

You're listening to All Kinds of Catholic with me, Theresa Alessandro. My conversations with different Catholics will give you glimpses into some of the ways we're living our faith today. Pope Leo, quoting St Augustine, reminds us: "Let us live well and the times will be good. We are the times." I hope you feel encouraged and affirmed and sometimes challenged, as I am in these conversations. Join our podcast community, get news and background information about the conversations, and share your thoughts if you want to. You can get the newsletter and each episode straight to your inbox by going to allkindsofcatholic.substack.com and clicking on Subscribe. It's free. That web address is in the episode notes too, and I'd love you to draw closer to our community. Thank you.

Theresa: Listeners, thanks for joining today's episode. I'm joined by Jacintha, who's actually in the Diocese of Plymouth. Thank you so much for joining us today, Jacintha.

Jacintha: You're very, very welcome. I often begin by asking — are you someone who's always been a Catholic? And I know that in your early life there are one or two people in particular in your family who've really influenced your faith. So maybe you'd tell us a little bit about that.

Jacintha: I have always been a Catholic. Mum was a convert and probably the better Catholic than Dad really, as converts often are. Mum's higher Anglican roots gave her an appreciation of the Eucharist, and that never left her. We were completely immersed in Catholicism — it was a way of life, it wasn't a bolt-on extra. So we had Mass in the morning, Sunday school in the afternoon, and Benediction — everything in the Latin, very difficult to understand the words, because it was my own phonetic understanding of Latin until I studied it for my O-level many years later.

The influences — my grandma, whose Irish roots completely infused and shaped her Catholicism. The Lord was always with her, as was Our Lady, who often appeared at the end of the bed. Nana seemed to be in a totally religious trance as she conversed with Our Lady. Her rosary beads, if I remember rightly, were always tucked under her pillow, along with her teeth, I think — the chatting probably continued throughout the night. And she was always in the church, that's how I remember Nana — her head used to incline forty-five degrees and she'd be in that prayer zone.

I used to clean in the church when I was a real tot — we'd clean all the statues, and they have little prayers at the bottom. So she'd take me around and we'd say a very lovely prayer to the Infant Jesus of Prague. Some of the words — and we know they're in scripture — ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened — through the intercession of Mary, I knock, and hopefully my prayer will be granted. Such a lovely prayer to say with your nana.

The other great influence was the headmistress of my junior school, a Sister of the Holy Child Jesus. She was wonderful — she supported my mum absolutely terrifically, and in that support she supported me. In our assemblies she would break open those

scriptures — drama was a big thing — and the naughty boys, usually, well, maybe my brothers who were the naughty boys, she'd bring them out of assembly, perhaps ask them to dramatise the parable of the Good Samaritan. And then her moral would be: it shapes our community when you love your neighbour. It shapes the local community when you do that, and the global.

Theresa: If I may, Jacintha, just before you continue — I'm hearing so much already, what a huge impression your grandma and your head teacher made on your childhood, that you can remember so much about how they were, and the prayers you said as a little tot being taken around the church. It's amazing the impact people can have on our lives at the very beginning, in sharing faith. I just wanted to pay tribute to grandmothers out there who today may be struggling in some ways to share faith with their grandchildren — I've heard so many guests who've found the influence of their grandparents to be really important, so we must be grateful for having grandparents in our lives who are people of faith. I interrupted you, Jacintha — please, continue.

Jacintha: Yes, Sister Canisius, she was quite special, and she would hitch up her habit, tuck in her rosary beads, and play football. She exerted such an influence on me. For example, I passed my Eleven Plus very early, and she made me head girl. She found things for me to do that would enrich not only my faith life but my wellbeing and educational life. She invited me to Lourdes when I was about fifteen, and we went around the shrines — of France, to Paris, to Catherine Labouré, Thérèse of Lisieux, Saint Bernadette of Lourdes. I think she was hoping I'd have a calling to the religious life, and to be perfectly truthful, I wondered myself, but it wasn't to be.

A highly influential woman — I met her again when I was a theologian, many, many years later, and I still found her so inspirational. Her interest in me, as old as I was, never waned.

Theresa: It's really interesting to hear about you becoming a theologian many years later, when she had, as you were saying, directed you to different kinds of learning, supported you in your faith and your mother in her faith — that you then became somebody who studied faith, studied God, in an academic way later. I can see where she was right in some of the things she thought she was seeing in you, and how she was supporting those gifts.

Jacintha: Many of those things came to fruition. She has died now — maybe I'll meet her one day. She used to say, "heaven is full of bicycles." I remember that, because all I ever wanted was a bicycle, and she used to say heaven's full of bicycles. Well, I developed rheumatoid arthritis when I was in my thirties, which was a big blow. But prior to diagnosis I would cycle down these lanes, and I would think about her, because nature, for me — I'm very much an outdoor person — I just kept thinking, heaven is full of bicycles. A very literal view of heaven, I have to say, but a joyous one.

Theresa: Absolutely, yes. And we shall see, we shall see. You just alluded there to being diagnosed with a chronic illness in your thirties, which is a blow for anyone. But just before that, you'd been nursing — you had some understanding. Maybe that made it worse when you received your diagnosis, maybe you could see some of how that was going to be for you, perhaps, I don't know. But tell us a little bit about your nursing career, and where your faith fitted in with that.

Jacintha: After A-levels I thought I'd take a year out, and then I became a nurse. I have to say it was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I preferred night duty, because at night duty patients are very vulnerable.

One incident really impacted very spiritually on me — a young boy of about fourteen, terminal illness, and holding him, and feeling myself trying to — the empathy, if you want, the sympathy, the compassion — but also the injustice of a young life cut short. And he said to me, "don't worry, nurse." He must have had a near-death experience, I think, or a religious experience. He said, "I have seen it, I have seen what is there for me at the end of my life. I know I'm going to die, and I'm not frightened at all." It was almost like this blissful state would be there waiting for him — life after death, really powerful.

There was one more incident — I was thinking about it today — it was Christmas Day, and I was working at the Christie Hospital in Manchester, in oncology, and this man had the most terrible tumour on his face — he couldn't see, it was appalling. In those days you had to put rods in for radiotherapy — awful, invasive rods that people had. And this tumour popped, and it popped on Christmas Day. His sight was kind of restored — it's like the blind man who could see, in the scriptures. Oh, my word! Even if it was only for one day, he was able to see again. And I thought, yeah, miracles happen, they do happen. My faith shapes my life, so I see the miracle, if you will. But he thought, "it's a miracle, and you are all angels." I'm not sure we are. So those experiences, and seeing the full face of Christ in those people who are suffering — the ego is subsumed, it's gone, and you get this vulnerability, and this clear way of being — the humblest, human, humility. And then the gaze is widened, and you see the face of Christ.

Theresa: Thank you, Jacintha — that's a beautiful reflection on working in what people who haven't been in that environment might feel very fearful of, that actually there is real humanity there, and the face of Christ, and sometimes a little miracle.

Jacintha: Absolutely.

Theresa: Thank you for sharing that. And then you had your own diagnosis of a condition that you knew then was going to be with you for life — rheumatoid arthritis. Tell us a bit about where you saw God in that. Did you feel disillusioned, or abandoned, or full of hope because you know God is in your life? How did it affect you?

Jacintha: Well, I don't think I felt full of hope initially — I think I was totally shocked. I wasn't angry, I think I was more questioning — why, why is this, why has it happened? I had a very good rheumatologist, and some beautiful people around me. They told me I would be in a wheelchair, but these wonder drugs had come onto the market. It was a bit of a utilitarian conversation with my rheumatologist, in the sense that these drugs might shorten your life, but they will give you a quality of life — and, of course, teaching ethics, for many, many years, that idea of NICE and QALY was there, because of course you're measured by your QALY score these days.

Theresa: Listeners, this concept of a quality score stands for Quality-Adjusted Life Year. It's about making some sort of measurement of how well you are, for how long, with different kinds of treatment or without treatment. I'll put a link in the episode notes to a more detailed explanation if you're interested — it's something we return to again in this conversation.

Jacintha: I worried and worried, and I read the scriptures. One day, in the morning, I heard — it wasn't a chattering voice, but it was a voice which wasn't a voice — which said, "You'll be all right, you won't ever be overcome by this. Yes, you'll always have it, but you won't be overcome."

A religious sister, many years later — I might have been telling her the same story — sent me a lovely reading from Julian of Norwich: "Though we are in such pain and distress that it seems to us we're unable to think of anything except how we are and how we feel, yet as soon as we may, we are to pass lightly over it and count it as nothing. And why? Because God wills that we should understand that if we know Him and love Him and reverently fear Him, we shall have rest and be at peace, and we shall rejoice in all He does." And then Julian goes on: "He did not say, you shall not be tempest-tossed, you shall not be work-weary, you shall not be discomfited, but He said, you shall not be overcome. And God wants us to heed those words, so that we shall always be strong in trust, both in sorrow and in joy."

Beautiful words from Julian of Norwich — very hopeful words. With the support of loving friends, with my faith, and these words, I undertook the medication, and within eighteen months my hands had gone very disfigured. I've had many operations on my hands, my wrists, and so on. But I'm still here, I'm not overcome. And there are bad days — yes, I'd be telling a fib — but God's in that messiness. I always remember somebody telling me many years ago about Catholicism being a messy religion, a very tactile religion, and sacramental. I love the sacraments. There are seven official ones but life itself is sacramental. So in that suffering there is sacrament as well, there is real presence.

Theresa: I think you're explaining that really well, Jacintha, thank you. I'm interested in what you said about the utilitarian way of looking at health and wellbeing — I wonder if you could tell us a bit more about that, now that you've studied theology and become a

theologian. I'm very conscious myself, too, as many listeners will be, that in today's world it's all about who is a person of value. It's a person who is productive. If you aren't productive, you're not valuable any more. That quality, as you say, quality of life, is measured in very specific ways that don't capture the messiness and richness and sacramental nature of being a person — a human being made by God, living in a community of human beings made by God. So tell us a bit about how you've experienced the quality of your life compared with how your very good consultant was talking to you about it at the beginning.

Jacintha: I have to say he was a very good consultant — I can't say he didn't have respect for the autonomy and the dignity of the patient. What he did for me was invite me onto the ethics committee in Greater Manchester, so that they could have someone who was informed, but also a patient who was informed. We never studied live cases — the cases had already happened — but to actually sit there and know that my viewpoint was valued was, to me... well, for anybody of faith to have that invitation gave me a great sense of dignity. My word held weight.

Yes, ethics — sadly, the principle of utility, whilst we don't like it, does permeate medical ethics. And of course we've got the debate going on now about dignity, euthanasia. I remember being in London at a conference — I'd taken some of my students, I knew the lecturer very well — and of course QALY was discussed. He asked me — I didn't mind standing up and explaining what I do — and he fictitiously said, so many points for that, so many points for that. It was a fictitious scenario, but it was to get across the point that QALY was some way that the health service measured your worth, in one sense.

I don't know how medical ethics can actually remove that, because even at my grand age of whatever it is, I do worry, because I am still on medication for rheumatoid. I'm not working, but I do give lectures and I raise money for charity — but whether that will ever give me any quality points, I think it's a very hard decision for those in charge of finances. How you can measure where to put the resources, without some people losing out and not being able to access them — which is where, in terms of euthanasia, the hospice movement needs to be championed more and more these days, to show there is an alternative. We can be with people. Think of that fourteen-year-old boy I was with — I saw something else. Life has value.

Theresa: Thank you, Jacintha. It's really interesting to hear your experiences around ethics and trying to bring your voice into that conversation. As you say, we can recognise again messy, difficult decisions to be made around these concerns — the money that there is, and how to support people. And I'm sure there aren't many people listening who would want to be in charge of making those decisions, maybe, because it is really hard.

Jacintha: It is, exactly.

Theresa: I know that working with students, when you were teaching theology, supported your faith — again gave you new ways of looking at faith and the world. So tell us a little bit about what you learned from the young people you worked with then.

Jacintha: I have to say, if nursing was a highlight, it was a superb privilege to have been a teacher, and to have been drawn into studying biblical scripture and narratives by scholars who knew their stuff, and to study theology and ethics — a real privilege. I went straight into sixth form college, into inner-city Manchester — loved it. Yes, we were constrained by the syllabus, but you had General RE as well, whereby you could explore a wider curriculum and faith. Sometimes in the General RE programme I'd have a class of nearly all Muslims — their parents loved the ethos of Catholicism; they appreciated the faith background. Catholic students — I've got many students who've been to Oxford, Cambridge. Then I was asked would I lecture undergraduates as well, and I thought, I don't know how I'll combine it all into one, but I did, you know, and I thoroughly enjoyed that.

My faith, as a child, went from being blind faith — I don't like that word — but a trusting, a real solid trust. My faith, as a teacher, became more of a thinking faith, faith in reason, more of an understanding and a philosophical background — the notion of soul, the Platonic notion of soul, which underpins much of mysticism, and then the Aristotelian version of soul, which Thomas Aquinas based his on — the soul as the form of the body. So there are two views of soul. Mind you, you can't take away your own personal experience, your own relationship with Christ, as Saint Teresa of Ávila shows us — the journey of the soul is your relationship with God, and with the Lord, with Christ. So my faith was shaped in a different way. I've heard some people say studying philosophy, you'll lose your faith — I didn't. It gave me a better understanding and appreciation.

Theresa: That's good to hear. Now we will return to your faith once more towards the end of the episode, Jacintha. It would be good to hear about prayers and scripture that mean something to you. But just before that, people listening may be impressed by how much you've packed into your life, but you're not done yet. You've been working with the National Board of Catholic Women, and I believe you're the president now of the National Board of Catholic Women.

Jacintha: Yes.

Theresa: You're really a testament to what living with a chronic illness can be like for some people — a passport to more activity and commitment than ever before. But tell us a bit about the National Board of Catholic Women, for listeners who don't know — tell us what the National Board is like, what happens there.

Jacintha: Well, when I retired, after I'd had a huge operation, it took a long time to recover, to get my confidence back. However, a very kind lady — I was chomping at the bit to do something — said, "You know, there is this organisation out there called the National Board of Catholic Women." I'd heard about the UCM, the CWL — good organisations — but I hadn't heard about the National Board. So off I sent an email, and the rest is history.

I was put onto the Education and Formation Committee, to convene it — I still convene it. I enjoy it, and I enjoy looking at ways we can form women. That lovely organisation, my lovely organisation, I'm hugely proud of it. But we are intergenerational — each one of those committees has different women with different backgrounds, whether it be violence against women and girls, ecumenism, women in the Church, medical ethics and science and technology. But each of the women involved in those spend hours researching, putting together papers, encouraging us — for example, with the debate on euthanasia — with lobbying Parliament. They absolutely stagger me, and they hold a mirror up to my own life. I ask myself, can I be like that person? They're all inspirational.

I do give talks, and sometimes I'll do something online for the Board, and usually I team up with another lady, who I find tremendously inspiring — she's a real woman of faith. And in the Examen in the evening, when I'm thinking about my life, I think, could I do that? Or I wish I knew that. I've found the Board informs me and it forms me. It's given me humility. The way that humanity — as woman — is presented in the Board, to woman, is beautiful. I ended my teaching career in a Mary Ward school, and I began to appreciate being with young women. My last student is doing her PhD in theology at Oxford, but I got that same experience in the National Board — stretching, being with, friendly, walking with, encounter, support.

Obviously I'm biased — a marvellous organisation, non-political. We hold many different views, we have to, because we're women, and women do have many different views, but we are supported within a Bishops' Conference set-up. We support our bishops, we support our priests — there are women who have a bigger, a different narrative, yet they support their priests. But we all want women's voices to be heard, to be valued, as Mary, Our Lady, and these beautiful role models we have of women throughout the ages. And if we can model their life today in the National Board, well, I think we will have done great service. The National Board is wonderful.

Theresa: Thank you, Jacintha — you've done the National Board proud there in your explanation of what it's like to be part of that organisation. And for listeners, there'll be a link in the episode notes, so if you can't find them otherwise, you can follow the link and have a good look at what's happening at the National Board of Catholic Women. More women always welcome, I'm sure.

Jacintha: Yes, definitely — please do join us.

Theresa: Then, just to bring our conversation to a close, Jacintha, I wonder if you'd tell us a bit more about your own spirituality. You already mentioned the Examen, from Jesuit spirituality, Ignatian spirituality, and I know there's another prayer there too, which I also really love, that you mentioned to me. So perhaps you'd tell us a bit about that.

Jacintha: So, Jesuit spirituality is very much embedded in my being, really. I read Margaret Silf's *Companions of Christ* and the Suscipe prayer, which absolutely speaks to me about what handing your will over to God is like, and what it should be, and the reward that you get. The Suscipe prayer goes: "Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. Thou hast given all to me. To Thee, O Lord, I return it. All is Thine, dispose of it wholly according to Thy will. Give me Thy love and Thy grace, for this is sufficient for me."

Theresa: It's a beautiful prayer.

Jacintha: It is a beautiful prayer.

Theresa: I love that prayer too, and I'm sure some listeners will.

Theresa: It's been really lovely talking to you today, Jacintha, it really has, and listeners, hold on, because we're going to have one more little snippet from Jacintha before the episode is finally done. But just to say, I'm thinking back to you as a little tot going around the church with your nana, cleaning statues and saying prayers together, and then there's such innocence and trust in those relationships that little tots have with their family members and good friends. For you to have then, in your thirties, this diagnosis, and a shock that life isn't going to be as smooth as you might have thought. And yet these words of comfort about not being overcome — and goodness, you have not been overcome, you've packed so much more into your life already — I think it's been wonderful to hear about the lives you've changed, and the ways you've been changed by meeting other Catholic people, and Catholic women in particular, in your life, how the Lord has continued to bless you and shower graces on you, despite this illness that you have made your own, made part of you, and brought with you through so many different experiences. So thank you so much for telling us about that.

And now, you'd shared with me before we began recording this poem that you love from Gerard Manley Hopkins, and I just think it'd be really nice to finish the episode with that, because I know there will be listeners who also love Gerard Manley Hopkins. So, would you read for us, "God's Grandeur"?

Jacintha:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Theresa: Thank you so much, Jacintha.

Jacintha: Thank you. That's been absolutely lovely — thank you for having me.

Thanks so much for joining me on All Kinds of Catholic this time. I hope today's conversation has resonated with you. A new episode is released each Wednesday, and you can follow All Kinds of Catholic on the usual podcast platforms. Rate and review to help others find it. You can also follow us on social media at @kindsofcatholic. And remember, if you connect with us on Substack, you can comment on episodes, share your thoughts, and be part of the dialogue there. Until the next time.