



## High Days and Holy Days for January 2021

(from Parish Pump, UK)

### High Days and Holy Days for January

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*Editor: As these special days in the Christian year do not change, most of these have appeared on the site before. Hilary of Poitiers is new this year.*

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Jan: The naming of Jesus**

Matthew and Luke tell how the angel instructed that Mary's baby was to be named Jesus - a common name meaning 'saviour'. The Church recalls the naming of Jesus on 1<sup>st</sup> January - eight days after 25<sup>th</sup> December (by the Jewish way of reckoning days). In Jewish tradition, the male babies were circumcised and named on their eighth day of life.

For early Christians, the *name* of Jesus held a special significance. In Jewish tradition, names expressed aspects of personality. Jesus' name permeated His ministry, and it does so today: we are baptised in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38), we are justified through the name of Jesus (1 Cor 6:11); and God the Father has given Jesus a name above all others (Phil 2:9). All Christian prayer is through 'Jesus Christ our Lord', and it is 'at the name of Jesus' that one day every knee shall bow.

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Jan: Have you ever wondered where the name 'Jesus' comes from?**

The name Jesus is a transliteration of a name that occurs in several languages. It is of Hebrew origin, 'Yehosua', or Joshua. There is also the Hebrew-Aramaic form, 'Yesua'. In Greek, it became 'Ἰησοῦς' (*Iēsoûs*), and in Latin it became 'Iesus'.

The meaning of the name is 'Yahweh delivers' or 'Yahweh rescues', or 'Yahweh is salvation'. No wonder the angel Gabriel in Luke (1:26-33) told Mary to name her baby Jesus: "because He will save His people from their sins."

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## **2<sup>nd</sup> Jan: St Basil the Great, champion of the Church**

Basil was most people's idea of the perfect diocesan bishop. He was a theologian of distinction, who as a monk devoted himself to much prayer and teaching. He leapt to the defence of the Church from the persecution of the Arian emperor Valens, but also appreciated great secular literature of the time, gave away his inheritance to the poor, knew how to run a soup kitchen, and counted thieves and prostitutes among his converts. Not your everyday bishop!

Basil (c330-79) came from a distinguished and pious family, and he had the best education available at Caesarea, Constantinople and Athens. He decided to become a monk with Gregory of Nazianzus, and settled as a hermit near Neo-Caesarea. He became bishop of Caesarea in 370, with 50 suffragan bishops to look after. It was the time of the great Arian heresy, and Basil would come to be seen as one of the great champions of the Church, defending it from secular encroachments.

Basil loved his people and was known for his generosity and care for the poor, both through food and medical care. He was a great preacher – preaching both morning and evening to vast congregations, and organising services of psalms before daybreak.

He was interested in monastic legislation, and to this day, nearly all monks and nuns of the Greek Church follow his rule. His emphasis was on community life, liturgical prayer, and manual work, rather than on solitary asceticism. His rule allowed for almsgiving, hospitals and guesthouses. Basil also wrote some important works on the Holy Spirit.

He died at 49, worn out by austerities, hard work and disease. He was so loved that even strangers mourned his death, and in the centuries that followed, many artists painted pictures of him. His cult spread rapidly in the West, through Greek monks in Italy and through St Benedict admitting that his rule had been inspired by "our holy father Basil."

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## **2<sup>nd</sup> Jan: St Basil and St Gregory, lives of costly discipleship**

'Discipline' is now virtually a banned word, along with 'risk', 'problem' and 'failure'. They seem to have been replaced respectively by 'focus', 'safety', 'challenge' and 'opportunity'. On the occasions when we do recognise and applaud the virtue of discipline, it's usually in the lives and activities of soldiers, police officers, dressage horses and the dog. But every year the Church Calendar remembers (on 2<sup>nd</sup> January) the lives of two outstanding leaders of the fourth century Church, Basil and Gregory. The hallmark of their lives was an iron self-discipline. Life-long friends since they were students together, they committed themselves to almost ferocious austerity. In fact, both died early from the long-term consequences of extreme self-denial.

Bishops in the Eastern Church, they looked more to the new city of Constantinople than to Rome, but they both faced powerful opposition. Basil's unwavering commitment to the faith earned him many enemies, not only from secular sources (political and even imperial) but also from within the Church. Gregory, a less robust character, faced similar insults and even physical violence when he set out to reform the church at Constantinople. Eventually this opposition cost him his bishopric.

Basil was an activist, Gregory a contemplative, yet their lives followed a similar path of costly discipleship. Basil was born into a wealthy and influential family, but during a time of famine he felt it was his Christian duty to distribute the entire family inheritance in the form of food for the poor in his city. From then on, he lived an austere, even frugal life, and died at the age of 49, worn out by disease and physical weakness. Gregory too had poor health, largely through self-imposed poverty.

In the declining years of the Roman Empire and in an atmosphere of moral laxity they believed that as Christian leaders they should set an example in self-discipline.

Basil and Gregory, whatever we think of their lifelong regime of self-denial, were clear that their life of discipline was motivated by love of the same Lord who in love disciplined them. Without going to the extremes that they did, perhaps a little godly discipline might help us to build a healthier relationship with the God we try to 'trust and obey.'

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### **5<sup>th</sup> Jan: St Simeon Stylites, one of the weirder saints!**

Quite frankly, this hermit was about as weird as they come. But he loved God, and God blessed him, strange though he was. So perhaps Simeon Stylites (390 – 459) should be the patron saint of all REALLY eccentric people.

Simeon was the son of a shepherd on the Syrian border of Cilicia. He joined a monastery near Antioch, where he practised mortifications and penances that nearly killed him. When the abbot dismissed him in disgust as crazy, Simeon moved on to Telanissos (nowadays Dair Sem'an) and spent his first Lent there in a total fast. He was found unconscious on Easter Day. After three years in that monastery he felt life was too easy, and so moved himself to the top of the nearby mountain, where he chained himself to a rock. He began to be talked about, and more and more people came to see him.

Simeon did not want their company, and so planned his escape: to the top of a pillar. For the next four years he lived on top of a pillar that was nine feet high. More people came by, and so Simeon in desperation added to his pillar, until it grew to be 18 feet high. Still people came to see him, and so three years later, Simeon built himself a real skyscraper – a pillar 33 feet high, from the top of which he enjoyed 10 years of comparative solitude.

Still people came to see him – both Christians and pagans, and so Simeon decided to somehow build a pillar that was 60 feet high and six feet wide. Here he found peace and quiet, and so here he lived for the last 20 years of his life. People still came to see him, and tried to catch the 'sacred' lice that fell off his body. They enjoyed his twice daily exhortations to everyone below. Even some emperors came by for a look – Theodosius, Leo and Marcian.

A scholar has written of Simeon: "His preaching was practical, kindly, and free from fanaticism. ... In an age of licentiousness and luxury he gave unique and abiding witness to the need for penance and prayer; his way of life provided a spectacle at once challenging, repulsive and awesome."

Simeon finally died and was buried at Antioch. Perhaps he would have enjoyed the chance to take the plinth at Trafalgar Square!

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### **6<sup>th</sup> Jan: Epiphany**

On 6<sup>th</sup> January we celebrate Epiphany - the visit of the Wise Men to the baby Jesus. But who were these Wise Men? No one knows for sure. Matthew calls them 'Magi', and that was the name of an

ancient caste of a priestly kind from Persia. It wasn't until the third century that they were called kings - by a church father, Tertullian.

Another church father, Origen, assumed there were three - to correspond with the gifts given. Later Christian interpretation came to understand gold as a symbol of wisdom and wealth, incense as a symbol of worship and sacrifice, and myrrh as a symbol of healing - and even embalming. Certainly Jesus challenged and set aright the way in which the world handled all three of these things. Since the 8th century, the Magi have had the names Balthasar, Caspar and Melchior.

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### **6<sup>th</sup> Jan:       Where did the Wise Men come from?**

Magi from the East – it isn't a lot to go on. The Magi had originally been a religious caste among the Persians. Their devotion to astrology, divination and the interpretation of dreams led to an extension in the meaning of the word, and by the first century the Magi in Matthew's gospel could have been astrologers from outside of Persia. Some scholars believe they might have come from what was then Arabia Felix, or as we would say today, southern Arabia.

It is true that in the first century astrology was practised there, and it was the region where the Queen of Sheba had lived. She of course had visited Solomon and would have heard the prophecies about how one day a Messiah would be born to the Israelites and become their king.

Matthew's gospel (chapter 2) is clear that the Magi asked Herod: 'Where is the One who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.' So it is possible that in southern Arabia the Queen of Sheba's story of how a Messiah would one day be sent to the Israelites had survived. Certainly, there are a number of other early legends that connect southern Arabia with Solomon's Israel.

To many people this makes sense: that the ancient stories of a Messiah, linked to later astrological study, prompted these alert and god-fearing men to the realisation that something very stupendous was happening in Israel. They realised that after all these centuries, the King of the Jews, the Messiah, was about to be born.

One more interesting thing that gives weight to the theory that the Magi came from southern Arabia is this: if you study any map of Palestine as it was during biblical times, you will find that the old Arabian caravan routes all entered Palestine 'from the East'.

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### **6<sup>th</sup> Jan:       What about the gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh?**

The story of the coming of the Magi grew in the telling. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century they had acquired names: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. By medieval times they were considered to be kings. Whoever they were, we do know from Matthew that they brought three gifts to Jesus.

What about their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh? While we cannot know for sure what was in the minds of first century Magi, one Victorian scholar has offered a possible explanation as to the significance of their gifts. He was the Rev John Henry Hopkins, an American Episcopalian minister, who in 1857 wrote his much-loved Christmas carol, 'We Three Kings of Orient Are'.

Gold, said John Henry Hopkins, was a gift that would have been given to a king. Frankincense had traditionally been brought by priests as they worshipped God in the Temple. Myrrh was a spice that the ancients used in preparing bodies for burial.

If that is true, then you could say that the Wise Men, in choosing their gifts for this infant, honoured Jesus with gold because He was King of the Jews, with frankincense because He was to be worshipped as divine, and with myrrh, because He would also become a sacrifice and die for His people.

The Wise Men were the very first gentiles ever to worship Jesus. What faith they had! They travelled for months over difficult terrain, they never saw any evidence of Jesus' kingship, His divinity or His sacrificial death. They worshipped Him through faith in God's promises about Him. Isaiah foresaw this response to Jesus: 'Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.' The Magi's eyes of faith saw clearly and far into the future.

Compare that with the High Priest and religious leaders whom the Wise Men saw in Jerusalem when they first arrived. These head priests knew all about the prophecies of their own coming Messiah, but NOT ONE Jewish religious leader travelled to look for Him in Bethlehem. And it is only six miles down the road!

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### **8<sup>th</sup> Jan: St Nathalan, an early farmer in Scotland**

Many saints have fed the poor, but not many were interested in actual food production. Nathalan (died c.678) was, so perhaps he might be the patron saint of anyone who produces food – and gives most of it away to those in need.

Scotland in the 7<sup>th</sup> century must have been a hungry place, especially as far north as the Aberdeen district. In any case, according to his Legend in the Aberdeen breviary, Nathalan was a nobleman who decided to cultivate his land as a way of serving God. He wanted to feed the people in times of famine. It is not known what food he managed to grow so far north, but Nathalan was well-loved for providing what he could.

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### **11<sup>th</sup> Jan: Mary Slessor of Calabar**

Courage, vision and leadership are found in the most unlikely of places.

Mary Slessor was born in December 1848 into a wretchedly poor family. Her father was an alcoholic who lost his job as a shoemaker. Mary was the second of seven children, and in 1859 they moved from Aberdeen into the fetid slums of Dundee. Her father and mother worked in the mills, and Mary joined them there when she turned 11.

When Mary's father and both brothers died of pneumonia, Mary's mother struggled on to keep Mary and her two sisters alive. By the time Mary was 14 she was doing a 12-hour day as a jute maker.

But life was not all drudgery. Mary's mother was a devout Christian who read the family Bible to her daughters, and also the *Missionary Record*, a monthly publication from the United Presbyterian Church. The stories of the missionaries captivated Mary. When she heard that David Livingstone, the great missionary explorer, had died, she decided that she would follow in his footsteps. She wanted to devote her life to taking the gospel to Africa. She was 25.

In August 1876 the Presbyterians sent her out to Calabar, Nigeria, an area where no European had ever yet set foot. With her red hair and blue eyes, Mary grabbed attention wherever she went, but despite recurring illness and constant danger, Mary settled happily among the tribes. She learned their traditions, quickly becoming fluent in their language, Efik. Soon she won the confidence of their

tribal leaders. She taught their children and was soon determined to put an end to some of their barbaric practises, such as the killing of twins (whom they thought were evil).

Over the years Mary put an end to many witchcraft practises, and she adopted every twin child she found abandoned. And she talked endlessly about Jesus Christ, the passion of her life.

Mary was tough – she made long trips through the jungles and took canoes up remote rivers. When her shoes gave out, she went barefoot. Her great passion was to go to ‘the regions beyond’ with the Gospel. She thrived in places and among people who would have terrified most women in her day.

It has been written of her: “Practically singlehanded she tamed and transformed three pagan communities in succession. It is a question if the career of any other woman missionary has been marked by so many strange adventures, daring feats, signal providences, and wonderful achievements.” (Dr Robert H. Glover, *The Progress of World-Wide Missions.*)

When in 1901 Southern Nigeria became a British Protectorate, Mary was appointed the first ever female Magistrate in the British Empire. She became a skilful diplomatic emissary.

She was known for saying: "It is not Mary Slessor, but God and our united prayers that have brought the blessings to Calabar. Christ shall have all the honour and glory for the multitudes saved."

When she finally died of fever in January 1915 the native Christian girls and women wept bitterly: “Our mother is dead. Everybody’s mother has left us.”

Mary Slessor once wrote to a friend who had long prayed for her: "I have always said that I have no idea how or why God has carried me over so many funny and hard places, and made these hordes of people submit to me, or why the Government should have given me the privilege of a Magistrate among them, except in answer to prayer made at home for me. It is all beyond my comprehension."

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### **12<sup>th</sup> Jan: St Antony Pucci: poor, plain and tongue-tied**

If you have nothing much going for you, Antony Pucci (1819-92) should be your patron saint. He came from nowhere – a peasant family in Tuscany. He went nowhere – he spent his life as a parish priest in the Tuscan city of Viareggio. He was unattractive to look at. He wasn’t good with words – people found him awkward and shy.

So why do people still remember him today? Because Antony Pucci used the one gift he did have in the service of others. He was an excellent organiser, and he served his people brilliantly. His care for the sick in the epidemics of 1854 and 1866 was outstanding. He even set up the first seaside nursing homes for poorly children.

Antony Pucci used to say that organisation is the servant of charity, not its substitute. But he used his gift for organisation as a way of showing his charity, and for that he was loved.

So – if your family is nothing to shout about, if you wince when you look in the mirror in the morning, if you stand tongue-tied in most social situations, don’t despair. Ask God to show you what gift He HAS given you, and use it in the service of others. And in giving to them, you will receive! It is when we lose our lives for His sake, in His service, that we truly find them.

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### **\*NEW 13 Jan: Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers**

Heroes are not always men or women of action. Sometimes the fight for right over wrong can be even more powerful when done through words and argument.

Hilary was such a champion of the Christian faith. Born into a wealthy pagan family in Poitiers in 315, he first became an orator of Neo-Platonism. Here he learned how to think and argue, but soon he lost confidence in paganism. By 350, Hilary converted to Christianity.

Already well known and loved in Poitiers, Hilary was made bishop only three years later. His oratorical skills in defence of Christianity were badly needed: it was a time when the Western Church was under severe attack. The heresy of Arianism, which denied that Jesus was divine, was spreading everywhere. Hilary became the outspoken champion of biblical orthodoxy, defending it at both the Synod of Bitterae in 356 and the Council of Seleucia in 359. Although briefly exiled to Phrygia in Asia Minor by the Emperor for his stand, Hilary continued to defend Jesus' divinity, and was praised by both Augustine and Jerome as 'the illustrious teacher of the churches'.

When Hilary returned from exile to Gaul, there was great rejoicing. He continued to write many doctrinal and historical works. He also became the first known writer of hymns in the Western Church, stressing Trinitarian themes and the unique relationship of Christ to the Father.

There are three churches dedicated to Hilary in England. His feast day begins the Hilary Term at the Law Courts and at the universities of Oxford and Dublin.

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#### **14<sup>th</sup> Jan: St Felix of Nola, saved by a spider's web**

What do you do when you find a large spider web in your house? If you ever feel some sympathy for the spider who went to all that trouble, then Felix is a good patron saint for you. He was saved by such a spider, spinning such a web.

Felix had been born to a Syrian soldier who had retired to Nola, near Naples in Italy. When his father died, Felix gave his property and money away, and was ordained by St Maximus of Nola. Felix went to work with him, ministering to the people of Nola.

Then Decius, the Roman Emperor, began another persecution of the Christians. Maximus escaped to the mountains, but Felix was arrested and badly beaten. Legend has it that he was rescued – and freed from captivity - by an angel. In any case, Felix followed Maximus and found him sick and in need. Felix hid him in an empty building, and prayed for God's protection. The soldiers were out looking for the two men, but then a spider arrived at the door of the building where they were hiding. The spider spun such a magnificent web across the door that it fooled the imperial soldiers into thinking the building was long abandoned. The spider saved Maximus and Felix that day, and the two men stayed on the run until Decius' death in 251.

After that, the people of Nola wanted Felix as their bishop. But Felix refused, and returned to farming his lands; giving the poor most of the food that he managed to grow. Though Felix went on to die naturally, he was still thought of as a martyr, or 'witness' because he had suffered torture, imprisonment and privations in the persecution. Felix did not mind: he served a King who was not of this world, and he looked forward to a better future life with that King in a new heaven and a new earth.

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#### **17<sup>th</sup> Jan: St Anthony of Egypt, hermit who defied an emperor**

If your Christmas and New Year break included just too many people and even a bout of indigestion, then St Anthony may be the saint for you. He was a hermit-monk with a reputation for making poorly people feel better.

Anthony was born in Coma (Upper Egypt) in 251, and at 20 became an ascetic. He settled down in the complete solitude of a deserted fort in Pispir, where he spent the next 20 years busy fighting the whole range of usual hermit temptations, such as having queenly devils approach you for marriage, and other hazards like that.

In 306 Anthony felt able to face the world again, and so he began visiting with some other hermits. One was Paul, and the story goes that the day they met, a raven provided lunch for them by dropping a loaf of bread nearby.

Anthony was a godly man, and he would pray for people. Stories went round that those he prayed for were healed, and so he became known as a miracle-worker. He was certainly brave: when in 311 the Roman Emperor Maximinus was persecuting the Christians, Anthony went to Alexandria to encourage the church there to stand firm. Years later he was stoutly defending the Christian faith in disputes with heretics.

Anthony died in 356, but even hundreds of years later he was not forgotten. A medical band of people adopted his name, and thus The Order of Hospitallers of Saint Anthony was founded (c.1100, in La Motte). It became a pilgrimage centre for those suffering from ergotism (called St Anthony's Fire - a serious form of fungi poisoning).

Anthony was a tremendously popular saint throughout the Middle Ages. By then he was seen as the patriarch of monks, and a healer of both men and animals. Anthony even gave us the word 'tantony', a diminutive applied to the smallest pig in a litter, and to the smallest bell in a peal of bells.

The early church father, Athanasius, wrote *The Life of Anthony*. This moving biography helped to convert the great Augustine.

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### **18<sup>th</sup> Jan: Amy Carmichael, founder of the Dohnavur Fellowship**

Not many teenagers, on becoming a Christian, will devote themselves to winning others for Christ in a foreign land. Amy was such a person. She left Britain to live in a tiny village in Southern India. Here, for the next 56 years, Amy rescued hundreds of orphaned and vulnerable children, and served her Lord in Dohnavur.

Amy Wilson Carmichael had been born in Ireland on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1867, into a devoutly religious Presbyterian family in Belfast. When she was 16, Amy had become a Christian, and decided to start a mission for mill girls. When she came into contact with the Keswick movement, she sensed a call to serve abroad.

At first, Amy planned to go to China, but ill health prevented her from travelling. Later, for 15 months, she worked in Japan, but the climate was detrimental to her health. In 1895, she went to India to evangelise around Bangalore, and then, in order to escape rising political violence, she moved on to Dohnavur.

Here she met a girl called Preena, who had escaped being a slave in a Hindu temple. From that moment, Amy knew she had found her true calling. She dedicated the rest of her life to rescuing girls and boys who had been given by parents or relatives to serve in the temple as prostitutes.

Amy donned Indian dress and learnt about the Hindu culture and showed the love of Christ through her compassion. Overcoming much hardship and danger, Amy expanded her evangelistic work to establish a centre for homes, schools and a hospital. The Dohnavur Fellowship still continues today.

In 1931, Amy suffered a severe injury that virtually confined her to bed for the next 20 years. Despite this, she wrote 13 of her 35 books and many thousands of letters. Amy based her life on prayer and trusted God for all her needs. She died on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1951, aged 83.

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### **21<sup>st</sup> Jan: St Meinrad, victim of grievous bodily harm**

The more things change, the more they remain the same. You could read Meinrad's story today in the newspapers of any large city. He was born near Wurtemberg of a free peasant family and he became a monk at Reichenau (Switzerland). In 829 he moved to Einsiedeln to be a hermit, where he lived quietly for the next 25 years.

Then one night there was a knock on his door. Meinrad courteously welcomed two strangers who had come to see him. Things took a turn for the bad – they demanded money or treasure. Meinrad explained he had none. They got angry – and savagely beat him to death with their clubs. The life of a gentle, godly man was extinguished. The murderers were caught and executed, and the local people were left to grieve and share their shock and sadness at the pointless death of such a godly man.

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### **21<sup>st</sup> Jan: St Agnes, child martyr of Rome**

Agnes should be the patron saint of all the young Christian girls alive today who live in areas of the world where they face kidnap, rape, forced marriage, persecution and even death – simply because they are Christian.

Agnes, born c 291, probably came from a noble Roman family. She converted to Christianity at the age of 10, and took a vow of chastity. When she was only 13, the son of a high-ranking Roman official wanted to marry her. But Agnes refused, declaring herself given totally to Christ.

This was not a safe thing to say in 304. It was a time of great violence against Christians, the so-called Persecution of Diocletian. So Agnes was condemned to death. Some accounts say she was burned at the stake, while Ambrose claims her death came by sword. She may have been sentenced to serve as a virgin sacrifice to pagan deities. Beheading has also been mentioned.

In any event, Agnes became a virgin-martyr, and thus became patron saint of chastity, girls, virgins, engaged couples and rape survivors. In the decades after her death her tomb became a place of pilgrimage, as other Christians sought courage for themselves by remembering her fearless witness.

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### **22<sup>nd</sup> Jan: St Vincent of Saragossa, first martyr of Spain**

Never under-estimate a deacon. After all, the first-ever Christian martyr was a deacon in the church of Jerusalem - St Stephen. And the first-ever Christian martyr in Spain was a deacon of the Church of Saragossa - St Vincent.

By now it was 304AD, and the Roman Emperor Diocletian was persecuting Christians. When his edict reached Spain, Vincent, a deacon of the Church of Saragossa, was arrested and brought before Dacian, the Roman governor in Valencia. Here the governor discovered that deacons do not scare easily.

For Valerius was quite prepared to suffer for the faith that had guided his life. He had been educated and ordained to the diaconate by Bishop Valerius, and had then ministered throughout the diocese for years, even acting as a spokesman for the Bishop himself, who had a speech impediment. His commitment to Jesus Christ was total.

So Valerius was put in prison, half-starved, and then offered freedom if he would burn the Scriptures. He flatly refused, declaring that he would pay no heed to either threats or promises. The governor was so angry that Vincent was then tortured and died in prison. But during his martyrdom, it was said that he preserved such peace and tranquillity that the jailor repented of his sins and converted.

Vincent's body was thrown into the sea in a sack, but later recovered by Christians. They eventually took his bones to Cape St Vincent, where, the story goes, they were protected by ravens. Certainly, by the time of Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula, the Arab geographer Al-Idrisi mentioned this constant guard by ravens, and named the place Kanisah al-Ghurab (Church of the Raven). In 1173 King Afonso 1 of Portugal had Vincent's bones exhumed and brought to Lisbon, where Vincent was adopted as the patron saint.

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## **25<sup>th</sup> Jan: Conversion of St Paul**

January is a month of the beginning of great things! As well as the naming of the Son of God, we celebrate the conversion of the greatest ever apostle of the Christian faith. Many books have been written on Paul, and here is the briefest of introductions.

He was a Jew, born as 'Saul' at Tarsus, and brought up by the rabbi Gamaliel as a Pharisee. A devout, fanatical Jew, Saul persecuted the Christians, and watched with satisfaction the first Christian martyrdom, the stoning of Stephen. Then, on his way to Damascus, Saul had a vision of Christ that stopped him in his tracks. He realised that this Jesus whom he was persecuting was in fact the Messiah for whom he had longed.

Saul changed overnight. He was given a new name, Paul, and became an evangelist for the cause of Christ. He became a leader in the early Church, and his special calling was as an apostle to the Gentiles. He wrote epistles to the young churches that he founded - and thus, inadvertently, wrote a great part of the New Testament.

Life as the greatest apostle was hardly full of perks: Paul was stoned, beaten, mobbed, homeless, hated, imprisoned, and finally martyred. Tradition has it that he was beheaded in Rome during the persecution of Nero in 64AD, and buried where the basilica of St Paul 'outside the walls' now stands. His mighty faith in Christ has kindled similar belief in many hundreds of millions of people down the centuries.

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## **25<sup>th</sup> Jan: St Paul, the first Christian intellectual**

This month, on 25<sup>th</sup> January, the Church celebrates probably the most famous conversion of all. At least, what happened to a young man called Saul on the road to Damascus has become a byword for all instant conversions - what is known as a 'damascene' moment. Saul was a devout Jew, a Pharisee, a

student of Gamaliel and a fierce critic of the followers of Jesus, then a very new sect on the religious scene.

On his way to Damascus to start a purge of Christians in that city, he was blinded by a bright light and heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' He asked the identity of the voice, and was told: 'Jesus, whom you are persecuting'. Stunned by the experience, he followed further instructions which led him to a Christian man in Damascus, who prayed with him. As he did, Saul's sight was restored.

The experience convinced Paul that Jesus - crucified in Jerusalem four or five years earlier - was in fact the Messiah and had risen from the dead. After a period of instruction, Saul was baptised and took the name Paul. At first, some Christians were wary about the reality of his conversion, but over a period of time he was accepted and indeed eventually recognised as an 'apostle', a 'special messenger' of Jesus Christ.

His intellectual stature and leadership gifts quickly marked him out, and within a few years he became a leading figure in the emerging Christian Church, preaching and founding churches all over the Middle East, largely of Gentile converts. He was eventually martyred in Rome, probably in 65AD.

Paul was the first intellectual of the Christian Church, the man who was able to set the events of the life and teaching of Jesus, and especially His death and resurrection, into a coherent theology, with its roots very clearly in the Jewish faith of his own upbringing.

Many people think of Paul as a rather negative, narrow misogynist, but even a quick reading of his letters actually reveals a person of great warmth, who evoked enormous affection and devotion from others. 'You would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me!' he writes to the Christians at Galatia. As for the charge that Paul disliked women, even a quick read of his letters will reveal how large a role women played in his churches. In terms of the first century, St Paul was a dangerous liberal! So, all in all, the amazing Paul of Tarsus deserves a bit of celebrating on 25<sup>th</sup> January.

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## **26<sup>th</sup> Jan: St Timothy and St Titus, how local church leaders should be!**

Timothy and Titus are the saints for you if you've been a Christian for some time, and now suspect that God wants you to move into some form of leadership. A daunting prospect!

The books of First and Second Timothy and Titus are what are known as the three pastoral letters, where Paul writes to ministers in charge of important churches, instead of writing to the churches themselves. Paul gives both Timothy and Titus explicit instructions for how to shepherd the sheep in their care. Timothy had been given the responsibility of the church at Ephesus, and Titus the care of the church at Crete. Both Timothy and Titus were young men, and both felt quite daunted at the task ahead of them!

Timothy, half Jewish, had met Paul when he was still a child, living with his mother Eunice at Lystra. Paul had come to their city and preached, and they had both become Christians. Timothy had then accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey - a great training experience. But experience is given to us so that we might in turn become productive - and in due course Paul entrusted the vastly important church of Ephesus into Timothy's care. This church was so vibrant in its faith that within 50 years so many Ephesians became Christians that the city's pagan temples were almost forsaken. A huge responsibility!

Titus was a gentile, almost certainly converted through Paul. Paul had used Titus as a trouble-shooter with the Corinthians, and when Titus was successful in that, gave him a real bit of trouble: the church at Crete. Again, Titus served his Lord faithfully, even in this most difficult of situations.

Timothy became the first bishop of Ephesus and was finally martyred when he opposed pagan festivals (probably in honour of Dionysius). He was killed by stones and clubs, easily to hand during the pagan festival of Katagogia. His supposed relics were translated to Constantinople in 356.

Titus went on to become the first Bishop of Crete, and is believed to have died there, though history does not tell us how. His relics are supposed to be buried in Crete, except for his head, which was allegedly taken to Venice in 823.

Both Timothy and Titus were good and faithful servants, and they could look back on lives well spent.

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### **27<sup>th</sup> Jan: St Angela Merici, helping children in need**

With international concern about the welfare of children, Angela is a good saint to remember. Not only did she herself survive a harsh childhood, but she went on to dedicate her own life to helping children in need.

Angela was born near Lake Garda, in Desenzano, where she was orphaned as a young child. The 1480s were hardly an easy time for orphaned girls, but somehow Angela survived to grow into her teens, when she became a Franciscan tertiary. However miserable her own childhood, Angela chose to let it work for good in her life: she decided to devote her own life to the education of poor girls. Girls! This was a time when most of the *men* were illiterate!

But Angela was an audacious woman, and she had only just begun. She and some close companions set to work in the name of Christ, seeking out the poor families in their community. Angela taught the young girls all that she could, and prayed with them, assuring them that even they were precious in the eyes of their Creator.

All of which left the Roman Catholic Church badly baffled. What should they do with religious sisters who had taken no vows, still wore their lay clothes, and who, instead of walling themselves up in some nunnery to lead an enclosed life, spent their days in a decidedly mobile, highly visible fashion – out and about in community support?

It wasn't until 1565, some 25 years AFTER Angela's death, that the Church decided it approved of such work. By then the Ursuline nuns, as they were by then called, were going from strength to strength. They still flourish today, with some 2400 Ursuline Sisters in 27 provinces on six continents. They have been well described as 'the oldest and most considerable teaching order of women in the RC Church.'

It took nearly 300 years, but in 1807 the Roman Catholic Church decided that Angela, unveiled, unenclosed and unsupervised as she had been, had been a saint after all – and 'made' her one.

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### **31<sup>st</sup> Jan: St Maedoc of Ferns, smart about beggars**

Are you wondering about which charities to support this year? Does it matter to you if your money is used wisely or not? If so, then Maedoc of Ferns is the patron saint for you this month. He certainly knew how to deal with people who would waste his money.

Maedoc (d 626) was born in Connacht and educated in Leinster and St David's Pembrokeshire before returning to Ireland in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. He founded a small monastery on land given by Brandrub, prince of Leinster, at Ferns, in Co. Wexford. He also founded monasteries at Drumlaane and Rossinver. He must have been loved, because after his death his bell, his staff and reliquary were carefully preserved – you can see them today in the National Museum (Dublin) or the Library of Armagh cathedral.

Maedoc had a reputation for self-denial, holiness and charity. But he was not 'stupidly good'. The story is told of how one day some spurious beggars hid their fine clothes and dressed in rags and came to the monastery pleading for his help to buy new sets of clothes. Maedoc invited them in and did some investigating. When he discovered their fine clothes hidden outside, he gave them away to real beggars nearby, and then sent the imposters off in their dirty rags, with neither new clothes nor alms. Rather cleverly done!