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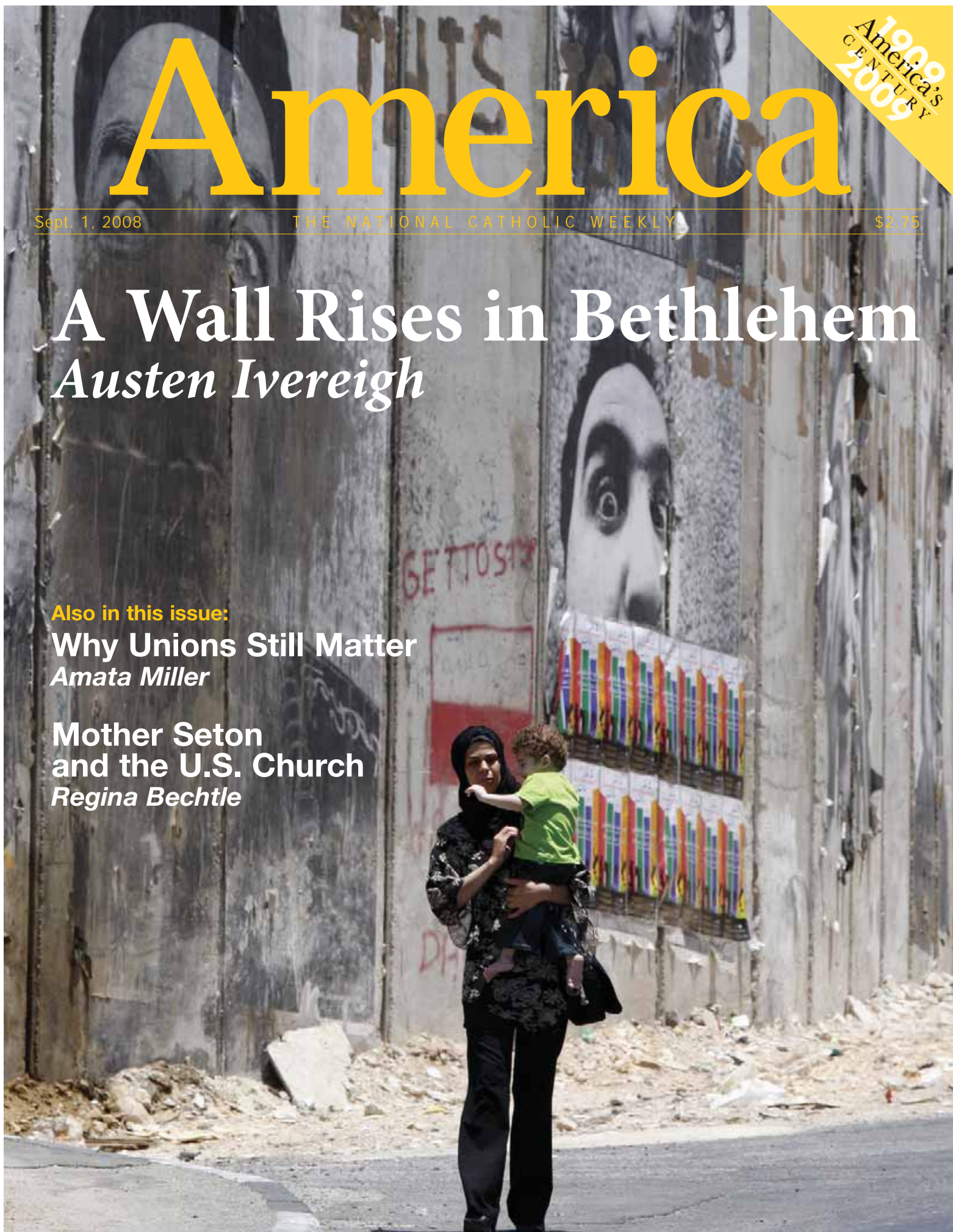
## A Wall Rises in Bethlehem

*Austen Ivereigh*

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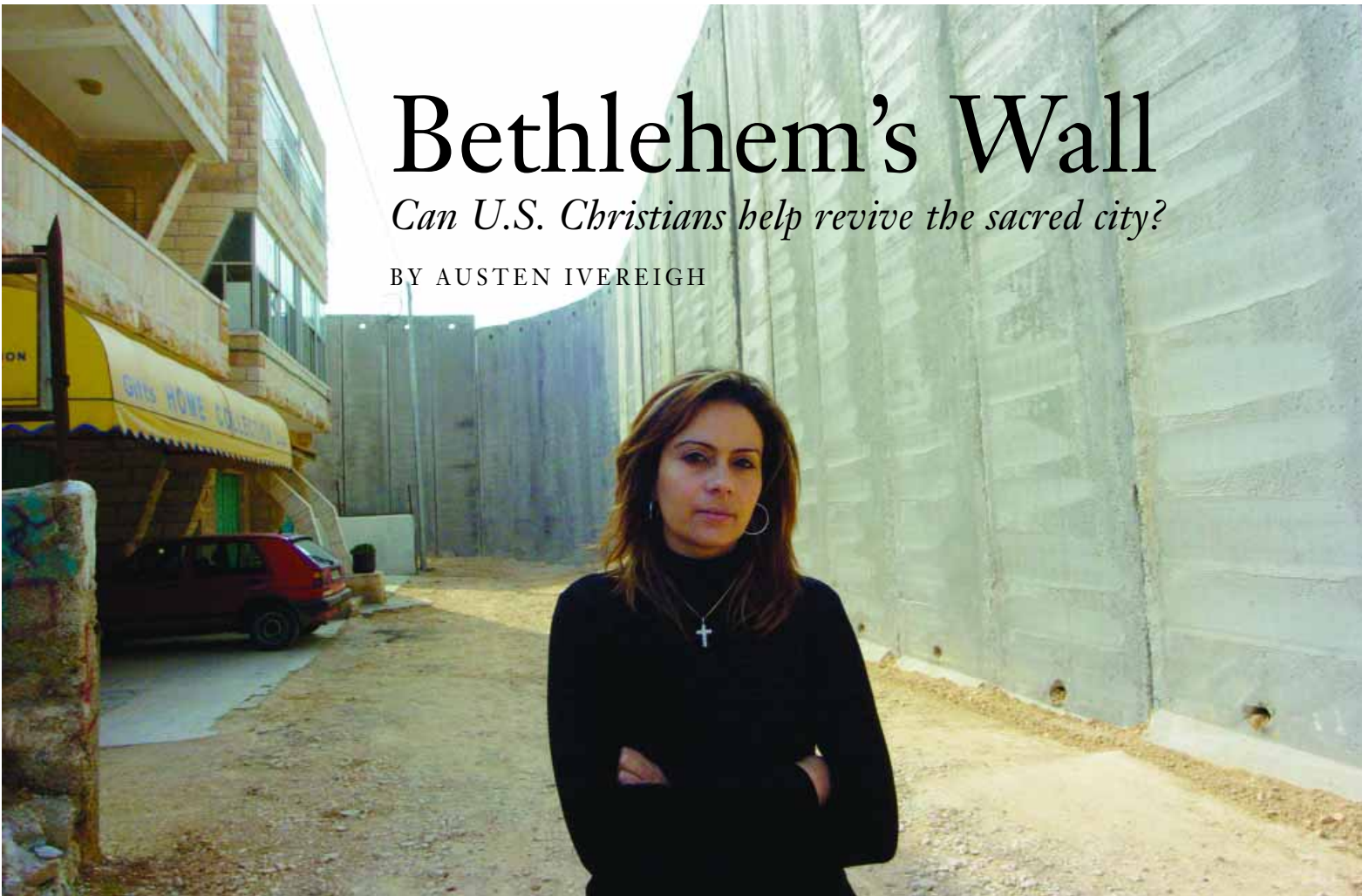
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# Bethlehem's Wall

*Can U.S. Christians help revive the sacred city?*

BY AUSTEN IVEREIGH



Claire Anastas, a Palestinian Catholic, stands between her family's apartment and the Israeli security wall in Bethlehem, West Bank.

**F**OR THE FIRST TIME IN MANY YEARS, there is some good news out of Bethlehem. The pilgrims on whom the town's Christians depend have begun to return; their number has increased by at least 50 percent from last year, which was in turn better than 2006. One can still sit in one of the chapels in the Basilica of the Nativity, the world's oldest church, without being disturbed—impossible in Jerusalem's holy sites. But now you need to wake up early to seize solitude in the little grotto of Christ's birthplace, time enough to touch the metal star embedded in marble and to ponder the divine eruption—before the Greek Orthodox priests throw a rug down the ancient steps and bark at you to get out so they can say Mass.

## Behind the Wall

Yet because so few tourists spend much time in the town, it remains shuttered and depressed. The reason they stay

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AUSTEN IVEREIGH, a writer, journalist and former adviser to Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, has been a regular visitor to Bethlehem. He was recently awarded a symbolic "Bethlehem passport" by Open Bethlehem.

away is the 30-foot-high concrete wall the Israelis have been building in fits and starts since 2002, which has severed Bethlehem from its sister city, Jerusalem, only a 20-minute drive away. The justification for the wall is security, to protect Jerusalem from suicide bombers. But the path it follows makes clear its real purpose: to consolidate the illegal Israeli settlements, which now flow down from Jerusalem almost to the borders of Bethlehem, on land seized from the town's Christian farmers. The wall is gray, chilling and spreads a fearful message. The Archbishop of Canterbury described it as "a symbol of all that is wrong in the human heart," when he visited at Christmas in 2006. So the pilgrims who come are disgorged from their coaches into the basilica and sent quickly around the Shepherd's Fields in nearby Beit Sahour, before they hurry back to Jerusalem—spending little, hearing little and passing up the chance to learn from one of the world's oldest Christian populations.

They miss out on the reasons why that population's future is under threat. Bethlehemites have long depended on the Jerusalem economy, yet they can no longer pass through the checkpoint without a special permit that is seldom granted. Some 345 square miles of land around Bethlehem, mostly owned by the town's Christian families,

PHOTO: CNS/DEBBIE HILL

have been confiscated by the Israelis, because the territory is in the “seam zone” area under military control. Two-thirds of the governorate of Bethlehem, which includes the adjoining hill suburbs of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, has been declared a military zone from which Palestinians are barred. Beit Jala has lost half its land, central Bethlehem a quarter and Beit Sahour a third.

Bethlehem has become a ghetto, severed from lands to the north and west by the wall, and to the south and east by settler-only roads. On land confiscated from Christian Arabs, Jewish-only settlements such as Gilo and Har Homa have been erected. Unemployment in Bethlehem is above 50 percent, and 3,000 Christians have left in the past few years. The shops lie idle, and the Christian olive-wood traders use increasingly desperate means—paying coach drivers huge commissions to snag the tour groups—to achieve sales.

The Salesian-run bakery in the old town is a barometer of Bethlehem’s poverty. Early each morning before the commercial bakeries open, the town’s neediest families line up outside to receive their daily bread, for which they pay only a few shekels each month. Suleiman, the chief baker, has worked with the vast ovens for 60 years, beginning as an eight-year-old boy. Every day, he says, they bake and give out 3,000 loaves—lighter and fluffier now, because the price of flour has soared—to around 600 families. Four years ago, they served 320 families.

The wonder is not that Bethlehem’s Christians are emigrating abroad, but how many stay. Next door at the Salesian technical school, Father Nicola describes how only 10 years ago most of its graduates commuted daily to Jerusalem. But the wall has stopped the flow of all but a few manual laborers (recruited, in a final humiliation, to help build the Israeli settlements on the land their own families once farmed). “There is no freedom,” Father Nicola says. “There is no opportunity to develop.”

### **Christian Exodus**

Since 2004, when the International Court of Justice ruled that the settlements were illegal and should be dismantled and the land’s owners compensated, Israel has built 30,000 Jewish-only housing units in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, according to the Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem, an independent watchdog group supported by the European Union. Bethlehemites wake up each day to see Gilo and Har Homa, wealthy suburbs on the other side of the wall that were built on their land. Others (A.R.I.J. has counted 220 “outposts” where settlers are claiming land) are far inside the West Bank, ringed by Israeli army checkpoints and fences. This is not just a land grab, creating “facts on the ground” that will determine the borders of a future balkanized Palestinian state, but a rush to control resources,

especially water. While settlers in Gilo hose down their cars and fill their swimming pools, Bethlehemites have to buy water weekly from trucks to fill the rooftop tanks that mark the town’s skyline.

The Salesians who make wine at the Cremisan estate, located on the terraced hillsides to the west of Bethlehem, live in the path of the wall. They cannot stop its expansion; they have a settlement behind them, far into the West Bank, and the wall is designed to ensure that the settlements are included within the Israeli border—when that is finally agreed upon. The Vatican has added its voice to the international condemnation, but until Israel implements the 2001 Fundamental Agreement with the Holy See, the juridical status of the Catholic Church is at best fragile and its power to negotiate limited. Israel has agreed to a Vatican request not to divide church lands that lie beneath the path of the wall, so when the wall is extended later this year, Cremisan will be cut off from Bethlehem—depriving the town of one of its oldest and popular landmarks—and from the Palestinian workers on whom the winery depends. “We are negotiating to allow the workers to come each day through the wall,” says Father Luciano, an elderly Italian Salesian at Cremisan. “But everything is very uncertain. It is a great weight on us.”

Because of the slow but steady emigration of Christians from Bethlehem—who tend to be among the town’s better-educated people, and who often go to live with relatives in the United States or Chile—this historically Christian town is fast becoming a Muslim one. Only a few years ago 90 percent of the “old core” of Bethlehem was Christian; now it is less than 50 percent. Christians now make up just one-third of the district’s population. Christian families are moving abroad, while farmers forced off their land are moving into ancient quarters like Anatreh, alongside the Nativity Church. The Latin patriarchate, based in Jerusalem, is discreetly buying up the empty houses abandoned by Christians on Star Street and Manger Street, hoping for the day when their owners will return.

Yet the town retains a distinctive Arab-Christian character, bolstered by the presence of religious orders and church associations (whether Latin, Melkite, Orthodox or Protestant) and the witness of many remarkable Christian charities. Edmund Shahadeh, the director of Bethlehem’s famous hospital for the disabled, says, “The best possible treatment for the poorest—this is Christianity.” He is passionate about the need for Christians to remain in the town, whatever the odds. “We are the bridge,” he says.

His point is regularly made by the Christians of Bethlehem. Without them the cycle of land annexation, reactive violence and further annexation will only get worse. The two eruptions of (Muslim) Palestinian violence protesting the settlements, the intifada of the late 1980s and another

er beginning in 2000, have only exacerbated the situation, handing Israel a justification for more annexations under the guise of security.

### Dispelling American Myths

The wall is strangling Bethlehem and its Christian population. It will come down only when Christian public opinion in the United States awakens to that fact and issues an S.O.S. for the birth town of Christianity, putting pressure on Washington to enforce international law.

But that means dispelling some deeply held myths. A 2006 Zogby opinion poll commissioned by the campaign organization Open Bethlehem found that only 15 percent of Americans know that Bethlehem is a Palestinian town with a mixed Christian-Muslim Arab population in the occupied West Bank. Bethlehemites, when asked why Christians are leaving, point to the wall and speak about the land confiscations; yet most Americans believe Christians are being pushed out by “radical Muslims.” Most Americans simply do not realize that the wall is responsible for the destruction of the town’s Christian population; instead, they accept Israel’s argument that the wall was built to protect Israel from terrorist attacks, not to consolidate the illegal settlements and land annexations.

The poll also accounted for the difficulty in attracting tourists to Bethlehem. Two-thirds of Americans believe it

is unsafe to visit. As a regular visitor these past years, I am amazed by this misconception. A sleepier, safer place is hard to imagine. Not only has there been no political violence for many years, but the last recorded incident in which a tourist was harmed took place in the early 1970s. Bethlehem has been for the most part a model of peaceful Christian-Muslim coexistence since the seventh century.

The key to Bethlehem’s survival as Christianity’s capital is for the world’s believers in Jesus Christ to come and claim it, taking advantage of its many merits as a base for visits to the holy sites in Jerusalem as well as the Judean desert. The idea of Bethlehem-based pilgrimages has begun to catch on, encouraged by visits from church leaders and the efforts of Open Bethlehem to persuade people that the town is safe and welcoming. Christians in Bethlehem need, above all, for people to come and stay and hear their story—and to pray with them. Visitors willing to do so assist Christian livelihoods and rescue Bethlehemites from an isolation that threatens their continued existence. The beleaguered descendants of the first witnesses to the Incarnation do not want to leave. And they need our help to stay. **A**



From the archives, Drew Christiansen, S.J., on the uncertain future of Middle East Christians, at [americamagazine.org/pages](http://americamagazine.org/pages).

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CULTURE'S NINTH ANNUAL FALL  
CONFERENCE

# The Family

SEARCHING FOR FAIREST LOVE

November 6-8, 2008

Helen Alvaré    Thomas Hibbs  
Philip Bess    John Finnis  
Janet Smith    David Lyle Jeffrey  
James McKenna    Gilbert Meilaender  
H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr.    Msgr. Charles Brown



“Only the truth will prepare you for a love which can be called ‘fairest love.’ The contemporary family, like families in every age, is searching for fairest love.”

~John Paul II, 1994 Letter to Families

## Sabbatical in Scotland

A Seven Week Sabbatical in Perth, Scotland

St. Mary’s Monastery, overlooking the historic city of Perth, is the gateway to the Highlands of Scotland, and provides an ideal environment for sabbatical rest and spiritual renewal. Participants invariably highlight these renewal dimensions of our course: the focus on inner healing and personal growth, the contemplative approach to prayer, emphasis on a spirituality of true self-esteem, the introduction to Celtic studies and spirituality and the three day pilgrimage to St. Columba’s island of Iona. And they all enjoyed being in Scotland. Easy access to Edinburgh, St. Andrews and Glasgow.

### Sabbatical Courses

20 October – 4 December 2008

11 May – 25 June 2009

19 October – 3 December 2009

Full details of all our courses and retreats on  
[www.kinnoullmonastery.org](http://www.kinnoullmonastery.org).

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