



President praised for official card showing Virgin Mary breastfeeding the infant Jesus

President Michael D Higgins has won widespread praise for his official festive greeting which will feature the Virgin Mary breastfeeding the infant Jesus.

Irish Independent - The image of 'Madonna of the Green Cushion' will be sent to hundreds of heads of states and diplomats around the world at the beginning of next week.

"It's a different card for a different President", said a spokesperson for President Higgins.

"The image speaks for itself, and we've been delighted by the response it has received so far."

A copy of the famous Madonna by Italian painter Andrea Solario was presented to the President and his wife Sabina by new mother Monika Wocial-Finke during an audience at Áras an Uachtaráin in early October.

Ms Wocial-Finke was one of a hundred breastfeeding mothers invited to Mr Higgins' home to celebrate 'Breastfeeding Week'.

The 16th century painting is widely considered to be a powerful symbol of care and love.

It currently resides in the Denon wing of the Louvre Museum in Paris.

The decision to feature a breastfeeding mother on his official presidential greetings card has won Mr Higgins many supporters online.

Moments after the card's official release, many Irish users said it was "fantastic" and "great" to see breastfeeding "being normalised".

"Great to see such a beautiful message being sent out to the world," said one Facebook user.

While one wrote: "Behind Michael D all the way on this one. Love it!"

Across Twitter the comments were equally supportive, with one user saying: "How anyone finds this controversial or the like is beyond me. Nice to see a breast being used for its intended purpose for a change."

"Only an Irishman could send out a picture of Jesus with ginger hair! Fair play to Michael D," joked another.

Snow Patrol trio to sing at Bangor Abbey for local charities

Snow Patrol intend to release a new album next year, but in the meantime, lead singer Gary Lightbody has been flexing his solo muscles by undertaking a series of (relatively intimate) solo shows.

Following gigs in the US , Lightbody returns home for two solo acoustic performances, the tickets for which sold out within minutes. All proceeds from the Wednesday event (at Bangor Abbey) will be donated to the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice, the Church of Ireland Bishop's Appeal (Ebola Crisis), and Bangor Abbey Fabric Fund. For this gig, also, he will be joined by Snow Patrol's Nathan Connolly and band associate, Iain Archer.

Advent Lantern festival marks end of Broughshane parish's anniversary year

St Patrick's Church, Broughshane, concluded its 250th Anniversary Year with an Advent Service – 'Christ the Light in the Community.'

The service was conducted by The Very Rev John Bond, Dean of Connor, and the Rev Adrian Halligan, Curate. The lessons were read by the Bishop of Connor, the Rt Rev Alan Abernethy and the Mayor of Mid & East Antrim, Councillor Billy Ashe.

At the end of the service a lantern was carried out of the church followed by children, young

people and the congregation carrying their prayer lanterns. These were then displayed in the shape of a Cross in the church car park.

Families were then invited to take a lantern home and include it in their Christmas decorations. The proceeds were given to Macmillan Cancer and the Lighthouse, Ballymena.

West Cork youth explore Dublin

In the early hours of a very wet Saturday morning, 30 young people and 6 leaders boarded a bus in West Cork heading for Dublin.

On arrival the group visited St Patrick's Cathedral, the National Cathedral of the Church of Ireland, where some of them were fortunate enough to witness a group being taught the art of bell ringing in the Tower.

Some of the group toured Dublin on the open top Viking Tour Bus and, despite pouring rain, thoroughly enjoyed themselves with an expert tour guide and a dip in the canal. The rest of the group headed to the Aviva Stadium where a guide showed them around the grounds and

gave a talk about the history and background of the Stadium.

After Christmas Shopping in Dundrum the group took part in a Church Service in Clontarf. The Rev Canon Patrick Bamber from Calry in Sligo was the guest speaker. Everyone enjoyed pizza and tray bake treats before playing party games and taking part in a disco.

Before returning to West Cork on Sunday morning the group attended Morning Service in Clontarf. The weekend was arranged by Amy McCrea with help from the Rev Lesley Robinson and the parishioners of Clontarf.

Mark Marx: 'Healing people, it is what Lord has called me to do'

The founder of a healing ministry in Coleraine admits that many people will find testimonies of miracles performed through the power of prayer unbelievable.

Belfast Telegraph - But Mark Marx of Healing on the Streets (HOTS) said: "It is what the Lord calls me to do."

He stresses that the prayer team, which has met every Saturday for 10 years outside Coleraine Town Hall, does not make any promises or give any guarantees.

"Jesus heals - we don't. We just pray our best prayers. Not everyone gets healed, but we feel that more people are healed than not," he said.

"We only know of those who say at the time that they have been cured or that their condition has been improved, or those who come back to tell us that.

"We do not have any definitive numbers, but I believe that hundreds of people have been cured over the years of our ministry."

The church was highlighted this week when the mother of a Donaghadee teenager suffering from cancer described how he got out of his wheelchair and danced after attending a prayer session.

Kim Martin said Mark had noticed that one of her son Joshua's legs was shorter than the other, and that when the team prayed with him the leg "grew in front of our eyes".

Kim added: "I'm so glad my mum was there because she is the most cynical person you could meet and I'm not sure anybody would have believed me if I had been there on my own."

Mark elaborated: "I saw that spiritually there was a fog over his life and a lifelessness behind his eyes.

"I told him that I believed there would be a sign of what God could do in healing him of his cancer.

"He had complained of a pain going from his back into his leg, and as we began to pray his leg began to lengthen, the fog over him lifted and the life returned to his eyes.

"I knew at that moment that God had touched him.

"We never say that people have been cured. That is up to them to say. What I know is that he got out of his wheelchair. There was a spring in his step and he walked away pushing his wheelchair."

Mark founded the HOTS ministry in Coleraine at Easter in 2005 and spends much of his time travelling the world spreading his message to other churches.

It is a far cry from his earlier life. Born in South Africa 58 years ago, he came to England with his father when he was just three after his parents separated.

At university he graduated in graphic design, but he later specialised as a high-end interior designer working for rich London families.

"I was decorating the homes of these very wealthy people and really did enjoy it," he said. "It was a way of releasing my creativity."

After his father died when Mark was 30, he admits that his world crumbled.

Then a friend he had met at art college suggested to him that he came along to a service in an Elim church in Ilford.

More at -

<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/mark-marx-healing-people-it-is-what-lord-has-called-me-to-do-34300119.html>

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<http://www.newsletter.co.uk/fresh-start-spare-a-thought-for-victims-and-the-survivors-1-7121713>

Lord Kilclooney - John Taylor - interview including churches and education - Belfast Telegraph

<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/lord-kilclooney-im-impressed-by-martin-mcguinness-development-34302140.html>

Micheál Martin: Who does Gerry Adams think he is coddling? - Irish Examiner

<http://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/micheal-martin-who-does-gerry-adams-think-he-is-coddling-712462.html>

SF leader's credibility in tatters over Murphy case - Irish Examiner

<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/politics/sf-leaders-credibility-in-tatters-over-murphy-case-34302957.html>

Loyalist bonfire funding 'poses fraud risk' report finds - Irish News

http://www.irishnews.com/news/2015/12/21/news/loyalist-bonfire-funding-poses-fraud-risk-report-finds-359725/?mc_cid=6af87638b1&mc_eid=23f2f80c40

Just eight schools divested of church patronage - Irish Examiner

On entering office former education minister Ruairi Quinn made it one of his top priorities to introduce plurality into a **church**-dominated education ...

<http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/just-eight-schools-divested-of-church-patronage-372593.html>

Church of Scotland Moderator's Christmas message

http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news_and_events/news/recent/a_christmas_message_f

Mail Online

The Archbishop of Canterbury has expressed solidarity with British Muslims who have felt pressured to defend themselves in the wake of recent terror attacks. Justin Welby also called on Christians to take the "risk of kindness" and engage with people whom others seem to be avoiding. Posting the message on his Facebook page, the Archbishop said the year had been hard for many people in the country. "I think too of the fear among Jewish communities, and among Sikhs, Hindus and those of other faiths."

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-3368036/Archbishop-Canterbury-supports-Muslim-brothers-sisters.html>

Exp/Tel

Speculation that HM The Queen's Christmas Day message will focus on "the importance of Christianity", in what is being seen by some commentators as a direct response to this year's extremist terror attacks. The former Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali is quoted.

<http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/628329/After-year-of-jihadi-terror-Queen-s-Christmas-Day-speech-to-focus-on-Christianity>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/queen-elizabeth-II/12060481/The-Queens-speech-is-set-to-be-the-most-overtly-Christian-yet.html>

BBC

The killing of minorities by Islamic State should be recognised as genocide, more than 60 parliamentarians have said in a letter to the Prime Minister. They urge David Cameron to use his influence to reach an agreement with the UN that the term genocide be used. IS has been systematically killing minority groups including Iraqi and Syrian Christians and Yazidis, it said.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35147645>

BBC

Benefit mistakes and delays are causing families to go hungry and putting homes at risk, a group of MPs has warned. A focus on reducing benefit overpayments has not been matched with tackling underpayments, the Work and Pensions Select Committee said. Fraud and error within the benefits system is estimated to cost up to £4.5bn a year - about 3% of welfare spending. The government said it had made "huge improvements" and was working to revolutionise the payments system.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35145845>

Mail

Reports on an online Advent Calendar produced by EU bureaucrats, which includes information about food and toy safety labelling. It claims to offer 'an informative and sometimes amusing take on how the EU works'. Nicky Gumbel is quoted saying the calendar was part of the trend of ignoring the true meaning of Christmas.

[http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3368204/EU-s-Christmas-without-Christ-Bureaucrats-attacked-health-safety-advent-calendar-featuring-rules-mince-pies-labels-toy-safety.html?](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3368204/EU-s-Christmas-without-Christ-Bureaucrats-attacked-health-safety-advent-calendar-featuring-rules-mince-pies-labels-toy-safety.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490)

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BBC

The bells of St Mary's Ilkeston, Derbyshire have been restored after a five-year appeal, which raised £30,000 to for repairs to eight 105-year-old bells. The Bishop of Derby rededicated the peel at a service on Sunday.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-35145188>

Comment

Mail: George Pitcher says Britain's economic prosperity should be celebrated – if it's enjoyed by all of us not just a rich elite.

[http://www.dailymail.co.uk/money/comment/article-3368076/Britain-s-economic-prosperity-celebrated-s-enjoyed-not-just-rich-elite-says-Reverend-George-Pitcher.html?](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/money/comment/article-3368076/Britain-s-economic-prosperity-celebrated-s-enjoyed-not-just-rich-elite-says-Reverend-George-Pitcher.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490)

[ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/money/comment/article-3368076/Britain-s-economic-prosperity-celebrated-s-enjoyed-not-just-rich-elite-says-Reverend-George-Pitcher.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490)

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