"

"Because it is more useful to me than any other. With that I can get into almost any man and manoeuvre him in any way that suits me best."

He went on: "The tool is so worn because I use it with almost everybody and very few people know that it belongs to me."

The priest ended his story: "It is superfluous to add that the price fixed by the devil for discouragement was so high that the tool was never sold." He concluded: "The devil is always in possession of it, and he always continues to use it."

The ringing cry of the statesman Georges Clemenceau, known as the "old tiger" is an antidote: Roll up your sleeves and make your destiny.

November 12, 1989

Flowers in unlikely fields

Piaf, Rimbaud, Wilde, Verlaine, Colette, Gainsborough, Pasolini, Dumas: on the surface, a disreputable bunch.

A priest writing in the daily *La Croix* (The Cross), the main official French Catholic newspaper, says there is a tendency to forget the uncomfortable words of Jesus: “Publicans and prostitutes will arrive before you in the kingdom of heaven.” We are apt, he says, to pass on to other things which are less unsupportable: the exaltation of virtue, the perfect purity of Christian life.

He reminds us that as the great French Christian thinker and writer Charles Péguy said, it was because the face of Jesus was dirty that Veronica wiped it with her handkerchief, and that one does not pick up that which has not fallen. Thinking along these lines, the writer states that he is becoming less drawn to edifying stories and more and more attracted to writers, singers and artists whose work, sometimes scandalous, he would call Karstique. Karst, he goes on to say, is that calcareous region of Yugoslavia where the hidden work of water has created an astonishing underground world from which arise unexpected springs.

He names a few of these artists. Naturally enough they are nearly all French. They are Jules Renard, Jean Genet, Edith Piaf, Arthur Rimbaud, Oscar Wilde, Paul Verlaine, Colette, Albertine Sarrazin, Alphonse Boudard, Serge Gainsborough, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Marguerite Dumas. On the surface and on the whole, that is a disreputable bunch. Some are, or were, worse than others, but there is not one whose life one would give as a model of conduct. Quite the opposite.

Of course, the priest does not expect his words to be an incitement to debauchery. The lives of the saints are edifying and should, at least in part, be the examples to be followed. *Ca va sans dire*, as they say in French – that goes without saying. Yet there is something in these “artists of the Karst”, a certain spiritual quality to be found in all of them. More could be added. I would include Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, and even Shakespeare. But let’s glance briefly at three of the artists given.

Pasolini was an Italian, a militant atheist (so he said), a Marxist and a militant homosexual. He was also a great maker of films, the moral qualities of

some not being at all clear. He was murdered by a youth on a beach, in mysterious circumstances. Yet he made a wonderful film called *The Gospel According to St Matthew* which is probably (I would say certainly) the best film account of the life of Jesus ever. For this he received a special award from the Vatican.

Edith Piaf was a singer, perhaps France's best popular singer, with an uncanny ability to break one's heart with a phrase of a song. Born literally in a gutter of Paris, her life was marked with drugs, alcohol, and unruly love affairs. Her half-sister tells how she was blind in early childhood. Some companions of her mother, women of no visible virtue whatever, made up a pilgrimage to St Thérèse of Lisieux, and little Edith was cured. She prayed to the Blessed Virgin at a shrine in her dressing room before every performance.

Jean Genet, who is still alive, is probably the most disreputable of them all. He was a professional criminal, drifting all over Europe and was condemned to a life sentence in French jails, from which he was released on a petition to the President, signed by leading intellectuals on the basis of literary merit. He has kept out of jail since then, but his life is not a model. A few months ago he won France's main literary prize, from the state. His extraordinary book, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, written in jail, cannot be recommended as improving or devotional reading, but there is in it a strange, hidden, spiritual force, something like the fountains of Karst.

Flowers bloom in strange places.

December 16, 1984

A saintly killer

*If Fréche is ever beatified he will join the ranks
of the most unusual of a most unusual bunch*

Divine grace falls on any number of people who seem to be, on the surface at any rate, unlikely recipients. There can be few groups of people more dissimilar than the saints. In fact, often the only common denominator is sanctity.

George Bernard Shaw, who admired her greatly and wrote his best play about St Joan of Arc, said that of all the odd fishes of which the Middle Ages were so rich, Joan was the oddest. Indeed, it is not an everyday thing for a teenage girl to take command of the armies of France and then to show herself a military genius. St Joan was well away from the common rut, but she exemplifies a point. Apart again from sanctity, a distinguishing feature of the saints is that none of them were what one would call ordinary people.

Jacques Fréche is dead, and he is not a saint. Perhaps he will be, for there is a growing body of people, including many priests and influential lay people, who think he should be and who are pressing that an inquiry be opened. That has not been done, but a learned Jesuit says that it is “very possible”.

If Fréche is ever beatified he will join the ranks of the most unusual of a most unusual bunch. For he was a criminal and a murderer and he died on the guillotine. Capital punishment was abolished by François Mitterrand after he was elected president of France in 1981. Even before that, though, it was very rarely used.

The murder that Fréche committed was judged brutal and there was no clemency for him. Indeed, after a while, he did not want it, and rejoiced in his coming fate. Waiting on death row he had an extraordinary and profound conversion and became filled with what was called a beatific happiness. He kept a journal in which he recorded the steps, not of his reconciliation and repentance only, but of his profound joy, which quality is another characteristic of saints.

Unusually for France, he was told the hour of his death, for it was thought to be more humane simply to awake the condemned man, offer him the services

of the Church, a glass of cognac and a cigarette before leading him to that grim instrument of death in the courtyard, sometimes called sardonically “Madame” by the prisoners.

With great calmness, lucidity and happiness he wrote in his journal: “In five hours I will see Jesus.” That is the title of a book which has been written about him. He spent his last hours in prayer and he went to the guillotine, as an observer noted “like a bridegroom to his wedding”.

Of course, the question arises: Was this conversion really genuine, of the spirit, the heart, the reason, or was it brought about by the circumstances in which the prisoner found himself, in a way a sort of last minute gamble with eternity? People who were with him, and in particular the priest chaplain, thought it was genuine conversion. The entire character and demeanour of the man changed.

Listening to a radio interview with a Jesuit on this subject the other morning, I felt one could not mistake the emphasis in his voice. He said that there were very few condemned people who had had conversions of this nature – indeed, he had not heard of one. He felt that this unlikely man, with a history of brutality, was indeed touched by the mystery of divine grace.

January 19, 1992

The blessing of the cars

There were many cars and of all types, from old beat-up jalopies to a most imposing new German limousine.

A minor traffic jam took place on Sunday morning recently just up the road from Villeveyrac. This is not unusual in the holiday season anywhere near the Mediterranean beaches and the vineyards of the south, to say nothing of the radiant sun which acts like a powerful magnet to so many from the cold north.

What made this particular jam look unusual, though, was that there was no one in many of the cars, which took up nearly all available space and totally blocked the square round the little baroque-style church just up the road.

This church is the chapel of the White Penitents, a lay order founded about 300 years ago, to which many of the bigwigs of Villeveyrac belong, notably Monsieur le Maire, the mayor. This chapel is distinct from the large parish church. The chapel is used for special occasions. The members of the order dress in white robes and cowls.

The reason for the jam was the blessing of the cars, the owners of which and their families were in the chapel attending a solemn sung Mass. The blessing is important and necessary at this time of year in France and in this part of the country where literally millions take to the roads at weekends. Road deaths are sadly a feature of the automobile society which France has become. One weekend alone this summer there were 13 million cars on the roads, a record.

Yet another example, I thought as I saw this jammed mass of waiting cars, of the adaptability and the universality of the Catholic Church.

The ceremony itself was impressive, long yet simple. L'Abbé Jean Baumel, our parish priest, emerged into the strong sunlight on the steps of the chapel, which the large congregation grouped themselves facing him in the space left by the cars. With two White Penitents, one at each elbow, he gave a general blessing in his usual voice of quiet authority and firmness. He said a special motorist's prayer in which he asked for firm hands and quick reflexes, for a lack of aggression and competitiveness, for consideration of others, for care

towards the occupants of the driver's care and for the others on the roads, and for prudence.

This was a good prayer and seemed to embrace most driving faults, so many of which stem simply from aggression and selfishness. I have often thought how astonishingly people's characters can change when installed behind the driver's wheel.

There was also a litany which included a request for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin under one of her most appropriate titles: Notre Dame de la Route, or Our Lady of the Road.

"I will now," said Father Baumel, "bless the cars individually." This I found impressive and oddly moving. There were so many cars, each with its driver standing next to it, like a knight next to his steed, while Father Baumel, with his two white-robed acolytes, pronounced the benediction over each one and sprinkled holy water on it, describing a wide area in the air. Horses had changed to oil-leaking, polluting mechanisms, but the priest and his attendants were the same as always.

The bright, hot sun with its Mediterranean quality of white radiance blazed down on his ceremony, so contemporary and so timeless. The large, burly figure of the priest moved among the mechanisms with a solid assurance, each car receiving its due measure of time.

There were many cars and of all types, from old beat-up jalopies of the French "two horse" type to a most imposing new German limousine belonging to a Belgian tourist. Many of the owners were obviously very moved. The Belgian, I noticed, had an expression almost of awe and wonder. One large man fell to his knees (it must have been quite difficult for him) beside his small car.

There was a young man with a punk haircut and a souped-up, sports type car, painted like a rainbow. It looked like the type of car not unfamiliar with scrapes and roguishness, which could have done with a blessing – which of course it got along with the more staid.

September 14, 1986

Ten Commandments updated

‘People were smug about not robbing banks – but not doing a fair day’s work is also a form of robbery.’

Some small furore, or tempest in a wineglass, has been caused by an updating of the Ten Commandments by Dominican friars at a shrine near Naples. The community’s reply was that they intended only to spur individuals into making better examinations of conscience by giving a contemporary relevance to the Mosaic law.

The monastery is at the shrine of Santa Maria dell’Arco on the slopes of the volcano of Mount Vesuvius. It is visited by more than two million pilgrims a year.

What have been described as the “commandments” appear in a booklet supplied at the 15th century shrine. They have received wide publicity. Here are some of them:

- Don’t dirty walls with sprayed slogans
- Remember to pay taxes
- Don’t cheat your car insurance company with your claims
- Do a fair day’s work
- Don’t give or receive kickback payments for favours
- Don’t demand protection money
- Don’t throw garbage on the pavements
- Don’t lend money at excessive rates of interest

Father Tommaso Tarantino, who is the prior of the monastery and rector of the shrine, said that a “revolution” was needed in the examination of the conscience to combat the ways sinning has evolved. Hence the booklet, which was an updated form of one distributed to pilgrims.

“We have not invented new commandments, although some newspapers have claimed that we did. What we have done instead is to point to the commandments’ contemporary relevance.” He said that people were smug about not robbing banks, but not doing a fair day’s work, kickback payments and protection money were all forms of robbery, even if more socially acceptable.

Although the friars' initiative is extremely controversial, the booklet has received the imprimatur of Bishop Umberto Tramma of Nola, the diocese in which the sanctuary is situated, as well as the approval of Cardinal Michel Giordano of Naples, and Cardinal Silvio Oddi, a retired Vatican official.

Among the many critics, though are theologian Giuseppe Agnelini, philosopher Massimo Cacciari and Catholic writer Vittorio Messori. Agnelini wrote that the Mosaic Ten Commandments contain everything one needs to live by, but that they need to be interpreted from Christ's standpoint, and to add new rules, reveals a pharisaic idea of God's law. Cacciari argued with some subtlety that these new rules conform to the deadly idea that religion has only a moral-civil aim. Messori said that the friars were vainly trying to keep pace with contemporary trends such as ecological concerns.

Father Tarantino's reply is that he felt like a doctor running a first-aid service in which he had to give immediate help. "Of course, the longer perspectives are important, but people also need guidance on how to make a step at a time. There is a need to spur people to create a more just, more civil society – this will allow for a fuller spiritual life. We are adding this social dimension to what was mainly a devotional centre."

Well, my personal viewpoint is the somewhat evasive one that there are rights on both sides, though it does seem to me that the commandments obviously cover the good friars' contemporary interpretations.

Why not add another: "Thou shalt not smoke?" I once wrote a flippant column in the secular press, and I wrote such things for many years. Perhaps deplorably, I am a smoker myself, and my column urged that smoking be permitted everywhere and that to adapt a censorious attitude was a sort of killjoy pharisaism. I have never received such a strong response to anything else I have written and it was all hostile, almost everyone missing the point that I was trying, obviously without success, to be amusing.

I thought at the time that it was a pity that such moral fervour could not be aroused by more worthy causes, and that self-righteousness is certainly a prime spur to indignation. In these matters, it is almost always only the indignant who take up pen or typewriter.

November 8, 1992

A synchronicity of angels

Perhaps there have been an increasing number of angels around. One doesn't know, but it is pleasant to wonder.

The other night I dreamt I was awoken by an angel. Or at least, those were my second thoughts. My first impression was of a magnificent, towering presence, clad in pure shimmering white and surrounded by unstained and radiant light.

Stupefied, I gazed at this figure in awe and wonder. Soon the apparition spoke in a voice like music.

“Where is your white bulldog Blanche?” I was asked. “In the kitchen,” I replied. “I have come to beatify her as a reward for a saintly character.” Then I woke up and the radiance had gone.

Certainly Blanche has a saintly nature. For example, she has just had three still-born puppies, the whole period of birth lasting four days, and she hardly whimpered. All bulldogs are stoical, but this was something extra.

Not long ago, too, I was at a baptism when, through a long series of complicated circumstances, the child was much older than is usual at Catholic baptisms. The wise and kindly priest, speaking to her gently, said that now we were surrounded by angels, as this was a very important occasion and angels were always at baptisms. So saying, he gestured towards the statue of St John the Baptist and the angel above the font. “Most important, though,” he continued, “your angel is here, the one who will watch over you for the rest of your life.” The little girl looked suitably impressed.

Round about this time, too, I was watching a production of *Hamlet* on French television, and I could not estimate how many productions of this great tragedy I have seen in one form or another.

The BBC has filmed all of Shakespeare's plays for the record, and French television is broadcasting the series, in English with sub-titles, for a second time, which shows a proper respect for great literature. The words, “Angels and ministers of grace, defend us”, caught my attention with particular force.

Then I read Pope John Paul II's document on angels, underlining their impor-

tance in Christian belief.

I saw a reproduction of painting titled *The Angels of Mons*, where angels were said to have been seen by some soldiers in the First World War.

This might have been an example of what the psychologist Jung called “synchronicity”, that is the combination of circumstances known to all of us when a series of events occur which seem to be linked together, and the odds against coincidence are very high.

Or perhaps there have been an increasing number of angels around. One does not know, but it is pleasant to wonder.

Of course, in France it is difficult to get away from angels or their symbolic representation. Every town has its war memorial and nearly every war memorial has its angels. Sometimes the artistic merit of these statues is not all that high, and sometimes their stone presence seems very corporeal indeed, but thoughts like this vanish at the memorial ceremonies when the town band (almost every town has one) plays the Last Post while people stand with bowed heads. Then there are the stirring sounds of the *Marseillaise*, and the mayor in his ceremonial robes lays a wreath. Then, quite often and without any effort of the imagination, the statues become as insubstantial as dreams, yet with a presence which is real, which is the nature of an angel.

St Augustine wrote that the name of these beings, from the Greek word for messenger, indicates office or function rather than nature. And St Thomas Aquinas said that angels were not composed of matter and form.

The truth of being surrounded by beneficent beings of pure spirit is an attractive one. Although not much emphasis is placed on it these days. This is odd, but our times tend to be materialistic, and an angel is the very antithesis of materialism, being not composed of any matter. Perhaps we should think of them more often, for what could be healthier for a spiritual life than the thought of beings composed of pure spirit?

Shakespeare’s image of a flight of angels singing Hamlet to his rest should be remembered: it is one of great poetry, truth and beauty.

January 4, 1987

Nuns' part in Springbok glory

Nuns were responsible for teaching the game to two of the best rugby players of all time in the world.

Nuns, we all know, are amazing and versatile women who can manage all sorts of things, from many attested miracles to practical work. They are very much of this world, nursing and teaching, for example, at which they excel, as well as the plain practical things of ordinary life. There is never laundry so clean and so well ironed as that done by a nun; there is no needlework so fine and so meticulous.

I must confess, though, that I had never thought of these most worthy ladies as rugby coaches! Yet I hear on the best authority that they were responsible for teaching the game to two of the best players of all time, not only in South Africa but in the world. The two were rugby Springboks Louis Babrow at centre and Maurice Zimmerman on the wing.

When it was common among sports writers and in competitions to pick the best sides of all time, including the past and present, Babrow in particular very often figured as one of the best centres ever, both in South African and international selections.

A stocky, well-set man of great good humour and kindness, his gifts, apart from rugby, went into the practice of medicine and there is many a former patient, including myself, who feels grateful to him. Now in his 80s, he is still practising during the course of a long and distinguished career, which included stints on the Medical Council and the University of Cape Town's governing authority. He was the doctor for the nuns at the Monastery Nursing Home in Sea Point – now sadly defunct. Such was the devoted care of the nuns there, in a place of secluded peace, that as far as possible, it became a pleasure to be ill.

I well remember their unfailing cheerfulness and their robust good humour – such as contrast to the largely dehumanised places of today. The disappearance of so many Catholic places of healing and teaching is a tragedy of present times and a sad commentary not only on growing secularisation but on an increase in the virtual worship of material values.

My informant is a niece of Louis Babrow, Audrey Carosin, a well known figure in Cape Town and Johannesburg student theatre life, in which she has scored many successes as director and coach.

Her Uncle Louis has often spoken of the days when as a nipper in the Free State, he and the small but ever agile Maurice Zimmerman attended a convent school near Smithfield as the first step in their academic life.

The nuns really mucked in on the rugby field, with whistles and admonitory shouts when necessary, and calls of praise when deserved. From Ireland as were most of the local nuns in those days, they had mastered the game in its technical skills, but also in a matched enthusiasm.

The young Babrow and Zimmerman went on to rugby glory, but they never forgot their first teachers.

May 21, 1995

What did Jesus look like?

We know where Jesus came from: under a continuous harsh desert sun, so he must have been dark, even

What did Jesus look like? What was the exact regard of the Holy Face? We don't know, but we do know that he was certainly not the blond, blue-eyed Arian of delicately suffering features so often depicted in paintings, many of them masterpieces, which figure in the history of the art of mostly Western Europe.

The face of our Lord is the theme of a new film by Catholic Communication Campaign in the US. The film had its premiere on March 31, 2001 at Radio City music hall in New York City. It was aimed at the Easter and Christmas festivals. The title is, simply: *The Face: Jesus Christ in Art*.

In a Catholic News Service report of the event, retired Professor Roger Adams from Nazareth College in the town of Rochester is quoted as saying: "Nobody knows what he looked like. We don't have any indication whether Jesus was thin, fat, tall or short."

I think we do have some indications, though. In the first place, it is next to impossible that he was fat. He led too hard and active a life to have accumulated superfluous flesh. We know that Jesus was wholly human and wholly divine, so we know that he felt in some degree or another the range of human feeling. He must obviously have been extremely sensitive to human suffering, and he himself did suffer deeply. He could not, though, have had a continuous look of sensitive suffering. Every text available shows that he was a natural leader. People followed him as sheep a good shepherd, to use his own metaphor, and at any gathering, including those hostile to him and his ideas, he was the centre. He was by no means and never the comic curate of English fiction and jokes.

Now, it is probably a sad fact of human nature, but people do not follow a man who looks too suffering, too sensitive, too sad, as though he had (as in fact Jesus did) the weight of the world on his shoulders. So, I think that he had a strong, firm, masculine face, with most perceptive eyes and certainly with expressions capable of anger (as in driving out the money-lenders), but also of deep feeling and love.

There is one reference to Jesus weeping, at the death of his friend Lazarus, but

none of him showing easy, cheap sentimentality. A basis of compassion, though, must have been present on his surely very expressive face.

With regard to his skin colour, we do know where he came from: under a continuous harsh desert sun, so we know he must have been dark, even swarthy. We also know he was a Semite. The Middle Eastern Jews of his time had very dark hair and olive skins, exactly like the Palestinians of today.

Professor Adams said: "In the United States society, can you imagine thinking that Jesus looked like one of those terrorists? But that's probably close to what he looked like."

A likeness which corresponds to the thoughts I have expressed does exist, albeit faintly, on the Shroud of Turin. This is highly controversial; carbon-dating techniques a few years ago were said to have established that it was not the genuine burial shroud of Christ. Later scientific research has indicated that this was probably mistaken. Personally, I think it is genuine. At the parish church at Villeveyrac, there is an enlarged and sharply defined replica of this image of the dead Christ. It shows a man of exceptionally strong features, hard but not harsh, both Christ the King and the suffering servant, the shepherd and the lamb. The face is semitic and very masculine.

Of course, various communities have tended to typify Jesus in their own image. There are black African Christs, for example, just as there were Renaissance blond ones, often of great physical beauty, as those painted and sculpted by Michelangelo. There is also the very beautiful Christ of Giotto in his frescoes at Padua, which are featured in this film. Then, of course, there were the icons, the favoured Russian and the Byzantine representations of Christ the King.

To my knowledge there has never been any representation of a laughing, or even an amused Christ. As one fully human, he must have had a sense of humour. It is true that there is no record of him laughing, but there is also no indication that he never did so. Probably awe too much overcomes the artist to even suggest flippancy.

The saviour of humanity must have a deeply personal content, and I think there are just about as many concepts of the appearance of Jesus Christ as there are Christians. Be that as it may, the words and the message are unchanging, and will last till the end of time.

May 2-8, 2001

Christmas

The three wise tycoons

The missal says a king has been born, but without canon, armies or palaces. A king? Yes, but a naked king.

Once upon a time there were three captains of industry and commerce, all heads of vast conglomerates in different countries. Their daily decisions influenced the lives of many more people than did the minor kings of antiquity.

They lived in different countries. One was black, another a trifle yellow, the third a little pink. They all enjoyed prestige and vast power. People said they used their power wisely on the whole, and that the vast enterprises which they headed did a lot of good too – although they did some harm in exploiting too many human beings for the profit of too few. They had the reputation of being hard men but just, and they certainly all recognised the fact that a worker treated with justice will be better at his job and produce more than one with a valid grievance. “Enlightened self-interest” might be the phrase.

One day there appeared simultaneously on their highly technical and totally secret electronic decoding machines the same message. Unsigned, it told each of them that the following day they would have to drop everything, get into their cars (their aircraft would not do), drive at random into the nearest wilderness and watch for a series of exploding comets. They should then aim their cars at the rail of the comet, which would appear often but irregularly. Their cars should be fitted with skis and caterpillar treads, like tanks, and it would be as well if they took some valuable things with them. The messages then faded from the screens, leaving no trace.

Without question the following day all three left.

The journey was arduous indeed, and in meeting such hazards as ice-floes, swamps, hurricanes, thick jungles, they found their cars an impossible handicap, and took to using such ancient transport – camels, donkeys, horses – as came to hand. Sometimes for nights and nights there were no comets, and they almost gave way to despair; they thought they were abandoned. Sooner or later, though, it always appeared, bright and beckoning in the sky.

After a long and hard journey they arrived at a mud hut in a distant and prim-

itive country, still under some form of colonial rule. A child had been born in the abandoned hut, near some cattle. Without any hesitation, the three made over their corporations to the infant, saying he was wiser than all three of them put together.

An unlikely story? Indeed. The “once upon a time” with which I began indicated that. So unlikely as to be quite impossible? Well, of course, I made it up, and its staggering improbabilities do go rather further than the usual fairy story.

Yet it is basically no more unlikely than the true story of the magi. There is a certain improbable enchantment about the truths and mysteries of Christianity which custom has led us to accept, unfortunately often without wonder.

The true story also illustrates the integral part miracles play in the Christian faith. At Epiphany, known in France as the Festival of the Kings, the Sunday missal invites us to pray for those who have not yet seen the star of Jesus rise, and for persecuted disciples.

The missal says a king has been born, but without canon, armies or palaces. A king? Yes, but a naked king. Redoubtable? He was killed. But we have come to recognise that he is the Saviour of the world.

January 6, 1985

A French Christmas carol

*The group of children simply looked lost and forlorn.
The youngest, a girl, was in tears.*

Apart from the original, of course, Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is probably the best Christmas story ever written. Even in France it has that reputation, and oddly enough a Christmas ago I saw what I thought was by far and away the best film on the theme of the 15 or so Scrooges that I have seen. Many more have been made – it is probably the favourite book for filming. The film was made for television and starred Michel Bouquet, who, most deservedly, won a best actor award for his performance.

That same Christmas, in one of those odd coincidences that might not be coincidences, I came across what was almost a real-life re-enactment of the story of the immortal Scrooge, except that it struck me as being a little less edifying, because Scrooge was never a hypocrite – the reverse, in fact. He was simply an old curmudgeon who felt like that.

In the Midi, as in all France, the festival of Christmas is observed as the birth of Christ. It is not commercialised, or perhaps one should say it is not nearly as commercialised as it is in English-speaking countries, where it tends to become the festivals of Mammon and Bacchus combined.

Since there are exchanges of gifts and the tables are laid with special food and drink, there must be a commercial aspect. Still, it is essentially and fundamentally a family occasion, a time of *la chaleur humaine* (human warmth), epitomised in the convivial family meals, the exchanges of gifts, and the Mass – above all, the midnight Mass.

On Christmas morning I noticed a lost little group of three children. They were not in rags, although their look somehow gave the appearance of it. Indeed, they were quite well dressed, except that unlike the other children they were in what one might call everyday clothes, not special festive garb. Also unlike the other children, they did not look as though they were going somewhere jolly, to get something good, some to-be-treasured toy. They did not look as if they were going to a funeral, either. They simply looked lost, and spiritually bedraggled, and forlorn. The youngest, a girl, was in tears.

Too old to be Santa Claus?

*In his long life, Georges had never felt
so hurt or so rejected.*

Christmas, at least in the West, is happily dominated by the genial figure of Father Christmas. This is not the place to go into the history of this jovial figure, nor to examine the changes he has undergone during the centuries and the different aspects he presents in different cultures.

Certainly there is a lot of fun-loving saint in him, and certainly he illustrates the words that it is better to give than to receive, as he does nothing but give, does not even expect a “thank you” in return. Perhaps the realisation that there is no Father Christmas is the first great disillusionment in life. This reminds me of the famous Marx Brothers scene in *A Night at the Opera*. These great comics are examining a contract clause by clause and tearing it up. They come to one.

“What is that?” asks Chico.

“That is the sanity clause,” explains Groucho, the lawyer.

“Ah, you can’t a-fool me. There ain’t no Sanity Clause,” says Chico, and they tear it up.

Well, the days when we believed in Santa Clause, those days of innocence, must have some similarity to mankind before the fall. At this time of year one looks back on them with some of the feeling of paradise lost.

Those random thoughts were brought about by a true story of which the season reminds me.

Father Christmas in France is called Papa Noël, *noël* being the French word for Christmas. During Advent he is everywhere in various forms, in shops, in shop windows in pictures, as a toy or chocolate models stuffed with sweets. Indeed, in my first Christmas as a resident of France I won one of them in a lottery in a small shop run by the dear, dead Madame Yvonne.

I knew an old man who had a responsible post in commerce, and who seemed to have achieved most of the things the world has to offer. He was respected in his community, he had a wife, a very worthy woman who loved him, and two children who were grown up and who themselves had done what he wished

them to do. His position and his hard work had placed them all in comfortable circumstances.

Yet on his retirement, it turned out that he had not been wholly satisfied. All his life he had nursed a secret ambition which he had felt he could not indulge for fear it might detract from the necessary dignity of his work, and reflect adversely on his family. It was not to run away to the South Seas and to paint like Gauguin, and neither was it to jaunt about on a camel in the desert or to search for treasure in pirate seas. It was simply to be Papa Noël in a shop.

This old man, whose name was Georges, had the attributes for it. He was large and imposing of build, he had bright blue eyes, through which shone a very kindly light, he had an agreeable deep voice and he loved his fellow man, without ever being demonstrative about it.

In due time he presented himself at a large department store, and he was accepted for the post. The large, red-gowned, white-bearded figure was one of the major attractions that Christmas, always with a child on his lap, always with a kindly and imaginative word, for he had always loved to make up stories. He was happy. He had realised his ambition.

The next year he went again to the same store. "I am sorry," said the manager. "We think you are too old. We have already engaged a young man." Too old for Father Christmas? How could that be?

In his long life, Georges had never felt so hurt or so rejected. The previous Christmas had been one of the really great successes of his long life. The fact that it is the usual thing in France to engage young unemployed men for seasonal work such as this did not make him feel less hurt. Crushed, humiliated, he turned away, his shoulders drooping.

The young man who had been engaged, who needed the money and who on the surface was rather a disreputable type, saw and heard this, as the interview was in the open. He was deeply moved. "Papa," he said, stepping forward. "The job is yours. I can't do it."

The manager, seeing the expression of incredulous delight on the old man's face felt he could not kill that joy, and agreed. That year Georges was an even greater attraction. The old man is dead now, but not in the hearts of many people.

December 21, 1986

A seasonal end to hostage drama

Dracula and Snow White advanced with their revolvers menacingly at the counter and demanded all the money.

Damon Runyan, the kindly scribe of the “guys and dolls” of Broadway in the days of prohibition, once told of the doings of three characters, as he was wont to call them, who were not exactly desirable members of society. In fact, two of them were bank robbers.

It is a complicated story and well told, but the gist of it was that one dark and wintry night the three, while copiously drinking rum to cure their colds, were engaged in the recovery of some booty. They discovered a woman, known to one of them, who was about to give birth. Blondy knew about such things and delivered the baby in a snow-bound hove. Her husband happened to be the bank-teller who had got the sack, unjustly, through the robbery. With a flash of that goodness which is in all of us they returned the money to save his job. On returning through the snow to New York they heard the bells ringing and realised that it was Christmas Day. As they are talking about this, they pass through a town called Bethlehem, in Pennsylvania. The story is called *Three Wise Guys*.

Runyon does not labour the allegory. He lets it stand just as it is, without comment. It is a good story, touching without undue sentimentality.

I am reminded of this story by a similar incident which I was told had happened in France a Christmas or two ago, but which does not fall into so neat a pattern. Still, the message is there, and if the characters in it are also not all that desirable – well, redemption is one of the lessons of Christmas.

This one involved a hold-up in a bank in December. The robbers burst into the small bank wearing those plastic masks which are sold everywhere at this time of the year. One was a Dracula, one was of all things Snow White. The President of France, François Mitterrand, was there in effigy, so was Goofy, the Walt Disney dog, and perhaps most appropriately, a werewolf.

The customers froze even without being told to. Dracula and Snow White advanced with their revolvers menacingly at the counter and demanded all the money available. This sort of thing is quite common, though, and these

days French banks are sophisticated places. An electronic surveillance system relayed news of the heist to the nearest police station, and *les flies*, the cops, were there soon.

The following events too have become almost routine. The bank was surrounded, the police told the robbers (as they always do) that there was no chance, advised them to throw their guns into the street, and to come out with their hand behind their heads. Almost like a mathematical formula there was then the next stage. The taking of hostages is an ancient practice (it goes back well before Christ), but in recent days it has become painfully routine.

Hostages, to be really effective, must be well chosen. Most people value some more than others. In the bank there happened to be three people particularly valuable to the criminals, on whom they were sure the police would not fire. They were a mother and baby and a priest. No need to look for any other. The robbers hustled the woman – too numbed to protest – the baby and the priest at gunpoint to the door and told the police to allow them to pass to their getaway car.

The priest, of course, asked them to take him alone and to set the others free. This, naturally, was refused. One of the robbers clutched the baby to his breast in a sort of grotesque parody of motherhood. The police looked on warily with guns drawn, teargas at the ready, but did nothing beyond attempt to bargain and say in a flat unemotional voice that this would avail nothing.

The rest of the story is easily told. The robbers changed cars, as planned, but they had to remove their masks, thus making themselves easily identifiable to the priest and the mother. They took all three with them in case they were intercepted, to their planned hideout in the suburbs.

There Father kept a cool head. He pointed out the time of year, which was the heavy banking day of Christmas Eve, and asked them to remember their First Communion.

To keep him quiet they would have had to kill him and the mother, and they could not bring themselves to do this. They gave him the money to return, and let all three go.

The baby's name was Christophe.

December 25, 1988

A real Christmas miracle

Mme Cross was the victim of an extremely rare disease, which shows its effects suddenly, and is virtually incurable.

I have frequently written for the Christmas edition of *The Southern Cross* accounts of the many stories and legends which are part of the season and which abound in France.

I am still inclined to think of that country as home, particularly Languedoc in the Midi, the south. It was home also to the Troubadours. It is a land of great scenic beauty, wine and sunlight.

Many of the legends and stories are of course true, or at least rooted in fact, although there is something in the air there that does breed fantasy. In the heart and in the head too, to paraphrase Shakespeare. This, though, is a story which is true in every detail. I can vouch for it because I was there and, in a way, was a part of the events. The story has the real Christmas spirit, so far from the over-commercialised version we know here so well. It invoked joy, and in a way, it was birth too – a birth of the spirit.

I know a woman who lived in Villeveyrac. She was French, but half-Vietnamese, which gave her a faintly exotic beauty. She was married to a Frenchman, and they had one child. Her husband, who ran a restaurant, was born in the area, her mother-in-law a bulwark of the Church.

Her name was and is Patricia Cross. In the agreeable, formal French manner, I always called her Madame Cross. I knew her well and was, in fact, a frequent dinner guest in her spacious, southern-type house, as she was in mine. She had two enormous dogs, a Rottweiler and a blind German Shepherd, an endearing creature which knew its way around so well it was difficult to believe he was blind, and old to boot.

Mme Cross used to take her little daughter, then aged 5, to the local Catholic school, which was about 50m from my house. One morning, about two weeks before Christmas, I saw her returning from the school with glazed eyes, and staggering. In short, she appeared very drunk. This was of course so unlikely as to seem almost impossible, and it turned out not to be so. Mme Cross was the victim of an extremely rare disease, a sort of tumour, which shows its

effects suddenly, and is virtually incurable. If the patient should survive, it is to live with some form of crippling disablement.

Mme Cross was rushed to the nearby Montpellier Hospital, which has two Nobel laureates on its staff, one of whom took care of my friend. She underwent an operation that lasted many hours and was naturally of a very delicate nature. Though her chances of survival were regarded as slender, she insisted that she would be home by Christmas. The doctors hardly bothered to humour her.

I have great faith in the Miraculous Medal of the chapel of that name in the Rue du Bac in Paris, an accredited place of an apparition of the Blessed Virgin in the 19th century. I sent her such a medal by way of her mother-in-law.

The sequel was impressive. To be brief, the illness cleared up, and in a few days Mme Cross was walking, looking better than before. The chief surgeon said to her: “Madam, I was not a believer, but you are truly *une miraculée*” (one to whom a miracle has occurred). She was indeed home by Christmas, and with days to spare. The delight of her family was tinged with incredulity. The dogs joined in the general gladness.

One of my most pleasant memories of this was after the midnight Mass. I was invited by Mme Cross to the repast which comes after the Mass, a most pleasant French custom, and truly in the spirit of Christmas. I met her outside the church, on star-spangled winter’s night, which might have been something like that one in Bethlehem, long ago.

There were tears in her eyes as she said: “I would like you to know that this is the happiest Christmas of my whole life!”

December 24, 1995

Boy to Santa: ‘You’re drunk’

Many of the Christmas symbols went to England from Germany under the aegis of the German Prince Albert.

Put Christ back into Christmas. Every year that slogan becomes more apt, more like a call to the faithful. It seems to me that crass commercialism has reached such a point, particularly in English-speaking countries, that it might be appropriate to look back at the origins of the festivities, more particularly at Father Christmas himself, under his various aliases.

Those who frequent bars or restaurants, cafés or shopping malls will have become used to those ubiquitous red-cloaked figures, so inappropriate to the hot African sun, and the unconvincing plastic white beards sticking to sweating, usually youthful faces. They go along with girls selling flowers at outrageous prices. This is all alleged to be for charity. Perhaps charities do indeed get some of the money, I’ve never inquired. I doubt, though, whether these persistent people are motivated by *caritas*.

A friend of mine, a jazz blues trumpeter (a modest man, dead now) was once prevailed upon, much against his will, to play Father Christmas at a children’s party. I know that his motives were genuinely charitable. To his horror, one of the little angels said in a loud voice while seated on his lap: “You’re drunk!” “I am not,” my friend replied indignantly. “Why do you say that?” he asked. “Because you smell just like my daddy,” replied the little boy. To nerve himself for the ordeal to come, my friend had had one whisky before going on stage.

In spite of secularisation, Father Christmas lives on. Christian symbols have been barred from some United States and English schools as “divisive”, and to promote tolerance. By contrast, France, whose constitution was the first to separate entirely Church and state, has schools in which Christmas parties are paid for by the state, with free presents. The gasps and cries of delight when Papa Noël, Father Christmas, makes his entry would warm the heart of Scrooge himself. I remember my little daughter Marie-Thérèse saying to me after the party that Papa Noël had even kissed her.

Internationally, children love the symbol of Christmas: the trees, the cribs, then the decorations, the presents, the songs, the special dishes and so on. It

is the very opposite of that cast of thought and action which children hate, and which has been called “miserabilism”.

The jovial chairman, as it were, associated with the Christ Child, goes by many names other than Father Christmas: he is Père or Papa Noël, Babbo Natale in Italy, Sinter Klaas in Holland, Tomten in Sweden, Weihnachtsmann in Germany, Julnissen in Norway, and Joulupukki in Finland. There is no doubt, though, that the ancestor of them all is St Nicholas, the greatly loved bishop of Myra, in what is now Turkey, who lived from 270 to 347. St Nicholas spent his life often acting as protector and helper of children in distress. He is still venerated particularly around the Mediterranean, where he is believed to have performed many miracles.

In particular Nicholas is the patron saint of Bari in Italy, where there is an imposing basilica dedicated to him. His remains were removed to Bari by sailors from territory under Muslim control, so he is the patron saint of seamen.

The name Nicholas was shortened to Claus in Nordic countries. It was not until the Middle Ages that he became known as the dispenser of gifts and graces. The figure of Father Christmas, in fact, emerged something like this. His fame crossed the Alps and spread over northern Europe, and the Dutch took their Sinter Klaas tradition to America. There he became also Father Christmas and went back to Europe, along with Christmas carols.

St Francis contributed the Christmas crib, now an integral part of Christmas in France and Italy. Many of the Christmas symbols, such as the Christmas crib, went to England from Germany under the aegis of the German Prince Albert, consort of Queen Victoria. Hence the “traditional” English Christmas is haunted not only by Mediterranean sunlight but also by the gloom of Nordic forests.

It has been pointed out that those critical and sceptical do not take into account the principle of *bonum diffusivum*, which means that goodness spreads itself. This brings joy and the resolution to be good among children. If given the proper opportunity, children identify powerfully with and are influenced by the Baby Jesus. This can be the first lesson in the mixture of reverence and joy, perhaps in retrospect the greatest gift a child can have.

December 20, 1998

People (Part II)

Whatever became of them?

His mother was sorry her only son had not done one more year of study and been ordained a priest.

Following are accounts of the early days of two men: a young priest, and a seminarian. I have edited them slightly so as to shade their identities. Can you guess who they are?

The first was assigned to an isolated, primitive village of 200 people. There was a wooden church, and a cluster of houses, with no electricity, running water, or sewerage. He arrived in a threadbare cassock and shapeless shoes, a skinny, bespectacled priest, carrying his belongings in a battered suitcase. His daily schedule was rugged. He rose at 5am, said Mass, then made the rounds of the parish in a horse-drawn cart – usually while reading a book – to celebrate Mass in outlying hamlets, and to serve his parishioners.

The second man, the seminarian, was a diligent scholar who scored the highest marks in his class. He was described as serene and effortlessly master of his environment, displaying the easy assurance of the child Christ debating with his elders in the Temple in Jerusalem. His studies were arduous, including Latin and Greek at advanced levels, at which he excelled. He remembered classical Greek all his life. His catechist training taught him to regard life as a series of problems and the liturgy was to influence his rhetorical style.

Regarded as a most promising student with a brilliant future assured, and a master of complex theology, he left the seminary after his fifth year (it was a six-year course) at the insistence of his mother, on grounds of his ill-health – he showed signs of tuberculosis. He was later to make his mark in other fields, but his aged mother always said she was sorry her only son had not done one more year of study, been ordained, and spent his life in holy orders.

Both these men are now figures who tower in the history of the 20th century, upon which both have left marks which will be remembered as long as history is recorded. Have you guessed who the two are? The first is Pope John Paul II; the second Joseph Stalin.

Stalin once asked the contemptuous rhetorical question: “How many divisions (of troops) has the pope?” At the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, John

Paul was to prove that he had massive unseen legions at his unspoken command.

I have just read biographies of these extraordinary men, neither of which I think does justice to their subjects. *His Holiness* (Doubleday) is written by Carl Bernstein, one of the journalists who exposed the Watergate scandal in the United States, and Marco Politi, an Italian journalist who covered the papacy for 19 years. The book is well written, but I found it too political, with not enough of the vital spiritual and theological dimensions of the pope. A serious flaw is, as the writers say, the primary sources are almost entirely their interviews, which does not make for accurate scholarship.

Joseph Stalin: Man and Legend (Hutchinson) is by Ronald Hingley, a lecturer in Russian and fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford. This is a scholarly book, but the subject is too vast for this comparatively narrow scope.

Hingley points out that in recorded history there is no man who has ever held such power as Stalin. His manner of achieving this is not easy to analyse. For one thing, he hardly ever held any public office, yet he wielded absolute power over life and death, simply as the first secretary of the Communist party.

Rarely has there been anyone of such personal contradictions. Most of his life was lived in the shadows. For one thing, he genuinely and intensely disliked personal adulation, yet he founded a personality cult of extraordinary dimensions. He seemed to become obsessed with power for its own sake. His personal life was austere and his private rooms were of an almost monastic simplicity. He avoided uniforms, medals and flashy clothes, dressing mainly in a simple tunic, boots and peasant trousers.

Yet Stalin's avuncular face would strike both terror and adulation into millions. He directly caused millions of deaths, yet he was not known to have killed anyone personally. There must have been many who agreed with his mother that it would have been better had he become a priest.

Young Karol Wojtyla who became John Paul II, was one of the many who suffered under the grim Soviet leader's iron dictates, as well as those of Hitler, during periodic occupations of Poland by Germans and Russians. In the end, it was the angelic young Pole who was to win his war against the forces of darkness.

September 11-17, 2002

An vagrant for God

She can sum up her life quite easily: 60 years as a vagabond, even if an apostolic vagabond.

Marie-Rose Siméon has been called, in the expressive French phrase, “*une folle de Dieu*”. There is no real English equivalent. One could say “one of God’s madwomen”, but that is literal, and the French phrase is complimentary. Simply put, she has a passion for God which shows itself in behaviour that does not correspond to “correct” or even generally acceptable social norms.

On September 7, 1983 she turned 83, the age of the century. Since she was 23 Marie-Rose, as she prefers to be called, has spent most of her life on pilgrimages, most of them to Lourdes, where she is a familiar figure. She does not remember how many she has made, “but there must have been several hundreds.”

She looks very weak: she is skeletally thin and her back is bent, yet several times a year she sets out to walk from her home in the Vaucluse to Lourdes, a distance of about 500 km. It can take her a month or more. She spends each night on the benches at railway stations, as she finds them. She is often to be found, at the end of one of her pilgrimages, at the Café of the Little Flower in Lourdes, dried, old, feeble, in a dress which, though not tattered, seems to be almost the same age as herself and a navy blue cape which has seen better days, too. At her side she keeps an imitation leather handbag in which rests all her fortune. She is alert and aware of everything, and at the mention of God her eyes shine with an innocent pleasure.

She can sum up her life quite easily: 60 years as a vagabond, even if an apostolic vagabond. Her life has been hard, almost unendurably so, but it has left her obviously happy, quite balanced and quite sane. Her mother died when she was three. Her father was very far from being a religious man. In fact, she says he made her life a Calvary. He never went to church, he chased after women, he drank excessively, he beat her. At 17 she ran away and found a job in a hospital, later qualifying as a home-nurse.

“Then,” she says very simply, “divine grace touched me. You know, one does not resist the light of the Holy Spirit.” She worked for a while with a

Dominican order in Marseilles which welcomed “girls who have led a bad life.” From then on, her life has been a continuous pilgrimage, 60 years of wanderings through country and towns, sometimes offering passers-by holy medals, sometimes simply testaments of faith, a faith which she says lights her path. “God loves us, he created us for holiness, love and charity,” is her explanation, saying it as though it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

At her most recent pilgrimage to Lourdes, a young man, a stretcher-bearer, gave her a note for the equivalent of about R20 to pay for her lodging. With a radiant smile, she handed him some tiny effigies of the Blessed Virgin. “Take them,” she said, “but you will have to get them blessed. I haven’t had the time.” She does not always have this good reception. As she says, she goes everywhere, even to night clubs, in one of which the owner slapped her, treating her, in her words, as an old madwoman.

The only regret she expresses is that next year she does not think she will be able to get to Lourdes, as her feet are in pain and her heart is beginning to give trouble. “It gets very cold at night in the grotto.” Indeed it does. Lourdes is high in the Pyrénées.

She speaks of death as a friend and a companion. “I will be so happy to join someone who loves me. And I think I have chosen the path he wanted for me.”

Marie-Rose is very human, though. Leaving the café, a big, strapping fellow jestingly said: “So, granny, you are off on your wanderings again?” She replied sharply: “I am going to ask the Virgin for your conversion,” adding a picturesque and unprintable expression which one could politely but not with anatomical accuracy translate as “moonface”.

September 18, 1983

The Jewish cardinal

Part of his school years was passed in the shadow of the Nazi occupation. He was used to the cry of 'dirty Jew'.

The career of Jean-Marie Lustiger, archbishop of Paris, is instructive. He was not always Jean-Marie Lustiger. Until he left the seminary, he was Aaron, a good Jewish name. His family were Polish Jews – agnostics, though they still felt rooted in Jewish tradition. His mother died in the horror-camp at Auschwitz, one of the millions of victims of the Nazi holocaust.

For the typical French bishop, a kind of formula for ecclesiastical and hierarchical success would be something like the following. First, get born into a family of practising Catholics. After ordination, as soon as possible become a professor or teacher at a seminary or get a post, such as chaplain to Catholic Action, then diocesan director, vicar-general and auxiliary bishop. Usually the bishops have a spirit of solidarity with the others, believe strongly in collegiality and are very aware of social injustice.

The career of Cardinal Lustiger could hardly have been more different. He was born in Paris into an immigrant Jewish, non-believing environment. He was educated not at a Catholic school but at a lay institution, the Lycée Montaigne. Part of his school years (he is 58) was passed in the shadow of the Nazi occupation and anti-Semitism. He was used to the cry of “dirty Jew”.

He has, incidentally, never denied his Jewishness. On the contrary, he emphasises it, often to the irritation of orthodox Jewry, who say that one cannot be a Jew and a Christian. In fact, I recently heard the chief rabbi of France say on television exactly that in connection with Cardinal Lustiger.

When he was named archbishop of Paris, Lustiger said: “C’est comme si tout à coup, les crucifix s’étaient mis à porter l’étoile jaune.” Roughly translated, this means: “It is as if suddenly the yellow star was put on to the crucifix.”

As a child, Lustiger read the whole of the Bible in secret, and he was converted at 14. After the seminary he passed many years in the intellectual

environment that suited him, as a university chaplain at the Sorbonne. His first parish appointment was the 16th arrondissement, the wealthiest part of Paris, where his sermons were regarded as brilliant. In 1879 he was named bishop of Orleans, and only 15 months later, to general surprise, he was appointed to succeed the beloved Cardinal François Marty, now retired archbishop of Paris.

The French Church has not got a formal head, but if there were one, that honour would probably belong to Cardinal Jean Vilnet, who is president of the episcopal conference. However, Lustiger's immense status as cardinal-archbishop of Paris, his endowments and his fame in the eyes of many people might raise him to that honour.

In a country where most things, including the episcopate, are seen in terms of political left or right, Cardinal Lustiger belongs to neither camp. He is said also to be an individualist, showing solidarity with the other bishops, but remaining essentially solitary. He escapes classifications.

His approach is essentially spiritual, and he thinks in terms of great ideas such as peace and justice and love, not in a temporal, political way. His view is that the present crisis of mankind is spiritual before economic or social. His aim is to be part of a "Christian fabric", and he thinks that the Church has a newer and more pronounced visibility.

His words to a mass meeting in favour of Christian schools were typical: "You want more Christian schools – then be more Christian."

July 1, 1984

Priest of the world's largest parish

Ascension may be the most cosmopolitan and varied part of Father Sullivan's parish – but it is a far cry from Rome.

Present among us in Cape Town is priest who bears lightly on his shoulders what he thinks is the largest parish in the world. His parish consists of the islands of Tristan da Cunha, St Helena and Ascension, so it takes up a big part of the generally inhospitable Atlantic Ocean.

He is Father Brendan Sullivan, who at the moment is supplying at Our Lady of Good Hope parish in Sea Point, Cape Town. He will help soon at St Michael's in Rondebosch, also in Cape Town, and then return to Tristan in July.

Father Sullivan's parish even includes the Falklands islands, the cause of that regrettable war, where his bishop is installed. He has paid parish visits there too, but he spends his life mainly between the other three, relying on available transport and taking whatever boat is plying this run. At the moment he is awaiting a boat to Tristan, which must be one of the most isolated places in the world, and has a population of only a few hundred people, only about 10% of them Catholic.

Tristan is basically a wind and rain swept outcrop of volcanic rock, inhabited by people who seem to come from an earlier and simpler world, speaking antiquated English, slow and courteous.

I have never been to Tristan, but I have met some of the islanders when some years ago a group made a most rare visit to Cape Town. It was a big media event of its day, and these rugged people seemed rather puzzled by it all. They are like all islanders, self-sufficient and individualistic, and people of high moral standards. They wrest a living from the soil and their life is not easy.

Father Sullivan told me that what social life there is revolves around birthdays on the whole. There are simple parties on these occasions, at which social custom decrees that the women be separated from the men.

Father Sullivan has a cherubic aspect, and looks more than 20 years younger than his 69 years. A life such as he leads needs outstanding qualities of self-sufficiency, which he obviously has, though he has a manner of pleasant and

gregarious charm. He reads a great deal and his Scriptural knowledge is shown in his homilies, always illuminating and expressed with great clarity. Nevertheless, it must be a hard and lonely life, although he makes light of it. Indeed, his predecessor lasted only three months. I asked him if he ever had a holiday. "My whole life is a holiday," he replied.

He was ordained in the north of England, and his pastoral duties have taken him to many places, including Europe, of which he remembers Holland fondly, and the United States, including New York. I can think of few places with less in common than New York and the bleak islands.

St Helena, too, does not afford a bustling metropolis. I do happen to have been there, although briefly, and I remember it as a place of rugged scenic grandeur, but not one of the capitals of world culture and civilisation. Napoleon died there in exile and was buried on a bleak site, which one might say is now forever France. The French flag flutters over it, but from all accounts the emperor was not exactly enamoured of the place and he would probably have much preferred his present resting place, after his remains were exhumed and taken to the magnificent les Invalides in Paris, which is also a military museum on the aptly-named Field of Mars. In St Helena the population is a few thousand, but most by far are not Catholic.

Ascension has a floating population, often swollen by American servicemen and officials, doing turns of duty there. Ascension is probably the most cosmopolitan and varied part of Father Sullivan's parish, but it is a far cry from Rome.

On a recent visit to Simon's Town, which he said he would like to see, Father Sullivan was much taken with the statue of that extraordinary Great Dane, Just Nuisance, the only dog ever to have been raised to the dignity of the Royal Navy Rank, Able Seaman. Just Nuisance had the habit of befriending sailors who had gone adrift on Cape Town (of whom there were many) and guiding them safely home to their berths in Simon's Town.

Father Sullivan's church in Tristan is simply a shack. It is strange to think that this simple structure is in essence, the same as the mighty Notre Dame of Paris or St Peter's in Rome, for example. The saving grace of the Eucharist makes them equal.

June 14, 1992

Age is nothing but a number

Having passed the target of 105, Sister Dympna has a future goal: to pass someone who reached 110.

One does not meet someone of 107 (or to be more exact, 107 and a half) every day. I cannot recall ever having spoken to anyone even remotely that age, although my maternal grandfather, who almost shared a name with George Bernard Shaw, managed to reach 97. Often known as GBS his name was George Bramwell Shaw.

The other day, with some friends, including young and bright Eulene, a schoolgirl from Pretoria, we called in for a brief visit to a Dominican Convent, St Michael's House of Prayer, which is like an island of sanctity in the leafy, well-heeled and bourgeois suburb of Rondebosch in Cape Town.

It was a Sunday afternoon. The nuns were gathered in the sitting room, all of them elderly, all embodying various aspects of tranquillity and repose. To my pleasure it was suggested that I meet Sister Dympna Carew, who is well into her 108th year. She has no intention of retiring yet.

I have spent a period of silent retreat at the convent, so naturally I spoke to no one and had only the briefest encounters with the worthy ladies who run this place, which is elegant of aspect and steeped in devotion. For me it was a spiritually rewarding and enriching experience, something like retiring from this rough and often jarring world and breathing a different and fresher air. So I did not meet Sister Dympna, although I knew of her quiet existence.

Sister Dympna is bed-ridden but her mind soars. She has a strong alert face, not particularly marked by the many years she has lived, and a mind which is alert, and travels. She knew all about *The Southern Cross*, for example, and brightened perceptibly when the sweet-natured Sister Amata mentioned that I wrote for this newspaper. She virtually showered blessings upon me at which I felt honoured and a little embarrassed.

She hails from Tipperary, famous for that haunting song. On my first visit there, I once remarked to a stranger in one of those most individual Irish

pub that for the first time in my life, I could not sing “I’m a long way from Tipperary.” He nodded, as though I had made some profound reflection and said something like: “Aye, that ye cannot be after doing.”

Sister Dympna is a long way indeed from her origins, but she carries it around something like a moveable feast. Apart from the light burden of Irish Catholicism, she still has that delightful lilt of the voice, happily so ineradicable. She has a sister, I was told, also a nun, who is 97 and still plays bridge. She had a brother who, in her words, let the side down by dying at 89. She herself, when she reached 100, said she had no intention of departing from this vale of tears. She had read of someone aged 105 and was determined to pass that milestone. Now that she has done that, she has a future goal. She has heard of someone else who reached 110.

She certainly seems set fair to pass that, aided by devoted sisters headed by Sister Giuseppe Largey, a woman of strong character and intelligence who also hails from Ireland, and is in charge. Perhaps the charming dog, DJ, of slightly raffish aspect who guards the good sisters will play his part too. He shares the quality of devotion, allied to selflessness, which is so much a part of St Michael’s House of Prayer.

Like so many of the Dominican nuns, Sister Dympna was a teacher, a vocation she continued until well into her 80s. She taught several subjects, as usual, but was known for her ability in maths, as well as her cheerfulness and good humour. One of her teaching posts was at Springfield Convent in Wynberg, Cape Town.

It was a great pleasure to see the rapport and interaction she established immediately with young Eulene. In terms of age there were 92 years between them, and there is a big cultural difference between Tipperary and Pretoria. In a common sparkle of humanity and a shared joy (a great Christian virtue) those years were really but a moment passed.

I often think that just being there, nuns such as these pay an enormous contribution to life. Their presence affords the presence of spiritual values in encroaching seas of materialism.

July 27, 1997

The pope's a nice chap, y'know

The pope met France's communist leader, who blushed like a schoolboy, and the two chatted together amiably.

Once upon a time the late Cardinal Owen McCann, former archbishop of Cape Town, asked me: "Do you know the pope?" That to me was an extremely startling question. How could someone of such remote eminence come into my humble circle of acquaintances?

It was typical of the cardinal, himself a man of great personal humility whose charity often led him to believe that others shared many of his distinctions. In my surprise I could manage little more than: "No, I'm afraid I have not that honour." "A pity," replied the cardinal. "He's a very nice chap, you know."

Of course, as I recalled at the time, the cardinal had known John Paul II well, having acted as an emissary and advisor on several papal trips to Africa, as well, of course, as his many visits to Rome, which included the Second Vatican Council and the conclave which elected the then Cardinal Karol Wojtyla as successor to St Peter.

The little anecdote is not entirely frivolous. It underlines the essential humanity of the Holy Father. It is not customary to think of someone weighed down with the panoplies of many centuries and superhuman responsibilities and with an immense intellect and learning simply as "a very nice chap".

The cardinal, though, in his sometimes homely style, which also accompanied learning and spiritual weight, summed up an essential quality of John Paul which always shines through the enormous weight of ceremonial and spiritual responsibility he carried. Indeed, he does seem a very nice chap.

Sadly I have never had the privilege of meeting the Holy Father, not even formally at a general audience, but I have seen him often enough on television, read enough of his many words, to feel some sort of personal relationship: and it is one of warmth.

John Paul paid several pastoral visits to France when I was living there, which I remember most vividly. There was saturation television coverage, particularly of the first one in the 1980s.

In a country such as South Africa *in partibus infidelium*, it is difficult to conceive of the amount of coverage this event was judged to warrant. On TV there were about 20 hours a day, because the pope kept up a cracking schedule that left one wondering at his stamina. In the media images we saw, he never showed any trace of fatigue in spite of the innumerable demands made on him. Rather, there was apparent always a serenity, an inner intense spiritual light.

French radio also abandoned its daily schedules, and the newspapers were full of nothing else. *Le Monde* had columns of reports and analyses. At the end of it, one felt one knew John Paul II as an intimate friend (there could have been few who thought of him as an enemy).

John Paul also has an affinity for youth. A young couple at his youth Mass were asked if they did not think of John Paul Superstar. The young man replied that he was indeed a superstar, but one with a spiritual dimension.

At a reception at the Elysée palace, just about every notable person in the country had assembled, to greet the pope in a reception line in what the commentator called “an historic moment”. He was introduced to Georges Marchais, then the long-term communist leader. Marchais looked like a blushing, honoured schoolboy, and the two chatted together amiably.

I consider John Paul one of the great popes. He has enormous gifts of intellect as well as spirituality and compassion, and he is very much a man of his time. Although essentially Polish, he is a true European, with a vision of a great Europe once again united, as it should be, by the Catholic faith. The history of the Catholic Church is the history of Europe. He is also a man for all nationalities, for all cultures, and he knows how to use television to bring home his pastoral message of universal truth and to show that he is indeed the successor to Peter, the Vicar of Christ.

In these days, when there is a disturbing spirit of compromise, of the dilution of the faith, he is like a rock. This is not meant in the conservative, sneering sense. John Paul sums up in one person the repository of the faith and he knows that one cannot bend and waver with passing fashion. The truth is the truth and – we have Jesus’ word for it – it will set you free. That, I think, is the basis of this most timely and most appropriate pontificate.

October 25, 1998

Humour

In search for Catholic humour

This type of humour involves an ability to laugh at oneself, while dealing with ethnic traits, real or imagined.

Why not Catholic humour? So asks a reader in a letter to me, suggesting in effect that I do something about it. He says that Jewish humour is well known and is appreciated by many people who are not Jewish. Is there such a parallel among Catholics? Is there something distinctive about Catholic humour? He asks all this, though not in so many words.

Jewish humour, of course, is often wry and sardonic, born of much suffering, which a laugh or two does tend to palliate a little. It is also often self-deprecatory. The best practitioners of it that I know are Groucho Marx and Woody Allen. Typical is Groucho's often repeated remark: "I would not belong to any club that would have me as a member."

Similar in tone is Woody Allen in his film *Zelig* (1983), in search of the ultimate truth. He goes to a rabbi, who says: "That will be five dollars," and hands him a document. Woody: "This is in Hebrew. I don't understand it." Rabbi: "Hebrew lessons, five dollars."

This type of humour involves an ability to laugh at oneself, while dealing with ethnic traits, real or imagined.

In my experience, Catholics can laugh at themselves as much as anyone or any other group, but I have not found humour taking that specific form. There are some amusing folklore sayings that I remember in French. I can think of none in English, obviously as the French language expresses, at least in part, a Catholic culture. "She has a face as long as a day in Lent," for example. That may be a little irreverent, but one does know exactly what is meant. (Somehow or other, it is always "she" in such things). Then there is a saying which I have always liked: "It will happen on the day of St Glinglan." Of course, there is no such saint, and so it will never happen. The very sound of the name St Glinglan is funny to me.

There is one very Catholic joke, told me by Monsignor Cornelius Lynch, which has always stuck in my mind as typical, in its charity and lack of malice. It went something like this.

A believer is granted a glimpse of heaven and hell. The first, hell, is a variant of the torture of Tantalus. A banquet table is laid with the most sumptuous and appetising food imaginable. The diners, though, are bound, and each has a very long fork which makes it impossible to guide the food to the mouth. So, the pangs last for eternity. Then there is heaven. Similar people are seated round a similar table with the same delicious food, and the same long spoons. The difference is that each is helping his neighbour.

The other was a favourite of a Catholic friend of mine, long since dead, a popular man of very cheerful disposition, Leonard Lourens.

A naughty boy in Italy hid away above a chapel dedicated to Our Lady. A man entered, and the boy boomed: "This is Jesus Christ, you sinner!" The man fled in panic. Then came an old lady, the type that is often the backbone of so many parishes in Italy or anywhere else. The hidden boy shouted the same phrase. The old lady replied: "Quiet, my boy, I'm trying to talk to your mother."

As far as there is a literature of constantly benign Catholic humour, the Don Camillo books by Guareschi come closest in my experience. The humour, though, and the sadness are not of the one-liner type. They come from the situations and consequently are difficult to reproduce succinctly.

I remember, though, when Smilzo, faithful lieutenant of the communist mayor, Peppo, stole the priest's bicycle and thought to render himself safe from denunciation by confessing his misdeed. The mighty priest met him outside with a boot at the ready. "The seal of the confessional does not extend to my left foot," he said.

Of course, the writer was one of the most Catholic of men, and generations have been charmed and amused by the stories, particularly the conversations with Christ on the cross, which are never in poor taste, and often are tenderly amusing.

February 25, 1996

More on Catholic humour

What did the future pope say when the young woman with a very low-cut dress entered the dinner party?

Well, there is a Catholic sense of humour. I always thought that such a thing existed, but this has been amply confirmed by the reaction to a column of mine in *The Southern Cross* recently when I asked the question. There has been a big response to this, and I have received many examples of such humour, both in the form of jokes and anecdotes.

Characteristics seem to be a certain warmth, a benign feeling, a tolerance. The jokes are rarely sharp-edged, never malicious. They do show, though, that we Catholics tend to share with Jews the ability to laugh at ourselves, which is a good gift to have and one that can take us over many a rough passage. I have very recently heard one from a Jewish lady who said it seemed to her to combine Catholic and Jewish humour.

Little Abe was a very bad boy always in trouble. His schools could do nothing with him. In desperation his parents sent him to a Catholic school. Immediately he rose to the top of the class and won prizes. His behaviour was exemplary. Asked why the change, he said: "When I got there I saw pictures and statues of a man nailed to a cross. I thought: these people don't mess around."

JP Crighton of Rondebosch, Cape Town, writes that there seems to be a lack of Catholic humour these days. "Once upon a time we did not take ourselves quite so seriously," he writes.

Mr Crighton's late brother-in-law, Pat Bliss, had a great fund of Catholic stories. Before he died, so that the stories would not die with him, his parish priest in Hout Bay, Father Kelly, asked him to write some of them down. Mr Crighton has sent me a number of these jokes and anecdotes, typed by Mr Bliss, which have given me many a chuckle and which show many of the characteristics of Catholic humour.

One of them concerns that most humane and loveable of popes, John XXIII, around whom many stories have collected. Pope John was taking a walk in the Vatican gardens when a gardener ran at him with a rosary which he wanted blessed for his daughter. A bodyguard shooed him away.

“Why did you do that?” asked the Holy Father.

“Security, Your Holiness,” came the reply.

“Nonsense,” said the pope. “Don’t be absurd. I had no intention of harming him.”

The other one was when he was papal nuncio, Cardinal Roncalli. A young woman entered a dinner party graced by the cardinal, late. She wore a very low-cut dress. Everybody stopped eating. The future pope remarked: “Why is it that when a lady comes in with a low-cut gown, everybody looks at me?”

A new Protestant minister was appointed in rural Scotland. He called on an elderly couple whom he thought were members of his flock. Suddenly, distressed, he thought he had come to the wrong house as he noticed a magnificent portrait of Pope Leo XIII in full canonicals, complete with tiara. Embarrassed, he pointed this out to the couple. The old man glared. “Is that what it is? Wait till I lay my hands on that fellow Issy Cohen in Glasgow. He told me it was Robbie Burns in his masonic regalia.”

At Downside, during a cricket match, the Angelus rang. All stopped to pray. With the next ball the batsman, a Protestant, was given out. He said: “I’ve been bowled out, run out and caught out, but I’ve never been prayed out before.”

Mr Bliss had a friend some time ago who was a sub-editor on a London newspaper, in the early days of radio telephones. Through a lot of crackling and static and pops he got a call from Minnesota. “This is St Paul speaking,” said a voice (the name of the town, of course). Stupefied, his friend listened. “Isn’t science wonderful,” was all he could manage to say.

Once upon a time it was more common than it is now to say or write DV, or Deo volente (God willing). In Stirnaway on the Island of Lewis off the West Coast of Scotland, the following notice appeared:

“The boat to Kyle will sail at 9am on Mondays and Wednesdays (DV) and on Saturday in any case.”

April 28, 1996

And then there was the one about..

I cannot remember ever having had such a response from anything I have written for The Southern Cross.

Who was it that cried: “It is not so sweet as it was before”? I think it might be garbled Shakespeare, summoned somehow from the mists of memory. At any rate, that, I thought, would be the general feeling after my series of columns about Catholic humour, including jokes and anecdotes. Apparently not, though. They continue to pour in, often with requests for more, both verbally and by letter.

I cannot remember ever having had such a response from anything I have written for *The Southern Cross*, including other popular subjects such as Lourdes, a Christmas miracle and the writings of Pope John Paul I. The response has come from friends (including many fellow parishioners), strangers who stop me in the street and letters.

With an interesting letter, showing a vast knowledge of classic films, John Lee of Johannesburg sent me a photocopy of a treasured book called *The Wit of Catholics*, published by Frewin, London, about 20 years ago. It is probably out of print. Rather to my surprise, it is compiled by an Englishman, Richard Hugget, whom I once knew quite well as an actor, and a man apt to bounce up more or less anywhere.

So, evidently there is a wish and a market for another column on the subject. What has emerged from this deluge is that there definitely is a specific Catholic sense of humour and that, like the Jews, we have an ability to laugh at ourselves. Sometimes the two combine, as in a joke that surfaces often.

The usual priest and rabbi (stock figures) are sharing a train compartment (a stock situation). The rabbi asks what prospects the job of priest holds. The good Father replies that he could have a parish of his own, he could be a canon, and he could even be elevated to bishop. There was even a remote possibility of becoming cardinal and, although so remote as to be inconceivable, there was the theoretical possibility of the papacy. “And after that?” “Only God is beyond that,” replies the priest. “Well,” remarks the rabbi, “one of our boys made it.”

Then there is the one that crops up fairly often, a part of the cycle of St Peter, the keeper of the keys. A good Catholic is disconcerted by the magnificent car the heavenly rabbi has, while his is only a battered old second-hand model. "You see," explains St Peter, "it is just the same here as on earth. One must look after the boss' relatives."

Another good and rather subtle joke, which comes up from time to time is the argument among the religious orders as to which is the best. So they pray a novena, asking for a divine settlement of this argument. Then a piece of paper comes floating down from heaven. On it is written: "All the orders are equal. Signed GOD, SJ."

I have been told that quite a few of the stories told to me are not suitable for a Catholic newspaper, and many indeed are not. Here is one that the writer thought was not quite fitting. I think in a way it is, though.

Two Dublin charwomen were scrubbing the steps of a brothel. A rabbi went in. "Just look at that," said the one. "Disgusting." He was followed by a Protestant clergyman. "Filthy Protestant," said the other. "What do you expect?" Then came a Catholic priest. "Ah, the good Father," said one of the ladies. "One of the poor girls must be sick."

There is, of course, a wealth of Protestant jokes, mostly featuring tough, no-nonsense Catholic priests.

After an argument between a Catholic priest and a Protestant minister, the priest says: "We must go our separate ways – you to honour our God in your way, and me to honour him in his."

James Joyce, the great writer, a lapsed Catholic, was asked if he intended to become a Protestant. He replied: "I have lost my faith, not my reason."

A Protestant hurled a stone through a shop selling Catholic holy objects, saying: "I can't stand this intolerance."

A Catholic on his death bed was converted to Protestantism. He said to the priest: "It is better for one of them to go than one of us."

June 9, 1996

One more for the road

*An effective and very short prayer:
"O Lord, please make my enemies ridiculous."*

Humour, of course, is in many ways an individual thing. Something that will cause one person literally to fall around with aching sides, in another will arouse a mild "ho-hum." The great humorist and one of the funniest men, apart from being one of the best prose stylists in English, PG Wodehouse, is one of my addictions. I have often repeated one of his lines. Some people, as I do, find it very funny. Others wait as though the catch-line will come later. It is a description of Beach, the butler. He entered, "a stately procession of one."

Another is an account of two women having a wordy and interminable quarrel. Bertie Wooster comments: "To my mind, it could all have been said in the words 'what ho'."

Wodehouse was not a Catholic, but there is a certain benignity in his world which is typical of Catholic humour, lacking the acerbity of Jewish humour, a great source of laughter, if at times bitter.

That most staunch Catholic, Evelyn Waugh, described Wodehouse's world as a last glimpse of mankind before the fall. That sunny place will last, he said, as long as people can laugh and can read English. From this reaction it seems that there might be space for another smile or two. We all need it. Laughter is a great medicine, the best, as was said by the French writer, who was also a professor of medicine, Rabelais. So here, let us hope, is some therapy for you.

This is not a joke. I heard it in France, and in church, to boot, when the congregation and even the priest obviously found it difficult not to burst into gales of laughter. It was at what was known in Villeveyrac as a children's Mass. Children were encouraged to come, and Monsieur le Curé, the parish priest, preached his sermon specifically for them. He used to encourage them to call out the answers to questions he raised. On the subject of temptation, he asked how the serpent had prevailed upon Eve to eat the apple, and why she had done it. "Because she was a woman, and therefore stupid," called out a little boy in the second row. (He actually used a colloquial word for "stupid", which

is rather coarse.)

Catholic jokes are apt to come in various forms, with the punch line remaining the same. I have heard the following often, in fact only recently I was stopped in the street and told it again. Briefly, the pope was the custodian of an old box, dating back to the days of St Peter. Eventually he was prevailed upon to open it, in the hope that great spiritual wealth lay inside. What was there, though, was the bill for the Last Supper.

A category is the convert jokes, for which I have some sympathy, being a convert myself.

The writer John Aycough, said: “The pope is barely Catholic enough for some converts.”

Then there is the story of the great lady convert who succeeded in getting the pope to give her a private audience, limited to 20 minutes. After nearly an hour, the Holy Father was seen by his chamberlain, slumped in his chair, his head in his hands. “Madame,” the pope was heard to say, “I must tell you that I already am a Catholic.”

The noted convert, Monsignor Ronald Knox, said: “Catholics are people who agree about Catholicism and very little else.”

When an old Protestant woman told him that in spite of all the denials, she knew that priests received money for giving absolution after confession, Knox said: “This is a very serious matter, madam. Either you have been misinformed or I’ve been swindled.”

Hilaire Belloc wrote: “The Hail Mary was written half by the Church and half by Gabriel. Dual authorship is seldom a success but the Hail Mary pulled it off all right.”

Voltaire was by no means a staunch Catholic, but he had an effective prayer, a very short one: “O Lord, please make my enemies ridiculous.” He claimed God had granted his wish.

I like the words of St Augustine. “He cannot have God for his father who refuses to have the Church for his mother.”

August 15, 1996

Popes: a bundle of laughs

Pius X: 'Do you want Cardinal Cassetta or the cardinal's cassetta (cash box)?'

The position of a pope is so august, so imposing, that any leavening of this with humour gains massive impact. Of course, this is rare. People generally don't feel they dare approach a pope in a spirit of levity; both the office and the man can be intimidating.

Unlike kings, popes have never had jesters or licensed fools. The office is mightier than that of even a medieval monarch. Some time after the fall and before the flood, I served my term as a court reporter for a newspaper. The slightest sally of a judge (usually of a very low level of humour) would get roars of sycophantic laughter. I thought frequently of the line of Gilbert & Sullivan: "The judicial humorist, I've got him on the list."

Here are some amusing stories about popes. They illustrate the humanity beneath the panoply, the man beneath the robes.

In 1902, when Pope Leo XIII was 92 years old, an American bishop on an *ad limina* visit, taking his leave, said: "Given that we shall not see one another on this earth again, goodbye." The pope replied: "Why, your Excellency, have you terminal illness?"

Pius X was of a quick and ironical mind. He was reminded that he could confer titles of nobility on his family. He replied: "My brother is already an official [postal], and my sisters are governors of the house."

Some priests asked Pius X to appoint the wealthy Cardinal Cassetta to their diocese. He replied: "Do you want Cardinal Cassetta or the cardinal's cassetta [cash box]?"

The same pope's tobacco box, which bore a miniature picture of him, fell on the ground during a walk with a close friend, a canon. The canon did not pick it up. "Let's leave it there where it belongs," the canon said. "Aren't you the vicar of Christ on earth?"

After the American entry into the war in 1942, the US ambassador, Robert

Murphy, who had met the pope when he was secretary of state Pacelli, said: “Your Holiness, do you remember what you prophesied to me in 1931? ‘Hitler is only a passing phenomenon,’ you said, and instead...”

“Ah,” replied the pope, “of course, I remember it well, but that happened before I became infallible.”

Pius XII was also apt to speak ironically of the exaggerated pomp which surrounds the popes, creating an artificial aura of distance. He enjoyed speaking on the telephone. Some of those to whom he was speaking would think it right to kneel during the conversation.

On the subject of talking, of which popes get more than their fair share, there are two amusing anecdotes.

Pope Pius XI dismissed a garrulous visitor by pointing to a fishbowl and saying: “These are the animals I like. They never talk.” The same pope had a love of efficiency. He had the tablets which referred to him in Latin as *Sedente Pio PP. XI* removed because, he said “the pope is always standing, always working.” Ironically, when trying to convince his collaborators to be brief, to save time, he once spoke for an hour.

An amusing inside story about John XXII the “caretaker” was that he was known in the Vatican as Johnny Walker, because he loved both outings and whisky.

Pope John Paul II has a face which is radiant with saintliness, and there is humour there too. When he was cardinal-archbishop of Krakow, an American journalist asked him if it were not undignified for a cardinal to ski. “No, among us it is normal,” replied Cardinal Wojtyla. “Half of the Polish cardinals ski.” That was true. The only other Polish cardinal was Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński.

July 25, 1999

At the Movies
(Part II)

Hitchcock's revenge

Hitchcock put the most gross errors into his films deliberately, confident that no one would notice them.

Who better to write a book and make a noted television feature on Alfred Hitchcock than a Catholic priest? And it does no harm if the priest is also a professor of film, history and English literature at Loyola University in Chicago.

The priest is Father Gene Phillips, a Jesuit – appropriate, as Hitchcock was educated by the Jesuits. Hitchcock once told the priest: “The Jesuits scared the hell out of me. I got even for the rest of my life by scaring everyone else.” This serves as the epigraph to Father Phillips’ book.

A library of books has been written about this famous director of cinema. Most of those I have read in English ignore the most powerful influence on and element in his work, which was the Catholic Church. Father Phillips, and the television programme in the American master series called *Hitchcock, Selznick and the End of Hollywood*, redress the balance. Hitchcock believed in redemptive suffering, and had many of his protagonists suffer before triumphing in the end. “You must suffer and sacrifice in life if you are to succeed,” Father Phillips remembers him saying. “He meant suffering in a moral sense, too. His characters suffer a great deal in his films.”

Father Phillips says: “He was a very good Catholic all his life. I have said to people that Alfred Hitchcock is a better Catholic than I am.” Certainly his Catholic imagination is part of the Catholic heritage. This sometimes showed itself in quirky observations. Günther Simmermacher of *The Southern Cross*, a film buff, told me an amusing remark of the master. His nickname for Los Angeles’ Our Lady of the Angels cathedral, with its well heeled parishioners, was Our Lady of the Cadillacs.

Hitchcock was known as a master of suspense, which indeed he was. He was also a consummate master of the craft of film-making. He was in fact such a marvellous story teller that few bothered to look beneath the surface. Those who did found a world of suffering, guilt and redemption, as well as other Catholic qualities.

I think I have managed, through interest and a sort of collector's instinct, to see all of Hitchcock's films. I prefer the English period, before he went to Hollywood and mega-bucks and glossy technical skills, good though these later films were. His great skills were best shown in the string of unpretentious British films with modest budgets and backgrounds. He did marvels with these, particularly *The Secret Agent* (whose cast included the great original Peter Lorre) and *The 39 Steps*.

Hitchcock was indifferent to glamour values, though he did have a weakness for icy blondes such as Grace Kelly, Tippi Hedren and the earlier Madeleine Carroll.

On television in France, I once saw one of those huge Hollywood tributes to him. Sean Connery was being particularly effusive, not typical of the likeable actor.

"Who are you?" asked the seated, honoured Hitchcock. "Why, you remember me, Hitch," said the aghast Connery. "It's me, Sean Connery." "Never heard of you," replied the great man grumpily.

The famous French director François Truffaut, one of the creators of the New Wave in cinema, was there. He could speak English only with difficulty. Through translators he conveyed his horror that people were calling the great man "Hitch", in familiar American style. "What do you call him in France?" he was asked. "We call him *maître* (master)," came the reply.

Hitchcock had a contempt for both actors, whom he called cattle, and audiences. I once heard him say that he put the most gross errors into his films deliberately, confident that no one would notice them. And they did not.

Hitchcock's most overtly Catholic film was *I Confess*, in which a priest, played by Montgomery Clift, is charged with a murder he did not commit, but is unable to clear himself because the real murderer has confessed to him, and he is bound by the seal of the confessional. In the film the murderer admits his guilt and the priest is released. This was done under pressure. Hitchcock would have preferred the priest to be executed, sacrificing himself for the inviolability of the confessional.

November 28, 1999

A forgotten masterpiece

The film's re-emergence has been greeted as the discovery of a forgotten masterpiece, which indeed it is.

It is a curious fact that several of the best Christian films were made by people who did not call themselves Christians, much less Catholics.

The best example, I think, is *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, made on a very small budget by Pier Paolo Pasolini with a cast of amateurs, and his own mother in the part of the Blessed Virgin. Pasolini said he was a militant atheist and Marxist, although a Vatican spokesman said after his murder that the filmmaker and poet was a better Catholic than he thought. The Vatican gave his film on St Matthew's Gospel their award as the best film of its year.

Then there is the French film *Thérèse*, a masterpiece on St Thérèse of Lisieux on which I have already commented. The director and author, Alain Cavalier, is not a practising Catholic, although he was educated in the tradition. His film though is one of the most luminous tributes to sanctity ever made.

And there is Roberto Rossellini, the late Italian master, one of the authors of neo-realism and the maker of *Rome, Open City* among other major films. Rossellini specifically said he regretted it, but "I do not have the faith". Like nearly all Italians, though, he was educated as a Catholic. Yet he, too, produced a most beautiful tribute to a saint, a masterpiece called *Francis, Minstrel of God*.

French television the other night did a great service in reviving this film, or one can even say, discovering it. It was made in 1950, was a commercial failure, and then seemed totally to vanish to the extent that most of the filmographies, the lists of films Rossellini made, do not even mention it. For a film of such high merit, this is quite extraordinary. *Minstrel of God's* re-emergence has been greeted as the discovery of a forgotten masterpiece, which indeed it is.

It has not been shown, on television or anywhere else, for 36 years. The television audience of millions were entranced by these simple stories from the life of St Francis of Assisi; in one night, far more people saw the movie than had done in its 36 years of life. Sensibly, too, *Minstrel of God* was shown in

the original Italian, with French sub-titles. Dubbing would have taken away a great deal of the authenticity of those Italian voices.

Francis, Minstrel of God is a film which seems to have been touched by grace. Apart from costing next to nothing to make, and being filmed entirely in the Italian countryside, all the actors are Franciscan monks, and their performances are near miraculous, particularly that of the friar who plays St Francis, a man who seems to breathe spirituality, delight, joy, simple pleasure, profound belief. The only professional actor in the movie is Aldo Fabrizi, in one of the episodes as the tyrant Nicholas. He is totally won over by the sweet nature and peacefulness of one of the monks.

The film is made up of the 11 episodes of “eleven flowers” of St Francis. It does not attempt to tell the life of the saint or even to indicate the background of Francesco Bernadone, prodigal son of a rich merchant of Assisi. One sees their hut being occupied by a peasant and his donkey and how the friars left them there and danced all night in the rain, giving thanks to God. Then there is their new hut, so small for reasons of humility that they can hardly enter. There is a visit of St Clare and the women of her order. In a very moving scene, one sees Francis kissing a passing leper whose bell was echoing through the wood. Then there is a little episode of the friar who returns to his brethren almost naked. He has given his habit to a man who was hungry.

The marvellous thing about *Francis, Minstrel of God* is the freshness and the joy which it conveys, with not a single false or sentimental note. When the friars dance and sing in the driving rain, squelching about in the mud, their joy is radiant. It could so easily have been ridiculous; it is the opposite when they literally jump for joy. Sweetness, innocence, peaceful faith are embodied in this happy band of brothers.

Francis, Minstrel of God is like a vision of the happiness of a pure spirituality. The spectator feels that heaven is made of such as these.

December 14, 1986

Gary Cooper, a nice guy

"It's the best thing I ever did."

Of course: how could it be otherwise?

The actor Gary Cooper was often the very embodiment of unassuming righteousness. There is, for example, the ineradicable memory of him as the sheriff in *High Noon*, one of the greatest westerns, facing the evil men out to destroy not just him but the whole community in a lonely village street, perhaps the best of the classic western confrontations between good and evil.

Coop, as he was known, was a great screen presence, one of the true stars of Hollywood's golden years. He was not an actor of great range, but in the type of part that suited him – that of likeable, often inarticulate, retiring and modest but high-principled goodness – he was unbeatable.

He played many parts such as that, too many to even attempt a summary. There are a few that come automatically to mind. The simple man who overcomes capitalist nastiness in Frank Capra's splendid *Mr Deeds Comes To Town*. Robert Jordan, the embattled idealistic soldier in Hemingway's *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. The pacifist who became a war hero in *Sergeant York*. The champion baseballer who gave his name to a disease, Lou Gehrig. The Quaker in the touching *Friendly Persuasion*. The American officer in Italy in another Hemingway film, *A Farewell To Arms*. The very quintessential of romantic love in *Peter Ibbotson*.

I doubt if Coop could ever play a bad man. I have no recollection of him ever trying, but it is somehow inconceivable. Also, he was not good at conveying intellectual distinction though he did try that as the architect in *The Fountainhead*.

In his youth Cooper had an astonishing beauty. He never grew really old, dying of cancer in his early 60s, but he matured into a look of shy but noble distinction. There was never an actor like him. The only one who came closest was probably James Stewart.

It is perhaps not well known that Coop was a Catholic. Other great Catholic names in Hollywood of the palmy days included Spencer Tracy, Bing Crosby, Pat O'Brien, Jimmy Durante, James Cagney, and Frank Capra, the great director.

It is, of course, altogether appropriate that an actor who effortlessly projected the good in man should be part of the universal Church. Unlike most of the other Catholic greats in Hollywood, he was a convert.

I have just reread the story of Ernest Hemingway's last years, called *Papa Hemingway*, by the American writer AE Hotchner, published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson. This contains two significant accounts of Cooper and Catholicism.

Hemingway and Cooper, incidentally, were close friends. Hemingway at times made the employment of the actor a condition of allowing some of his books to be filmed. Coop did suit the Hemingway hero very well.

When both men were in their mid-fifties, Cooper confided to Hemingway that he had converted to Catholicism. His wife Rocky and his daughter Maria were both Catholics. He asked Hemingway's advice. The writer replied that although he was himself a convert, he did not think he was a good enough example to say anything, but that he hoped that it would work out all right.

A few years later, when Hemingway was hospitalised with the nervous depression that was to lead to his suicide, Hotchner went to see Cooper, on his deathbed and ravaged with pain. Speaking with difficulty, Cooper said he had heard Hemingway was back in his hospital. "Poor Papa. Tell him I'll beat him to the barn." Then, racked by a particularly severe pain, Cooper reached for a crucifix at his bedside. "Please give Papa a message. It's important, and you mustn't forget, because I'll not be talking to him again. Tell him, that time I wondered if I'd made the right decision – tell him it was the best thing I ever did." He moved the crucifix close enough to touch his cheek. A few days later, he was dead.

The feeling summed up in the words "the best thing I ever did" is common among converts. One expects it in the first fine, careless rapture, as it were, but oddly enough, the feeling and the emotions and the thoughts stabilise over the years till they become simply a part of being.

"It's the best thing I ever did." Of course: how could it be otherwise?

It is a very apt thing for the sheriff in *High Noon* to say after showing how good will rout evil. It is also appropriate for the White Knight in Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, in a film version of which Cooper also played with decorative distinction.

March 14, 1999

A tribute to Alec Guinness

*His refusal to show any signs of being broken
is one of the high marks of cinema acting.*

The story of the event which led to the conversion of the late Sir Alec Guinness is worth retelling. In its very simplicity, it encapsulates great truth. Simplicity was also one of the features of the work of this great and versatile actor. (Anyone who does not think he justified the adjective “great” should merely glance at his great range of work.)

The story is told by himself in his 1985 memoir which he entitled *Blessings in Disguise*. He told of what he described as his “reconciliation with the holy, Roman, catholic and apostolic church.”

In 1956 he was filming his *Father Brown* film in the great wine-making region of Burgundy in France. He was playing the little priest whose wisdom and knowledge of human nature led to his becoming another Sherlock Holmes. Still dressed as a priest he walked from the set back to his hotel. A young boy of 7 or 8 greeted him in the French style as *mon père* (Father) with trust and affection, and chattering away, walked the way back with the actor.

Guinness wrote: “I reflected that a church which could inspire such confidence in a child, making its priests, even when unknown, so easily approachable, could not be as scheming or creepy as so often made out. I began to shake off my long-taught, long-absorbed prejudices.”

He was received into the Church two years later and kept the faith till his recent death at the age of 86. He was known for this, as in other things, for his own unobtrusiveness, for doing good by stealth. He did write of personal dejection and acedia “which were soon disposed of”. These were not unknown to that great St Thérèse of Lisieux.

He met several popes. Of Pius XII in 1948, writing before he became a Catholic, Guinness said: “I felt for the first time that I had met a saint.” In 1994 he was among the pilgrims in St Peter’s Square for the Easter morning Mass celebrated by John Paul II. “I decided that his voice is the most beautiful and the most dignified speaking voice I have ever heard,” he wrote. And that old actor knew something about speaking voices. His own was not only

beautiful and expressive but most adaptable.

This is all the more remarkable as he came from the most humble origins. His mother, in obituaries and biographies, is described as a part-time barmaid and prostitute. Illegitimate, he did not know who his father was.

He played parts of incredible diversity, but even in this galaxy, in my opinion at least, is his Father Brown who stands out. He always identified with his parts, but he really became the humble and wise little priest, the greatest fictional creation of fellow-convert GK Chesterton. Oddly enough, only one film in English has been made out of the Father Brown stories, and that was the one Guinness starred in. If anything called for a series, this was it. Father Brown has appeared on television, but that is not the same.

Guinness' best-known film was probably *Star Wars*, in which he also incarnated wisdom, but that gives only a hint of his diversity. In contrast, for example, he played Hitler, most convincingly, in *Hitler: The Last Ten Days*. And there was *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, in which he played eight parts, all very different, and one of them female. Who could forget also the flamboyant, overpowering villainy of his Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, which caused Jewish protests in New York? The old veteran, humane communist in *Doctor Zhivago* was another example of the deep humanity Guinness brought to all his roles. His unbelievable versatility never swamped human feeling. One more example of this was that of the Arab potentate he played in *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Apart from Father Brown, though, my fondest memory of Sir Alec was as the misguided, almost deranged British officer in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, for which he won a most deserved Oscar. There he incarnated not only all the foolishness but also the gallantry and courage of this major who becomes obsessed with doing well what was in effect an act of treachery: building a bridge for the Japanese in war and doing it as well as it could be done. Guinness's blinking eyes, his refusal to show any signs of being broken as he emerges from brutal solitary confinement into the sun is one of the high marks of cinema acting.

September 10, 2000

War on celluloid

*The definitive war film, in my opinion,
is the French film La Grand Illusion.*

Films on war are among the most ancient and popular of the cinema genres. They divide themselves roughly into two: gung ho or aggressively militaristic and propagandist, and anti-war.

One remembers with great fondness one such film with a Catholic character: Pat O'Brien in *The Fighting 69th*, in which he played the lead, a priest. This grand old actor, of Irish origin, made something of a speciality of this. Here he was at his best.

Going on national general release last Friday was what has been called the best of all war films, *Saving Private Ryan* by the redoubtable Steven Spielberg of *E.T.*, *Jaws*, *Schindler's List*, *Amistad*, *Jurassic Park* and so on. Spielberg is truly the man with the Midas touch: any celluloid he touches turns to gold. Commercially, he is the most successful filmmaker of all time.

I saw *Saving Private Ryan* at a preview, and was duly impressed by it. The film was released first in the United States, of course, where the publicity it generated was unprecedented. How Europe and Africa react will be interesting. The beginning of the film is undoubtedly the best and most grim and realistic depiction of war I have ever seen in a feature film. It conveys with realistic horror the landing on Omaha Beach, Normandy, by American troops on D-day in June 1944, the subject of the mammoth movie *The Longest Day*, made more than 30 years ago.

The photography of *Private Ryan* is in black and white, lit with splashes of the red of blood. It is so real that one feels shudderingly present. The hand-held camera flickers and slides nervously over grim and ghastly scenes. Occasionally it peeps at men at prayer, holding a cross or kissing one. There is a brief flash of a priest kneeling next to a dying man to hear his last confession, to the sound of crashing guns and zipping bullets. This sequence lasts for about 25 minutes.

The film is about the search by a platoon of eight men through the battlefields of Normandy for one Private Ryan, the survivor of four brothers (the other

three were killed in battle). Dilemmas and moral problems raised include whether the lives of eight men should be imperilled for the sake of one, and whether this search is justified in terms of winning the war. The story is gripping, but the main merits of the film are in the scenes of battle, the grim depiction of the horror of war, and of man's inhumanity to man.

Saving Private Ryan has already been called the definitive war film, but in my opinion, at any rate, that honour goes to the French film *La Grand Illusion* (1937) by Jean Renoir, with unforgettable performances by Erich von Stroheim, Pierre Fresnay and Jean Gabin playing, respectively, a commander of a German prisoner of war camp, an aristocratic French officer, and an ordinary man, representative of the workers. Set in the First World War, it is an enduring classic, a work of profundity clearly stated.

Then there was *All's Quiet On The Western Front*, an American movie based on Erich-Maria Remarque's novel directed by Lewis Milestone in 1930. The closing scene of this film is one of world cinema's great moments. In the very last minutes of the war, on November 11, 1918, a soldier crawls out of his trench to catch a butterfly, elusive symbol of peace, freedom and beauty amid the ravages of the carnage. A random sniper's bullet cuts him dead.

Back to contemporary film, I saw recently, also at a preview, a film that was complementary to *Saving Private Ryan* – a French film called *Captain Conan* by the distinguished French director Bertrand Tavernier. The film won two Césars, the French equivalent of the Oscar, for best direction (Tavernier) and best actor (Philippe Torreton) in 1997. This is a very good anti-war film, and acts as balance to *Private Ryan* in that it lacks the visual horrors but emphasises the spiritual wastes, the weariness of soul which prolonged war can produce. In other words, war is shown not so much as hell as a grim purgatory. Unlike Spielberg's most grimly realistic and detailed battle scenes, here the uniformed corpses simply lie about the fields like broken and abandoned dolls.

The film is about one of the many forgotten wars. After Armistice in the First World War, there was an undeclared war in the Balkans when about 100,000 Frenchmen, many from military prison, were forced to fight against an assortment of Bolsheviks, Bulgars, Serbs, Turks and Greeks for about a year. Both these current films bring home the reality behind the clichés.

September 20, 1998

Put a halo on these movies

A most interesting film never got made: the story of St Paul, with Frank Sinatra as the apostle

The saints are an incredibly versatile lot. The least one could say about them is that they are an interesting and unusual bunch of men and women.

Apart from sanctity, obviously, one can find little in common between, for example, the remote and urbane intellectual with his complex and civilised character, Thomas More; the peasant girl from the remote Pyrénées who was virtually illiterate, Bernadette of Lourdes; that military genius and most remarkable of all teenagers, Joan of Arc; and St Thérèse of Lisieux, the contemplative from a poor family who did practically nothing but pray, never but once travelled, and yet became the patron of missionaries. Had Bernadette been placed at dinner next to Thomas More, it is difficult to imagine what they could have found to talk about, particularly as Bernadette was very reserved.

Yet as I noticed in an article the other day, the cinema, the biggest-ever mass entertainment medium, has on the whole made little use of their inviting material. There have been some films, though, and they have included very good ones. One of the best was the fairly recent French movie, entitled simply *Thérèse*, about Thérèse of Lisieux which won all the main awards at the annual presentation of the Césars, the French equivalent of Oscars.

On a more populist level, that fine actor Charlton Heston, a Catholic, knows something about cinematic saints as he has played several biblical figures as well as saints. These have included Moses in the *The Ten Commandments*, St John the Baptist in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, and St Thomas More in the television version of Robert Bolt's play *A Man For All Seasons*. Heston has been quoted as saying that no actor could claim to have a saint's understanding. The trick to being a film saint, he added, is to play the character as anything but a saint. "Walking around with an invisible halo is the worst thing an actor can do. Saints did not know that they were saints."

What would certainly have been a most interesting film unfortunately never got made: the story of St Paul, with, oddly enough, Frank Sinatra as the apostle! Sinatra is a very good and versatile actor, and I think he would have made an excellent Paul.

The director Frank Capra, another Catholic, was one of the greats of Hollywood, with a particular style which emphasises warm-hearted human values, often among simple people. Certainly his Christmas movie *It's A Wonderful Life*, with a remarkable performance by James Stewart, and Henry Travers as an apprentice angel trying to gain his wings, is one of the most oddly moving films ever made. So were *Mr Smith Goes To Washington* (also with James Stewart), and *Mr Deeds Comes To Town* (with Gary Cooper), the story of a good non-conformist who in real life would certainly have been a saint.

Joan of Arc is a very cinematic subject and has duly been filmed several times. The best known is the one with Ingrid Bergman, but the best undoubtedly is the silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, by the Danish director Carl Dreyer.

There was once, in the 1930s, a very fine French film on the life of St Vincent de Paul, a subject which also lends itself naturally to the cinematic medium, particularly the galley slave sequences.

One of the best films about a saint, undoubtedly, was the film of Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, which won five Oscars in 1966, including best film. Paul Scofield is a magnificent actor who rarely makes screen appearances. As St Thomas More he won an Oscar, and it is difficult to conceive of any actor conveying better the worldly saint and his troubles with Henry VIII.

Becket, made in 1964, too was in the grand production class with Richard Burton at his best as St Thomas, and Peter O'Toole as his friend and enemy, Henry II.

I must say, a film I would like to see is one of the life of that lovable intellectual St Augustine of Hippo, played by to my mind the best of living actors, Marlon Brando.

November 28, 1992

Make 'em laugh: Best of comedy

I have found recent comedies aimed at the youth market vulgar and appalling.

Listing the “best” films is always an interesting game but essentially a subjective process. The United States Catholic Conference’s Office for Film and Broadcasting have just issued their list of the 10 best American comedies as part of the great Jubilee Year celebrations. They will follow with other categories.

I have seen all of them, except one, the last on the list: *Moonstruck* (1987) by Norman Jewison and with Nicholas Cage and Cher. Günther Simmermacher of *The Southern Cross* describes it as rather awful. I’ll take his word for it. He would include *Tootsie* with Dustin Hoffman, and Cary Grant in Capra’s *Arsenic and Old Lace*. I would agree with that, also *His Girl Friday*, the Howard Hawks screwball comedy with Rosalind Russell and again Cary Grant.

Here is the Office for Film and Broadcasting list with my comments:

The General (1927). Perhaps the best film of the great master of comedy, Buster Keaton. The involved story is basically a chase of a steam train during the Civil War. The amazing timing and athleticism of Keaton and the comic potential of his wistful, never-changing face and haunted eyes have never been better shown.

City Lights (1933) is the great Chaplin story about how the Little Tramp saves the sight of a blind girl. When the girl, her sight restored, recognises from his voice the bedraggled little figure as her benefactor, it is probably the most heart-breaking close-up in the history of cinema. A masterpiece, but I think Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush* was even better.

Duck Soup (1933) was the best of the surreal comedies of the amazing Marx Brothers in one small package. It portrays the struggle for liberation in the embattled country of Fredonia.

In *Sons of the Desert* (1933), Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy (the thin one and the fat one) were probably the most endearing and enduring purveyors of pure, wholesome humour, with no bitterness, no satire, no social consciousness. Their comic timing was miraculous. Such was their standard that it is difficult to

choose among their films, but certainly *Sons of the Desert* is up at the top.

It Happened One Night (1934) by Frank Capra has a claim to be the king of romantic comedies, with Clark Gable, ever charming as a tough reporter, and Claudette Colbert as a fleeing heiress.

Bringing Up Baby (1938) was probably the best of the screwball comedies of the kind that they don't make any more. Howard Hawks again shows he was the master. The eponymous baby, incidentally, is a leopard. Cary Grant is a palaeontologist and Katharine Hepburn the girl who wants him. Certainly one of the funniest and most enjoyable films ever made.

The Bank Dick (1940). WC Fields made a career out of drunken misogyny. He is now a cult figure, which would probably have surprised the old reprobate. His bulbous nose almost literally lit up many an individual comedy, but my favourite was *It's a Gift* in which the old monster is transferred with his family to California and performs miracles of timing with a recalcitrant deck chair. He started his show life as a juggler, and it shows.

Sullivans's Travels (1941) is probably the best film of Preston Sturges, whose brand of intelligence and sometimes bitter satire is not well enough known. A satire on Hollywood, this tells how a somewhat phoney director (Joel McCrae) learns about life the hard way – on a chain gang.

Dr Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. Made in 1964 at one of the bleakest days of the Cold War, this is a satiric comedy about the end of the world. Stanley Kubrick, who died recently, made it on a shoestring, as they say. Peter Sellers plays three parts, but is most memorable as the crazed and manic German scientist (modelled on von Braun) who is not averse to blowing up the world. He has his moments as the President of the United States and as a RAF officer too. It seemed better at the time, but it still holds up.

I would certainly include on this list *Some Like It Hot* by Billy Wilder, with Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis and Marilyn Monroe fleeing the mob. Also the marvellous *Harvey* with James Stewart as an amiable lunatic who has for a friend an invisible rabbit slightly taller than he is.

I have found recent comedies aimed at the youth market vulgar and appalling. Comedy always makes a comeback, though.

September 17, 2000

Hollywood goes West

Clint Eastwood's epic ranks as one of the best Westerns of all time.

Continuing his lists of “best films” to mark the millennium, Henry Herx, veteran reviewer and former head of the US Catholic Bishops’ Conference’s Office for Film and Broadcasting, has supplied his best Westerns.

As usual, his list is knowledgeable and interesting. It contains, though, some strange omissions.

The Western is the only totally original art form to come from the United States. The classic, simple format was good versus evil, sometimes moderated to bad against good. This was often symbolised by the shoot-out in a deserted, dusty village street, most typically in the classic *High Noon*. The genre produced several masterpieces, much good entertainment, and of course a good deal of forgettable rubbish.

The king of the medium, incidentally, was undoubtedly John Ford, a Catholic with a vision that combined wide spaciousness and a warmth of human feeling.

Here is Herx’s list, in chronological order. I shall supply a few of my own, with comments:

The Iron Horse (1924); *The Virginian* (1929); *Stagecoach* (1939, the film in which John Wayne made his name); *The Ox-bow Incident* (1943); *Red River* (1948); *The Gunfighter* (1950); *Shane* (1953); *The Searchers* (1956); *Ride The High Country* (1962); *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969).

This is a solid and conscientious list of worthy films with which no one could find much to dispute. There is, though, one glaring and inexplicable omission, in my opinion one of the top two classic Westerns: *High Noon* (1952), directed by Fred Zinnemann. Günther Simmermacher, film buff and newly appointed editor of *The Southern Cross*, noticed this too, remarking that it has been said to be an analogy on the McCarthy witch-hunts.

High Noon is not only a great Western but also a great film. It contains one of Gary Cooper's finest and most typical performances as the sheriff of a small town left alone by his cowardly townspeople, deserted by his Quaker wife, and forced to take a lone stand against some very dark villains in the sunlit main street one midday.

Cooper was always good at playing quiet nobility, the peaceful man forced in the cause of right into violent action against his will, the White Knight himself. Here he is at his best, and he deservedly won an Oscar for it.

Herx also does not mention Clint Eastwood, who with director Sergio Leone helped originate the "spaghetti western" in Italy, with enormous commercial success, and then returned to the United States as director and actor to become something of a legend. *The Unforgiven*, a story with the basic elements of redemption, villainy and heroism is a comparatively recent movie of his. I think it ranks as one of the best Westerns of all time.

Sam Peckinpah, a colourful figure with a most vivid style, was one of the latter-day directors specialising in the Western genre. He was a Catholic convert. Herx cited his notable movie *Ride the High Country*, but I think more of *The Wild Bunch* (1969), about some very wild men indeed, ageing anachronisms in a world that has passed them by, setting out on a hopeless quest. With its vivid direction and fine acting (William Holden notably world-weary), the movie is a sad requiem to the Old West. The characters are like fatigued dinosaurs overwhelmed by the machine age, non-conformists resisting the encroaching stamp of uniformity.

Another Western (though set after World War II, the film's "feel" is essentially a western theme) that I think forces itself into inclusion is *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1954) by John Sturges. The theme once again is good and evil and Spencer Tracy gives one of his best performances as a one-armed man who uncovers a small town's secrets of racism and murder. Lee Marvin is splendid as one of the very bad men – something he was always very good at.

Another great Western hero was Henry Fonda. Among many others, I think *My Darling Clementine* (1946), again directed by John Ford, forces entry. Like Cooper, Fonda had a quiet nobility. Here he gives one of the many interpretations of Wyatt Earp.

February 18, 2001

Even educated fleas do it

Love stories have been a staple of movies since the first crowds gathered in darkness to escape from a humdrum world.

Love stories are the latest in a series of lists of “best films” compiled by the Office for Film and Broadcasting of the US Catholic Conference. The list is drawn up, as were the others, by Henry Herx, the office’s retired director, a knowledgeable and expert film reviewer of vast experience. His reviews have frequently been published in *The Southern Cross*.

Romantic films or love stories, of course, have been a staple of movies since the first crowds gathered in darkness, often to escape from a humdrum world to the cloud-capped towers of high romance, so the choice is vast, and the quality often very good.

Here is Herx’s list. To this I will substitute and add a few of my own. The lists are by no means inclusive.

Way Down East (1920); *History is Made At Night* (1937); *Wuthering Heights* (1938); *Gone With The Wind* (1939); *The Shop Around The Corner* (1940); *Casablanca* (1942); *The African Queen* (1951); *The Quiet Man* (1952); *Marty* (1955); *An Affair To Remember* (1957).

A weakness of the list is that it includes only American films. They are all films of solid merit, but there are better which clamour for attention. Here are some.

It Happened One Night (directed by Frank Capra, 1934). Many would think the very archetype of American love stories. The story does not matter much, but it is a whimsy about a runaway heiress (Claudette Colbert) and a pursuing journalist (Clark Gable). Naturally, they fall in love. As Günther Simmermacher of *The Southern Cross* points out, it uses the strict censorship rules of the day to advantage, for example in the famous scene, when the couple, forced to spend a night in a hotel bedroom, hitch up a blanket between their beds which they call “the Wall of Jericho”.

Brief Encounter (Ronald Neame, 1945). A British film based on a one-act play by Noël Coward, this low-keyed tender little romance which takes place almost entirely on a small railway station, is surely one of the most touching films ever

made. The protagonists are verging on middle-age, a doctor and a housewife, both married, played by Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson. Their affair never goes beyond a kiss. This adds to the sadness and heightened emotion.

Les Enfants du Paradis (Marcel Carné, 1945). A French film, this simply is one of the best ever made, a true classic. Although there are many other themes, the basic story is of the love of a mime for a beautiful and remote actress, Garance. The parts are unforgettably played by the sad-faced, grieving Jean-Louis Barrault (a great mime) and the haunting Arletty, the French equivalent of Garbo.

Pépé le Moko (Julien Duvivier, 1936). The story of a gangster hiding in the Casbah in Algeria until he throws away his life for the love which draws him out like a magnet. One of the very greatest screen actors, Jean Gabin, plays Pépé with his usual intense feeling locked in by iron restraint (his style was similar to that of Spencer Tracy). The film is also infused by a haunting poetic quality.

Le Diable au Corps (Claude Autant-Lara, 1947). An intense and destructive affair between a very young man and a woman whose husband is away fighting World War I. The title means “the devil in the flesh”. The young man is played by Gérard Philipe, surely the best of all romantic actors, who died an untimely death. The woman was played with great feeling by Micheline Presle.

Camille (George Cukor, 1936). How could the great and elusive Garbo be left out of any list of romantic films? Almost any of her films would qualify, but in terms of the high and doomed romance, which was her speciality, she was probably at her best in this story of a courtesan doomed by tuberculosis who gives up with noble self-sacrifice. Garbo is magical, Robert Taylor was never so handsome, the movie as a whole has that glamour which was associated with MGM.

Peter Ibbotson (Henry Hathaway, 1935). I have mentioned this movie before as a fantasy, but it is a great love story, too. It is about the intense love of a man imprisoned for life in solitary confinement. The couple meets only in dreams and reveries, which is enough for them. They are reunited in heaven. An extraordinary film, a favourite of the surrealists with touching performances by Gary Cooper and Ann Harding.

The Philadelphia Story (George Cukor, 1940). A film of remarkable sophistication with remarkably deft performances by Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant and James Stewart, in which true love wins in the end.

January 21, 2001

Being Catholic
(Part II)

Story of an African princess

The annals of the Catholic Church are full of strange stories, but this must be one of the strangest.

A lesson of forgiveness and reconciliation comes to us across the centuries from an African nun who died in 1748. She was Sister Teresa Tshikaba, who was born in 1676 in Guinea, West Africa, and died in the convent of St Mary Magdalene of Penance, Salamanca, Spain, in 1748.

One of “the humble, the little ones,” her life was described, in a biography published four years after her death by her confessor, Don Juan Carlos Pan y Agja, as one of terrifying harshness.

A process of canonisation has been opened. One may pray for its success for many reasons. Torn from her home into slavery at the age of 10, Sister Teresa led a life of exemplary virtue, of which I perceive echoes in the Spielberg film *Amistad*. Her biographer says she was not captured by slavers but by beneficent Spaniards who treated the young girl as one of royal blood, an African princess – which indeed she was. Baptised with the name Teresa on the way to Spain, on the island of St Thomas, she was known as Negrita – little black girl.

I have received many interesting documents relating to the life of the Venerable Teresa Tshikaba from Sister Rosa Maria Calvo of St Dominic’s convent in Senekal, Free State. Like Sister Teresa, Sister Rosa is a contemplative Dominican, having come to South Africa from Spain with six other Spanish nuns in 1985, to start a new community in the Free State. Two of the sisters came from the convent in Salamanca where the remains of Sister Teresa are venerated. Sadly, one of the two died in a car smash in August 1987.

The community has grown since its foundation, and has now an international flavour. Its numbers now include a Peruvian, a Mozambican, a Zulu, two Xhosas and a MoSotho. This Spanish-African mixture, typified by Sister Teresa, is being suitably maintained as an apostolate of prayer for South Africa. What could be more appropriate?

Sister Teresa’s official biography speaks of the envy, scorn and solitude

which marked the girl's early days in Spain, in contrast to the ease and admiration of her high life in Africa. Even so, given the chance of returning home, she chose to stay in Spain.

She was not treated unkindly in the household where she was a slave, and she was allowed to seek admission as a contemplative religious. The local bishop, though, refused her such admission, allowing her only tertiary status, as a servant of the community. The humble Teresa was not downcast. She adapted herself, prayed and worked, until after many hardships, the same bishop allowed Teresa's profession as a nun. Her life thereafter was a model of dedication and humility. It had been a long voyage for her in all senses of the word, from daughter of the king of the "underground gold mine" as her part of Guinea was called.

The annals of the Catholic Church are full of strange stories, but this must be one of the strangest.

One of the documents sent me by Sister Rosa is headlined: "First African Dominican woman to be beatified?" So may she indeed be.

The high regard in which Teresa was held was shown in that when her community was suppressed after the French invasion of 1810, and the nuns relocated to Santa Maria de las Duenas monastery in Salamanca, they took Teresa's remains with them. These are now beneath a black marble slab in the burial cloister in Salamanca.

Sister Teresa's cause should be the subject of much prayer. Its success would have a high symbolic value indeed, apart from its intrinsic worth.

May 17, 1998

Pick a nun up with a spade

*The vast financial institution suddenly
seemed more human.*

The other day I was in my bank in Montpellier, the head office for the region of the biggest bank in France. When I say “my” bank, the words sound a trifle grandiose: my contribution to its grandeur is modest indeed, and certainly does not include any form of ownership. At any rate, it is a grand and very busy establishment, bristling with computers and other electronic what-have-you’s (France has become very much a country of high technology, in the space of just a few years.)

Being the day after a long weekend, the place was full of customers, activity, and general purposeful bustle. The queues were long and the tellers somewhat sharp-edged, as French people used to working fast usually are, as anyone who has been even a tourist in Paris will know.

In front of me in my queue there was a nun, very small and bright-eyed. In fact, being rather tall (particularly in France), I felt slightly embarrassed at towering over her so. I had a modest transaction which would not take much time, but behind me there was a businessman with sheaves of cheques and books and documents, which, had I been teller, I would have glanced at with a jaundiced eye.

I assumed the nun was the treasurer of her convent, but when it came to her turn, her business was very simple indeed: “Have you any calendars to spare for our convent?” she asked the slightly harassed teller, who was surrounded by keyboards, bank notes and letters of credit.

Masking what must have been some surprise with admirable skill, he answered with the greatest courtesy: “I don’t think so, *ma soeur*. It’s quite late in the year now, and I think we have already given them all away. Indeed, we did so before the New Year. I will go and look, though.”

That young man is normally rather abrupt, yet he spoke gently but without condescension, and addressed her correctly. Leaving the queue of busy people, none of whom seemed to mind, the teller disappeared into the recesses of the building. He came back bearing two. “I have managed to find these,

ma soeur. They are our last.” The nun said thank you, smiled and was gone. The vast financial institution suddenly seemed more human.

Now, I am always vastly impressed by these fine ladies, and that little anecdote is by way of being my praise to nuns. I have not known as many as I would have liked to, for I am a convert, though of fairly respectable vintage now (not far off 20 years). In my childhood, unlike cradle Catholics, I rarely came across nuns. My father was an atheist, tolerant of all religions but that was all, and my mother had no special religious belief.

The faith, the practicality, the warm good humour, the simple goodness of all the nuns I have met, to me has been a source of wonder and pleasure. By Freudian rules, they should all be thwarted and embittered, but I have never met one who has not seemed to me to be totally fulfilled.

I remember my late mother-in-law, who came from Ireland, telling me, with much kindly mirth, how a nun had fallen in Dublin near some navvies. One called out: “No, don’t touch her, she’s holy. Help her up with your spade.” An amusing story, I thought, and one with no disrespect towards a noble kind of woman.

April 24, 1988

It's a miracle

There have been at least 10,000 reported cures at Lourdes. Yet the Church recognises only 65.

The cure of a young Sicilian girl, now aged 25, at Lourdes in 1976, was recognised as miraculous in July this year. This was made public by the archbishop of Catane.

This is only the 65th Lourdes miracle recognised by the Church. Very high standards are demanded. There have been at least 10,000 inexplicable cures registered at Lourdes since Bernadette spoke to the Blessed Virgin in 1858. An international commission of experts examine the cases, apart from the board of doctors that sit at Lourdes. To be recognised as a miracle by the most exacting standards of the Catholic hierarchy, the cure must be “certain, durable and inexplicable”.

As well as the thousands who report inexplicable cures there are many who do not. I myself, for example, once went to Lourdes with what seemed like influenza and bronchitis, accompanied by a fever. At the grotto, the symptoms simply evaporated.

The hierarchy, quite correctly of course, does not encourage miracle-seekers. The true miracle of Lourdes is Bernadette and her conversations with the Blessed Virgin. Still, inexplicable things do happen there. The place in itself has a strange and peaceful feeling of total sanctity.

Delizia Cirolli, the object of the latest miraculous cure to be recognised, was born on November 16, 1964, into a modest Sicilian family. In 1976 she showed the first symptoms of the Ewing sarcoma, a malignant tumour of the bone marrow, most often noticed among children. When developing, the disease kills the bone tissue. The course is rapid.

Delizia was hospitalised on April 30, 1976, at Catane. The doctors advised the amputation of a leg and cobalt treatment. The parents refused all surgery as well as the cobalt treatment, which at the time could not have seemed wise, but the decision, of course, was very difficult indeed.

Her village of Paterno then got up a subscription to send the young girl, now

in a desperate state, to Lourdes. They are poor people and they dug deep into their pockets. During her pilgrimage to Lourdes from August 5 to 13, 1976, her state got worse. On her return to Paterno, it seemed that all hope was lost. The village, as one man, prayed for her, not giving up at all and staunchly keeping the faith. At Christmas, 1976, she began to feel the symptoms of a cure.

She returned to Lourdes in 1977 to present herself, to pray, to give thanks. The doctors there agreed on the miracle. Her case, as is usual, was transmitted to the International Medical Commission, which is very severe and demanding. It was not until 1982 that the experts gave their final verdict, after the most meticulous examination. The cure had followed the requirements. It was “certain, durable and inexplicable”.

Even this did not make the miracle official. The records, again as is the custom, were sent to the appropriate ecclesiastic authority, in this case the Archbishop of Catane, Luige Bommarito, who worked and prayed and waited for seven years before confirming the miraculous nature of the cure.

In view of all this, it seems inconceivable, but it is true, that the Catholic Church is often accused by ignorant people of “exploiting” miracle to gull the superstitious. Perhaps the words, “there is none so blind as her who will not see”, are appropriate. I often think of them when I hear this sort of thing. There are those who have eyes but see not and ears but hear not.

To repeat, there have been at least 10,000 reported cures at Lourdes. Of these medical evidence recognised about 2,500 as certainly inexplicable. Yet the Church recognises only 65. One would be enough to establish the truth.

As for Delizia Cirolli she has just received her nursing diploma at Catane.

August 27, 1989

A miracle amid utter horror

The dreaded SS rounded up the 450 women and children into the church, then set it on fire.

The little town of Oradour-sur-Glane in the department of Haute-Vienne, part of the region of Perigord (about 22 km from Limoges), is not as well known as it should be. It was the place of one of the most horrible massacres in human history and also the occasion of what the few survivors said was a miracle, as many do to this day.

The town was destroyed by vengeful Nazis of the dreaded SS on June 10, 1944. It was burnt to the ground and most of the men simply shot on sight. For the women and children the German soldiers preserved another fate. About 450 of them, all that could be found, were herded into the church. This was then set on fire and all were burned alive. The few witnesses who can still talk tell of the horrible and harrowing screams, the sickening odour of burning flesh.

What the Nazis left of the town has been preserved as it was as a reminder of man's inhumanity to man. About 2,000 people still live in the village, but apart. The death area remains, grim and desolate. The few survivors will sometimes walk among the ruins, pointing out the various parts of the devastation to visitors. They will never take any money or in any way act as paid tourist guides.

"This," you might be told "was the baker. Here was the tobacconist. An old friend, killed and his family burned alive, lived here."

Sometimes they weep.

Yet on that awful summer's day, a strange thing happened. In the church, the statue of a local saint, Victurnien, remained strangely preserved from the fire. The statue was of wood, too, and dated from the 16th century, and it was painted in several colours. In other words it was very combustible indeed. Naturally that was seen as a sign of hope and a rallying point.

This work was the most noticed and remarked upon at a recent exhibition of the local saints of the area of Limousin, which was held at Cussac, not far

from the site of the massacre. The exhibition was one of great fascination, of aesthetic as well as religious interest. There were 53 statues, shrines and paintings from the 14th to the 18th centuries, showing an odd unity of style and what an art critic called “a vigorous popular aesthetic”, which puts it very well.

The unifying style is essentially simple and uncomplicated, of the people. It has a strength and vigour which is much rooted in the fertile soil of this hauntingly beautiful green area and the strong peasants who work it.

Limousin has had a complicated history, and it was once even marked by anti-clericalism. There are also lingering traces of pagan rites, centering on water and trees, but incorporated into local Catholic practice.

There were many hermits in the deep forests, characteristic of the region, some of whom are venerated as local saints. Some of these are very well known. There is, for example, St Martial, who evangelised the region, St Valerie the Good (as he is usually called), St Eloi, St Etienne de Muret, founder of the order of Grammont, St Leonard, the protector of prisoners of the whole of Christian Europe. There are dozens of others, of whom we know practically nothing. Some of the names are Alpinien, Auvent, Pasammet, Pardoux and Yrieix.

The granite of the area does not take to sculpting, so most of the statues of this impressive array are in painted and decorated wood. The churches themselves tend to be massive and stark, with the holy objects in vivid contrast. The exhibition at Cussac gets together superb examples of these.

The whole shows once again the strength and the adaptability of the Catholic Church, as at home in the solitudes of the dark green caverns of the forests of Limousin as in the splendours of Rome. With this versatility is also most strikingly shows the underlying unity, the diversity of form simply underlining the unity of faith and action.

No matter how it is represented, truth is not altered. A humble wood-carved popular saint of Limousin, by some anonymous hand, reflects this truth as well as the sublime work of art by Michelangelo, the Pieta, in Rome.

October 20, 1991

Love beyond the grave

At All Saints we also pray for and think of what St John called the immense number who cannot be counted.

“People are dying this year who never died before.” So said the author Ernest Hemingway. He expresses well a feeling we have at this time of year, when more and more years have swept by and are piled up, and the list of those for whose souls we pray grows ever longer.

Hemingway had a great gift of trenchant expression, of saying things simply, which seems to spread ripples of recognition. He forged a new style and altered English prose; surely an accomplishment of genius. Hemingway was also a Catholic convert, though the depth of his convictions have been the subject of debate.

I have read all of his published works at least once, and a great deal of what has been written about him: a flood of words in the forms of biographies, critical studies, articles, memoirs and so on.

His life was not a model of the Catholic virtues. Indeed, he fell into despair and killed himself. But in spite of evidence to the contrary, I find a strong undercurrent, seldom explicitly expressed, of Catholic feeling. Certainly he believed in prayer, and certainly he responded, both emotionally and intellectually, not only to the pageantry but also to the solemn rites of the Church. He spent most of his life in Catholic countries, and moved easily in an environment of popular devotions. He also felt and understood, to an intense degree, the dignity of the Church, and one feels he knew all about the fall of man. But he knew about redemption, too.

The occasion for these remarks is, of course, the feast of All Saints, followed (on the calendar anyway) by the feast of All Souls. It is another example of the wisdom of the Church, I think, to have these days one on the morrow of the other, even though locally we have shifted All Saints to the following Sunday, so that its celebration lags behind All Souls.

In Catholic countries these are days of enormous importance. Unfortunately here in South Africa, *in partibus infidelibus*, we are in a minority. There, graveyards are a noble sight, with huge masses of banked flowers, mainly chrysan-

themums, framed by the weeping cypress trees in autumn, the evergreen symbols of immortality. There it is obligatory to pay a visit to the last resting place of the dead, to pray, and everyone does so.

Masses for the two days are fully attended, perhaps even more so than at Easter or Christmas. Often, after the High Mass on All Souls, there is a procession to the cemetery. Graves in France are kept always in immaculate condition, in sad contrast to the unkempt neglect one usually sees in England, for example.

The Church has canonised many of those who give an example. At All Saints we also pray for and think of the others: what the Apocalypse of St John called the immense number who cannot be counted. We think also of all men and women of goodwill, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who have tried to live up to the Beatitudes.

Of the feast of All Souls, the French missal puts it well: “Still in the light of All Saints, we think more intensely of our dead, of those we loved, of those we knew, of those of whom we have heard and of those nobody thinks of any more. For all of these, for all of mankind, Christ was born and rose again. For them all we invoke the mercy of him who judges by love.”

Two thoughts of Vaclav Havel are relevant here, both of deep import. Havel, a Czech playwright and writer, is a former dissident who became president of the Czech republic. Both utterances have always impressed me, but notably within the context of the feasts of All Saints and All Souls: “I have always believed that there is a mystery of life, that things have a meaning, that there is a moral authority, that the universe obeys an order; that it is not simply a mass of improbable chance.”

The other: “In my own life, I aspire to something which surpasses myself, which goes beyond the horizons of my existence, and I think that all that which I have touched, in one fashion or another, is eternity.”

I notice that a work I have been consulting has as a bookmark a memorial card of Father Patrick Joseph Connaughton, who was born in Ireland in 1914 and died in Sea Point, of which he was the curate, in 1981. He was a priest for only 11 years. He died when I was living in France, but I remember him well, a dear man and a priest of warm heart. Father Paddy is typical of those who should be remembered in our prayers on All Souls’ Day.

October 30 to November 5, 2002

Priests and celibacy

So often overlooked is the fact that there would be the priest's wife to be considered.

“It would bring misery into the Church.” That was the trenchant remark made by a priest in a little gathering the other day in Villeveyrac when the conversation had turned to married priests. As, of course, he was speaking French, the word he used was *misère*, which sounds a little stronger and has in fact more nuances of meaning than the English “misery”.

Pope Paul VI spoke of the priceless heritage of the Latin Church: the celibacy of priests. And we know the several counter-arguments of those who favour married priests, notably the practical one that there is a scarcity and that the tradition does not go back to the earliest days of Christianity.

I thought, though, that the arguments of Monsieur le Curé as a priest, a very good one, and as an evidently robust and masculine man (he is built something along the lines of a truck driver) had great cogency and force.

He pointed out the obvious fact, so often overlooked, that there would be the priest's wife to be considered. What guarantee could there possibly be that this woman would be suitable? What would be the position of a divorced priest, or a priest living separated from his wife? What, in that case, would be the position of the children? He asked us to think of the position of a country priest whose wife acted in such a way as to bring scandal, and thus weakened his spiritual esteem in his community, the moral authority that a priest should have.

What would be the position if the wife stopped being a Catholic and, for example, joined a sect? What if she conducted herself in an unseemly manner, as under the law she would be perfectly entitled to do, providing it stopped short of criminality? There is always the possibility of scandal and gossip, and looking around one, it would be most naïve to think that the wife of a priest would be either immune or necessarily of so high a character as to avoid it.

Father mentioned a specific case, but typical of others, which recently badly affected the life of a priest in the Orthodox Church, a man he knew person-

ally. In the Orthodox Church, which has a small representation in France, priests can be married, but not bishops.

This priest's wife seemed at first to be of good, even exemplary character. They had four children. Then she began being troublesome and difficult. It ended by her running away with a reprehensible person, leaving the poor priest (both literally and figuratively) with four children to support and to take care of on his inadequate stipend. "One can imagine," Father said, "how the affairs of the parish suffered, too."

This is admittedly an extreme case, but I personally know of a rabbi's wife who did the same thing, and there also there were children involved, and there also the rabbi had a tough time. People who live together have rows and disputes. It is sad but inevitable.

How, asked Father, could a priest, after having a bad row with his wife, whoever was to blame, walk from the presbytery to the church and keep his mind on the Mass?

Of course, if one is not a celibate priest, and in fact has not known celibacy, one should not be pharisaical and make judgments in this matter. A priest, though, speaking with force and practising what he preaches, is not a Pharisee. There is also the overriding practical argument that the parishioners should come first – that they are Father's spiritual children, and that he should not be distracted from them.

I am reminded of the story of a Catholic priest and an Anglican clergyman, a true one. It was in London at the time of the blitz of the Second World War. They were having drink in a pub one evening when the air raid warning started, and soon the bombs began to fall.

"I must get back to my family," said the Anglican vicar.
"I must get back to my flock," said the Catholic priest.

July 31, 1986

The Catholic press in France

There are 80 Catholic publications in France – plus diocesan bulletins and the organs of various groups.

One of the indices of the health of the Catholic Church and the interest in it must be the number of Catholic publications. In France the Church has 80 publications which, in round figures, print 5 million copies which have 20 million readers. Catholic publications are usually passed from hand to hand, so the number of readers always greatly exceeds the number of copies sold. Statistics show that the French Catholic press is the most dynamic in Europe, in fact.

This is not bad for a country in which the Church is constantly attacked both from inside and outside as moribund, split with dissension, out of a fashion and style, loosing influence and power, out of step with the times in the stand against such things as abortion, genetic engineering, contraception and blatantly explicit advertising on television for contraceptives aimed at preventing Aids.

I have lived in France as a Catholic for more than 10 years, and I have very often visited the country before that. To me the faith seems to be as firm as a rock, although the percentage of Mass attendance could be improved. It is a rare parent in this basically Catholic country, though, who does not get his child baptised. The child who does not make his or her first Communion, too, is very rare, and those usually are Jews or Muslims. Protestants form a very small minority. There are, in fact, more Muslims and Jews than Protestants in France.

In West Germany, Italy and Spain, Catholic journals of large circulation are usually launched by the hierarchy and depend generally on the dioceses. As I have said, there are 80 Catholic publications in France. This does not include diocesan bulletins and the organs of various groups. These are journals destined for what the French call *le grand public*, the great public. They include regional or local newspapers, such as my local one, *La Croix de l'Herault* (The cross of herault), *La Croix du Jura*, *La Vie Quercinoise*, *Semaine Provence* and others.

Then there are the national publications. An interesting one is *Telerama*, a

weekly publication devoted entirely to television, giving all the programmes of the week with comments and articles on various aspects of the medium and its personalities, in a bright and chatty style which yet manages to pack in a great deal of information.

There is also *La Croix*, a daily newspaper, of considerable authority which makes an excellent job of covering world events in an impartial and accurate manner. Others known to all are *Pelerin* (Pilgrim) magazine (which has just come out in a bright new format) and *La Vie* (Life). Contrary to other European countries, these journals owe their life not to the hierarchy, but either to the laity or to religious orders.

Many of them were born in embattled periods of the Church's life in France. For example *Pelerin* was launched in 1873 to combat a falling Christian feeling among workers and peasants. Thus it was and is in the form of a popular magazine, easy to read by people who certainly would not pick up a theological treatise.

The success of Catholic publications is most striking among the young and the elderly. The weakness is what are called "young adults", that is those between 25 and 45. For this group a specific project has been studied for some years, a new magazine, but it has not yet been launched.

February 11, 1990

Mystery of the spiral staircase

*Experts who have visited the stairs say they've
seen no other such piece of carpentry.*

The story of the miraculous staircase of Santa Fé is strangely not well enough known. One would expect this remarkable construction to be spoken of constantly from one end of the world to the other.

This might be due to paradox. Miracles are an integral part of the Catholic faith. Yet a secular age looks at them with a discomfited glance. Faced with incontrovertible evidence of such an event, the secular man tends to look the other way and to let his mind go blank. He can, as it were, sweep the dust under the carpet, or mutter about derangement of reason. There was a writer, for example, who saw the dancing sun at Fatima, and said he was one of the victims of a mass hallucination.

Nevertheless, the staircase of which I speak has stood since 1878 without any reasonable explanation from anyone, and looks set for many years yet.

Incidentally, along with many others I knew this story, but was impressed anew by its remarkable, literally unearthly quality. I found it recounted again in a book by a British journalist, Bernard Levin (not a Catholic), called *Enthusiasms*.

The story is simple. Santa Fé is a town of about 50,000 souls in the middle of the New Mexico desert. By decree the centre of the town is built in the traditional adobe style of the native North Americans. This has been done with skill and variation within the prescribed constant. The whole area is bathed in that clear desert light, so refreshing a contrast to the smog of the cities.

Appropriately, on the edge of this area there stands the chapel of Our Lady of Light, enclosed in which is one of the wonders of the world. The chapel was built as a functional and unremarkable place of worship. As all such places are to the eyes of those not spiritually impaired, there is a sense of wonder about it. It is not a wonder out of the ordinary. Once when the world was young, men walked daily with wonders. Now, the glory has not exactly faded, but it has to be looked for.

The workmen (Catholics, presumably: they are dominant in those parts) did

their work conscientiously enough, were paid, and left. They left one thing undone, however, because they said it was impossible to build: a staircase with a turn to the left, for which they said there was no space. As sisters do, they prayed. And, as so often happens, their prayers were answered. A mysterious stranger appeared, bringing nothing with him. He volunteered for the job, and worked at it for six months. He spoke little and gave no name. Also, he refused payment.

One of the extraordinary features of this is that the stranger used a variety of woods not locally available, and as I said, he was not seen to have brought anything with him. The man used only a hammer and a saw, and water in which he soaked the wood, to make what looked like an impossible spiral. No nails were used. His joints were so perfectly fashioned they looked as if they could stand for eternity.

In 10 metres of height the staircase makes two complete 360° turns, with grace and beauty. It is said to look as if it floats, and the beauty is emphasised by the different colours of the woods. Experts who have visited the stairs say they've seen no other such piece of carpentry.

Naturally enough, it was not only the sisters at their heartfelt prayers of gratitude who thought that this mysterious stranger who had walked in their midst was a certain carpenter of 2,000 years ago. We shall never know. The staircase of Santa Fé is one of the myriad mysteries of the Church.

I once knew an elderly, pious lady, now long since gone, who said from time to time that her dearest wish was to possess a table made by the hands of Jesus Christ, though she was concerned that this might be a blasphemous thought. I said I did not see why it should be. Carpentry is certainly a noble and dignified work. I did not say that time would long since have eroded such a structure.

There is a parallel in a way to the true story of Santa Fé, in the delightful 1963 film called *Lilies Of The Field*, in which an unknown black man, marvellously played by Sydney Poitier, builds a chapel for some nuns in a desert. He won an Oscar for the movie.

The unknown stranger who rides into town, does the work of a knight errant, and then fades into the sunset, is an appealing stock figure of the traditional Western film too.

November 26, 2000

Going Places
(in France)

St Germain, Paris

The charming Hotel de Londres exists no more – if it did it would be chic, and its prices would match that fact.

The church of Saint Germain-des-Prés haunts my memory. It is a part of that sort of attic of the mind where one keeps all sorts of things: relics of the past, precious or valued objects which might any day be useful again.

This beautiful Romanesque church has a claim to be the oldest in Paris, a section of it dating back to the 6th century Merovingian basilica. The imposing belfry, which gives the church its distinctive look, is certainly the oldest. It is a tower, built in the 11th century, square and giving an impression of timeless strength. This is a turbulent quarter and the belfry has looked down upon many things, from revolutions to existentialists, and including the Resistance fight against the Nazis.

I must have walked past this church thousands of times. The first time I set myself up in Paris was a long time ago, in the early 1950s, and I was not then a Catholic. In spite of that, Saint Germain had always a sort of mesmeric effect on me, and I have spent many hours on the terrace of the famous café Les Deux Magots, just opposite, across the square, absorbed in its quiet tranquillity in the midst of all the bustle. Even then the quarter was crowded, and the café, called somewhat pretentiously I thought “the rendezvous of the intellectual élite”, was crowded too.

Jean-Paul Sartre, his companion Simone de Beauvoir and their group used to gather there. Now it is very expensive and fashionable, and the title “intellectual rendezvous” has been dropped. It is still a pleasant place, redolent of history, still austere dominated by that great belfry.

I lived just down the road, at a modest place called the Hotel de Londres in the rue Bonaparte. There were many little hotels like that in Paris in the old days, reasonably comfortable and pleasant, and at a negligible price. Now they hardly exist: the area is fashionable and the prices are high (although not up to the dizzy heights of London). The charming Hotel de Londres exists no more – if it did it would be chic, and its prices would match that fact. The passing of the small, cheap Parisian hotel is one of the sadnesses of time.

Eternity remains, or a tangible sign of it, in the form of the church of Saint Germain-des-Prés. Prés, incidentally, means “meadows”, and now it is difficult indeed to envisage the church set among rural fields.

On a sentimental journey to my old Parisian haunts recently, I revisited Saint Germain and assisted at the celebration of a weekday Mass there. This had the effect once more of reinforcing the realisation of all the things I had missed before I was converted. The magnificence of the church, its visual splendours, were accentuated and given stronger meaning by this Mass, celebrated by an ascetic and intellectual-looking priest.

The church is steeped in history: it has many visual beauties, but needs the familiar words of the Mass to light all this with its true significance. A fitting symbol, I thought, is that the mighty belfry, supported by a marble column form the sixth-century Merovingian basilica. Among the visual splendours are a statue in marble of the 15th century, of Our Lady of Consolation, St Margaret’s chapel, St Theresa’s chapel, St Benoit’s chapel, St Anne’s chapel and the Chapel of the Most Holy Virgin.

The church is far from being simply a monument to past glories. It is a particularly active parish church, whose activities include a magnificent choir, organ recitals, advice to parishioners, charitable work, Masses in Spanish and advice and help to Spaniards, a club for the elderly, theological courses, catechisms, and special liturgies for the very young, to mention only a few of the good works of this great church. During the week there are three Masses daily.

The day I went, there were many of us – for a weekday, that is – and the silence, a sort of holy hush, emphasised agreeably the roar and bustle outside, although this barely penetrated the stout walls. So the old and the new merge in the universal: always an aspect of the Catholic Church.

January 28, 1990

Marseille's main drag

*I thought nobody really talked like that outside
of an old Elvis Presley film.*

The other day I happened to be in the Italian consulate in Marseilles. That is a city I have often been to (I live quite near it). I know it fairly well, and like it for its engaging mixture of raffish good humour, beauty, squalor and Mediterranean sun.

I do not, however, know the area in which is to be found the Italian consulate, la rue d'Alger, to be precise. It is not a particularly attractive part of this old city, and as I had gone there by taxi from the railway station, St Charles, through a confusing labyrinth of narrow, twisting streets, I had not the remotest idea of where I was in relation to where I wanted to be.

That was the Old Port, le Vieux Port. And so I asked an official, a handsome Italianate man who looked as though he should be singing tenor in opera, with dark wavy hair and melting brown eyes. It turned out that he was very proud of his English, or rather American, and insisted on speaking it, so I switched from French.

The Old Port? Of course, he knew exactly where it was, and the best way to get there would be to take what he called the "subway" – what the French call the Metro, and the English the tube. The underground railway in Marseilles is comparatively new and plush.

His directions of how to get to the Metro were precise, and he drew a little map. "Take the second turning to the left," he said, "and then you will hit the main drag." I thought nobody really talked like that outside of an old Elvis Presley film.

The point is, though, that I took the second turning to the left, I "hit the main drag", and there in the distance, on the other side of the bay, on top of a hill, was the beautiful sight of what the Marseillaise call *la Bonne Mère*, the Good Mother, the magnificent cathedral of Notre Dame de la Garde, crowned with its huge statue of the Blessed Virgin, which overlooks the whole of Marseilles, and the ships entering and leaving the ports, both old and new.

If I had seen the cathedral, there would have been no need for me to have asked any directions. Everyone who knows Marseilles at all knows where things are in relation to this most impressive building. One has, therefore, the feeling in Marseilles that the Good Mother is indeed watching over all her children, even those who in some of their ways are not exactly models of virtue.

Notre Dame de la Garde is built in a variety of architectural styles and on several levels, the whole crowned with this colossal statue, visible and welcoming from miles out to sea, a beacon of hope and love. The variety of styles could have made a hodgepodge, a monument of mistaken idealism, overreaching itself. Exactly the opposite has happened, though.

The cathedral is aesthetically very pleasing, both in its own harmonious lines and in its magnificent setting. What always strikes me as almost miraculous, though, is the manner in which the vast scale of the place has taken on a human, warm, even homely dimension. Notre Dame de la Garde is a place of great spiritual beauty and natural magnificence.

For all its splendour, though, the cathedral has the human warmth of beloved familiarity. And, as is often the way with popular sayings, that is expressed in the name given by the Marseillaise – the Good Mother.

June 23, 1985

La Camargue's wild horses

*The first sight of the Camargue is so weird and so strange
that one can hardly believe one is in Europe*

There are not many parts of the world where you will find wild black bulls and wild white horses. One of these places is quite near where I live, in the south of France. It is called the Camargue, a large area of mostly desolate marshlands and lagoons. It is also the centre of some dramatic bird life, notably flamingoes.

The South African expatriate poet, the late Roy Campbell, wrote a poem about it, not one of his best, I think, as he was better as a satirist than a lyric writer. Nevertheless, the area gives a certain tug to the imagination as it did to that of Campbell, for the first sight of it is so weird and so strange that one can hardly believe one is in Europe; much less in civilised France. It calls to mind some imagined savannah of the moon, or even some satellite circling a long-dead planet, to which vestiges of life cling.

Prosaically, it is the delta of the Rhône, between the Grand Rhône and the Petit Rhône, with an area of about 500km², salty and, as far as people are concerned, barely habitable. It is blasted by the mistral, the cold wind which sweeps down the valley of the Rhône. It is criss-crossed with canals, and a certain amount of rice is grown there. The few people who live there seem to be a race apart, hardy, tough-looking, independent and speaking a French with so heavy an accent that to me it is almost impenetrable. They do not seem to me exactly to welcome strangers, but the area is of such exotic beauty that there is a considerable tourist attraction.

The Camargue, in fact, has a magnetic pull. I have often been there, and the other day, when a publicity pamphlet was pushed through my door advertising a tour at a cheap rate, I readily fell for the temptation and made another trip in a very luxurious bus, including lunch at a good restaurant and a two-hour tour on a boat on one of the canals. The tour also included a stop at Aigues-Mortes, a medieval town in a very good state of preservation, enclosed by some of the best ramparts in France.

The best way to see the area is by boat on the canals. Like most of France, it is very Catholic, and, from time to time, in the lunar landscapes, there

will appear an ancient monastery – often, sadly, in ruins – or a church, somehow still gallantly functioning among the sparse and scattered population. Sometimes one will see herds of those strange and dramatic wild black bulls, more often the wild white horses – completely free.

A coastal town of the Camargue is the famous pilgrimage place of the gypsies, Saintes Maries de la Mer, or the Saints Maries of the Sea. The pilgrimage is in May when the whole area fills with gypsies and the exotic air makes the opera *Carmen* look like something that happened on a Hollywood backlot. Gypsies converge in caravans from all over Europe.

I was there about two years ago, and I must confess that I am not overly fond of having my fortune told, which seems to be the mainstay of the gypsy women's occupation. One, apparently irritated by my refusal, shouted after me that I must beware of two people, a man and a woman, who would do all in their power to harm me. All this did not seem to me to be consistent with a Christian pilgrimage.

My visit to Aigues-Mortes this time, though, was consistent with a pilgrimage. The name is a corruption of Latin and means “dead waters” (*aquae mortuae*) because of the surrounding salt. It is enclosed by medieval walls, with huge towers, the largest, Constance, having been a prison for Protestants after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

It was once a centre of some crusades and the church of Notre Dame du Sablon (Our Lady of the Sands) has a famous and magnificent statue of St Louis, who was also King Louis IX of France. He led the seventh and eighth crusades from Aigues-Mortes.

The church has been restored. It is a fine edifice, very beautiful, very peaceful. I spent as long as I could there in quiet prayer and reflection, and it became to me a sort of haven from the tourist buses and the shuffling feet outside.

September 1, 1991

Albi: Glory, harmony and heresy

The Albigensian heresy is still remembered by the locals, who speak of it as if it took place yesterday.

Gothic ecclesiastical architecture is one of my great loves. It is always a pleasure to wander around France, for it is a country of many riches, but one's travels become even richer if there is an object in view – and what better object can there be than a Gothic cathedral – those marvellous edifices built purely for the glory of God, in complete antithesis to contemporary materialism. There was no expense spared, and the labours were the labours of love.

The great craftsmen and artists who wrought the buildings were almost always anonymous and many of the world's greatest architects, painters, sculptors and weavers of tapestry left their works to posterity without signature. In general the style expressed the unity of the universe and man with the divine, and this was often accomplished with a sort of humour, a feeling deeply rooted in a common humanity. One cannot see a Gothic cathedral without echoing the words of Shakespeare in *Hamlet*: “Oh, what a piece of work is man.”

So, a few days ago as I write, I set off for Albi in the Tarn in the region of the majestic Pyrexes, to see a rare example of what is known as flamboyant Gothic, and one of the few monuments of any kind that gets the most authoritative Michelin Guide's three-star rating.

Albi itself is a delightful medieval town of about 50,000 inhabitants, and all of those I met were charming and helpful, typical of the people in this part of France. The area is rich in soil, well-watered and with a staggering grandeur of scenery. Those who have been to Lourdes, which is not far away, will know of this majestic land.

The cathedral itself, dedicated to St Cecilia rises above the town, huge and imposing in a sort of redbrick, pink construction, born of the available materials of the region, as all the cathedrals were, because those were the days before contemporary technology, when one built with love.

The cathedral has the look of a fortress, which well it might, as it was built so sturdily partly as one, as well as the adjoining archbishop's palace, now a museum of the works of the great painter Toulouse-Lautrec, who came from Albi.

The area was torn by religious conflict. It gave its name to the Albigensian heresy, from which sprang a crusade, but it was also the place of Protestant clashes and, later, of anti-clericalism.

The most magnificent choir, in fact, was saved only by the action of a courageous priest, who faced a mob intent on destruction and pleaded with them not to deprive the town of such a masterpiece. They listened to him. The choir is one of the artistic masterpieces of all the ages, distinguished by its delicate tracery and the humanity and spirituality of the many sculptures, notably of the apostles.

The Albigensian heresy – which is still remembered by the ordinary people who live in this region and who speak of it as if it took place yesterday when, for example, working in the vines – was one of the many dualistic heresies of the Middle Ages, but perhaps the most important.

The heretics were known as Cathars, from the Greek work for pure (hence catharsis), and basically they thought that goodness existed only in the spiritual world, created by God. The material world was evil and was created by Satan.

The whole history of this is enormously complicated. For one thing Cathars thought that anything that tended to propagate the human race, such as marriage, was wrong, and that Jesus was simply an angel who came to point the way to salvation. The heresy was powerful, but, apart from the crusade and the Inquisition, factors that led to its collapse were the preachings and the examples of St Bernard and St Francis.

The fortress-like structure and the inner harmony of the cathedral of St Cecilia in Albi are a witness to, and an example of, the solidity of the Catholic faith. The most majestic and powerful exterior contrasts, but without any clash, with the delicate traceries of the interior, the whole reinforced by the organ, one of the largest and best in the world.

January 5, 1992

Intense in Lourdes

Lourdes is the place which attracts more pilgrims than anywhere else in the world, and that includes Mecca.

“The serene beauty of a holy life is the most powerful influence in the world next to the power of God” – those profound words by Blaise Pascal. This 17th century French philosopher, scientist and mathematician has a strong claim to have been the greatest thinking machine that ever lived. Among his many achievements was, in principle, the invention of the calculating machine and computer.

I thought of this on a recent pilgrimage to Lourdes. On the one side there is the little peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous, who was backward at school and could barely get through her catechism classes; on the other, the prodigious thinker and mighty intellect. Under the grace of the Blessed Virgin, who has had the greater power? Pascal himself, I am sure, would say it was not he.

There is a contemporary Jesuit priest who has written more than 40 books on St Bernadette and Our Lady of Lourdes. Recently he remarked that he doubted if any one of his books had converted a single person, whereas St Bernadette had influenced millions. Perhaps the good Father is unduly modest, but that is certainly an approximation of the fact.

Lourdes is the place which attracts more pilgrims than anywhere else in the world, and that includes Mecca. In 1987 there were 4,5 million pilgrims, more than Rome, Fatima or Benares, as well as Mecca. That was the official number, and there must have been many like myself this year who went on solitary pilgrimages, registered with nobody and thus going unrecorded.

This is as the result of a humble person who when asked by the ecclesiastical authorities why, as she was very poor indeed, the Blessed Virgin should have chosen her as a confidante, replied: “Perhaps she could not find anyone poorer.” Also, Bernadette repeated over and over again: “I have never said it was the Blessed Virgin”. She referred usually to *une belle dame*.

Born in 1844, Bernadette was a simple girl and she never lost that simplicity, keeping it whole and pure until her death in 1879, as Sister Marie-Bernard in the convent of the Sisters of Charity at Nevers. Indeed her mortal remains

retained that purity, for when disinterred (she was canonised in 1933) her body had not decomposed.

Readers of *The Southern Cross* will know a great deal about St Bernadette and Our Lady of Lourdes, so it is not necessary for me to go into much detail about her sort and illness-racked life. She herself said that Our Lady promised her happiness in the next life, not in this.

I would like to tell you something, though, about my individual pilgrimage there and some of the lessons it gave and the impressions it made on me, and the intensity of the experience as a whole. The pilgrimage of which I am writing is not, of course, my first there, but I think it was my most serious. I live about 500 km by rail from Lourdes, which was the means of transport I used; the best, I think, as it leaves one with a tranquil mind. Apart from the feelings of devotion which the place inspires without effort, I tried to be systematic. I went out of season in early March, at the end of the French winter, which has advantages and disadvantages.

On the positive side, I was privileged to be at the grotto on the anniversaries of two of the days Our Lady appeared. A disadvantage was that there were none of the magnificent and inspiring candlelight processions.

Bernadette with her family of six lived for a time in a place known as the *cachot* or dungeon, which has been preserved exactly as it was then. This dank cell, practically unventilated, had been condemned as unhealthy for prisoners, and they were not too solicitous of the health of convicts in those days. The whole family lived in this one most unhealthy room, and Bernadette made her way, as a young teenager, to the grotto of Massabielle every day, to gather wood and to look after sheep. She was an asthmatic, and it must have been very tough. Yet the family, fallen on bad days, were never heard to quarrel.

A kindly nun showed me the place, gave me a short history to read and left me to myself to think and pray. I retraced Bernadette's footsteps several times.

Then, in better circumstances, the family moved to a most modest house nearby, also now preserved as it was, in which both her parents died (the beds are still there) and in the kitchen in which Bernadette fainted while saying good-bye to her mother, to enter the convent at Nevers.

Bernadette's bed is still there too. There are family photographs, and kitchen utensils which the family used, hung in French fashion on the wall. The kitchen is practically the same room as the flour mill in which Bernadette's father worked at his trade, and leading out of it there is a tiny bedroom in which he died.

Of course there are many South African families who live in conditions as bad or worse than those in the cell, but that gives it no social distinction.

Near where Bernadette spoke 14 times to the Blessed Virgin, there is the vast, two-level basilica of the Rosary, in Byzantine style. I went to a morning Mass in the crypt of the upper basilica. This was followed by the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the monstrance of which was a present from Pope John Paul II on his visit to Lourdes, impressive in its stark simplicity.

I had the purifying bath, and like everyone else I noticed how the icy water from the underground spring does not feel at all cold, and how when one dresses immediately afterwards the clothes dry at once without having used a towel and without a spot of moisture. Anyone who has ever dressed without drying in the sun after a plunge into the sea will wonder how this can happen – but it does. The two burly men who assisted me were kind and strong.

After saying the Hail Mary in unison, one handed me a pamphlet to be kept, which quotes the words of Our Lady to Bernadette: "Come and drink at the fountain and wash yourself." As the document points out, by this the Blessed Virgin invited us to go back to the essential sources of life.

It is also a reminder of the Passion, with Christ stripped of his garments. "We are here, Lord, such as we are, poor and naked before you." (Actually, one is dressed in a sort of loincloth, but the effect is the same.) It is also a reminder of one's baptism.

The underground basilica of St Pius X is to me one of the wonders of the world. On this out-of-season pilgrimage I had the odd experience of having this vast artificial cavern, seating 5,000 people, entirely to myself for nearly two hours. Being under the ground the silence is almost palpable, and the sweeping curves of the architecture emphasise the beauty and the solemnity of the place and the events it commemorates. This is a place of great beauty, the aesthetic and the spiritual complementing each other.

I was able to do a solitary Stations of the Cross before the sculpted, illuminated Stations of stark grandeur and simple, tragic words.

At the far end there is a small chapel dedicated to St Thérèse of Lisieux. I suppose one can legitimately have favourites among the saints, and Thérèse is one of mine. My daughter is called Marie-Thérèse.

There is a photograph of the saint in this small and holy place which seems alive, or so it seemed to me. The contrast between this, another humble and sublime young girl like Bernadette, and the magnificent yet quietly beautiful surroundings, was touching, superb and appropriate.

I found the visit to the chapel, quite alone in a small section of a huge construction, one of the most intense experiences of my life.

Such is the seasonal crush of pilgrims that yet another basilica, to seat another 5,000 people, is being built. There is an appeal for funds. It is all a long way from Bernadette's request to the parish priest to build a chapel there, as was Our Lady's wish.

May 1 & 8, 1988

Notre Dame, Paris

Notre Dame is something of an obsession with me.

I visit it at least once every time I go to Paris.

A life-long friend of mine, an Englishman, dearly loves an argument. I don't share that particular taste. In fact I tend to the opposite fault, a sort of *laissez-faire*, and if I don't consider the matter of fundamental importance, I tend to say vaguely: "Yes, yes", and let it drift by. To avoid unnecessary hassles, I recollect, I once found myself agreeing with an argumentative woman that Antwerp was not a port, and this is a city of Belgium that I know very well, and whose dock area I find particularly beautiful.

At any rate, my English friend loves his arguments and he has a tenacity greater than that of my British Bulldog, Blanche. He kept me arguing once for five years on the somewhat unimportant subject of war diaries. Evelyn Waugh kept them, which, as several of Waugh's biographers state, was forbidden under British military regulations, for the obvious reason that these documents could fall into enemy hands and give away important information. Perhaps because he kept a diary himself while at war, my friend contends that this was perfectly lawful.

An argument which has now lasted in epistolary form for about a year is one on the subject of the light in Notre Dame-de-Paris, the great Gothic cathedral that is one of the world's masterpieces of architecture. It is, in my opinion, the noblest monument raised by man, surpassing even the Acropolis of Athens, but that is not relevant to this running dispute.

To summarise: he finds it dark, and I find it light. To back up his views, he has sent me, among other things, an article from a newspaper and an extract from a scientific American publication.

It is true that there is a certain sombre quality sometimes in the interior of this great cathedral, but the Gothic consciousness worked in splashes of light and dark. They thought and perceived vividly. We have lost a great part of this sharpness of reaction, which is obvious if we look at the visual art or if we read the literature of the Middle Ages.

Notre Dame is something of an obsession with me. I visit it at least once

every time I go to Paris, and I have been doing this for many years. And as I have always found it the quintessence of light, I found my friend's views worthy of dispute.

The hundreds of anonymous people who built Notre Dame did not conceive of it simply as a building. It was an expression of the glory and beauty of God, so everything was made as perfect as possible to reflect that mighty aim. And one of the aspects of God is light, as opposed to darkness.

An enclosed space is necessarily dark. To overcome that, they built the mighty rose window, of thousands of facets of glass, one of the biggest windows ever constructed, which not only strains but emphasises the light to a quality of transcendent radiance, particularly when the sun strikes it. In this, one can feel the certainty of faith.

I was interested the other day, therefore, to come across an eloquent passage supporting this in a book by Emile Mâle, called *Religious Art in the 13th Century in France*, published in 1899. My translation will fall short of Monsieur Mâle's poetic splendour, but it will convey the gist:

The sublimity of the great vertical lines act first on the soul... The cathedral, as the plain, as the forest, has its atmosphere, its perfume, its light, its contrast of light and darkness, its shadows.

The great rose window behind which the sun sets, seems in the late afternoon to be the sun itself, ready to disappear in the fringes of a miraculous forest.

But it is a world transfigured, where shines a light more dazzling than that of reality, where the shadows are more mysterious. Already we feel ourselves in the breast of that heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the future. We taste a profound peace.

Light, serenity and peace. It is wonderful how the old masons could summon up those qualities from the intractable stone.

June 16, 1985

The Writers
(Part I)

Jesuitically Sherlock

Doyle himself did not particularly like the creation who made him so famous.

Perhaps Sherlock Holmes was the creation of the Jesuits. That deduction is my own, and I might have been influenced by re-reading the entire 56 short stories which make up the bulk of the work on that very distinguished detective, the very master of the art and craft of deduction, a word he practically made his own.

One reason for deducing the possible Jesuitical strain is that his creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, was educated at the noted English Jesuit school, Stonyhurst, before he went on to graduate as a doctor at the University of Edinburgh. A Jesuit schooling is famous for marking beneficially those who have received it for life, and Conan Doyle, although he was not a Catholic, must to a certain extent at any rate have been influenced by this disciplined training.

This rigorous discipline of thought reflects itself on Holmes, described by his faithful friend, Dr Watson, as the greatest thinking machine that ever lived – although that honour should go, as far as we can judge, to the very Catholic genius, writer, theologian and mathematician, Blaise Pascal.

There is also, perhaps, the confessional element. The stories invariably start with a sort of confessional statement, usually after the famous words: “If I am not mistaken, Watson, this is our client now.” Events then follow an almost ritual pattern, with eventually the client in a way absolved by the solution of his case, the disentanglement of the strange things which have been troubling him.

The entire emphasis on orderly thought and expiation is certainly Jesuitical. Holmes’ oft-repeated maxim, too, might be a debt to his creator’s Jesuitical training. “Eliminate the impossible, then what remains, however improbable, is the truth.” That certainly owes something to the “Razor of Occam”, the principle of the medieval nominalist philosopher and Franciscan monk.

There is also in Holmes’ complex character a continuous refrain of the sin of accidie, what medieval philosophers sometimes called the death of the soul, an intolerable blight of weariness which creeps over most of us from time to time. He says to Watson, for example, when a new case has just emerged: “It will save us for a few hours from the insufferable fatigues of idleness.”

The book I have before me is a treasure. It is called simply *Sherlock Holmes, the Complete Illustrated Short Stories*, and is published by Chancellor Press, London. A particular felicity is that it has the original illustrations from *The Strand* magazine from 1891 to 1927. Most of them are by Sidney Paget, but there are some later ones by A Gilbert and Howard Elcock. Their interest to me was that, of the many times Holmes has appeared on screen, the definitive actor was Basil Rathbone. The sharp features and intelligent face of Rathbone are virtually sketched here, and Doyle approved the drawings, so this must have been his conception of Holmes. The Dr Watson of the drawings, also looks like Nigel Bruce, Rathbone's faithful companion in the film series.

The power of the Holmes stories has been extraordinary. To this day, letters addressed to the detective arrive at the Baker Street number which does not exist, and there are innumerable international Sherlock Holmes societies.

Doyle himself did not particularly like the creation who made him so famous, preferring his historical novels. He once even tried to kill Holmes off at the hands of the archvillain Moriarty, "the worst man in London", but public clamour brought him back and even saw to his peaceful retirement, keeping and studying the methodical bees, but coming out now and again to solve a case or two.

Part of the fascination is certainly in the extraordinary character of the man. Among a people of conformists he was an eccentric. Apart from his deerstalker hat and his old pipe, there was his addiction to cocaine, alternating the drowsiness of the drug and the fierce energy of his own keen nature, in Watson's words. He also, in Watson's words, loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul.

He never married. He had no affairs and, apart from the virtual shadow Watson, he had no friends. One drifts automatically into talking of him as though he were a real, not fictional, character, so vital is he.

The only affection he ever showed to anyone was to Watson, a conventional person, in many ways his complete opposite. With the most methodical of minds he was most untidy. He kept his tobacco, for example, in an old slipper. He hated and despised any form of physical exercise, but he was as strong (and as brave) as a lion.

August 11, 1996

The spirituality of TS Eliot

*Meeting the great poet was to me
something like meeting Shakespeare.*

From his death in the mid-'60s and his winning, a little earlier, of the Nobel Prize for literature, interest in the poet TS Eliot has been steadily mounting. An indication of this is a recent film, a good portrait, called *Tom and Viv*, largely about his disastrous marriage to a woman who slipped into insanity.

I was once honoured to meet Eliot. It is one of the most memorable experiences of my life. I was a very young journalist, and I had just finished an MA in which the master figured. It was something like meeting Shakespeare to me, and I thought it most presumptuous when Geoffrey Faber, a publisher and poet, called him "Tom".

Nevertheless, Eliot treated me with all the courtesy for which he was renowned, and his features which look so austere in photographs, were softened by his kindly expression. He seemed to impress everyone with whom he came into contact in that way. There was no wild Bohemian romantic poet in his aspect. Until middle life, in fact, he worked as a banker in London, starting as a clerk, and he dressed the part. He had refused academic posts at the Sorbonne, Oxford and Harvard. When told that a superior at the bank had said there was a possibility that in the remote future he would be promoted to branch manager, the future Nobel laureate said with pride and humility: "Most gratifying."

I have been reading a book of tributes to Eliot called *TS Eliot, The Man And His Work* (Allen Tate, London). It made me wonder, as I have often wondered before, why he did not become converted to the Catholic Church. He did all but. As is well known, he was an American who flirted with the idea of French nationality (he wrote French very well) before becoming a British citizen, and he was very British indeed. Brought up as a Unitarian, he was converted to the Church of England and always called himself an Anglo-Catholic.

Nevertheless, in practice he was close to Rome indeed, a fact which shines through all his work, to say nothing of his attitude to life and his principles. As long ago as 1926, when he was already an Anglican, he wrote to the aca-

demic Bonamy Dobrée: “It seems almost inevitable that Canterbury should eventually be superseded by Rome.”

His attributes did not change as he grew older. Eliot matured young and he remained that way throughout his life, “flying,” as he put it, “through the purgatorial flame.”

Robert Speight, the actor, writer and Catholic, who played the lead in the first production of Eliot’s masterwork *Murder in the Cathedral* (about Becket and Henry), wrote: “Eliot’s thought was at no point at variance with Roman Catholic doctrine.”

Sir Herbert Read, art historian, poet and man of letters, found that Eliot, like the philosopher Kierkegaard, had a keen realisation of the “all-consuming power of original sin.” The same writer draws a parallel between Eliot and that most devoted Catholic, the great French thinker, Blaise Pascal. Pascal, said Eliot, was to be commended “to those who doubt, but who have the mind to conceive and the sensibility to feel the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being.” In this he had an affinity with St John of the Cross.

Eliot, incidentally, described prayer, in a conversation with the sceptic Virginia Woolf, as the attempt to concentrate, to forget self, to attain union with God.

With regard to his poetry, *The Journey of the Magi* seems to me to be more than ecumenically Christian – it is Catholic. This is only one example. There are also his final four great poems, known as *Quartet*, notably *Burnt Norton*.

August 18, 1996

The pain of Virginia Woolf

The phrase “stream of consciousness” was coined by Woolf and she used the technique with great skill.

For various complicated reasons I have been making a little study of Virginia Woolf recently. Woolf was not a Catholic, but it struck me repeatedly while reading a recent monumental biography by Hermione Lee entitled simply *Virginia Woolf* (Schatto & Windus) that this was an obvious pity as a strong system of belief could have saved her from much pain.

This biography, published in 1996 and 892 pages long, is a sort of monument in itself combining deep scholarship and readability. It is certainly one of the best literary biographies published in English. The writer is a professor of English literature. She was born in 1948, five years after the suicide of Woolf, who weighed her pockets with stones and drowned herself in the River Ouse. Woolf has been described as a classic manic-depressive and throughout her life bore this illness, which she attacked with courage.

Born into the intellectual upper middle classes of England, she became one of the best-known and most influential literary figures of this century, mostly as a novelist, but also as a journalist and essayist specialising in literary matters.

Her father was Sir Leslie Stephen, editor of the *British National Biography*. At the age of 29 she married Leonard Woolf, a Jew who gave up a promising career in the Colonial Service to marry her, at least partly because he thought she was a genius who need nurturing. She was 58 when she killed herself.

Woolf was a very learned woman, but almost entirely self-taught. She never went to a school or university or wrote an examination. As a literary figure, of course, she was associated with Bloomsbury, really a set of friends, mostly of high literary and artistic merit. They had an enormous influence on English arts and letters. Perhaps the best-known were Lytton Strachey and the economist Meynard Keynes. They were mostly in reaction to the formal and bourgeois particularly to the relics of Victorianism and were mostly pacifists.

Woolf's contribution to the novel form was considerable. She is recognised both for her skilled and sensitive delineations of human nature and her technical innovations.

In fact, as a student, many years ago, I once enrolled as a PhD student. I did not complete this. Journalism and France beckoned. The registered title of my thesis for which I did little but assemble some notes was: “The Stream of Consciousness Concept in the Contemporary English novel, with specific reference to the works of James Joyce”. The phrase, “stream of consciousness”, was coined by Woolf and she used the technique with great skill. Roughly it involves reproducing a stream of thoughts and feeling, without necessarily a correlation of place and action or time. The technique needs great skill, but can convey the interaction between thought, feeling and action with depth.

She appears to have been an agnostic, although she did not talk or write about it much. It is at least possible, and I think probable, that had her circumstances or her reading been slightly different she might have become a Catholic. The feeling and indications are there. For example, when visiting Spain in 1923 she wrote from high in the Alpajurra mountains to her sister Vanessa that she felt the “warmth and colour” of the Catholic country with passion. “Why not bring the children up as Roman Catholics?” she wrote. “I think it induces to warmth of heart.”

Visiting Rome in 1927 she described herself as “intensely happy”. Rome was wonderful, she wrote, and she loved the aestheticism of Roman Catholicism. “I am sure that Rome is the city where I shall come to die.” Perhaps if she had taken another route it would have been, not an English river in a dark landscape. Catholicism, for example, might have prevented her having the feeling she described in 1933 of violence and unreason crossing in the air, “something terrifying or unreasonable”.

After reading a book about St Joan of Arc she was fascinated by the voices which Joan had heard. Perhaps, she argued, “the general state of mind was so different to ours that voices, saints,” came from what she called a common psychology. Oddly enough I find that a Catholic thought. There was a unity of mind, belief and purpose, a commonality, which is difficult to conceive of in this fragmented age.

Virginia Woolf’s death was a sad end to a brilliant woman, born of despair. How unfortunate she did not go a little further on the path she noted when she wrote of the warmth of Catholicism, the aestheticism and intense happiness of Rome.

August 31, 1997

Fellow-feeling for Márquez

Márquez seems to me to be one of the few really deserving people in recent years to have received the Nobel Prize.

Often when reading books of older cultures (and remembering specifically France) I think of the enormous benefits, not only cultural but spiritual, of not living *in partibus infidelium*, in other words being part of a sound Catholic culture where the faith seems a part of the air that one breathes.

These thoughts which are never far below the surface with me, were brought into focus once again as I read for the first time the famous novel by Gabriel García Márquez called *Love In The Time Of Cholera*, published for the first time in Spanish in 1985.

Márquez won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982, mainly on the basis of the famous novel *One Hundred Years Of Solitude*, acclaimed fairly universally as one of the few masterpieces of modern literature.

Márquez seems to me to be one of the few really deserving people in recent years to have received the Nobel Prize. There was reported to have been animus against Graham Greene for example, who for many years held an eminence in world letters.

Greene was probably not a great writer, but he was certainly a very good one, and his exclusion, year after year, caused a great deal of puzzlement and controversy. Some said that it was because of his Catholicism, but this could not have been so, as many a Catholic has won this most valuable of all literary awards (in terms of money, apart from prestige and publicity). William Golding, for example, of *Lord Of The Flies*, also a Catholic, and undoubtedly a good writer, had not Greene's merit and he won the award in one of the years when the accolade was confidently expected to go to Greene. That book, in fact, was almost a parable on the subject of original sin.

I have always had a faint fellow-feeling for Márquez, although I have never met him and I basically know very little about him. This is one of the flimsiest of reasons.

When he won the Nobel Prize I was living in France and I was enraptured by a

television programme about him, filmed in Paris, when he returned to the haunts of his youth, as an impoverished young man living there. He was filmed returning to the cheap hotel on the Left Bank where he had lived in a sort of convivial semi-squalor, lit from time to time by superb food and drink, and conversations in which the finite and infinite take their due place next to each other. It was identical to the hotel, in the same area, in which I had spent a significant part of my youth. The people who remembered him seemed much the same people I remembered.

Hemingway once wrote that if you had lived in Paris while young you were fortunate, as for the rest of your life you would have a moveable feast.

Márquez's novel *Love In The Time Of Cholera* is permeated and soaked in Catholicism, although no great issue is made of it. It is purely that practically every event in the book is related to a festival, particularly Pentecost, and the book is punctuated with church bells and celebrations of the Mass.

One of the key episodes is very reminiscent of Greene's fine novel *The Heart Of The Matter*, when a spouse becomes convinced of the infidelity of the other, who abruptly, after a lifetime of fidelity stops taking Holy Communion.

There are frequent references to the Holy Spirit, almost as a constant companion, as for example, on the very last page when one of the faithful (or faithful in a way) lovers of more than 50 years, is described as having a voice illuminated by the Holy Spirit which conveys "tremendous powers of inspiration" as becomes a poet.

The novel itself is about love, in the time of a long endemic cholera epidemic in a South American republic, and so, in a sense it is Catholic, although it is as Eros and Agape. It is not, therefore, a devotional book recommended for spiritual reading, but there is a broad humanity which certainly makes it eminently likeable. It has been described, quite aptly by the publisher, as "a work of art radiating with humanity that readers will savour and remember for the rest of their lives."

Márquez himself was born in Colombia in 1928 and worked as a journalist in Paris, Rome, Barcelona and New York. He now lives in Mexico City. Certainly he is an example of the merits of a Catholic education, which provides a framework of thought and feeling to last a lifetime.

September 15, 1996

What if Jesus met a scientist?

*He recognises the force and validity of revolution,
but does not seem to have felt it himself*

In an article dealing basically with conversion, Christopher Isherwood makes an interesting point. What would happen if Christ himself should enter the laboratory of a scientific pedant who claims that all truths should be verifiable by the slide rule, the microscope or laboratory experiment? What if he made the very same statements that the scientist had scoffed at when made by a convert? How would the scientist react?

“If he were a pure non-human materialist, he would of course remain entirely unconvinced. But since he is a creature of emotion and intuition as well as of reason, the chances are that he would be impressed, not rationally but emotionally, by the personality of Christ and the tremendous psychological impact of such a meeting. In spite of his scientific training, he would venture to trust his intuition. He would say to himself: ‘Although my scientific methods of analysis cannot deal with these statements, my intuition tells me that this man has some authority for his words’.”

Isherwood states that the beliefs of the convert will always be covered by what Aldous Huxley called “the minimum working hypothesis”. Properly speaking, he says, a religious doctrine can be called a creed only by those who know it to be true. It remains a hypothesis as long as you are not quite sure. Spiritual truth is by definition directly revealed or experienced. It cannot be known at second-hand.

Isherwood does not say so, but it seems to me that this knowledge is one of the aspects of grace. These extracts are from an essay “Hypothesis and Belief” in a valuable book titled *Christopher Isherwood: Where Joy Resides*, a compilation of the writer’s works by Don Bachardy & James P White (Methuen).

Most people, if they have heard of Isherwood at all, will know him as the creator of Sally Bowles and hence of the stage musical and film *Cabaret*, the royalties of which contributed much to the comfort of his later years. There was more to him than that, though. In fact he was described by the learned Gore Vidal, who wrote the preface to this book, as the best prose writer of his

time. I think that that is over-rating him, but he was certainly one of the best, and as such is comparatively neglected.

As to the bare facts of his life, he was born into upper middle-class England in 1904 and died in 1986 in the United States, of which he had become a citizen. Literally, the most productive period of his life was spent in the slums of Berlin when Hitler was coming to power, and where he met Sally Bowles and wrote about her life. His style is pure, easy, flowing. His work is marked by a boundless tolerance and a vision of the world that is benign, yet mildly caustic.

It was fashionable in his group as a young man to be a communist, so he duly became one, though his adherence to party dogma always seemed to be of the very slightest. Later, in his 30s, he seemed to be moved by some sort of spiritual crisis which led him to Vedanta and Eastern mysticism. At one stage he thought of being a monk. His beliefs remained fairly constant for the rest of his life, but they lost a great deal of intensity.

He always thought clearly, though, and expressed himself with the utmost clarity. It is a pity that the influences he was under took him to Vedanta and not to Catholicism, because he would have made a good Catholic, and often, it seems to me, expresses himself unconsciously in Catholic ways.

He describes his conversion experience with honesty. It was not accompanied by that feeling of light and certainty which seem to be hallmarks of Catholic conversion. He says that people will say to any convert: "Do you actually believe all that?" This is distressing, says Isherwood, because if he is to be honest, he must reply: "No, I don't – yet".

He recognises the force and validity of revolution but does not seem to have felt it himself, nor the effects of grace. He speaks though with what seems like Catholic feeling "of the direct revelation of the few, the saints, who win for themselves a personal knowledge of spiritual reality".

It seems to me that in the end, the saints all say much the same thing, though the tone varies. As they are demonstrably not mad or struck with a collective lunacy, and on the contrary all seem remarkably sane, then what they are saying is true.

July 9, 2000

King writes royal junk, for once

King's manic capacity for work shows that he is driven by something more than the need for money or luxury

Stephen King, I always think, has never reached anything like his full potential – and that by choice.

This might seem an odd thing to say, because he is currently the author who sells most. Every new novel of his is an automatic bestseller, and he has a most prolific output of huge books.

King works every day of the year, he has said, except Christmas and the Thanksgiving Day. And of course he uses a word processor, which facilitates greatly these torrents of words.

We might conjecture what would have happened to literature had, for example, Dostoevsky had access to high-tech computer word-producing techniques. His output too was in torrential rivers. Perhaps he needed the extra control, or perhaps the ease would have facilitated his great genius. It is difficult to conjecture.

King writes books mainly of horror, in which he shows an incredibly versatile and fertile imagination, sometimes of a Gothic nature, to rival that of Edgar Allen Poe. He lacks, though, Poe's concision, though maybe that is deliberate.

He can also write books in which the horror depends not on the supernatural but on warped human nature such *Dolores Claiborne* and *Misery*. Both were filmed with Kathy Bates. For *Misery* she got the Oscar as best leading actress.

In general, his novels are fantasies with a strong element of the supernatural. He shows a sense of evil and a knowledge of the clash between good and evil, often played out with cosmic force, which is very Catholic, notably, I think, in his long, sprawling novel *The Stand*.

It is this powerful imagination, this moral sense, and his occasional ability to write prose of muscular strength and clarity which make me think that King could be a major literary figure. But he has chosen the route of popular success, probably deliberately, although his manic capacity for work shows that he is driven by something more than the need for money or luxury – he already has plen-

ty of both. In any case King prefers an isolated life with his family in Maine, and he rarely goes out, much less travels.

In his latest book, *Insomnia*, recently published by Hodder & Stoughton, another long and sprawling novel of 650 pages, he shows most strongly his tendency to play the popularity stakes. The issue is not really the insomnia of the title, though this does figure as an ingredient in the horror formula, but abortion, now such a cogent issue, particularly in South Africa, where proposed legislation is complicated by the presence of a priest and a nun among the legislators.

To summarise baldly, the theme of King's book is the clash between right-to-life and pro-abortion feminist and other groups, occasioned by the visit of a well known feminist to the local women's centre, which apart from being an abortion clinic or mill, is a centre for beaten women.

As happens in nearly all King's books, cosmic forces get mixed up in it all. There is good in the form of a human who is rather like an elderly Gary Cooper, and a Demon King, out of pantomime, who, it seemed to me was really rather easily defeated in a struggle that was less than cosmic.

Although this is a novel and not a polemic, King seems to be decidedly on the side of the abortionists. Those believing in the sanctity of life tend to be not only villainous but grotesque, sometimes mad or evil or both, always malevolent. The least they are is cranky to the point of grotesqueness. There is even a sympathetic police officer who says he is a staunch Catholic with altar boy sons, who backs the abortionists on the most flimsy grounds that he has seen so many children behaving most badly and murderously. This is a quite absurd argument, but it is advanced seriously. How is it possible to determine and then, presumably, to abort foetuses who will become young murderers? One way would be to abort them all, and no one has gone that far. Not yet.

The chief villain is a brilliant young scientist driven berserk by the slaughter of babies, many would think rightly, but that is not how it appears in the book. He becomes not only a wife-beater but also a plotter of mass murder, all to fight the good cause of those who hold that life is sacred. In this he is aided by the supernatural forces of evil on several levels.

All in all, the novel is almost total junk, and not only because of its deplorable theme. King can do better than this.

January 14, 1996

Future pope bailed out Greene

'Part of your novel will always offend Catholics, but you should not let that trouble you.'

A review in the *London Catholic Herald* in 1940 of the masterly novel by Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, quoted from Cardinal John Henry Newman on Catholics who preferred their religious reading sugar-sweet: "A novelist's world to these people consists of the Guild meeting and the daily Mass, of priests who are always understanding and of a laity who are always humble. It is a world which has never existed and never, let us fairly hope, will exist."

That was never the way of Graham Greene, though as a type of writing it can have its individual charm. A recent edition of the US Catholic newspaper *Our Sunday Visitor* tells in detail how this novel had been condemned by the Holy Office and found a champion in Archbishop Giovanni Montini of Milan, later to become Pope Paul VI. Many now think this was Greene's finest book. It is certainly one of them.

Briefly, *The Power and the Glory* is the story of a "whiskey priest" under the persecution of the Church in Mexico in the 1920s. The priest lives with a slatternly Indian woman, he has an illegitimate child, he is terrified of being caught, he is mostly drunk. Yet, he goes to certain death to administer the sacraments to a dying man. He dies a martyr's death before a firing squad. His captor, a communist official is in contrast to the priest a man of strict principles, almost at times of nobility. In drawing him thus, Greene's point seems to be that, quite simply, it is the truth that matters, independent of the human vessel.

"It does not matter so much my being a coward, and all the rest," says the priest. "I can put God into a man's mouth just the same; and I can give him God's pardon. It wouldn't make any difference to that if every priest in the Church was like me." Greene's familiar themes of grace, redemption and what he called "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God" are all there.

Greene was a convert who began to take a course of instruction simply to humour his fiancée, herself a convert. He became convinced of Church doctrine by reason, abandoning his agnosticism.

Documents now made public illustrate the real-life drama that followed the publication of the book. Naturally there was controversy, and many were shocked. The Holy Office, since superseded by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, appointed two consultants to examine the book. They decided that it was harmful to the cause of true religion. One criticised Greene's "abnormal propensity" towards situations involving sexual immorality.

The book could have been placed on the Index forbidding Catholics to read it under penalty of sin. They proposed instead that Greene be "exhorted to write other books in a different tone," to correct the defects of this one. He should refuse also reprints or translations until he had made "suitable corrections".

The then Archbishop Montini intervened. In a confidential letter to the Holy Office he praised the book as "a work of singular literary value" and proposed that another consultant assess it.

Monsignor De Lyca, the new man, took a totally different view. Any action, he said, would grievously damage the Church's prestige. It would show a "light-weight" judgment and undermine the authority of the clergy significantly. Greene's "harsh and acerbic art," he said "addressed those who are most distant and hostile: those whom we will never reach."

In a letter described as remarkable for its humility, Greene wrote directly to the Holy Office, saying he was distraught at its criticism. He expressed his devotion to the pope and to the Holy See. In 1963 Greene had a papal audience with his defender, now Pope Paul VI. He warmly praised the book, and told Greene: "Part of your novel will always offend Catholics, but you should not let that trouble you."

Greene, who died in France in 1980 at the age of 86, was honoured many times in his lifetime. He should have received the Nobel Prize for Literature, but never did, reputedly because of the enmity of an authoritative member of the committee. Many lesser writers did.

The book that influenced me most before my conversion was *Brighton Rock*, an early novel on the theme of grace and redemption, and a powerful study of a damned soul, an evil teenage gangster, Pinky, who seems to have no good in him at all, but who mysteriously causes the redemptive power of good to be revealed.

October 10-16, 2001

Will catcher in the rye grow old?

The catcher is far from sinister: he is a figure of Christ-like compassion, caring for an unknown flock.

Holden Caulfield is now 50 years old. Or, put another way, he is touching 70. To elucidate those two cryptic statements: JD Salinger's enormously influential novella *The Catcher In The Rye* was published 50 years ago. The chief character, Holden Caulfield, a young man, still lives in those pages, with a youth that knows no change.

Since that book, the writer has been silent, but his creature lives on. Holden is instantly recognisable as the universal sensitive young man – to paraphrase the English poet AE Housman, alone and afraid in a world he never made. Salinger has lived as a recluse in rural America for more than 50 years. He publishes nothing, and refuses all interviews as intrusion into his privacy.

This most reclusive of men says nothing at all about himself, so one does not know what religious beliefs he has, if any. He does, though, show a Catholic spirit. Before *The Catcher In the Rye*, his first and only novel, he published a few short stories about a Jewish-Catholic family called Glass, in which the Catholic Church seemed at times like a flying buttress in a medieval Gothic cathedral. The story, *A Fine Day For Ranana Fish*, is a little masterpiece.

Then consider the fine passage from which his novel took its name. A catcher in the rye seems a sinister and gloomy concept, the very words are somehow frightening. Holden says he keeps picturing thousands of little children in a big field of rye, with nobody else around except himself, "standing on the edge of some crazy cliff."

"What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff – I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going, I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. I'd just be the catcher in the rye."

Therein contained is a somewhat profound allegory of Christian compassion and redemption. The catcher is far from sinister: he is a figure of Christ-like compassion, caring for an unknown flock.

The story, such as it is, concerns a young man's Odyssey through nightmarish

Manhattan, peopled by adults straight out of Dante's *Inferno*, a world of sludge and grime, as the innocent goes to confront his parents about dreadful marks he has received in his examinations.

About the only half-way decent people he meets are two nuns. This is the relevant passage: "I said I'd enjoyed talking to them a lot too. I meant it too. I'd have enjoyed it even more, I think, if I hadn't been sort of afraid the whole time I was talking to them that they'd all of a sudden try to find out if I was a Catholic. Catholics are always trying to find out if you're a Catholic. It wouldn't have spoiled the conversation if they had, but it would've been different, probably. I'm not saying I blame Catholics. I don't. I'd be the same way probably if I was a Catholic."

The American Catholic writer Russell Shaw has well compared Holden to JM Barrie's Peter Pan and Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin, the holy fool, the epileptic, in the great novel *The Idiot*.

The comparison is apt, but from the points of view of literary merit and spiritual insight, vast oceans separate them. Peter Pan was the little boy who did not grow up, an imaginative figure marred by that treachery sentimentality which was Barrie's great weakness. Peter Pan is a figure of cardboard, cut out for children's matinées.

Prince Myshkin was a genuine innocent, a man to whom holiness was as natural as breathing. Dostoevsky's description of his mystic experience comes closer in words than anything I have read to describe a state which transcends the verbal.

Holden has not the profundity of Myshkin: he, as it were, flirts with it. Nevertheless, that deep, central feeling is there, somewhere beneath the vivid but limping, semi-articulate phrasing. Will Holden ever grow up? He answers himself: "It's such a stupid question, if you ask me."

There is the essential reply, not only of youth but of innocence. It is also extremely, paradoxically, sophisticated. He sees a moral superiority in the fresh gaze of innocence, and though he does not use the words, growing up seems to him a form of corruption of purity. The voice is authentic. Many millions have heard from Holden echoes from their secret hearts.

December 11-17, 2002

Life in France
(Part II)

Where food is religion

*A dish called simply Jesus is a pork-liver sausage;
St Germain is thick pea soup*

It is sometimes said here in France that if you see two priests eating out together, you can be sure that it is a good restaurant, with, as the French say, “an excellent rapport of quality with price.” If you see priests often at that same restaurant, any lingering doubt can be dispelled, and that is the place for your money.

If, however, you see a priest dining with a layman, they say, do not be too sure of it. He might simply be a wealthy parishioner, and the good Father might have had no say in the matter.

I remember years ago I often used to dine in a restaurant on the Boulevard Montparnasse in Paris called Rougeot. Unfortunately, it exists no more, another victim of “progress”. Before the bulldozers, Rougeot’s was a cavernous temple dedicated to good eating in the traditional French style; not haute cuisine, but elaborate and ordinary French cooking, which is one of the glories of civilisation. The menu was as vast as the dining room, the décor the highly elaborate Belle Epoque. The waiters seemed to have been there forever. One I remember well. An elderly cripple, he had spent a lifetime there, but he got around as fast as anyone and carried as much, and as dexterously. The large clientele were serious eaters, educated and knowledgeable in the arts of the palate.

I remember as if it were yesterday once seeing a solitary priest there. It was obvious that Monsieur le Curé knew his gastronomy and that he enjoyed it. The owner of the restaurant, herself a woman of vast culinary erudition, took his order with respect and attention. Each course was learnedly debated and the wines were chosen with scholarly care. The priest’s attentions were then fully on his dinner. It was a great pleasure even just to observe a connoisseur at his enjoyment.

Gluttony, of course, is a sin. This was not greed; it was refined and civilised pleasure, based on knowledge and sensibility. This is a common attitude, so with cooking and Catholicism both being so integrated in French life and so intertwined, it is not at all surprising that the names of many dishes and many

wines have ecclesiastical connotations.

Here, for example, are typical names of a few red Bordeaux wines (mysteriously call “claret” in England). There are many others: Castle of the Angelus (St Emilion); Chateau l’Evangile or “castle of the Gospel”; Chateau Saint Pierre (St Peter); Chateau Trois Crois, or “three crosses castle”. An Italian wine, incidentally, is called the Tears of Christ.

With regard to food, there are even more examples. There is, for example, a pheasant of the Holy Spirit, stuffed with beef bone-marrow, veal, pork and herbs. A dish called simply Jesus is a pork-liver sausage, a speciality of the east of France.

Naturally, there are many saints who have had dishes named after them. These include St Germain (all thick pea soups); St Michael (a fine pastry); St James (Coquille St Jacques, a baked shellfish); and St Honoré, a complicated cake with two types of pastry and a cream filling. St Honoré, incidentally, is the patron saint of pastry chefs and bakers. Then, of course, there is coffee cappuccino (originally Italian but it has become French), so called because it looks like the cowl of a Capuchin Franciscan.

Of similar origin is the Religieuse, a pastry which looks like an old-style nun. The basic ingredients are cream, coffee, chocolate and vanilla. It looks elaborate, stately and virtuous. A simple pastry which is popular in the southern region in which I live is called a Jesuit, but I don’t know why. Basically it is an almond-flavoured biscuit of triangular shape.

This, of course, takes no account of the many traditional dishes served on holy days or significant occasions, such as the blanquette of veal.

Tradition and cooking go well together, a natural alliance.

July 22, 1984

Priest, mayor and volunteer

Then there stepped into the matter a Solomon in the substantial and bearded form of the defence minister.

Many will know Guareschi's stories about the turbulent, good-hearted Don Camillo and the communist mayor Peppone; their fights, their antagonisms and their basic liking and respect for each other. In some ways they are aspects of the same person, and that is one of the factors which has given their stories their abiding popularity and appeal. In a village near Villeveyrac, they have become the same person, in fact.

The fictional priest and mayor both favour direct and often unconventional action, and to settle the disputes of faraway battling bureaucracies, they use bull-like, uncomplicated approaches which often work because of their simplicity. This is what happened when the mayor and a priest in the village of Belmont-sur-Rance, near Toulouse, heard of a complicated matter involving a military call-up of a young man, which would in turn have caused the unemployment of nine people.

L'Abbé Albert Aliès is the mayor of the town. Although the bishop has ordered him to give up his function as parish priest, he is still a clergyman, regards himself as one, and is addressed as "mon père" or "Monsieur le Curé", the French was of saying "Father".

Obviously, Father Aliès is well known in the little world of Belmont-sur-Rance, where in a sense he has both temporal and spiritual sway. The village is charming and typical Mediterranean, a collection of flat-roofed houses, sun-baked, built on a hill with a church and towering spire on the summit. Everyone knows everyone else, usually for all their lives, and naturally everyone knows the mayor and is respectful towards him.

A mayor in France is not a mere figurehead. He is the administrative head of the community and has great local power. His approval has to seal practically every deal. He keeps the records and runs the town. He also performs civil ceremonies, as only civil weddings have the force of law in France. Of course, in Father Mayor's case, he can do both.

Father Aliès is 59 and a burly, handsome, vigorous man, with an open smile.

ing face and a direct manner. Naturally, he is very popular.

At any rate, it came to the attention of Monsieur le Maire (mayor) or Monsieur le Curé (priest) that one of his constituents, the young Gilles Pendariès, had been called “under the flag”, as they picturesquely say in France. In other words, he had been conscripted. The trouble was that Gilles owned and managed a small furniture business, specialising in traditional and antique styles. He employed nine people, and without him the business would close, adding nine more to the sadly impressive unemployment list.

For various reasons, the young man was not eligible for an exemption, so Father Aliès did a most unexpected thing. At the age of 59 he went to the military tribunal and offered himself as a soldier in place of Gilles. He was strong, burly and healthy, he pointed out, and well capable of adapting to soldierly duties. One had only to look at him to see that this was true. Indeed, he looks considerably more suited to a military life than the rather frail young furniture maker. This threw the military tribunal, which sits in Toulouse, into disarray. But the Reverend Father or His Worship the Mayor (depending on your point of view), was perfectly serious and it looked as though in his substantial person the army would get a better bargain. And then there was the question of unemployment.

Then there stepped into the matter a Solomon in the similarly substantial and bearded form of the minister of defence, Charles Hernu. In effect, Monsieur Hernu postponed the date of the call-up of Gilles until the end of October, without altering the validity of his summons. The point is that the relevant two-year period lapses in October, so that in effect the armed forces will lose one soldier, whether he would have been a strapping priest or an earnest young carpenter.

And Belmont-sur-Rance has settled back to its peaceful life in the sun, between the Mediterranean and the Pyrénées.

March 3, 1985

A steel town with heart

*The major remains vigilant, and the towns people
have flocked around with material help*

Not many people, even in France, will have heard of Villerupt, a small town in Lorraine, in the east of France. Yet it has given a conspicuous example of Christian charity, which if generally followed would greatly improve life in this wicked old world. One hears often of the “heartless” ways of the urban conglomerates. Villerupt has shown it has a heart.

This small town has not much in the way of worldly goods. In fact it is a fatality of the decreasing importance of mines and steel works brought about by the age of the microchip, in many ways so regrettable. Once a prosperous valley in the department of Meurth-et-Moselle, the town is now marked by closed mines, a vanished steelworks and unemployment. In the circumstances, most who could leave the town have left.

The mayor, the parish priest and others have now decided to make a fight and to do everything they can to help those who want to stay, not at all easy as the resources of the town are small.

Their main work has been in the case of Serge Kowalski and his family of a wife and three children, the youngest a baby of six months. For two months they have been trying to help Mr Kowalski. His story is sad but, unhappily, a common one in places where staple industries begin to fade and waver. He had bought a house in more prosperous days and now found he could not honour the payments.

He is a garage mechanic, with a modest wage, a hard-working man, but the money he earns even with his family allowances for the young children, is not enough to pay for the debts which have accumulated on the house, all beyond his control, such as a defective roof, for which he had not only to borrow more money but to sell his cherished motorbike.

A fault, too, of course, lay in a certain gullibility in accepting too attractive terms fashed upon the family by house-selling societies, who in France as elsewhere are apt to promise the world and then to fade away and re-appear like tigers with fanged teeth when it looks as though they might not get their full charges.

Then this is what happened.

A few months ago, Mr Kowalski received a letter “inviting” him to appear before the court at the nearest big town, that of Briey. There he was told that he “would be made the object of a seizure and a forced sale”, to directly translate the French official jargon. With no experience at all of this sort of thing, Mr Kowalski, an honest man with a blameless life, did not know what to do. He knocked at the doors of various banks. In vain.

Then he was advised to go and see the mayor, which he did. This concerned man and his helpers reacted with vigour, if a little quixotically. They intervened with the prefect, the legal and administrative authority, and the finance companies. Moreover, the mayor roundly published a decree forbidding all seizures of property and expulsions in his commune. This was later overruled as one would have expected and the Kowalskis were told that the house would be sold at a price well below its value, but sufficient to cover their debts.

Serge and Lydia Kowalski and their three children are, however, still in their house. The major remains vigilant, determined that they will not be ejected, and the townspeople have flocked around with material help, which might become larger if necessary. All indications are that this modest family will remain in their humble home.

Their two-storeyed house is not remarkable, and, in fact, is like all the others in the area, and it is more than 100 years old. It means a great deal to the Kowalskis, though.

The family are unusual in that they like the somewhat bleak and ill-favoured Villerupt, and they want to stay there – more so since they have received so much support often from strangers. Serge could find work, he thinks, in nearby Luxembourg at higher wages, but he would, understandably, rather stay where he is.

“We don’t want to leave Villerupt. All the family is here,” explained Lydia. And, of course, the extended family: all their new and charitable and warm-hearted friends.

October 1, 1989

A time to party

Every town and village in southern France has its annual festival, usually in summer.

Two friends, a truly learned professor and his wife, equally learned, came to visit us recently in Villeveyrac, our village which a local song-writer described as a little corner of peace and sun between the Mediterranean and the Pyrénées.

It is in one of the largest wine-producing areas of the world, a few kilometres from the Mediterranean, and the wine farmers and small workers often have a choleric disposition. They have often barricaded the roads, and they once flooded the streets of the nearby port of Sète with many thousands of litres of Italian wine, the importation of which they strongly resented. In particular, they showed an active and evident dislike of the former minister of agriculture, Edith Cresson, who in fact is a most intelligent and competent woman.

I remarked on this trace of sexism to the learned couple, neither of them Catholic, visiting us. The wife said: "There has always been an undercurrent of feeling against women becoming too important here. It is traditional to the Mediterranean." To which her husband wittily replied: "I don't know. The Virgin Mary seems to have done all right."

That superficially flippant remark in fact illustrated a great truth. A noted French theologian, Jean Potin, wrote recently: "The person of Mary in the course of the centuries has profoundly modelled the national soul, notably in the influence which she has had on the women of our country. This secret imprint explains the radiance – *rayonnement* – which Lourdes exercises on those who are far from the Church, including unbelievers." He added that this Marian devotion had tempered expressions of faith in the French Church away from rigidity and bareness, even in the most mystical writings and, presumably, feelings.

Practical evidence of this is everywhere to be seen. Taking Villeveyrac as a typical example, every street name sign bears a representation of the Sainte Vierge, the Holy Virgin. Outside the town, dominating the main entrance, there is a huge statue of our Lady in a sanctuary on a small hill, with many benches set amid carefully tended flowers. This small area is bathed in the

vivid Mediterranean light, but more than that, in peace. As a work of art, the large statue would win no prizes, but as usual with these places, this is of secondary importance.

Every town and village in France has its annual festival, or certainly every town in the south (or Midi, as it is called here). They are normally in summer. The festival of Villeveyrac centres on the Day of the Assumption, in August, and it combines both secular and religious aspects. There is a procession and a special outdoor Mass in the main square with a special flower-bedecked altar. The Masses are crowded, as they are at Christmas and Easter. Apart from this, there are five days of festivities, including a dance every night, a large fun fair and many other amusements such as clay-pigeon shooting and competitions of boules and petangue, the French game which has a similarity to English bowls, except that there is no formality.

All this takes place under the blazing August sun or in the warm Mediterranean nights, to the sound of the cicadas or crickets and the beat of pop music, or older-styled dance music for the *bals de papa*, or dad's dances. I felt a little old when the music of one such was entirely that of the Rolling Stones.

An interesting thing is that this Marian festival is one of full vigour, with an emphasis on youth, and the sounds of revelry and the typical French firecrackers going on all night for nearly a week. And yet the basic religious significance is emphasised. After all, the Assumption is an occasion for rejoicing.

Similarly the town of Poussan, near here and of a similar character, has a large central area with an altar and a shrine for our Lady. It was built as a result of a vow taken by the townspeople that they would set up such a place if Poussan were saved from the ravages of the Second World War. It was, and this shrine is an oasis of calm, with an almost tangible feeling of peace.

September 4, 1983

Sound the trumpets

With drum and tambourine they give the necessary flourish to the workday world.

The English words music and fanfare have a pleasant sound and pleasant associations, which they have in French too. In France, though, they also take a concrete form. *La musique* and *la fanfare* are also the words for a brass band, which can of course give a flourish of trumpets – which is what fanfare means in English. These brass bands are an integral part of French community life. They are, in a way, an expression of the soul of the community.

The stirring music by *la musique* is a part of the great Catholic festivals. Although they play their part on secular occasions too; secular and sacred tend to become mingled in Catholic France. For example, the big fête of May 1, one of the biggest of the year, is international workers' day as well, being the feast of St Joseph the Worker.

In Villeveyrac we are fortunate in having a splendid fanfare, made up as usual of amateurs. I thought of that the other day when having a chat with my dear friend Charles Plasse at the charming local café L'Avenir. Charles is everywhere known as "Papy", an untranslatable work which is an affectionate nickname, particularly here in Midi, for a man of mature years. Yves Montand in his latest film *Manon Of The Wells* brilliantly plays a rugged, elderly man of the south whom no one calls anything but Papy.

Well, the local Papy is a man of a warm and open heart and a generous disposition who knows this area, having been born in it. He pointed out to me that the Villeveyrac fanfare was one of the best. In fact, for such a small town it performed marvels. When listening to the elaborate and highly sophisticated fanfare of Paris, I thought his words were confirmed. There was more precision in Paris, of course, and more volume; but in Villeveyrac there was at least as much heart.

The Villeveyrac town band, to give it its English name, has smart debonair uniforms, with peaked caps, as is traditional, and it makes a brave display as it marches from *La Mairie* (the town hall) to the church, and stops at the central square for performance. Often there is an address by the mayor on these ceremonial occasions, of which there are many in France.

The band of course, is made up of local men, all looking different to their usual workday selves. There are, for example a handsome young garage hand, the postman, a bachelor who works the wine cooperative, and many wine-farmers. With drum and tambourine they give the necessary flourish to the workday world.

The ambience of festival they convey is recognised. I was pleased, for example, to see them at the oyster festival at the nearby town of Bouzigues.

I had an old friend, John Rydon, now sadly dead, who was a well-known Fleet Street journalist. On the last of his many visits here, one evening after dinner he heard the strains of the band drifting through the windows of the sitting room. Like an old warhorse, his ears went up, for at one stage he had played the trumpet in a military band and remained a deft hand with the bugle. Suddenly he disappeared. There was a momentary silence; then a roar of approval from the nearby place of rehearsal. The unmistakable sound of the March of the British Grenadiers replaced traditional French airs, undoubtedly for the first time ever in this little neck of the woods.

“They are pretty good, but I think I taught them a thing or two,” he said with some satisfaction. This was echoed by our common friend, Humphrey Thomas.

So the strands of the secular and the sacred mix, and the town band’s *la fanfare* brings home the joy and the ceremonial that is so much a part of Catholic life.

January 31, 1988

Scenes from a French restaurant

*In a penetrating voice rising to a scream,
she heaped obscenities on the poor man's head.*

An elderly priest eating by himself at a *caféteria* in a supermarket is a sight that catches the eye. One associates priests in this respect certainly not with the pomp and grandeur of the *de luxe* establishments, but perhaps with a humble, but well cooked repast in the presbytery, or with one of those solid middle-class establishments with an excellent cuisine of the type known as *bourgeois*.

My eye was caught the other day by such a man in such a place. He was very unobtrusive, but somehow of a calm and commanding presence. He was slender and white-haired, with a thin and ascetic face, and as he ate his movements were delicate and precise. In his quiet way he seemed happy and enjoying himself.

A *caféteria* in a supermarket is not the sort of environment I much enjoy. The surroundings are too Americanised and too commercial for my taste, though in France they do these things very well, and there is a strong tradition of service, which pervades even this type of thing. The quality of the food is high, of the type, and even if you collect it yourself on a tray, where it is possible the order is cooked in front of you while you wait. The girls who serve and those at the checkout point always say “*Bon appétit*” with a smile which seems genuine no matter how rushed they are.

The reason I go there occasionally is because my little daughter, Marie-Thérèse, aged three-and-a-half, adores the place. When she arrives there, she usually throws her arms in the air and shouts: “*Montlaur!*” which is its name, and chants: “*On a gagné!*”, which is a sort of triumphal shout French sport fans utter when their team has won. At the table she sits very upright, eats most correctly, makes courteous small talk with people at neighbouring tables, and looks around her with an expression of polite and reserved gravity, very adult, very absorbed and very alert. At home she has the habit of imitating the waitresses, and taking orders for lunch.

That same day, when my wife and little Marie-Thérèse were just about finishing lunch, and the priest was rapt in decorous reflection, there was a most

indecorous interruption. At a nearby table, a woman with disarranged hair and eyes blazing, seemed to spring up from nowhere and rushed at a man sitting by himself, obviously her husband. In a penetrating voice rising to a scream, she heaped obscenities on the poor man's head. Everyone stopped eating and stared.

The unfortunate man tried to ignore this flood of meaningless vituperation which seemed to redouble her frenzy. Then she rushed out. The man sat there, looking deflated, then with a rather pathetic attempt at dignity, he too rose and followed.

These events were followed by the priest with that sad, wise and understanding look that old priests often have. A thought occurred to me: What a difference in human beings, in human reactions. On the one side, calmness and tranquillity; on the other, frenzy. It is difficult to imagine a priest or a religious being in such a state for whatever reason.

I happened once to dine near to another priest in quite different circumstances, which I also found a very pleasant sight. This was in Paris, at an old-style restaurant specialising in traditional French cooking but at a relatively modest cost. Father, who was a large and jovial-looking man, took his table, obviously one to which he was well accustomed, near the pavement windows. The owner of the restaurant moved up with a gleaming smile and the look of a galleon in full sail, and they began a knowledgeable discussion on the day's bill of fare, both of them clearly experts. The proprietress was clearly happy to talk about the cooking with a fellow expert, and the occasion had something of the air of a ritual.

Well, the dishes came in their prescribed order. Father in his quiet way was enjoying himself, and it was a pleasure to watch him. Then he called for the bill. A waiter came up.

"It is paid for, mon père," he said. "By whom?" "The gentleman has left."

He had left, but his good wishes, his kind gesture, remained behind.

March 13, 1988

The man in red

He was a dangerous vagabond, a stranger who lurked around stealing from farmhouses, a bogeyman.

As I have written before, the south of France is a land for stories. The people love telling them, and not even television has managed to kill this impulse. They are vivid and moving stories and, strange as they often are, the strangest thing about them is that they are usually true.

Here is one I heard the other day, the teller saying it was a *conte de Noël*, a Christmas story. By this he did not mean that it was fictional (on the contrary, he knew that it was true), but that the spirit was true to the spirit of Christmas.

There is and was a modest farmhouse in the area in which I live, the countryside known as *la garrigue*, which, although beautiful, is not particularly hospitable to farming except viticulture and olive cultivation. There is a lot of hot sun and very little rain. Small and modest farms do not have an easy time.

In one of the little farms, not long ago, a family was sitting round the fire waiting for midnight. There were the kindly old grandfather, two children who loved the old man, the father and mother. To pass the time the children clamoured excitedly for the old man to tell them a story which he often did as he was one of those gifted storytellers so common around here.

“Well,” the old man said, “I will tell you a story you haven’t heard before. I will tell you the story of the man in red.”

Once upon a time (in French, “there was time”) there was a farmhouse in which lived a little girl, her mother and a father. They were poor, but they made an honest living by very hard work, and they deeply loved their little daughter. Sometimes they had to go to the town near by and once they had to go together, leaving the little girl alone with her pets and her toys for a short time. She was a brave little girl and she was not frightened. Before they left they told her to keep the house locked. Above all she should be careful of the man in red. He was a dangerous vagabond, a stranger to the area, who lurked around stealing from farmhouses, a dangerous person, a bogeyman. They left on their errands.

The man in red, on his usual search, fell upon the farmhouse. He noticed it was deserted and silently approached. Attempting to force a window, to his horror he saw the face of the little girl. "What do you want?" she asked in fear. "Food," he said simply. "I haven't eaten for three days. Have pity on me."

The brave, but perhaps foolhardy, little girl let him in. From the family's meagre larder, she gave him things such as cold sausages, cheese, paté, bread (French staples), not forgetting a bottle of wine, all placed on the kitchen table. He ate ravenously.

"It goes well with you now?" the little girl asked. "Yes, and thank you very much, but I am very tired. I haven't slept for two nights." "Go to the barn and sleep. There is straw there." Thanking her again, the man in red did just that.

The parents returned. "Who has been here?" they asked in consternation, appalled. "The man in red," the little girl replied. "Where is he?" "He is sleeping in the barn."

Roughly, the father woke him. "Monsieur," the man in red said, "I look simply for work." "Are you an honest man, a good worker?" "Yes, but I have had no chance," said the man in red. "Good, then I will give you work and we shall see what we shall see."

That was the end of the story. A deep silence fell. "And what happened to the man in red?" asked the little granddaughter.

"My little one," came the reply, "the man in red is me." There was a deeper silence, a silence of astonishment.

"And that little girl?" the granddaughter asked. The old man raised his head and looked at the couple. They nodded.

"The little girl is your *maman*."

March 19, 1989

A happy school

I remember myself as the very model of Shakespeare's sluggard, crawling most unwillingly to my scholastic day.

Rabelais wrote that in education one must remember that a child was not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be lit. That is a very good principle, clearly stated by someone who was not only one of the greatest writers of France, but a professor of medicine at a very early age, a monk and a priest. He lived, of course, in the Middle Ages, but he is one of those timeless figures.

Rabelais' dictum is, I think, admirably fulfilled on the whole by Catholic education. After all, the Church has been about it for nearly 2,000 years and lay education, as known in France, really only since the Revolution, a mere 200.

I thought of this the other day when my daughter, Marie-Thérèse, aged five and a few days, made her entry into the local Catholic school. She went happily, which, looking back through the deep mists of memory and the past, I am sure was not so in my case. In fact, exactly the opposite. I remember myself as the very model of Shakespeare's sluggard, crawling most unwillingly to my scholastic day.

The hours here are long too, by English-speaking standards. For her at the age of five they are from 9am to 12 noon, then from 1:45 to 5pm. Wednesdays are free, but there is school on Saturdays.

At the moment children can stay longer if they like or if their parents so wish because of the grape harvest, the *Veupanses*, which means they can be at the school from eight until six. Marie-Thérèse always chooses this, so "detention" is no punishment.

The school is a delightful place with sunlit grounds and statues of Mary and St Joseph, both dated 1891. One enters past a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes. There is a magnificent view of the rolling vines, a typical Mediterranean vista. The children flit around happily, looking and sounding like chirping birds.

The teaching, too, is of a high quality. Monsieur Rouviere, who teaches the class Marie-Thérèse is in (called the *grande section*) has already implanted in

her a sense of logical order and encouraged a desire to learn.

Madame Dugué, a woman with an evident love of her charges and an attitude of firm common sense, when I went to see her originally, said she regarded as essential that Christian morality, ethics and belief should be taught, not only in the catechism sense, but by example and precept. The feeling for Christian charity, for example, should be cultivated and at the school they did their best to do it.

She told this to all prospective parents to avoid misunderstanding, adding that if they disagreed at all there was a lay school nearby, which provided the same scholastic framework as required by French law. “Here,” she said, “we are all firm and practising Catholics. That is the framework of our teaching.”

The happy children in the sunlit playground are an eloquent witness that these methods not only work, but bring joy.

October 29, 1989

Return to a drowned village

'Do you remember, the bakery was there? That was the hotel. Your house used to be over there.'

The Mass has been celebrated in all manner of unlikely places. One of the most unusual surely must have been the one in France recently in a ruined and drowned church which has emerged from the waters at the bottom of a huge dam, which it does once every 10 years.

The reason is not miraculous, nor is it mythological. One could call it scientific. Nevertheless, it is not the sort of thing that happens every day, and it all makes a strange and moving story, illustrating, among other things, the persistence of human will and feeling against vast impersonal forces whether made by man or not.

In 1952 the last inhabitants of Tignes abandoned their village in the Savoy after unavailing protests and several years of resistance. Those departing were surrounded by hundreds of the special riot and guard French police, a formidable bunch known as the CRS men.

A huge dam property of the French power source, the EDF, was then filled with water, inundating all their buildings and pastures. Of course they were financially compensated, but for many of them their old homes, their old associations, meant more than money.

Every 10 years, for reason of security, the EDF empty their dam for a few days, and the surviving villagers flock back in a strange and moving pilgrimage.

This is a tourist area – mainly winter sports – grouped around the resort of Tignes-le-Lac, which has an altitude of 2,100m. Many of the former villagers work in one way or another in tourist activities.

A muddy and sinuous path leading downwards to this sad valley, once so beautiful and now, without its water, looking like a crater of the moon more than anything on earth. Many of the survivors of course are now old, but they come from sturdy mountain stock, some of them former shepherds, and they made their determined way downhill to the lost valley.

What is extraordinary is how well some of the ruins have resisted more than 40 years and the pressure of hundreds of millions of cubic metres of water, enabling the village to grow again in the collective memory.

The church with its magnificent bell tower was blown up before the flood, but the vestiges are there, easily identified and placed. The visiting priest had placed there a humble altar with a wooden cross. Hundreds of the veterans were there, bringing with them their imperishable memories, for what better memory-gatherer is there than a church?

There was a tear in many an eye, a crack in many a voice. The last one baptised was there, so was the last bride and fingers pointed them out, for among this little band of less than 1,000, almost everyone knew almost everyone else.

The last marriage is a sort of Romeo and Juliet story. Marthe Révial married only a few days before the village was destroyed, to one of the workers on the dam. Before that he had been one of the CRS guards, but fell in love and left his post, as the villagers regarded these men as a hostile, occupying army. Even as a dam worker there were problems, and they met in secret. The building chief was afraid of the antagonisms this liaison could cause. Only three days before the floodwaters came the couple were married, but the prefect and the police were there, just in case.

After the Mass of which I write there were two baptisms. The sad little crowd then gathered on what had been the square, exchanging memories – such as of the last of the resisters who had wanted to die in his house and had to be removed by force.

They had brought picnics and bottles of wine, and a few set up tables and drank on the exact place where the local café had been, pointing at various sites and making remarks such as: “Do you remember, the bakery was there? That was the hotel. Your house used to be over there,” and so on. A few children found this a marvellous playground among the mud, and they probably would have made a few memories too.

There were several hundred people there, but the vast empty spaces made them seem a sad little crowd, emphasising their melancholy. One, an old shepherd, said philosophically that one day all that concrete would have its turn and vanish. Far off, maybe, but a happy day.

July 1, 1990

Hairy, scary angels

*It takes a lot to make the blasé Parisians goggle,
but this strange cavalcade brought the crowds to a stop.*

A tattooed biker with hair either long or shaven, dressed in leather and wrapped here and there with a chain or two, is a figure of fear to the average stay-at-home. Somehow they seem to affront every comfortable and established feeling, springing, complete with snarl and knife, from some terrible murky sub-conscious nightmare. And they make it all the worse by prowling and roaring about in gangs.

These feelings have been around for some time. Way back in the 1950s Marlon Brando featured in a film called *The Wild Ones* about motorcycle gangs in which he was confronted by Lee Marvin doing his usual number in those days of utmost villainy. They all wore leather jackets, then a symbol of total non-conformity. Nowadays the film seems innocuous, boringly so, with a strain of unctuousness relieved only by Brando's usual powerful and brooding performance. (The film was, however, banned in England for many years, as it was in South Africa.)

In other words, this crowd seem not the stuff of which angels of mercy are made. Still, one must never be pharisaical: there is the highest authority for that; yet such is human nature that most of us are, too often, just that.

Not long ago in Paris more than a hundred young men belonging to a formidable motorcycle gang, all on huge Harley-Davidsons, gave a striking lesson on practical charity at a cost of some trouble and expense to themselves. They gave a dream day to severely handicapped children, all patients of the specialised hospital of Garches in Hautes-de-Seine, near Paris.

The children all have severely muscular degenerative diseases and are normally confined to wheelchairs. What then must have been their feelings to change a wheelchair for the powerful swoop of a giant motorcycle, the very symbol of triumph and power? As one of them haltingly said, it was like a flight of angels. Perhaps the roar and throb of the engines sounded to their deprived ears like an angelic shout of triumph. That was what one of the children seemed to be trying to say.

The motorcycle gang came from all over France, and they came specifically for this outing. Their number plates showed, for example, Toulouse, Rouen, Nevers, Grenoble, Circassonne, Bourges, as well as many from the Paris region itself.

All 100 of them were dressed in their virtual uniform: black leather jackets, hair either long or practically shaven, earrings, and covered with bright badges. It must be admitted they looked more piratical than angelic.

They were expected at the hospital, their little charges were ready, together with the woman in charge of the hospital who went on the leading bike. All were carefully placed on the pillion, correctly and most carefully belted against danger of falls, and then they set off on a tour of Paris, the most beautiful of cities, the long and immense cortege going slowly and carefully.

Their meticulously chosen itinerary was also a tour of dreams. They went, for example, down the Champs-Élysée, surely the most beautiful avenue in the world, to Etoile and the Arch of Triumph; they went to Place de la Concorde; they fringed Napoleon's tomb near the Champs-de-Mars.

It takes a lot to make the blasé Parisians goggle because just about everything under the sun happens there daily, but this strange cavalcade brought the crowds to a stop.

That was not all: far from it. There followed a picnic, a magnificent repast prepared with the care and devotion to food which is uniquely French, and after this there was a rock concert. There were souvenir photographs and each child received a trophy for courage and endurance. There were even "races" on the giant bikes, which the drivers were of course careful to take at a relatively slow pace.

Sometimes the handicapped have called themselves "les petits oubliés", the forgotten little ones. That day they were the stars, as was shown in many a shining eye.

As for the bikers themselves, they were a taciturn lot, unwilling to talk about their noble action, happy simply to relax with their new friends. "Next year we will have other outings," said one with a shy smile, a young man of tattoos and bulging muscles. He looked so happy!

December 9, 1990

Au revoir France; hello SA

*I shall miss my friends, and what a diverse bunch they are
in the little sun-baked community of Villeveyrac.*

To say *au revoir* to France is not easy. Shakespeare wrote that parting is such sweet sorrow. Sometimes it is, but rarely to *un amour fidèle*, a faithful love, which France has been to me since 1950 when on a bleak wintry day I fell in love utterly and irrevocably with a whole country, its language, its people, its way of life. The French say that to part is to die a little. That is a simple and accurate statement, which well reflects a universal feeling.

In brief, I have left the Midi, and a part of it which is described in a song as “a sun-drenched corner of paradise between the Pyrénées and the Mediterranean”. And I am back, a trifle bemused, in the new South Africa and the Cape Town where I was born, feeling a little like Rip van Winkle.

Among the things I miss most, of course, is living with a Catholic framework and in a Catholic environment. I am a convert, and most of my life as a Catholic has been spent in France. I have assisted at very many more Masses in French than in English. At first to me this was a little exotic, rather, I should imagine, like hearing the Mass in Latin by someone who knows the ancient language, but not as a tool of daily usage.

That feeling soon passed and the French Mass became a part of my built-in store of reactions to the world around. The words, of course, are the same, the sacrifice is the same, but words in different languages have echoes and overtones of meaning which by association and resonance are different. For example, as someone once pointed out, the words “moon” and “lune” mean exactly the same thing, but somehow the feelings evoked are different. This holds true even with the universal Mass of the universal Church, somewhere beneath the level of consciousness.

I miss too the universal acceptance and celebration of the communion of saints, the feast-days of the children; florists showing each day the name of the appropriate saint so that flowers and good wishes can be sent, with the words *bonne fête*, “happy feast-day”.

I miss too the feeling of life passing to the rhythm of the Church calendar, for

secular as it may be in many respects, France remains Catholic at the core, with the first Communion still the happiest day of a life, where someone of a sublimely innocent look is said to be like a person to whom one can give the good Lord without confession.

Then, of course, there are my friends, and what a diverse bunch they are in the little sun-baked community of Villeveyrac, surrounded by vines and rolling plains.

There is Monsieur le Curé, the parish priest Jean Baumel, who has the build of an all-in wrestler (and a no-nonsense manner to go with it), combined with a mind of vast erudition and an inflexible faith, who labours hard in his particular vineyard every day, with never a holiday and never a day off. He is the type on which the immortal Don Camillo was based, and like that Italian priest of fiction, Monsieur le Curé's intractable faith and sometimes short temper ruffles a few feathers. Not ever for long, though. He is too transparently honest a man.

Then there are my very dear fiends Charles Plasse and his devoted wife Suzanne, as warm and human a couple as one could hope to meet even in the Midi, which breeds people like that. Charles is universally known as "Papy", which is a term of affection for an older man. He has had a chequered life; which included deportation to the Nazi death camp of Buchenwald. He is an effusive, emotional man who survives all his troubles with a smile and, literally, a tear. Like all the men of the Midi, the south, he is not ashamed of crying openly when emotionally affected. He often paid me a great compliment by saying that to him I was a son, a brother and a father.

As I write this I can see his rugged face with a smile breaking through the tears like the Mediterranean sun through a rare passage of clouds. The southerners, the Meridionales, are not ashamed of emotion, indeed they would be ashamed of not having it.

There are, of course, many others. Those I have mentioned will do as examples of a rare and sturdy breed.

It is strange to be back, but the changing South Africa does not have a bad feeling, and I am optimistic after all these dark years. It is being said: "In this new South Africa we must all try to love one another." As we say in *la belle France*: *Espérons, espérons* – "let us hope, let us hope."

February 16, 1992

The Writers
(Part II)

A world of man before the fall

*One does not want to be too serious about
PG Wodehouse – one simply enjoys him.*

A recent exchange in *The Southern Cross* interested me enormously. The subject was PG Wodehouse; a subject on which, I must admit, I am a fanatic – in a mild and pleasant way, for fanaticism in its pure and harsh forms has rarely done good to anybody.

I was thinking of a brief exchange on the subject of Jeeves, whom a writer in *The Southern Cross* in an otherwise perceptive little analysis of the master called a “butler”. A small matter, you say? Not at all, Jeeves would have been shocked and horrified at the very suggestion. As would we Wodehouse enthusiasts, seriously, for the words of the master are as of gold.

Wodehouse did create the perfect butler. His name was Beach and he butted at Blangings Castle, whose master was the Earl of Emsworth. Once, hearing himself described as this, the “poor peon” thus addressed burst into hollow laughter, knowing full well that the real master was the earl’s sister, Lady Constance Keeble. Beach it was, as any Wodehousian will tell you, who performed the extraordinary feat of entering with the afternoon tea in “a stately procession of one”.

No, Jeeves was a gentleman’s personal gentleman. One could have described him as a valet, but he would not have done so. In fact, Jeeves described himself thus when talking to a policeman once after his gentleman, Bertie Wooster, had been discovered in a tree on which, for various complicated reasons he was balancing a pot plant so that it would fall through a conservatory. The policeman, after a “Ho!”, asked if he worked for the headmistress of the school in the grounds on which grew the tree. Jeeves replied that he very much doubted if said headmistress employed a gentleman’s personal gentleman.

Evelyn Waugh once described the innocent world of Wodehouse as that of man before the fall, a very apt description. There is no evil of any kind anywhere in a Wodehouse book, no one ever does a really nasty thing, and nobody even says one, except the Aunts (particularly Aunt Agatha). And they are a race apart. “Sometimes I think Jeeves looks exactly like an aunt,” remarked Bertie. Jeeves could have his stern side.

incidentally, Waugh – who was not given to praise of other writers and had a pure grasp of the English language – in his few almost awestruck letters to Wodehouse addressed him as “Master”, and in an article described him as the greatest living English stylist. Over a game of golf, Wodehouse remarked that he thought Waugh must have been talking about “a couple of other fellows”.

Nevertheless, PG Wodehouse expresses pure innocence, pure delight, pure humour in the most immaculate and skilful style, expressing a world inhabited by people without sin and malice in a place where it is always a perfect English summer’s afternoon.

One does not want to be too serious about Wodehouse, though – one simply enjoys him. Everyday I read a snatch or two of one of his books. They never pall.

Jeeves was a great brain. Bertie Wooster put that down to his eating fish, and asked people if they had noticed how Jeeves’ head bulged at the back. Using that brain, he got everybody out of trouble, in the most pleasant possible way. Bertie also imagined that Jeeves liked to fish for shrimps. Once, after a particularly brilliant piece of work, the Great Intellect returned to his seaside holiday. “I pity the poor shrimp that pits its meagre brain against you, Jeeves,” said Bertie. He added: “And I meant it.”

The various quotations I have made are all from memory, so I might have got a word or two wrong and annoyed the purist. I feel, though, boastfully, that I know Wodehouse’s books so well it is not worth the trouble of verifying passages.

This is just a little salute to someone who gave a great deal of pleasure to very many people and whose gifts were love and laughter.

December 12, 1987

Scruffy poet's good deed

Dorothy Day on WH Auden:
'Poets do look a bit unpressed, don't they?'

Wystan Hugh Auden, the major English poet who died in 1973, was a strange and fascinating character. I say "English" poet, for although he was a naturalised American for more than half his life and lived partly in Austria, where he died, his poetry seems to me to belong essentially to the English tradition, and his voice is English.

Auden's private life was not exemplary, on the whole, but one must not be pharisaical. He often showed an exemplary Christian charity and in his middle years he became a regular attendant at the Episcopalian (Anglican) Church in New York. While living in Austria he went often to Mass in the parish church of the village in which he lived.

My memories of Auden have recently been refreshed and my knowledge of him deepened by an excellent biography by Charles Osbourne called *WH Auden: The Life of a Poet*.

Auden could be erudite and complex, in his works and his thoughts. He could also be extremely coarse. An example of his complexity and Christian feeling was the title *Nones*, a book of poetry published in 1950 containing one of his greatest works, *In Praise of Limestone*. Not many realised the significance of the title, which had the double meaning of the daily office of the Church, said at the ninth hour, the canonical hour at which Christ hung on the cross and darkness covered the earth, and "nonce", most of the poems in the book being nonce-poems, or poems inspired by unrecurrent occasions.

Like many writers, Auden could work only in the mornings, and he had a fixed routine of rising at 6am and immediately going to his desk. In the middle years he wrote that he could never explain the feelings of depression and unease that crept over him about 3pm, making any form of writing difficult if not impossible, until he realised it was the canonical hour of Christ's crucifixion.

In his 20s Auden had what seemed to be a type of mystical experience, a feeling of "blissful communion" in a garden in Wales. It was not until he was about 35, though, that he started to take a serious interest in Christianity and to

resume the church-going of his childhood.

He described his “conversion” as the result of another experience. “Then, providentially – for the occupational disease of poets is frivolity – I was forced to know in person what it is like to feel oneself the prey of demonic powers, in both the Greek and the Christian sense, stripped of self-control and self-respect, behaving like a ham actor in a Strindberg play.” He does not explain further.

A good example of his Christian charity, his frequent anonymous gifts of large sums of money, occurred in New York. To picture the incident, it is necessary to understand that Auden was one of the worst-dressed prominent men of his time. He was variously described as looking like an unmade bed and a football stadium after a match. He held his trousers up with a piece of rope and, going out, he often wore slippers instead of shoes.

At the time Dorothy Day, the Catholic social activist, ran a shelter for derelicts in New York. She found herself in trouble with the law for infringing the fire laws and was fined \$250. The magistrate gave her a day to pay. The following day, as she left the house on her way to court, there was the usual group of ragged and needy men at the door awaiting the distribution of clothing, ran a report in the *New York Times*. From the midst of them a man as dishevelled and ragged as the rest stepped forward.

“I just read about your trouble,” the man said. “I want to help a little bit towards the fine. Here’s two-fifty.” Miss Day, elated at having what she thought was two dollars and 50 cents of the total, thanked her benefactor and hurried on her way to court. In the subway train she opened the envelope and found not only a cheque for the full amount, but that it was signed by one of the leading contemporary poets: WH Auden. “Poets do look a bit unpressed, don’t they?” she said to the newspaper reporter when she reported the incident.

Auden, up early as usual for his work, had read about Miss Day in the morning newspaper and had hurried over to the lower East Side of Manhattan to do what he thought ought to be done.

Auden is buried in the Catholic graveyard in the Austrian village of Kirchstetten, where he had been a member of the congregation for years, although never formally received into the Church.

February 12, 1989

Sin in good literature

*Dickens' Oliver Twist was responsible
for many children today not having to ask for more.*

Cardinal John Henry Newman, a 19th century convert from Anglicanism, had a way with words and often so neatly summed up a position and an attitude that it seems one could put it no other way. I was particularly struck by this the other day when I came across the following passage from his work *The Idea of a University* in which Newman expressed with absolute succinctness why it is virtually impossible to be purely a “Catholic writer” and why in fact there is no major writer who could accurately be so described:

“I say, from the nature of the case, if literature is to be made a study of human nature, you cannot have a Christian literature. It is a contradiction in term to attempt a sinless literature of sinful man. You must gather together something very great and high, something higher than any literature ever was; and when you have done so you will find that it is not literature at all.”

That does not mean of course that one can or should as a Catholic let one’s beliefs and convictions fall by the wayside when attempting a work of literature or any other artistic purpose, or that one should try to be totally uninfluenced by belief and consequent moral principles. Newman simply means, as he expresses with the greatest clarity, that one cannot make a sinless literature of sinful man.

There are any number of edifying books, written purely for the purpose of being edifying, some of which succeed in their purpose. The more abstract the edification though, less literary and, it must be confessed, often the more dull.

Charles Dickens was a great writer and many of his characters were far from admirable. Samuel Smiles was a very poor one and his *Tale of Self Help*, written with an eye to conscious (not to say smug) virtue are very dull. Dickens wrote with charity and with zest and with a full if sometimes humorous consciousness of the old Adam. Consequently his books had much practical effect in the reform of the poor laws, the workhouses, and the orphanages, for example. Who could forget Oliver Twist asking for more? That passage was responsible for many children today not having to ask for it.

Graham Greene, who quotes Newman with approval, says that he objects strongly to being called “a Catholic writer”, adding that many times he has been forced to say that he is not a Catholic writer, but a writer who happens to be a Catholic. Greene says that it was only after his *Brighton Rock*, published in 1937 (with its fascinating study of Pinky, a damned soul), peopled with Catholic characters, that he began to be thus described.

“Catholics began to treat some of my faults too kindly, as though I were a member of a clan and could not be disowned, while some non-Catholic critics seemed to consider that my faith gave me an unfair advantage in some way over my contemporaries. I had become a Catholic in 1926 and all my books, except one lamentable volume of verse at Oxford, had been written as a Catholic, but no one had noticed the faith to which I belonged before the publication of *Brighton Rock*. Even today some critics (and critics as a class are seldom more careful of their facts than journalists) refer to novels written after my conversion, making a distinction between the early and the later books.”

Greene and Evelyn Waugh are probably the best known novelists writing in English this century who belong or belonged to the Catholic faith. Both were converts and neither could have been accused of attempting “sinless stories of sinful man”. Both, in fact, were often sharply criticised, Waugh in particular for *Vile Bodies*, *Scoop* and *Black Mischief*, all works of a satirical nature, often very funny but in another way profoundly sad. Waugh was once attacked in the most intemperate terms in *The Tablet*, which would not happen today.

Greene fell foul even of his great friend Waugh for *A Burnt-out Case*, but the main attacks from a Catholic point of view were probably on *The Power and the Glory*, set in Mexico in which figured a “whiskey priest” and an upright communist. The priest proved both heroic and faithful, but that tended to be overlooked.

The proper study of mankind, in short, is man.

May 31, 1987

Smiling pope's famous letters

'Dear Dickens, I am a bishop who has been given the odd task of writing a letter to some eminent person once a month.'

I have vague recollection of some time ago reading a story by, I think, the polished English writer who called himself Saki, which hinged on the fact that the most anyone could remember about Queen Anne was that she is dead. This is not exactly the case with Pope John Paul I, but certainly little about him lingers in the popular mind, unfortunately.

There was ridiculous story that he was murdered as part of Vatican intrigue involved with financial scandals exposed as a fraudulent. It was a concocted scandal, but it is astonishing how the bad will linger in the memory. Shakespeare's Marc Antony said much the same in his funeral oration about his friend Julius Caesar.

The good that John Paul I did, though, was not interred with his bones. A book I have just read called *Illustrissimi*, published by Collins of London, shows him as an enchanting character who might well have made one of the great popes, distinguished by modesty and quiet humour, as well as a sort of broad genial look at life and culture.

As pope, Albino Luciani died of a heart attack after only 33 days in office. He was elected on August 26, 1978. In honour of his two predecessors, he took the name of John Paul. The present pope, of course, continued the practice.

Albino Luciani was born in 1912 in a small village near Venice, of which city he was to become patriarch. John XXIII (like John Paul I a former patriarch of Venice), who thought very highly of him, appointed the relatively young Father Luciani bishop of Vittorio Veneto in 1958. He was made a cardinal by Paul VI in 1973.

When Luciani was patriarch of Venice he wrote a series of articles in the form of letters to the famous, an astonishing variety that included St Bernard of Clairvaux, Charles Péguy, Goethe, GK Chesterton, King David, St Thérèse of Lisieux, St Bonaventure, St Luke, St Teresa of Avila, Petrarch, Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, and even Jesus Christ himself.

The collection, the title of which means “the most illustrious ones”, was published posthumously.

Cardinal Basil Hume, archbishop of Westminster, in his preface to the English edition of the book, says that during his 33 days of ministry, Pope John Paul I endeared himself to people, both in his few televised appearances to his audiences and in his words recorded in the press. Part at least of the sorrow aroused by his untimely death, writes the cardinal, was from a sense of personal deprivation that we had not more time to get to know and appreciate him.

People are left with unanswered questions about this pope, who in the words of the funeral oration “passed like a meteor which unexpectedly lights up the heavens and then disappears, leaving us amazed and astonished.”

These letters, originally articles in the Catholic newspaper *Messaggero di S. Antonio*, will fill part of the gap.

That to Charles Dickens begins: “Dear Dickens, I am a bishop who has been given the odd task of writing a letter to some eminent person once a month.”

That to Christ begins: “Dear Jesus, I have been criticised. ‘He’s a bishop and he’s cardinal,’ people have said. ‘He’s been writing letters to all kinds of people: to Mark Twain, to Péguy, to Cassella, to Penelope, to Dickens, to Marlowe, to Goldoni and heaven knows how many others. And not a line to Jesus Christ.’ I have a feeling that you seemed to worry more about the suffering sin produces in the sinner than the offence against God. When you gave them hope of forgiveness, you seemed to be saying: ‘You can’t imagine the joy your conversion gives me.’”

He writes: “You had a horror of useless words. ‘Let your speech be yes, yes; more that this is derived from evil. When you pray, do not use many words.’” (This divine injunction against verbosity is indeed a guide to good writing!)

The following passage in the cardinal’s letter is particularly cogent: “Today everyone asks for dialogue and more dialogue. I have counted the dialogues in your Gospel. There are 86; 37 with the disciples, 22 with other people, and 27 with your opponents. When John the Baptist sent from prison to ask where you were, you wasted no time in chat.”

Never, said the cardinal, had he been so dissatisfied with anything he had

written as with this letter.

Writing to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, he states that it is permissible for the artist to represent evil, but it must not be made beautiful, it must not encourage others to repeat and imitate it.

With his typical humour, he goes on: “In the Oedipus Rex of Sophocles the central theme is incest. This is described in crudely powerful language, but disapproval is so obvious from beginning to end, the punishments that fall on the guilty are so terrible, that the reader is left pretty unenthusiastic about incest when he has finished reading.”

In the same letter John Paul I disposes neatly of the old romantic idea that the man of genius is not obliged to meet standards of morality applicable to ordinary humanity. “Here is another idea that must be rejected: that the man of genius is a demigod – a star – somehow above ordinary mortals. You yourself [Goethe] expressed this thought, especially at the time in which you were studying Spinoza with Madame von Stein, and were seeking God in the ‘Great Whole’. You believed then that the intelligent man could, through rising higher and higher through culture, be gradually absorbed by God, melting into him and becoming a law unto himself. Today many people share this idea, at least in practice. This is wrong. Man’s destiny and possibilities are certainly great, but this greatness includes everyone, even the poorest, the most ignorant and unfortunate.”

Writing of *noblesse oblige*, he says: “If someone is gifted with artistic talent, and achieves fame and riches, this means he has a greater obligation than others to show his gratitude to God by leading a good life.”

To be great, he says, should not make us proud but should urge us instead towards modesty and virtue.

Writing to Christopher Marlowe, who was an atheist, Pope John Paul I says that he believes that about 450 years ago, the poet and dramatist denied the existence of the devil. “I’m very sorry about that,” he says. “With Charles Baudelaire, who like you was a poet and like you anything but a pious fellow, I think the devil’s most successful trick is to make man believe that he does not exist.”

In his letter to St Teresa of Avila, a holy and practical person, a mystic with feet firmly on the ground, he writes: “A woman, but one worth 20 men, who

left no method untried and managed to carry out splendid internal reforms and influence the whole Church with her work and writings. The first woman to be proclaimed a Doctor of the Church.”*

On the irritations of daily life, which must be overcome, he writes: “Plenty of people have disturbed me making slurping noises as they ate their soup.” He quotes Dante as calling God “the Lord of all courtesy”. Most of us can profit from that example.

March 26 & April 2, 1995

** The first female Doctor of the Church was joined in 1983 by St Catherine of Siena, and in 1997 by St Thérèse of Lisieux.*

The Interview

This is Owen Williams

In 1999, The Southern Cross broke with tradition and published a profile of a regular columnist. Over several cups of coffee in a beachfront café in

Anyone telling Owen Williams in 1983 that he would 16 years and 833 columns later still be compiling his weekly column for *The Southern Cross* without missing an issue, would have been thought of as mad by the columnist.

Yet that has been the reality: the column has survived through illness, change of countries and circumstances that would have discouraged most people from being “regular” with their copy.

When he started the column in 1983, Mr Williams had been living in France for four years. A visiting former *Cape Times* colleague, Edmund Honeyman, had suggested that he write a column from France for *The Southern Cross*.

“I wrote to Monsignor Donald de Beer [editor from 1974-86] and he suggested the subject of the column should be of Catholic interest with a light touch, which suited me. My frame of reference was the small French village of Villeveyrac, with a population of 2,000, virtually all Catholics,” said Mr Williams. In the 12 years he lived there he never spoke, thought or read in English – except when it was to compile his weekly column for this newspaper.

“I think *The Southern Cross* is extremely good; it strikes a balance – it does not pander to anyone and is very readable. I started reading it long before I started working on it.”

His first column on August 28, 1983 begins: “An immediate effect of living in a Catholic country – even if the surrounding structure is not very obvious, even if it is low-keyed, as it were – is that one feels at home.” One example he cited in the article was the French media’s publication of the name of the saint for each day of the year – this included communist newspaper *La Marseillaise*.

This quiet recognition of Catholicism in France was a theme that would be

fondly recalled in his column years after his return to South Africa in the early 1990s.

“I feel at home in Europe, especially the south of France, even though I was born in Cape Town. I have never returned to France, but were I to go, I would probably stay there.”

His parents were tolerant of religion, “but never set foot in a church.” His father was a Welsh socialist and his mother came from a long line of Methodist missionaries. Her great-grandfather, Barnabus Shore, founded the Metropolitan Methodist church that still stands on Greenmarket Square in central Cape Town. His ancestor was one of the first missionaries to work in the Eastern Cape who preceded the 1820 settlers.

Mr Williams said his parents had approved of his conversion to the Church. “I was always attracted to Roman Catholicism. I read a lot and my conversion was not a sudden thing,” he said. He was drawn to spiritual matters and his reading included the works of Indian mystics, but the novels of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh were also influential in his thinking.

“It is difficult to say what turned me to Catholicism. I thought of Christianity as a philosophic answer that was coherent and had no internal errors. If one accepted Christianity, then one had to be a Catholic.”

In 1970 he met Father Brian Gaybba, since laicised, at a wedding, and asked to be instructed by him. Within a month, thanks to a special dispensation from Cardinal Owen McCann, he was received into the Church.

“I had always been attracted by the ritual but I knew so little of it. Once I was part of the Church I was drawn to its glamour and remain so, but that is not a primary motivation for me.

“What is lacking in converts are the automatic Catholic responses. That is something bred in the bones of Catholics. But after nearly 30 years as a convert, you do develop the reflexes; but you won’t find many converts as ignorant as many cradle Catholics,” he said.

Once in the Church, he found its practices easy to follow. “I am a great believer in the communion of saints. I did not believe in the efficacy of prayer, but now, by trial and error, I am convinced it works.

“The more familiar I become as a Catholic the more I believe in it. Whether in the practical or philosophical sense, I learn something every day. I never get to the end of it.”

As a young adult Mr Williams had primed himself towards an academic life. Having studied for his master’s in philosophy and French at the University of Cape Town, he was preparing to complete a doctorate on James Joyce and the “stream of consciousness” style of writing that the Irish author had co-developed.

“I seemed to have been in university a long time when I ran into a friend of mine at the Café Royal in [Cape Town’s] Church Street who suggested I take up journalism.”

The friend spoke to the editor of the *Cape Times* and soon Mr Williams was hired. For four years he worked as a court reporter before going to Europe. He worked as a teacher in London and, then, for the British Council as adult teacher in France and Finland.

“I came back to South Africa mainly because my parents did not like the lifestyle I had led in Europe.”

For a year he studied medicine in Johannesburg before reverting to what is his natural state: as a journalist – this time as a columnist for the *Pretoria News*, for a year. He then returned to Cape Town to work as a sub-editor and a columnist for *Cape Times*.

In 1963 he became arts editor for the *Cape Argus*, a post that was created for him by the then editor. This gave him scope to examine and indulge his love of the arts: books, food, theatre and what he is justly famous for: films.

The respect that Mr Williams gained as a film critic was illustrated when he called for the reappraisal of a ground-breaking film, Federico Fellini’s *8^{1/2}*, that was panned by a *Cape Argus* reviewer while he had been on holiday. His subsequent favourable and incisive critique of the film lengthened its run by six weeks – an achievement few film critics can claim.

The original *King Kong* was the first film he can recall seeing as a child. But he rates *Casablanca* as the most entertaining film of all time and Jean Renoir’s anti-war film *Le Grand Illusion* as the greatest film ever made.

His work as a journalist has been taken up by leading newspapers in England and Germany.

The subjects of his columns in *The Southern Cross* have been drawn from the cinema, his wide range of reading, his colourful past and his experiences as a Catholic.

A more recent column was inspired by a short snippet heard on the radio which he developed into a full column on how the music of the late Bing Crosby was being used in American shopping malls to deter teenagers from hanging about causing mischief.

“I once did a column, from France, looking disapprovingly at pornography and got a strong response from readers.” A column on Catholic humour earned him a big reaction from *Southern Cross* readers. “I received envelopes and envelopes of jokes and people at Mass would come over to me with their Catholic jokes,” he said.

Also popular was his series on his visits to Lourdes and the Holy Land.

Another column he wrote, also from France, received a lot of complaints from *Southern Cross* readers as it implied that it was un-Catholic to complain. “That received a hostile reaction, including from some nuns,” he said.

“Rarely do I have anything in mind when it comes to writing the column – but the subjects seem to come.”

Long may they continue to do so.

August 29, 1999

- Abbé Pierre Groues 126
Adams, Keith 9
Adams, Roger 163
Agca, Mehmet Ali 115
Agnellini, Giuseppe 158
Aliès, Fr Albert 281
Allen, Woody 195
Aquinas, St Thomas 160
Arletty 224
Auden, WH 305
Augustine of Hippo, St 160,202
Autant-Lara, Claude 224
Aycough, John 202
- Babrow, Louis 161
Barrault, Jean-Louis 224
Barrie, John 276
Bates, Kathy 271
Baudelaire, Charles Pierre 151,311
Baumel, Fr Jean 55,60,117,155,300
Becket, St Thomas 218,264
Beethoven, Ludwig von 135
Belloc, Hilaire 202
Bergman, Ingrid 218
Bergudo, Rabbi Yehouda 82
Bernadette, St 11,217,231,253
Bernanos, George 102
Bernard of Clairvaux, St 252,309
Bernstein, Carl 182
Bidandi, Fred 40
Blanchet, Cate 107
Bliss, Pat 197
Bolt, Robert 217
Bommarito, Bp Luige 232
Bonaventure, St 309
Bonnaire, Sandrine 102
Boudard, Alphonse 151
Bouquet, Charles 169
Bowie, David 98
Bradburne, John 121
Brando, Marlon 91, 218, 297
Brigstocke, Celia 121
Bruce, Nigel 262
Burton, Richard 218
Byron, Lord George Gordon 103
- Cacciari, Massimo 158
Cage, Nicholas 99,219
Cagney, James 211
Calvo, Sr Rosa Maria 227
Campbell, Roy 249
Carew, Sr Dympna 189
Carné, Marcel 224
Carosin, Audrey 164
Carroll, Lewis 112, 211
Carroll, Madelaine 208
Campion, St Edmund 108
Capra, Frank 99,211,218-220,223
Catherine of Siena, St 312
Cavalier, Alain 95,105,209
Chaplin, Charles 219
- Chesterton, GK 17,214
Cher 219
Ciriolli, Delizia 231
Clemenceau, Georges 150
Clift, Montgomery 208
Cockburn, Claud 17
Colbert, Claudette 220,223
Colette, Sidonie-Gabrielle 34,151
Columbus, Chris 112
Connery, Sean 208
Congar, Fr Yves 96
Connor, Fr Bernard 10
Cooper, Gary 112,211,218,222,224
Coppola, Francis Ford 104
Coward, Noël 223
Cresson, Edith 285
Crichton, JP 197
Crosby, Bing 25,107,211,317
Cross, Patricia 175
Cukor, George 224
Curtis, Tony 220
Crystal, David 122
- D'Oliveira, Basil 21
David, King 309
Dafoe, Willem 98
Dante Alighieri 87,275,312
Davies, VG 43
Davis, Bette 108
Day, Dorothy 306
De Beer, Mgr Donald 10,44,314
De Beauvoir, Simone 245
De Foucauld, Charles 96
De Gaulle, Charles 78,123
De Muret, St Etienne 234
Decourtray, Archbishop Albert 82
Delmas, Fr François 76
DeMille, Cecil B 95
Depardieu, Gerard 102
Dickens, Charles 169,309,310
Dobrée, Bonamy 264
Donnelly, Eugene 9,44
Dostoevsky, Fyodor 151,271,276
Dove, Fr John 122
Doyle, Arthur Conan 261
Dreyer, Carl 218
Dumas, Marguerite 151
Durante, Jimmy 211
Duval, Abp Leon-Etienne 123
Duvivier, Julien 224
- Eastwood, Clint 222
Economou, Alex 314
Einstein, Albert 24
Elcock, Howard 262
Eliot, TS 263
Elizabeth I, Queen 108
Eloi, St 234
- Faber, Geoffrey 263
Fabre-Colbert, Henri 69

- Fabrizi, Aldo 210
 Fellini, Federico 316
 Fields, WC 220
 Flynn, Errol 108
 Fonda, Henry 222
 Ford, John 221,222
 Francis of Assisi, St 29,209,252
 Francis Xavier, St 92,95
 Fréche, Jacques 153
 Fresnay, Pierre 216
 Freud, Sigmund 135
 Frossard, André 119
 Frossard, Ludovic Oscar 120
- Gabin, Jean 216,224
 Gable, Clark 220,223
 Gainsborough, Serge 151
 Garbo, Greta 224
 Garland, Judy 112
 Gaybba, Brian 315
 Genet, Jean 151
 Germain, St 76
 Gielgud, John 108
 Gilbert, A 262
 Gilbert & Sullivan 203
 Giraudeau, Bernard 59
 Giotto di Bondone 164
 Godard, Jean-Luc 93,99
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von 311
 Golding, William 267
 Goldoni, Carlo 310
 Grant, Cary 99,219,220,224
 Greene, Graham 17,29,105,267,273,308,315
 Green, Julien 30
 Guareschi, Giovanni 196,281
 Guinness, Alec 213
- Hardiman, Sr Aine 20
 Harding, Ann 224
 Hardy, Oliver 219
 Harkin, Sr Clare 20
 Harris, Ed 91
 Harris, Richard 112
 Harris, Rivka 38
 Hathaway, Henry 224
 Havel, Vaclav 133,236
 Hawks, Howard 219,220
 Hedren, Tippi 208
 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 111
 Hemingway, Ernest 9,212,235,268
 Henry, Abp Lawrence 39
 Hepburn, Katharine 220,224
 Hernu, Charles 282
 Hershey, Barbara 98
 Heston, Charlton 217
 Herx, Henry 220,223
 Hickey, Sr Genevieve 19
 Hingley, Ronald 182
 Hitchcock, Alfred 207
 Hitchner, AE 212
 Hitler, Adolf 17,23,182,204,270
- Hochhut, Rolf 23
 Hoffman, Dustin 219
 Holden, William 222
 Honeyman, Edmund 9,314
 Honoré, St 280
 Hopkins, Gerald Manley 122
 Housman, AE 275
 Howard, Trevor 224
 Howse, Eric 145
 Hugget, Richard 199
 Hugo, Victor 35
 Hume, Card Basil 310
 Hurley, Abp Denis 20
 Huston, Walter 99
 Huxley, Aldous 269
- Irving, Henry 103
 Isherwood, Christopher 269
- Jackson, Peter 110
 Jacobs, Bp Sam 115
 Jesus Christ
 13,35,55,82,92,97,134,151,154,158,163,168,169,178,
 192,236,242,252,255,269,310
- Jewison, Barry 219
 Joan of Arc, St 11,153,217,218,266
 John of the Cross, St 92,264
 John XXIII, Pope 197,204,309
 John Paul I, Pope 309-312
 John Paul II, Pope 26,46,67,95,115,123,160,181,191,
 204,213,255,309
- Johnson, Celia 224
 Jordan, Neil 104
 Joseph, St 68,287,293
 Joyce, James 200,266,316
 Jung, Carl Gustav 160
- Kafka, Franz 133
 Karas, Anton 135
 Karloff, Boris 46,104
 Kazan, Elia 91
 Kazantzakis, Nikos 98
 Keaton, Buster 219
 Keitel, Harvey 98
 Kelly, Grace 208
 Keynes, Meynard 265
 Kierkegaard, Soren 264
 King, Stephen 271
 Knox, Mgr Ronald 202
 Kowalski, Serge 283
 Kubrick, Stanley 220
- Landau, Julia 39
 Largey, Sr Giuseppe 143
 Laughton, Charles 32
 Laurel, Stan 219
 Le Crosnier, Bishop 82
 Le Pen, Jean-Marie 80,81
 Lee, Christopher 104
 Lee, Hermione 265
 Lee, John 199

Lefebvre, Abp Marcel 81,98
Lemmon, Jack 220
Leo XIII, Pope 203
Leonard, St 236
Leone, Sergio 222
Levin, Bernard 241
Lorre, Peter 208
Louis IX, King 11,250
Lourens, Leonard 196
Lugosi, Bela 103
Luke, St 309
Lustiger, Card. Jean-Marie 74,82,98,185
Lynch, Mgr Cornelius 196

Mackintosh, Cameron 35
Malden, Karl 92
Mâle, Emile 258
Malou, Mol 80
Malpeli, Daniel 41
Mandela, Nelson 19,39
Mao Tse-Tsung 93
Marchais, Georges 192
Marlowe, Christopher 311
Marques, Gabriel Garcia 267
Martial, St 234
Marty, Card. François 186
Marvin, Lee 222,297
Mary, Blessed Virgin 56,59,93,108,152,156,176,184,
196,231,247,253,285,293

Marx Brothers 171,219
Marx, Groucho 195
Matthews, James 40
McCann, Card. Owen 10,20,44,191,315
McCrae, Joel 220
Meir, Golda 24
Messiaen, Oliver 29
Messori, Vittorio 158
Michelangelo Buonarroti 234
Milestone, Lewis 216
Mitchum, Robert 32
Mitterand, François 40,153
Monroe, Marilyn 220
Montand, Yves 287
More, St Thomas 92,217
Morrison, Jim 34
Mouchet, Catherine 96
Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus 135
Murnau, FW 104
Murphy, Robert 204

Napoleon Bonaparte 188
Neame, Ronald 223
Newman, Card John Henry 273,307
Nicholas of Myra, St 178
Norton, Molly 123

O'Brien, Pat 107,211,215
O'Flaherty, Mgr Hugh 23
O'Sullivan, Sr Marion 19
O'Toole, Peter 218
Occam, William 261

Oddi, Card. Silvo 158
Osbourne, Charles 305
Ozawa, Seija 30

Paget, Sydney 262
Paltrow, Gwynneth 107
Pan y Agja, Don Juan Carlos 227
Paparemborde, Robert 71
Pascal, Blaise 252,261,264
Pasolini, Pier Paolo 94,95,151,209
Pasteur, Louis 150
Paul, St 119,144
Paul VI, Pope 237,273,309
Peck, Gregory 24
Peckinpah, Sam 222
Péguy, Charles 105,155,309
Pendarriès, Gilles 282
Penn, Sean 105
Perrault, Charles 112
Petraarch 309
Philipe, Gérard 224
Phillips, Fr Gene 207
Piaf, Edith 151
Pialat, Maurice 101
Pierre, Abbé 126
Pilgram, Anton 136
Pius IX, Pope
Pius X, Pope 203
Pius XI, Pope 92,204
Pius XII, Pope 23,204,213
Plasse, Charles (Papy) 57,125,287,300
Plasse, Suzanne 300
Poe, Edgar Allen 271
Poitier, Sydney 242
Polanski, Roman 104
Politi, Carlo 182
Potin, Jean 285
Presle, Micheline 224
Prejean, Sr Helen 105
Pugge (of *The Times*) 18

Rathbone, Basil 262
Read, Herbert 264
Reed, Carol 135
Remarque, Erich-Maria 216
Renard, Jules 151
Renoir, Jean 216,316
Révial, Marthe 296
Riobé, Bp Guy-Marie 28
Rimbaud, Arthur 151
Rives, Jean-Pierre 71
Robbins, Tim 106
Rohmer, Erich 85
Rossellini, Roberto 209
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 120
Rowling JK 111
Runyan, Damon 210,293
Russell, Rosalind 219
Ryan, Meg 9
Rydon, John 288

- Salinger, JD 275
 Saki 309
 Sarandon, Susan 105
 Sarrazin, Albertine 151
 Sartre, Jean-Paul 123,245
 Scanlan, Fr Michael 115
 Schreck, Max 104
 Schulberg, Budd 92
 Schuster, Leon 109
 Scofield, Paul 218
 Scorsese, Martin 97
 Scott, Sir Walter 309
 Sellers, Peter 220
 Servais, Norman 121
 Shackleton, Michael 10,44
 Shakespeare, William 46,151,159,160,299,309
 Shaw, George Bernard 9,153
 Shaw, Russell 276
 Shelley, Mary (Godwin) 46,103
 Shore, Barnabus 315
 Silberberg, Rod 100
 Siméon, Marie-Rose 183
 Simmermacher, Günther 10,44,207,219,221,223
 Simpson, William C 23
 Sinatra, Frank 91,217
 Smiles, samuel 307
 Soubirous, St Bernadette (*see Bernadette*)
 Speight, Robert 265
 Spielberg, Stephen 215,227
 Stack, Fr Tom 19
 Stalin, Joseph 181
 Stanton, Harry Dean 97
 Steiger, Rod 91
 Stephen, Leslie 265
 Stern, Henry 41
 Stewart, James 211,218,220,224
 Stiffer, Adalbert 136
 Stoker, Bram 33,103
 Strachey, Lytton 265
 Stubbs, Fr Louis 44
 Sturges, Preston 220
 Sturgess, John 222
 Sullivan, Fr Brendan 187
 Swift, Jonathan 120

 Tarantino, Tommaso 157
 Tartier, Rev Jean 82
 Tavernier, Bertrand 216
 Taylor, Robert 224
 Teresa of Avila, St 311
 Thatcher, Margaret 31
 Thérèse of Lisieux, St 11,95,152,213,217,256,312
 Thomas, Humphrey 288
 Thomas, Parnell 91
 Toerien, Peter 35
 Toirin, Fr 55
 Tolkien, JRR 109,111
 Torretton, Philippe 216
 Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri 251
 Tracy, Spencer 107,211,222,224
 Tramma, Bp Umberto 158

 Travers, Henry 99,218
 Truffaut, François 208
 Tshikaba, Sr Terese 227
 Twain, Mark 310

 Valerie the Good, St 234
 Veidt, Conrad 99
 Verlaine, Paul 151
 Vidal, Gore 269
 Vié, Jean 49
 Vilnet, Bp Jean 81,186
 Virgin Mary (*see Mary, Blessed Virgin*)
 Volstedt, Betty & Eugene 144
 Voltaire 120,202
 Von Stroheim, Erich 216
 Vorster, BJ 21
 Vratslav, Margaret 134

 Waugh, Evelyn 78,108,202,257,303,308,315
 Wayne, John 221
 Welles, Orson 91,135
 Wenders, Wim 100
 Whale, James 104
 Whitman, Walt 140
 Wilde, Oscar 151
 Wilder, Billy 220
 Williams, Marie-Thérèse 61,177,256,289,293
 Williams, Michael 45,117
 Wodehouse, PG 12,78,110,202,303
 Woolf, Leonard 265
 Woolf, Virginia 264,265
 Wynne, Owen 21
 Wyszynski, Card. Stefan 204

 Zimmerman, Maurice 164
 Zinnemann, Fed 221



Owen Williams was born in Cape Town in 1924, and worked as a journalist since the 1950s. A former arts editor at the *Cape Argus* and columnist at the *Pretoria News*, he lived and worked in South Africa, France, England and Finland. The winner of the prestigious Pringle Award and the Johann Nell Award for Services to Theatre he wrote his popular weekly column for *The Southern Cross* from 1983 until his death in July 2007 in Cape Town.

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