Salvation in the World of Covid-19

It is exceptionally hard to write this Easter message at this time of global and local, individual and collective suffering, anxiety and loss. It is too early to reflect on what Covid-19 will mean for our future, including the future of our Institute. However, there is one theme that connects well with Easter and appears more frequently as I read in the news that someone’s life has been saved, that efforts are being made to save jobs, etc. This theme is ‘salvation’. What is salvation? And, how are we to think about it at this point in our lives and history? I wish to admit straightaway that salvation is one of the hardest themes for me to grasp. As a student of theology, I struggled with soteriology (a study or doctrine of salvation). Even if at the level of faith, I think I get it, I still struggle to spell it out. So, here is my attempt to share with you a few thoughts, with the hope they generate some thoughts of your own. If you would like to share your reactions, please do get in touch with me (aa2008@cam.ac.uk). We can perhaps continue this exploration of salvation via our MBIT blog.

I find it consoling that philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre or Ludwig Wittgenstein see ‘salvation’ as something important yet cannot explain well what salvation means. Sartre in his autobiography The Words claims that salvation was his life goal: ‘my sole concern has been to save myself - nothing in my hands, nothing up my sleeve – by work and faith. As a result, my pure choice did not raise me above anyone. Without equipment, without tools, I set all of me to work in order to save all of me’ (London: Vintage Books, 1981, p. 255). For Wittgenstein, it was his ‘soul with its passions, as it were with its flesh and blood, that ha[d] to be saved, not [his] abstract mind’ (Culture and Value. Oxford: Blackwell, 1974, p. 32). Clearly, there is a yearning for salvation in these great minds. Of course, there are philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche who deny that salvation is necessary at all (except in so far as we require to be saved from the thought that we require salvation). But, for the Greeks and Romans, salvation was important. It was about a state of being or remaining whole (in good health, physical as well as moral and spiritual). Salvation indicated two things: reaching a desirable way of life as well as the process of attaining it. It had to do with being either removed from a situation or released from a danger that separated one from salvation. Often that danger was the outcome not of a person’s wickedness or the choices they made but was brought about by forces outside their control (bad luck, as, for example, a virus) which made them vulnerable and thus in need of salvation.

Overall, those who write on salvation emphasise the lack of something essential to human functioning (alienation within oneself, in society, brokenness, etc.) and point to the means by which this lack is addressed. So, salvation can be understood as attaining something better than the current state; regaining what was lost, taken away, forgotten; achieving a sense of ‘becoming one with’ or complete. There is much to reflect on each of these points in the Covid-19 climate. (I encourage you to do your own reflection). While the majority of salvation scholars agree that we all are in need of salvation, they disagree on the source and means of salvation. The main difference is whether salvation

Jyoti Sahi (Indian, 1944–). Resurrection, 2007. Oil on canvas, 178 x 122 cm.
is something we achieve by our own (human) efforts or whether we need divine intervention. The answer, of course, depends on one’s worldview. Theists and non-theists or atheists will give different replies. For the former, we need God to be saved. For the latter, we don’t need divine intervention in order to be saved from, for example, our selfish impulses. More importantly, this second group (non-theists or atheists) is often critical of the theistic view which present salvation as something to be achieved in a distant future. They say that we trade our humanity for life in heaven, implying that whatever we do in this life doesn’t really matter. I think these criticisms are useful as they urge us to clarify our position on salvation. What exactly do we mean when we say that God saves us and what is our role in salvation? The Catholic position (albeit not always clearly presented) is that we have a fundamental role to play in our salvation. But, equally fundamental is the thought that we cannot be saved without God. We cannot capture what it means to be human without referring to God.

It seems important to stress that any disembodied approach to salvation is problematic. It discredits our responsibility for salvation. What we do and don’t do today and tomorrow matters hugely to us and the world. Equally, becoming at one with our proper humanity requires God. Salvation requires holding these two realities, divine and human, sacred and secular, together. This embodied reality of salvation is so clearly visible as we journey through the Covid-19 crisis. Every act of care offered by medical staff, a political leader or a scientist, a volunteer or a cleaner, a shop assistant or a delivery worker, a family member or a friend is an act of salvation. Ultimately, salvation is about acting lovingly towards the other. For us, believers, this capacity to love has a divine source. In loving like God, we become God-like. If we do accept that we are responsible for perfecting our humanity (salvation), we are open to God who saves. May the Risen Lord help us to overcome different forms of lack and alienation in ourselves and the world and enable us to celebrate every act of kindness in this Coronavirus world that cries for salvation. May He always Easter in Us!

A SPECIAL WORD OF THANKS TO:
Sally Livesey for her exceptional leadership and hard work from the beginning to the very end of our building project.
David Livesey for his guidance and support over the past two terms in relation to governance and internal management of MBIT
Aude Alston, Felicity Fildes and Mari Kelly Gross, our dedicated volunteers, for their generous contributions, warm presence and unique skills.

THE BUILDING PROJECT

Some of you will know that here has been a building project taking place at the MBIT and, as I write, it is taking shape and the completion date is the 6th March so it will be ready for letting as and when things return to normal (of course we had hoped that we would be letting in the Easter Term but in the current circumstances that will not be the case).

The purpose of the project was to upgrade six of the residential rooms in the Harding wing by adapting them to en suite accommodation and to create six new en suite rooms from what was the library on the second floor of the same block. In recent years the use of the library has much reduced, as most students now access resources in a very different way. The books donated by Professor Nicholas and Mrs Janet Lash are now housed in the Lash Library and all other books and resources in the Chapel, both of which are on the ground floor and more easily accessible to all. Similarly, given that our students are almost entirely post graduate and/or mature/sabbatical students, there are higher expectations in terms of residential accommodation and the Institute cannot afford to be uncompetitive in this respect. To date there have been no en suite rooms,
which is a disadvantage, and we will now be in a position the accommodate conferences etc. more easily.

The project was a long time in the making and also in ensuring we had enough funds to cover the cost. We are very grateful to the Maurice and Hilda Laing Charitable Foundation, which had agreed to provide a significant contribution towards the project, enabling it to become a real working possibility. There was an anxious time when the returned tenders were higher than estimated - a frequent problem in the Cambridge area, where there is so much building work being carried out all over the place but, to cut a long story short, we were delighted to welcome the contractors on site to commence work in early October - a bit later than originally intended.

Working on such projects and ‘keeping the show on the road’ inevitably involves disruption and disturbance and it has been a demanding time for all concerned. Despite this, everyone has risen to the challenge in a most positive way. Much of the planning and organisation of vacating the premises, moving books and all other documents to storage elsewhere on site and finding alternative office spaces for those working on the ground floor was led by Lynda Turner, the House Manager. This was achieved very efficiently and of course it will soon have to be done in reverse order. Also Margaret Sallis our new Senior Administrator arrived just as the project was taking off, and so was thrown in the deep end but, mixing metaphors here, is now running with it, alongside everything else her job involves. The contractors themselves have been very considerate in ensuring the disturbance was kept to a minimum and have always kept the relevant staff informed if there were any practical issues arising which required further discussion.

The main principle of the project was to improve and expand the residential facilities, but, other issues revealed themselves once the required preliminary surveys were undertaken. It became clear that unless a high proportion of this ‘extra’ work was included it would not be possible for the project to proceed. The additional required work included stripping out the old heating, hot water and electrical installations, which did not meet current standards and regulations, replacing the poorly insulated flat roof which was showing signs of leaks and replacing windows not already double glazed. This now brings the Harding Wing completely up to current standards of all mechanical and electrical services and building standards for insulation etc. The project has also incorporated the upgrading of the overall wifi provision in line with the University of Cambridge and Eduroam.

The cost for all this work for the MBIT is considerably more than when the project was first conceived, but it represents a good investment for the future as it will increase our revenue, some of which was not forthcoming whilst this part of the building had to be vacated. The final stage is the furnishing of the rooms at around £1,500 per room. Any contributions, towards, for example, furnishing or sponsoring a room would be most gratefully received, so please contact Margaret Sallis (ms2674@cam.ac.uk) if you feel able to contribute to this cost in this way. We need the rooms to be up to standards of similar accommodation in Cambridge.

The Institute is grateful to all our donors, both individual and grant giving-bodies for their support, for this project and in general, but we cannot be complacent and must keep raising funds in order to enable the Margaret
Beaufort Institute to flourish and continue to provide the special environment in which people can take part and study in a variety of ways which ultimately contribute to the good of society and the wider world

**LIVING AT MBIT**

**Maria Khan** is a PhD student at St Edmund’s College, studying eighteenth-century German literature and theatre. She was recently interviewed for Cambridge University Varsity Magazine about what it’s like to be a resident in MBIT. Maria was very happy for us to use this interview to give you a small flavour of life in MBIT. In the article, she stresses the beautiful and peaceful surroundings and also reflects on life as a Muslim within MBIT’s community. To quote a short extract:

‘As a Muslim woman in a Roman Catholic space, Maria finds both her room and the community at the Margaret Beaufort Institute helpful for the practice of her faith.

“Being here felt right. I feel like I’m surrounded by people who really care about their inner life, whatever their beliefs. The other day I wasn’t feeling so good, and someone told me they would pray for me. That touched me. In a place so far from my family and my original home, that kind of support and community means a lot.”

You can read the full piece by Anna Stephenson here: [https://www.varsity.co.uk/lifestyle/18176](https://www.varsity.co.uk/lifestyle/18176) (Friday 5th November 2019).

**FLOURISHING INSIDE: DEVELOPING THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL RESOURCES FOR PASTORAL WORK IN PRISONS**

MBIT Director of Research, Féirdia Stone-Davis, and Research Fellow, Elizabeth Phillips, were recently successful in their application to the Plater Trust for a grant to carry out research and development of resources and training for prison chaplains. Their project, Flourishing Inside, asks the following questions: What do incarcerated people need from pastoral workers? What resources do pastoral workers need? How can they work best within the prison system? What can Catholic social thought contribute? And how can Catholic social thought be enhanced from listening to the prison context?

The method of the project is participative and iterative; these questions are being explored in four phases: Phase One involves consultation with pastoral workers, formerly incarcerated persons, theologians, and criminologists. This began on 9 March with a gathering of chaplains who shared their views and experiences, continues now through phone interviews with ex-offenders, and will culminate in sharing analyses of these conversations with a select group of theologians and criminologists in order to identify themes and resources from CST for the prison context. In Phase Two, all that arises from the consultation phase will be used to create a range of training and resources for pastoral work in prisons, as well as an academic volume which seeks to contribute to Catholic social thought. In Phase Three, the wide range of project participants will be asked to collaborate in this creative process by offering feedback on draft resources, which will be disseminated in Phase Four.

We look forward to giving regular updates on this project as it takes shape. It is our hope that as a result of this work, MBIT will be able to offer rich, targeted theological and ethical resources and training for pastoral work in prisons which both draw from and make new contributions to Catholic social thought.
RELIigious LIFE AFrica: A SUSTAINable FUTURE

Dr. Catherine Sexton and Dr. Maria Calderón Muñoz, of the research team for the project ‘Religious Life Africa: a sustainable future’ share some of their experience of the project.

In October 2020, MBIT, along with the Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham, hosted a visit by five sisters from East and Central Africa: Sr Margaret Sewe IBVM (Kenya); Sr Scholastica Mwale SCO (Malawi); Sr Deusdedita Lutego CTH (Tanzania); Sr Christine Keneema DM (Uganda) and Sr Helen Kasaka (Zambia). The sisters had spent the last two years working as Project Support Assistants on a research project run by MBIT, in collaboration with the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University and funded by the Catholic Sisters’ Initiative of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation in the United States. The project explored the essence and sustainability of religious life for women in East and Central Africa. We wanted the sisters to have the opportunity to spend some time in the two partner research institutions, and to participate in and speak at the Symposium where the results of the project were shared, at Notre Dame University’s London Centre in October 2019.

The sisters were not, by any means, newcomers to our part of the world. One had spent the summer in a programme at the Bar Convent in the York; one had completed her M.Ed some years previously in Dublin and another had studied in Germany for a PhD in Mathematics. However, none of them had been treated to a tour of Cambridge by blue badge guide Debbie Barfield before; none had been charmed by the apple trees in MBIT’s lovely garden and none had been so fortunate to attend sessions with MBIT’s very own celebrities: Dr. Anna Abram; Dr. Susan O’Brien and Sr. Gemma Simmonds CJ and Professor Janet Soskice. Furthermore, none had previously encountered a woman theologian who is even nominally a theological advisor to a Bishop (Professor Karen Kilby of the CCS at Durham); been to a service presided over by a woman priest (Evensong at King’s College) or travelled on a high speed LNER train. These were some of the highlights that excited the sisters and formed the memories that stayed with them. For our part, we were just so thrilled to see the change in the sisters themselves. When first recruited, they were hesitant to stand up and speak in front of religious superiors. Yet, in our symposium they enthusiastically shared from the platform their views on the future sustainability for religious life for women in their countries – shaped and informed by their experiences in and contributions to the project. That was our highlight.

MY JOURNEY WITH THE RESEARCH PROJECT RELIGIOUS LIFE FOR WOMEN: A SUSTAINable FUTURE

Now I have time to share with you my journey with this research, “Religious Life for Women: A Sustainable Future Project”. It started off with an email from the Project Director, Catherine Sexton in 2017 and later an interview on Skype. After some days I received the acceptance letter through email with guidelines and a job description. I was so excited. Immediately, I forwarded the email to my Provincial Leader and she approved it. It was a great pleasure for me to participate in this research, which ended last year, 2019.

I was very excited to be one of five sisters from East and Central Africa to assist Dr. Catherine Sexton and Dr. Maria Calderón Muñoz, in doing research for the project “Religious Life for Women in East and Central Africa: a Sustainable Future.”

The three-year research project focused on the countries of Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. The research was funded by the Catholic Sisters’ Initiative of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. Our goal for the project was to explore how sisters experience and articulate their own understanding of religious life, through their charisms and spiritualities, and hear how they saw the impact in their ministries and in the places where they minister.

We invited congregations from each of the five countries through the National Associations of Sisterhoods of the respective countries to participate. Both international and local diocesan congregations accepted the invitation, and a total of 80 congregations took part. Sisters were asked one question, what is the essence of religious life? –designed by a team of sisters from these five countries who had come to a consultation in Kasisi, Zambia in 2016.

Another excitement moment came when Dr. Catherine Sexton invited us to attend the symposium in the United Kingdom. It was like a dream but it became a reality in October, 2019. Before the London
symposium, the five of us sisters who worked on the project were invited to participate in educational sessions at Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge and at the Centre for Catholic Studies at the University of Durham in the UK. It was a very exciting time for us to hear wonderful speakers on the history of apostolic religious life for women (Dr Susan O’Brien); apostolate, prayer and charism (Sr. Dr. Gemma Simmonds IBVM); ecclesial ethics (Dr. Anna Abram); the theology of love and suffering (Professor Karen Kilby); ecclesiology and communion (Dr. Greg Ryan) and “Thinking differently about ministry and ageing in religious life” (Dr. Catherine Sexton).

I also learned about and actually experienced how deeply committed the laity are to the Church, and how they treasure the future of Catholic religious life. They helped us reflect deeply on the essence of religious life and how to sustain it. This shows how much they treasure and value what the sisters are doing in the Church and the world at large.

I was also surprised to see how our sisters in the UK are working together with Anglican sisters. It was the first time I had seen Anglican sisters in habits and veils or had heard them sharing common concerns affecting Catholic sisters. These sisters take vows and also live in communities and promote vocations as Catholic religious sisters do. They participated in the other research project conducted by the MBIT-CCS team about new vocations and entrants to religious life in the UK since 2000.

In the Symposium, we had an opportunity to speak to the audience about our experiences of the project in different conditions which, for someone from this continent, I found completely overwhelming. Apart from that, we had a chance to listen to the latest updates from sisters and the laity working in Religious vocations and formation for women in the UK and Ireland.

During the live panel discussion, Professor Janet Soskice asked us a number of questions, and from the responses we gave, the audience seemed to feel encouraged, awakened, consoled and motivated. We praised the participants (mostly Catholic sisters from around the UK) for their courage to share freely their experiences in order to sustain apostolic religious life. We realized that the issues covered not only affect sisters in Africa but in other continents too: like challenges faced by candidates in the initial stages of religious life and the gap between the young and older generations).

In short, that was a great trip – a little bit tiring but enjoyable. Tiring especially was the running up and down to catch the trains and underground for the Symposium! Oh, I miss it... I miss it and the respect and kindness from people we met who gave their seats to us with joy, those who helped us to carry our luggage and taxi driver refused to take money from us saying: “You are doing a lot for the vulnerable ever felt involved in an international conference and the needy in society.”). Never before have I like this outside my continent. Not only have I been reunited through this project with my colleagues in the essence of religious life from East and Central Africa, but I have met fellow Christians from all over the world working in Religious vocations and for the formation of women in the UK and Ireland.

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**Special Offer to MBIT Alumni and Current Donors.**

Do you want to spend some time exploring Cambridge? We are offering special rates for our newly refurbished accommodation only for MBIT Alumnae, Donors and their guests. This exceptional opportunity will be available as soon as the government COVID restrictions are lifted and MBIT is able to resume normal operations. Watch the website for more information, or email mbitadm@hermes.cam.ac.uk.
A WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY - ONLINE

Even though next term is shaping up to be rather different from all those before, being a worshipping community lies at the heart of all that we do and are.

To this end we have developed initiatives to keep us all praying together at this time.

**MBIT Community Prayer**

From **Monday 30th March**, we are introducing a **10 min MBIT Community Prayer**

**Connection.** It will take place Monday to Friday at midday (Angelus) –

for our staff, students, residents, alumni and Friends.

The idea is simple: those of us who can/would like, will connect in prayer (not on-line but in-heart; the way we do it on Mondays in the Oratory).

You might be interested in some online local resources: ‘Meditations in Time of Retreat’ by our Blackfriars friends

http://www.blackfriarscambridge.org.uk/.../meditations-in-ti.../

There is also daily Mass at St Laurence

http://www.saintlaurence.org.uk/live/ and at Fisher House

https://www.facebook.com/CatholicChaplaincyCambridge/

**Thursday Mass via Zoom**

**INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE**

MBIT aims to equip people to make a difference, whether on a worldwide scale or in a personal setting. Our deep Catholic foundations, enable us, in very practical ways, to address the social issues this country has to face up to.

We want to future-proof our work for generations to come. This is especially important in the current crisis when MBIT is facing a significant loss of income.

We are truly grateful to all our community for their support and prayers for us at this time.

If you feel able, there are a number of further ways in which you can also help us financially:

1. By giving a donation (no matter how small) to help us through this current situation.
2. By giving a donation to help with a particular aspect of our work.
3. By leaving a legacy.

Our new legacy campaign aims to raise money to ensure the courses we teach, the accommodation we provide, the opportunities for accompaniment in spiritual and pastoral care we provide, our shared worship and the hospitality we offer as a community remain open to all who need and want them.

Please do consider giving a donation and/or leaving a legacy.

Feel free to contact Anna Abram if you would like to talk about this further: email: aa2008@cam.ac.uk.

Thank you for your support at this time.
Looking Forward

Dates for your diary

Easter Term

Postgraduate Learning Online
We have four exciting online MAs in Spirituality, Faith, Ethics and Pastoral Care and Chaplaincy.
If you would like to get a flavour of these, you can audit a module or attend as an affiliate student this term. Courses running online include:

Spirituality in Context
Discover the value of spirituality in today’s world and learn about how spirituality relates to context across history.

Philosophical Theology
Learn to think philosophically about theology by studying important Western and Eastern Orthodox thinkers. These modules can be taken as part of MAs or Postgraduate Certificates and Diplomas. Sign up and give them a try!

For more information email louise.nelstrop ln324@cam.ac.uk

Thursday Afternoons Online

Dr Férida Stone-Davis will lead:

Creation, the Planet and Us
Thursday afternoons
23rd April - 7th May 2020
Although we cannot meet in person, Thursday afternoons learning will continue online course next term. Please keep signing up! Email Margaret Sallis mbitadm@hermes.cam.ac.uk to register and for more information.

This course aims to speak to growing concerns about the environment and our impact on it. It will encourage theological reflection on our relationship with the planet and other animals by meditating on the belief that God created the world. In doing so, the course will explore how our thought and practice might be transformed. The course will draw on approaches within ecotheology/environmental theology, intersectional theology, and animal/creatuely theology.

Although our Thursday afternoon course are normally exclusively for women, in these exceptional times we have opened up our online learning to all who are interested in taking part.

A ZOOM SEMINAR
No Justice without Solidarity: Lessons from the Current Wave of Populism

21st May 9am-1pm (£20) led by Dr Janusz Salamon (Institute of Political Studies, Charles University, Prague)
Dr Salamon will take a close look at the way in which populism reacts to injustice today and argue that we need solidarity. Without solidarity we can have no justice.
Please email mbitadm@hermes.cam.ac.uk by 15 May to secure your place.

ZOOM CONFERENCE: ‘Divine Harmony’
Organised by the Friends of Sophia, Saturday 23 May.

Rich contributions on music, play, poetry, theatre, mysticism. Speakers include:

Peter Tyler, Douglas Hedley, Ian Coleman, Férida Stone-Davis, Julienne McLean, Valentin Gerlier.
There is no charge for participation. For more details see MBIT Facebook page or email: dominic.white@english.op.org

Short Summer Courses

Dr Melanie-Prejean Sullivan will lead two courses: Thursday 18 June 2020: ‘The Eucharist as a Paradigm for Practical Theology’
Thursday 9 July 2020: ‘The Eucharist as a Paradigm for Rethinking Ecclesial Relationality’

We are monitoring the situation – if needed, this course will run online.

Giotto 2020

Covid-19/Coronavirus update
Due to the continuous uncertainty regarding the coronavirus outbreak both in the UK and in Italy we have decided to postpone the Giotto trip (21-26 September). The new date is set for 20th-25th September, 2021. Those who have already booked will have a received a letter from the travel company about options. We very much hope to be able to run this trip (“In Giotto’s Footsteps – A Life in Colour”) next year and that those who have already booked will keep their booking for 2021.

MBIT Blog: Please follow our online blog. Here is the link to Sue Price’s piece written just before Easter:
Who’s Who?

Staff
Dr Anna Abram – Principal
Dr Fédia Stone-Davis – Director of Research
Dr Louise Nelstrop – Director of Studies
Sue Price – Pastoral Outreach Coordinator
Dr Sr Gemma Simmonds CJ – Director of the Religious Life Institute
Margaret Sallis – Senior Administrator
Lynda Turner – House Manager
Ged McHale – Associate Member/Chapel Coordinator
Beth Stevens – Book Keeper
Neil Warmsley – Gardener
Mick Turner – Domestic Assistant

Senior Research Fellows
Dr Catherine Sexton

Research Fellows
Prof Susan Docherty (Mary Ward Fellow)
Dr Elizabeth Phillips – 2020 Research Fellow
Dr Liam Hayes – Director of the Centre for Ecclesial Ethics
Dr Kevin Grove CSC( Cardinal Hume Fellow)
Rev’d Dr Carrie Pemberton Ford (Senior Fellow in Ethics and Public Life)

Research Associates
Prof Michael Barnes SJ
Dr Amy Daughton

Dr Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin
Mr Travis La Couter
Dr Ela Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska
Dr Christine Lai
Mr David Lonsdale
Dr Jon Loose
Dr Barnabas Palfrey
Dr Elizabeth Powell
Dr Samuel Randall
Dr Rebecca Skreslet Hernandez
Dr Melanie-Prejean Sullivan
Dr Alexandra Wörn
Dominic White OP

For more information about our staff visit our website:
www.margaretbeaufort.cam.ac.uk/staff/

If you are an alumni and interested in joining our alumni association, please contact: the Association for Past Students: mbitalumnae@gmail.com


Congratulations to our two new PhD Students: David Jasper and Evelyn Nicholson