

# Christian Heritage Centre will keep the faith flying through the years

As Theodore House at Stonyhurst College stands on the threshold of finally opening its door to the public, Anton' de Piro looks at why the Church needs this Catholic faith centre more than ever

Theodore House is on the verge of throwing open its doors and welcoming all who seek truth. After years of work, and months of building, the new retreat, study and Christian Leadership Centre, situated in the grounds of Stonyhurst, the world's oldest Jesuit School, is nearly complete.

The official opening of Theodore House will take place on February 15th and the building will be formally opened by the project's Royal Patrons, Lord and Lady Nicholas Windsor. Lord Nicholas, the Queen's cousin, is a convert to Catholicism and his wife, Paola, is a member of the Princely European, Catholic, Frankopan family.

Her Majesty the Queen will be represented by the Lord Lieutenant of Lancashire, Lord Shuttleworth.

Before the official opening, the Oratory of Theodore House will be consecrated by His Grace, Archbishop Patrick Kelly, Emeritus Archbishop of Liverpool and former Metropolitan and Bishop of Salford.

The chapels is dedicated to two of the great 20th century saints, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Pope John Paul II.

Trustees hope that over the years Theodore House will enable thousands of Christians – especially schoolchildren – to learn more about great Christians such as these, to visit the campus and to make use of some of the resources that the Catholic community of this country has preserved for the evangelisation and education of the next generation.

The Christian Heritage Centre's newest Trustee has a special vocation to promote this use of sacred art and religious objects to evangelise and tell the Christian story.

Sr Emanuela Edwards is a Missionary of Divine Revelation. Born in Lancashire, she is based in Rome, and is a world authority on the way sacred art can inform catechesis and evangelisation – an issue that is central to the CHC mission, to tell the story of our rich and deep Christian history both as a means of evangelising and in order to help understand how the Christian faith has shaped society and should continue to do so.

Another of the charity's Trustees, Dominican Deacon Br Samuel Burke OP, rightly says that Sr Emanuela will make a unique and hugely important contribution to the future development and work of the Christian Heritage Centre and its flagship project of Theodore House.

Much of that work will be in the hands of the charity's first director, Stefan Kaminski, who begins work at the end of January. He will create programmes for visiting schools, de-



Sr Emanuela, pictured in the Vatican

pending on age, interest, ability, and religious persuasion.

Stefan will be working at a time when Britain is seeing the emasculation of religious belief and when secularists and atheists are determined to destroy Britain's Christian identity.

Many atheists insist that all our problems would be solved if only religious adherents shared their own world view that God does not exist and that religions shouldn't be allowed to exist either. GK Chesterton, after whom one of the rooms in Theodore House is named, mocked this belief in non-belief, remarking: "When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything".

Although it is true that crimes have been perpetrated in the name of religion, never forget that the great mass murderers of the 20th century – Hitler, Stalin and Mao – were united in their world view in hating and persecuting religion and that, between them, were responsible for at least 100 million deaths.

The Christian Heritage Centre will ensure that visitors know their story – good and bad; that they learn about the unique contribution that Christians have made to building the foundations and institutions of this country – everything from its universities and hospitals to its laws and values.

It will also celebrate the place of the Gospel and religion in our world today, where religious faith continues to animate and inform so much of the contemporary world. Around 84 per cent of the world's population has religious beliefs.

There are 2.4 billion Christians, around 30 per cent of the global population, and that number has been increasing.

Lyse Doucet, the BBC's courageous foreign affairs correspondent, was right to say that if you want to understand the world you have to understand religion.

The ultimate paradox would be to counter a decline in religious literacy or understanding by teaching less about religion – but in our unChurch world, we have our work cut out.

The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst has not been established to enforce a belief in God: but it is about respecting and taking seriously those who do. Teaching about religious faith cannot be elided into social sciences, reduced to a purely human or theoretical phenomenon,



Stefan Kaminski

or a methodologically agnostic, neutral approach.

Christian thinker Leslie Newbigin described Christian faith as public truth, confident that its message is true – based on evidence – and offering hope to humanity. The charity's Trustees hope that visitors will leave with that sense of mission and hope rekindled.

As well as understanding religious faith as transcendent belief by which millions of people live, the CHC will also shine a light on those places in the world where men and women are persecuted for their faith. Think of the Uighurs in China, the Christians in North Korea and Pakistan, the Rohingyas in Burma, or the Yazidis in Iraq.

The rising generation need to see the practice of religion as a human right, as defined by Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the right to believe, not to believe, or to change your belief – a right that is denied to millions but one that we so often take for granted.

Religious literacy and understanding of faith, and no faith, the honouring of difference, the determination to understand one another and to reconsider bigotry, prejudice and caricatures, must surely be at the heart of how we form tomorrow's citizens – and will be at the heart of the programmes which will be promoted at Theodore House.

This will not be achieved by forcing the dilution of religious belief – quite the reverse, in fact. Dumbing down the Christian faith, or pretending that adherence to its precepts doesn't come at a price, would be foolish, and have no place in an

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environment where the sacrifices of men like St Edmund Campion SJ and women like St Margaret Clitherow continue to be celebrated.

Religion is not just about learning a subject, it is about a framework by which to live – and remembering who went before.

We need to better recognise the important contribution that Faith makes to our shared values, and resist those who are hostile to Faith, undermining rigour and religious literacy at a time when persecution of religious freedom has increased globally.

2019 provides great opportunities to renew our faith, as individuals, in our families, our parishes and communities. Theodore House and the Christian Heritage Centre will play its part in achieving that.

So, make it your 2019 New Year's Resolution to come and visit or to support the charity in its work.

**Anton' de Piro is the Head of Development for The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst**

## How to support the Christian Heritage Centre

The Christian Heritage Centre is a registered charity, established to increase access by the Catholic community to the Stonyhurst Collections. Images are kindly reproduced by permission of the Society of Jesus and Stonyhurst College. The CHC has built Theodore House – to be followed by a Visitors' Centre – to enable scholars, parishes, schools and retreatants to deepen their Christian faith. Further details of how to support the project or to book Theodore House are available at [www.christianheritagecentre.com](http://www.christianheritagecentre.com) or from [info@christianheritagecentre.com](mailto:info@christianheritagecentre.com)