



The first snowfall of winter has timed its appearance well as it arrives just as I put pen to paper for this Christmas Newsletter. A sign not only of the change in temperature but also of the proximity of the Christmas season. The main reception in Drumalis is full of suitcases as the boys from Abbey Grammar prepare for departure after 3 days on retreat, while the women for the Crafters weekend are starting to arrive. A further two groups will arrive later in the afternoon. On the topic of good timing, the heating in the new part of the house broke down yesterday. All part and parcel of the pattern of life at Drumalis.

Over the past two months we have been getting necessary renovations done to the exterior of the house, with guttering replaced, windows repaired and a start has been made to painting the Heritage House. The plunge in temperature may mean that we have to wait until spring for the painting to be completed, but it will be well worth the wait.



Work begins on re-painting the Heritage House

Mention of Abbey CBS is an indication of the growing number of schools now making use of Drumalis for their school retreats. Previously this year we have hosted Assumption Grammar (Ballynahinch), Our Lady's Grammar (Newry), Dominican College (Fortwilliam), while next week will see two days with the Sixth Formers from St Marys' CBGS (Glen Road). It is encouraging to see so many young people enjoying the facilities here at Drumalis as well being invited to deliver retreats in schools.

This morning I also heard news of the death of a friend who leaves behind a partner and their children. The television was giving details of further deaths of innocent men, women and children on the streets of Gaza. Speculation is rife about what happens next in Ukraine following recent election results and the world seems to be holding its breath as we enter further into uncertain times.

It is into this world of joy and pain, of courage and brutality, that the Child Jesus is born. The message of the manger foreshadows the message of the Cross - there is nowhere too humble on this earth for God to be found; there is nothing that can separate us from the abundant love of God.

So while the world may prefer the tinsel, the lights and the decorations, the Child Jesus invites us to come as we are to receive his gifts of love, peace and joy.

The team at Drumalis would like to thank all our friends for the great support you have given us over recent times. In a time of change, your support and friendship has not been taken for granted. We hope and pray that every blessing you need will be yours during this Christmas season. May it be a time of rest, renewal and creating many happy memories with those you love. We look forward to seeing you all again in 2025.

Forthcoming Events at Drumalis

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| 31 Jan | Under the Cloak of St Brigid: Tea, Tales, Lunch and Craft
with Vicky McFarland (11 am - 2:30 pm) |
| 21-23 February | "The Music of Leonard Cohen as a Window to the God of the Scriptures"
Weekend Retreat led by Sean Goan |
| 21 April | Easter Monday Open Day (12 noon - 4 pm) |
| 23 - 29 June | "Walking Together... Communal Presence" Guided Retreat
with Sr Joann Heinritz CSJ |
| 30 June - 9 July | Choice of 8 day, 6 day or 4 day Individually Guided Retreat
with Fr John Eagers and Drumalis Team |
| 12 - 21 August | Choice of 8 day, 6 day or 4 day Individually Guided Retreat
with Fr Piaras Jackson SJ and Drumalis Team |

Please check Drumalis Website/Facebook page regularly for updates.

Weekend Retreats at Drumalis

The past six months has seen a wide variety of weekend retreats being offered in Drumalis. Particularly encouraging has been the uptake in retreats from across the churches, including Belfast City chaplains, the CS Lewis Fellowship, Cursillo, Young Life International, Methodist ministers, Presbyterian clergy and their families.

A few retreats attracted significant feedback from participants. Sr Sheila Curran RSM facilitated a weekend on **“Wise Women and Prophetesses: Journeying with Women in the Bible.”** One participant reflected that her *“eyes had been opened to the great treasure of stories about women in the scriptures.”*

Sean Goan presented a weekend retreat on **“The Music of Leonard Cohen as a window to the God of the Scriptures.”** The reaction to that particular weekend was such that we have a second weekend planned for February 2025 on the same theme. Ten of the participants on the first weekend have already signed up for the next one. A good sign for anyone considering attending! Please register your interest as soon as possible to secure your place.

We held a **“Loss and Blessings”** Day of Reflection in November. This well-attended day of prayer and symbols was an opportunity to remember the loss of loved but also to count the blessings we have received from them. The final act of the day was the planting of a tree of remembrance in the front garden with a final blessing from Rev Arlene Moore (*pictured right*).



Educating the Next Generation on God's Creation

Drumalis is a place of peacefulness and tranquility. It is an oasis that allows time and space for introspection; a space that allows us to re-evaluate our lives and to focus on what is important; away from the hubbub of the school routine. Our Year 13/14 A Level Religious Studies class visited Drumalis Retreat and Conference Centre in Larne last February. Its beautiful building and gardens provided an appropriate space to allow our Dominican girls to set time aside for introspection, prayer and meditation. This was our pupils' first opportunity, since Covid, to experience a retreat off site and it was very memorable for them all. Anna Privilege, one of the students who attended shared her thoughts: ***“It is great to have the opportunity to explore our faith in a relaxed way...our discussions were thought provoking. I loved our sensory walks in the gardens, even though it was raining. It just brought a whole new perspective to our Religion classes. The retreat allowed us to speak and be heard in a wholesome way, that reflected a mutual respect between everyone.”***

The warm welcome, the thought-provoking activities and the delicious lunch made the experience very special. It appealed on so many levels to our older pupils and it was their feedback that encouraged us to arrange an Eco Retreat with Mr Brian McKee and Sr Therese.

Our Year 9 Retreat took place on the 15th October and was based on the theme of ecology linking into the Year 9 RE curriculum on our responsibility for the planet, our role as stewards of God's creation, and reflecting on Pope Francis' encyclical on caring for our common home. The retreat included a tour of the beautiful grounds at Drumalis (*pictured left*) led by local volunteer Bertie, who described some of the projects underway to re-wild the estate and encourage biodiversity and wildlife.



After a delicious lunch, the retreat ended with a calming meditation. Our Year 9 pupils thoroughly enjoyed the experience and left Drumalis brimming with ideas on how to actively respond to Pope Francis' call and many have already spoken of how they have already encouraged their family to plant wildflower seeds in preparation for next spring or to add birdfeeders to their garden!

***- Mrs Carmel Niblock, Head of Religion and Joanne Webb,
Co-ordinator for the Liturgical Life of the School.***

European Heritage Open Day

Over two hundred people attended the **European Heritage Open Day** on Saturday, 14 September. The reception foyer was buzzing with activity throughout the afternoon. As well as the ever popular guided tours and afternoon teas, the environmental work at Drumalis was highlighted thanks to a wonderful display put together by Bertie Stirling from A Rocha. Between the showers, Bertie also managed to lead an ecological walk in the grounds.

There was something for the younger members of the family too - in the craft room, Brian's wife, Elizabeth, offered face-painting and Katrina's daughter, Aideen, led Victorian-themed craft activities, including creating cup and ball games and thaumatropes!

It was very much a family affair with Linda's young daughter, Lily, taking part enthusiastically and we were delighted to welcome back Damien and Barbara Donaghy's daughter, Catherine, who helped out along with Maighread at the tombola whilst on a visit back home from Germany.

We are indebted to all our volunteers for giving up their time not only on Open Days but throughout the year. Their support cannot be underestimated.

A bustling reception foyer on Open Day →



All things creative...



Barely a weekend has gone by throughout the autumn without the craft room and large conference room being a hive of artistic activity. We have welcomed Crafty Scrappers, Stitches and for the first time the Quilters Guild of Ireland., who are already planning a return visit in 2025.

These groups have been in addition to the regular WI Craft Ladies and Paul Holmes' art group, who meet twice weekly. The latter have christened themselves the **Drumalis Art Group** and have produced a fabulous calendar illustrating their talents, which has been on sale at reception.

It is easy to see why Drumalis is so perfectly suited for such events and provides inspiration for those who come. Art is woven throughout the fabric of the building - whether in the architecture of George Walton in the Heritage Building, Helen Sanlon's artwork "Boundaries" in the Elizabeth Prout Conference Room, the hand-carved wooden Stations of the Cross by John Haugh, the much loved red Stained Glass by Neil Shawcross or the works by husband and wife, Dara Hand and Alison Britton, commissioned for the new building including Dara's "Embrace" sculpture which welcomes all located at the entrance to the main car park.

Parish Retreats

Over fifty parishioners from Glengormley and Carrickfergus & Whitehead Parishes attended the final Parish Retreat of the year, which took place from 5-6 October. It was a wonderful turnout for the last retreat of 2024. The retreat was led by Fr Darren Brennan and the Drumalis Parish Retreat Team.

The theme for this year's retreat programme was "**A Symphony of Prayer**" which truly resonated amongst this year's retreatants. Retreatants were invited to rekindle and deepen their relationship with God, to listen to His voice and to seek His healing grace.

The Parish Retreats would not be possible without the support of the priests and voluntary team members who lead them.

We are grateful for their efforts in continuing this very important part of the ministry at Drumalis and look forward to what they have in store in 2025.

Summer Retreats

July and August are traditionally the months when Drumalis offers a programme of summer retreats and 2024 was no different. From 1-10 July and from 13-22 August, Directed Retreats took place at Drumalis. The Directed Retreat team was made up of Fr John Eagers in July and Fr Piaras Jackson in August as well as Sr Finola Cunnane SSL, Sr Phyllis Behan RSC, Margaret Webb and Josephine O'Neill. The retreats were offered on a choice of either four, six or eight day options – both of which were fully booked. It was particularly encouraging to see the diversity in this year's attendance - in terms of age, background, etc.

Sr Joann Heinritz CSJ also led a five-day Guided Retreat, **“Mending the Gaps”** from 14-20 July.

We received excellent feedback from the retreatants. To give just one example of the many positive comments:

“Blessings of the retreat... there are numerous! The place, the comfort, the peace, the input from Joann, the handouts, the food and variety of it, the silence and the whole place lead to a real spiritual renewal. I am going away enriched and refreshed – thanks to all the staff who made it so good for us.”

The dates have already been confirmed for next year's summer retreat programme. Please see front page of the newsletter for further details.

“A Living Community”

One of the overwhelming successes of 2024 at Drumalis has been the Lunch Club events. Since offering a taster session in May, they have now become a firm part of our monthly programme. They regularly sell out and have brought many local people to Drumalis who have never been here before - despite being in their eighties and older!

The idea is simple - a two course, sometimes themed, lunch is offered at 1 pm on specific dates each month. We try to keep the cost low to make it accessible and places are limited to around fifty each time.

It has been heartwarming to hear how they have impacted people's lives. One elderly lady commented that she usually doesn't feel comfortable to attend events on her own but she considers Drumalis as home and a place where she can come and enjoy herself without relying on others. Another was brought to tears as she expressed how much she looks forward to them every month. Drumalis truly comes alive at these lunches with conversations around the tables, friendships formed or rekindled. We are grateful too to our kitchen and dining room staff for their wonderful food and attentive service at these events.

As the Newsletter goes to print, we are approaching the end of a busy festive programme of events including Christmas storytelling, crafting and lunches. At a recent lunch, guests were entertained by the talented “This is Me” choir - as Brian wrote about it on the Facebook page, “Friendship - community - living in the present moment...”

One part of the Drumalis Vision Statement refers to **“A living community where all experience the power of God's love and compassion.”** In 2025, we hope to build on this “living community” by offering more in-house retreats, events, lunches and days of reflection as well as strengthening links with local community groups such as Extern and with schools and churches. There is much to look forward to in the year ahead.



“This is Me” Choir entertaining guests at Christmas

Final Thoughts - Christmas Message of Pope Francis from 2023

From the manger, the Child Jesus asks us to be the voice of those who have no voice. The voice of the innocent children who have died for lack of bread and water; the voice of those who cannot find work or who have lost their jobs; the voice of those forced to flee their lands in search of a better future, risking their lives in grueling journeys and prey to unscrupulous traffickers.

Brothers and sisters, we are approaching the season of grace and hope that is the Jubilee, due to begin a year from now. May this time of preparation for the Holy Year be an opportunity for the conversion of hearts, for the rejection of war and the embrace of peace, and for joyfully responding to the Lord's call, in the words of Isaiah's prophecy, “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” (61:1).

Those words were fulfilled in Jesus (cf. *Lk* 4:18), who is born today in Bethlehem. **Let us welcome him! Let us open our hearts to him, who is the Saviour, the Prince of Peace!**