

Holy Cross Retreat

Letter 305

12th December, 2025



Christmas hampers



We delivered a good number of hampers to the Vinnies and several more to the Sacred Heart mission in St Kilda, where Sr Karen CP ministers. The mission would be grateful for any further hampers, so please donate if you are able. Thank you. Karen wanted to express her thanks....

A Message of Gratitude from Our Community to Yours



From our community at Sacred Heart Mission, both workers and those doing it tough, we extend our heartfelt gratitude for the generous Christmas hampers you have gifted.

Each year, as the season draws near, we become deeply aware of how quickly life can change. One piece of unexpected news, one lost job, a rental ending, a family bereavement, or simply the growing pressures of daily life can place someone on the margins. For many, this time of year brings not abundance but uncertainty, and crisis supports become scarce just as the need grows.

Your hampers will be given directly to individuals who find themselves in these fragile vulnerable moments. They will be offered as signs of hope, relief, and dignity. While the familiar image of Christmas is families gathered around tables heavy with food, your gifts



allow a small reflection of that warmth to be carried in a hamper bag, a reminder that the wider community sees them, cares for them, and holds them in the embrace of the season's love.



Thank you for your generosity, for your faith in what we do, and for giving us the privilege of passing these gifts on, on your behalf. Your kindness helps ensure that no one feels forgotten at Christmas time. From our community to yours, may peace and blessings be upon you this season. Thank you.

Karen

Christmas Masses

The community has decided to hold Christmas Eve Carols and Mass in the Holy Cross chapel, as we did last year. It is a difficult decision because some people prefer outdoors (especially for children) while others prefer inside (especially because it feels safer for them underfoot). Last year we held it indoors and the atmosphere was wonderful, We had a spill-over room where maybe 70 or 80 people sat comfortably, close to the chapel, and joined in via live streaming. We will do that again this year.

A benefit of having Christmas Carols and Mass indoors is that we do not need to hire sound equipment (\$500) nor provide words for the Carols on paper. We do not need to carry, place and clean 250 seats nor stack and return them afterwards. The musicians can set up easily out of the afternoon sun, and taking this option, we do not need to second guess the weather. We welcome you to join us if you can.

On Christmas Eve: Carols will begin at 7.00pm and Mass at 7.30pm

On Christmas Day: Mass will be at 10.00am.

Who is doing what

Jerome spent five days in hospital but returned on Monday looking and feeling much better. One day later he was back for most of the day, then back home again.

Chris is back from his retreat with the Little Sisters of the Poor, in Sydney he has a number of commitments until he begins holidays on Boxing Day.

Erick is grateful for having completed his studies (Masters in Counselling) and feels like many people who retire say,, “how did I find time to meet all the various commitments”. Erick will celebrate a Christmas Day Mass for the African community in Melton. Unfortunately he’s had a heavy cold for a week.

JD will continue studying through the traditional holiday period and will be in Adelaide this weekend for the ordination of **Vinh**.

Mike is also attending the ordination in Adelaide and then staying on until December 29th to assist in Glen Osmond parish.

Tri participated in the Passionist Retreat Team end of year retreat in Brisbane and returned on Monday. He too, is attending the ordination in Adelaide.

Dennis and Mary Cogle

You will notice Mary and Dennis Cogle on the prayer list. They have not wanted to bother people but things are more serious now. At the present time, Mary is in the Austin hospital and Dennis is in Bua across the road from Holy Cross. It is hoped Mary can join Dennis soon. They are official benefactors of the Passionist Congregation.

Chain saw gang



Quite a large tree fell in the grounds two weeks ago. I asked Maurice Molan after Mass last Sunday if he thought he could cut up some of it. Maurice in typically enthusiastic fashion replied “Some of it? We’ll do all of it”. Sure enough early that afternoon he, Andrew Concannon and John Hogan, not only cut up the tree, but removed the timber from the property. There is just a small pile of branches and leaves remaining. I’m glad his speciality is radiology – if he were to be involved in amputations, I’m sure I wouldn’t want to be the patient!

Come Away Days



Unfortunately, we overlooked to take a photo on Monday of the team that led the five ‘Come Away’ reflection days throughout the year. Paola is missing from the photo here that was taken on a previous occasion. It shows Lien Thai and Kay Lewis (back) and Pam Storey and Sr Brigid CP (front). Each day included a Mass and Anointing which JD, Mike and myself offered.

The team gathered for an end of year review and date planning for 2026. The attendance throughout 2025 was very good and the feedback was that the days were very much appreciated. It is difficult to determine days and dates because no regular day suits everyone. The team has agreed to offer four days (on Wednesdays) in 2026. The dates are: March 25th, June 24th, September 16th and November 25th

Pam Storey interview

At the last moment last week, Erick included in the Newsletter, the link to an Advent theme video with Pam, on ‘*Vulnerability and Peace*’. Tri acted as interviewer. We are grateful for Pam, who has been a long time Passionist Companion and special associate of Holy Cross community. She is no stranger to suffering and has been seriously unwell for many months. This interview is a most valuable reflection. The link is: <https://youtu.be/OExDEkcAlyA>

Alida Valmorbida interview

Erick acted as interviewer with Alida who accepted the invitation to share her reflections on ‘*Vulnerability after Loss*’. Her sharing of her loving husband Maurice is both touching and inspirational, as is her sharing on how she has managed his loss, and her grief, and has found peace. The link for the interview is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPlcgoGxz78>

Eggs

For those who collect eggs every second Monday, Dominic will take orders and be here this coming Monday (December 15th). The next delivery will be on January 19th.

Coffee Cart Day



The next **Coffee Cart Day** will be on Sunday December 21st after 10.00am Mass. We want to take this opportunity to invite people after Mass to view the renovated Tavern, and the renovated BBQ area, so please allow a bit of extra time to do this on that day.

Those who have passed



We celebrated the funeral of **Brian Gesell** on Wednesday this week. Brian was a gentle and calm man who flew planes of every sort from a Tiger Moth to a Boeing 767. He was the first pilot to fly a 767 into Australia in September 1983. As a commercial pilot he experienced a profound sense of responsibility for every single passenger, and expressed this a variety of ways. There was an excellent attendance at his funeral. We assure Sue, his wife of 55 years of our love and support.



Early on Monday morning December 8th, **Peter Owen** died peacefully after a long period of time in Bupa across the road from us. Like Brian, Peter was a gentle man and like Brian he suffered from dementia, and needed to be in residential care. Prior to his illness, Peter was a leader of the 'Come Away' retreat programmes held at Holy Cross. When I visited Peter on Sunday afternoon, Bernadette said that earlier, Brian had said "Jesus is coming today". Indeed, Jesus did come to take him home within a few hours. We assure Bernadette, his wife of 60 years of our love and support. His funeral will be held at Holy Cross next Wednesday, December 17th at 10.30am.



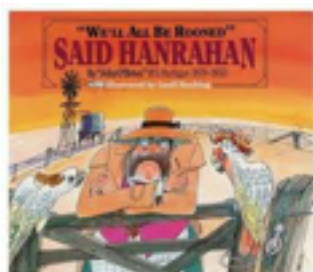
On Friday December 5th, **Noel Smyth** passed away quietly after his battle with MND. Noel has served as a medical doctor for 50 years and established the practice now known as Eastbrooke, back in 1984. At the time of his retirement four years ago, he expressed his amazement that his patient visits would have filled the MCG three times. His family had long supported the Passionists – and not because they owned the Templestowe hotel! Noel cared for many of our professed and student members over many years. His funeral will be held at St Patrick's cathedral on Monday 15th December at 10.30am. This is where Noel was married to Lynda who died several years ago. The cathedral was their local parish. Noel is survived by his second wife, Mary-Lynn and his daughter, Simone.

Advent – Joy

Some people seem to be happy by nature. Even when they go through sickness or hardship, they smile and remain positive. Some other people always seem to be unhappy. They complain and only see the negative side of any situation.



A young priest always preached sermons about 'doom and gloom'. His parish priest asked him to preach on the following Sunday about St. Joseph and he said to the young priest, *"Remember, St Joseph was a cheerful man"*. When the Sunday came, the young priest spoke about St Joseph. He reminded people that Joseph had been a carpenter. He said many people in those times died from sickness and disease, so St Joseph would have had to make a lot of coffins!



For some people, even when good things happen to them, they say, "Ah yes, but the good times won't last!" There is a famous Australian poem written by Mons Patrick Hartigan under the pseudonym John O'Brien, called 'Said Hanrahan'. It traces the fear of a farmer named Hanrahan, who says that unless rain comes soon, everyone in the district will face financial ruin. We'll all be rooned (ruined)" said Hanrahan!.

Rain eventually comes, and then the Hanrahan complains that if the rain doesn't stop there will be floods and everyone will face financial ruin! A few weeks after the rain stops, Hanrahan looks at the tall grass and says, there is going to be bushfires and then "we'll all be ruined". Hanrahan is never satisfied and never hopeful.

"What is the difference between happiness and joy"?

Happiness is a good feeling, but we usually think of it as something temporary that is caused by something that happens to us or to people we care for. Some people find a deep emptiness within when they 'come down' from encounters that made them feel happy. On the other hand, Joy comes from within. It seems sacred and it remains with us as part of our spirit.



'Happiness' is mentioned 30 times in the Bible. Joy is mentioned 300 times! Maybe joy is ten times more important than happiness! Khalil Gibran, author of 'the Prophet' wrote, *"Is not the dread of thirst when your well is full, a thirst that is unquenchable?"* Unless we are truly content with who we are and what we have, we will always be investing in other things to provide us with happiness. This will never bring us joy.

It has been suggested that 'maybe tourists

Are you a tourist, a traveler, or a pilgrim? Tourists want to have fun, travelers want to learn something, and pilgrims seek to be transformed.

are happy and pilgrims are joyful'! This is because tourists are often satisfied with a superficial appreciation of something they see, whereas pilgrims appreciate the spiritual significance of a place they visit and who they see it with.

Tourists are concerned with their personal enjoyment, whereas pilgrims appreciate the experience. Joy can embrace pain, disappointment and sorrow without losing hope and contentment. Joy delights in being alive.

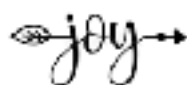


We can see something of the message of joy in the reactions between John the Baptist and Jesus. John was a man of God. He was a fierce preacher who called people to repentance. John did not compromise. He announced the wrath of God. He said that sinners were going to be separated from the just, and destroyed with fire. Jesus believed in John's ministry and asked John to baptize him. But after John was arrested and put in prison, Jesus put a different emphasis on his message. He still called people to repentance, but not with a message of fear. While John spoke of judgment and punishment, Jesus spoke of joy, mercy, forgiveness and healing.

While John had lived in the desert and avoided daily contact with people, Jesus shared meals not only with friends, but also with sinners, including tax-collectors and prostitutes. Jesus' message was filled with warmth and with the compassion and joy of God. In his prison, John became concerned when he heard stories about Jesus. He wondered how Jesus could be the promised Messiah. As we know, Jesus sent messengers back to John in prison inviting him not to look like a tourist, but like a pilgrim. Look at the heart of what is happening: *'The blind see again, and the crippled can walk, lepers are being cured, the deaf can hear again, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News of God's love is being shared with the poor.'*



Here was an experience of true joy. Men and women were experiencing the healing that God offers. This message of the generosity of God is what we rejoice in today. Our hearts are filled with the spirit of pilgrims because we have encountered the liberating message of Jesus. We cannot but be women and men of joy.



Opening to the mystery

of an Unknown Future (Mark Clarke)

The call of this Advent is to discern and reflect on how we are



captive to the mental models and frameworks that no longer have meaning for us personally and collectively. History often enters periods in which old frameworks, behaviours, and habits no longer serve the common good, leading to division and polarization.

When we explore the spiritual significance of the Advent scriptures, we see God calling Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, and Zechariah to move beyond their assumptions and mental frameworks. God is urging them to become radically detached and open themselves to God's invitation to new life. They were asked to release their long-held beliefs and behaviours in order to connect with their inner selves, embarking on a journey of self-discovery.

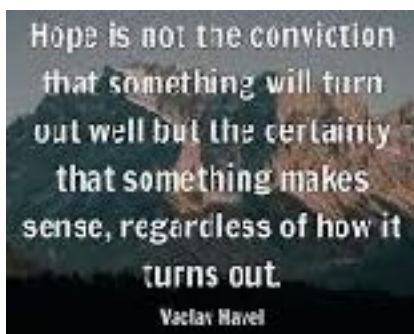


Mary was betrothed to Joseph and was found to be with child.

Joseph, facing the decision, what do I do with my betrothed who is pregnant in a mysterious way?

Elizabeth and Zechariah realized she was pregnant in their old age

Brené Brown's new book, *'Strong Ground'*, states, "The problem is that we live in a rapidly changing world, where we need to spend as much time rethinking as we do thinking." (P.67) That was the challenge Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, and Zechariah faced as they said yes to their divine call. Each of them faced spiritual questions and challenges that were neither typical nor accepted in their historical context. Yet each one, with an open heart, said yes to the mysterious unknown, with a faith rooted in trusting God and themselves.



In Otto Scharmer's October newsletter, he quoted Vaclav Havel's wisdom: 'Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out.' Otto reflected: "The current moment no longer feels like we are standing at a threshold." Otto reflected further: "It feels like we are in the process of crossing a threshold... with the abyss right in front of us." This is what Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, and

Zechariah faced in accepting and embracing God's call.



Living in times marked by significant differences that divide friends, families, communities, and at times lead to violence, we are called in faith to accept the unique call God extends to us. It is the inner freedom rooted in detachment that allows

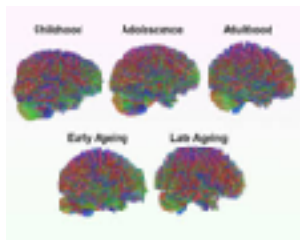
us, like Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Joseph, to fully embrace life with love and faith, despite the unique circumstances, disenchantment, and seeming paralyzing nature of this historical time.

This Advent, we are called to be transformative beacons of light that radiate a caring presence, seek peace in every interaction, and serve as instruments of peace as God's co-creators in an emerging new world order. Clearly, we are being called to open ourselves, both individually and collectively, to cross the threshold into the mystery of an unknown future.



Five 'eras' of the brain

Hannah Devlin *Science correspondent* Published by 'The Guardian', 25 Nov 2025



Scientists have identified five major “epochs” of human brain development in one of the most comprehensive studies to date of how neural wiring changes from infancy to old age. The study, based on the brain scans of nearly 4,000 people aged under one to 90, mapped neural connections and how they evolve during our lives. This revealed five broad phases, split up by four pivotal “turning points” in which brain

organisation moves on to a different trajectory, at around the ages of 9, 32, 66 and 83 years.

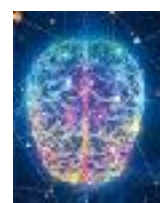
“Looking back, many of us feel our lives have been characterised by different phases. It turns out that brains also go through these eras,” said Prof Duncan Astle, a researcher in neuroinformatics at Cambridge University and senior author of the study. “Understanding that the brain’s structural journey is not a question of steady progression, but rather one of a few major turning points, will help us identify when and how its wiring is vulnerable to disruption.”



The childhood period of development was found to occur between birth until the age of nine, when it transitions to the adolescent phase – an era that lasts up to the age of 32, on average. In a person’s early 30s the brain’s neural wiring shifts into adult mode – the longest era, lasting more than three decades.

A third turning point around the age of 66 marks the start of an “early ageing” phase of brain architecture. Finally, the “late ageing” brain takes shape at around 83 years old.

The scientists quantified brain organisation using twelve different measures, including the efficiency of the wiring, how compartmentalised it is and whether the brain relies heavily on central hubs or has a more diffuse connectivity



network. From infancy through childhood, our brains are defined by “network consolidation”, as the wealth of synapses – the connectors between neurons – in a baby’s brain are whittled down, with the more active ones surviving. During this period, the study found, the efficiency of the brain’s wiring decreases.

Meanwhile, grey and white matter grow rapidly in volume, so that cortical thickness – the distance between outer grey matter and inner white matter – reaches a peak, and cortical folding, the characteristic ridges on the outer brain, stabilises. In the second “epoch” of the brain, the adolescence era, white matter continues to grow in volume, so organisation of the brain’s communications networks is increasingly refined.



This era is defined by steadily increasing efficiency of connections across the whole brain, which is related to enhanced cognitive performance. The epochs were defined by the brain remaining on a constant trend of development over a sustained period, rather than staying in a fixed state throughout. “We’re definitely not saying that people in their late 20s are going to be acting like teenagers, or even that their brain looks like that of a teenager,” said Alexa Mousley, who led the research. “It’s really the pattern of change.” She added that the findings could give insights into risk factors for mental health disorders, which most frequently emerge during the adolescent period.

At around the age of 32 the strongest overall shift in trajectory is seen. Life events such as parenthood may play a role in some of the changes seen, although the research did not explicitly test this. “We know that women who give birth, their brain changes afterwards,” said Mousley. “It’s reasonable to assume that there could be a relationship between these milestones and what’s happening in the brain.”



From 32 years, the brain architecture appears to stabilise compared with previous phases, corresponding with a “plateau in intelligence and personality” based on other studies. Brain regions also become more compartmentalised. The final two turning points were defined by decreases in brain connectivity, which were believed to be related to ageing and degeneration of white matter in the brain.



Vatican gardeners go electric



The Vatican’s gardeners have received a custom-designed quiet, precision-cutting electric lawn mower bearing the Holy See’s coat of arms for maintaining the papal grounds. Pope Leo received the mower and appreciated the Vatican’s coat of arms placed on the appliance. The specially commissioned model features leather-lined handles

and was hand-assembled at the Swardman company's facility in Šardice in the Czech Republic.

Humour

Joe appeared on 'Who Wants To Be A Millionaire' and was halfway to the final prize. "Now", the host said, "for one million dollars, and remember you only have one phone a friend life-line left. Everything is riding on this last question.

Will you go for it?" "Absolutely," said Joe.

“Which of the following birds does **NOT** build its own nest?

a) Sparrow b) Thrush c) Magpie d) Cuckoo?"

Joe didn't have a clue, so he said, " I'll phone my friend, Frank"

Joe called and repeated the question. “Joe, that’s easy”, said Frank. “It’s a cuckoo.”

"Are you sure?" asked Joe. "Of course I'm sure." Frank repeated

Joe hung up the phone and said, , “I’ll go with cuckoo as my answer.”

"Is that your final answer?" asked the host. "It is." Joe said.

There was a long, long pause and then the host screamed, “Cuckoo is the correct answer! Joe, you’ve won a million dollars!”

The next night, Joe invited Frank to the pub to buy him a drink. “Tell me, Frank?

How did you know it was the Cuckoo that doesn't build its own nest?"

"Because", said Frank, "everyone knows the cuckoo lives in a clock!"

I asked my friend to spell wonton backwards. He said not now.

Early one morning, Kay and Graeme were arguing over who should get out of the warm bed to make the coffee. Finally, she folded her arms and said, “You have to make the coffee. It’s in the Bible! Graeme was shocked. “It is not! Show me!”

Pulling out her Bible, the wife opened it to one of the New Testament books and declared, "It says right here — HEBREWS!"

And so he has lived this Bible command ever since



A man went into a book shop and asked the saleswoman where the help section was. She said if she told him, it would defeat the purpose

- What do you call a melon that's not allowed to marry? Cantaloupe.

- I'm reading a book about anti-gravity. It's impossible to put it down!

- I didn't think orthopaedic shoes would help. But, I stand corrected.

- Thief steals wheels off police car! Cops work tirelessly to nab suspect.

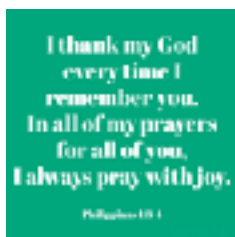
- I entered ten puns into a competition to see if one would win. No pun in ten did.

- Bill went to Maccas and ate a Kid's meal. It was nice, but her mum was furious.

- The invention of the shovel was a ground-breaking discovery, but the invention of the broom was the one that truly swept the nation.
- My friend keeps saying, cheer up man it could be worse, you could be stuck underground in a hole full of water. I know he means well.

Prayers

We remember those who have died recently especially **Peter Owen, Noel Smyth Brian Gesell, Ilona Antal** (Dominic Marasea's mother in law) **Joe Conti** (husband of **Nina**), as well as those whose anniversaries occur at this time, especially **Maree Spinks, John Sheehan, Anna Maria Facciolo, David Fuller, and Anne Tobin**. We pray that all who have died, have found joy in God's eternal presence.



We pray for members of our Holy Cross family who are coping with illness and all who care for them: we especially remember **Lucia Isgro, Pam Storey, Fr Jeff Foale CP, Gerry Bond, Anne Woon, Mary and Dennis Cogle, Max McMahon, Fergus Ryan Lesley Yang, Nina Conti, Maria Di Giantomasso,, Caroline Hagedorn, Kate Lenic, Greg Agosta, Lisa Iverach, Joanne Moorcroft, Dr Peter Heffernan, Cate Sweeney, Fr Brendan Lane, Bob Hallam, Monic Sleeman, Anthona Henderson, Elizabeth Walsh, Billy Uasike, Nancy Reynolds, Graham Burke, Maureen Barns Denise Egan, Marilyn Cilmi, Alexander Lim. Bernadette Owen, Caroline Meade, Carol Battistella, Anne Burke, Rex & Jan Cambry, Jeanelle Bergin, Luke Norden, Rod Gorfine, Zoe & Sophia Chung, , Pam Gartland, Patricia Keeghan Peter Barry, Doris Castro, Julia Cantone, Helen McLean, Phil Drew, Bro Jerome CP, Anne Jenkins, Errol Lovett and Fr Mark Robin Hoogland CP**

Mass on line

Chris will send the link for Sunday Mass, on Saturday afternoon.

God bless,

Brian

