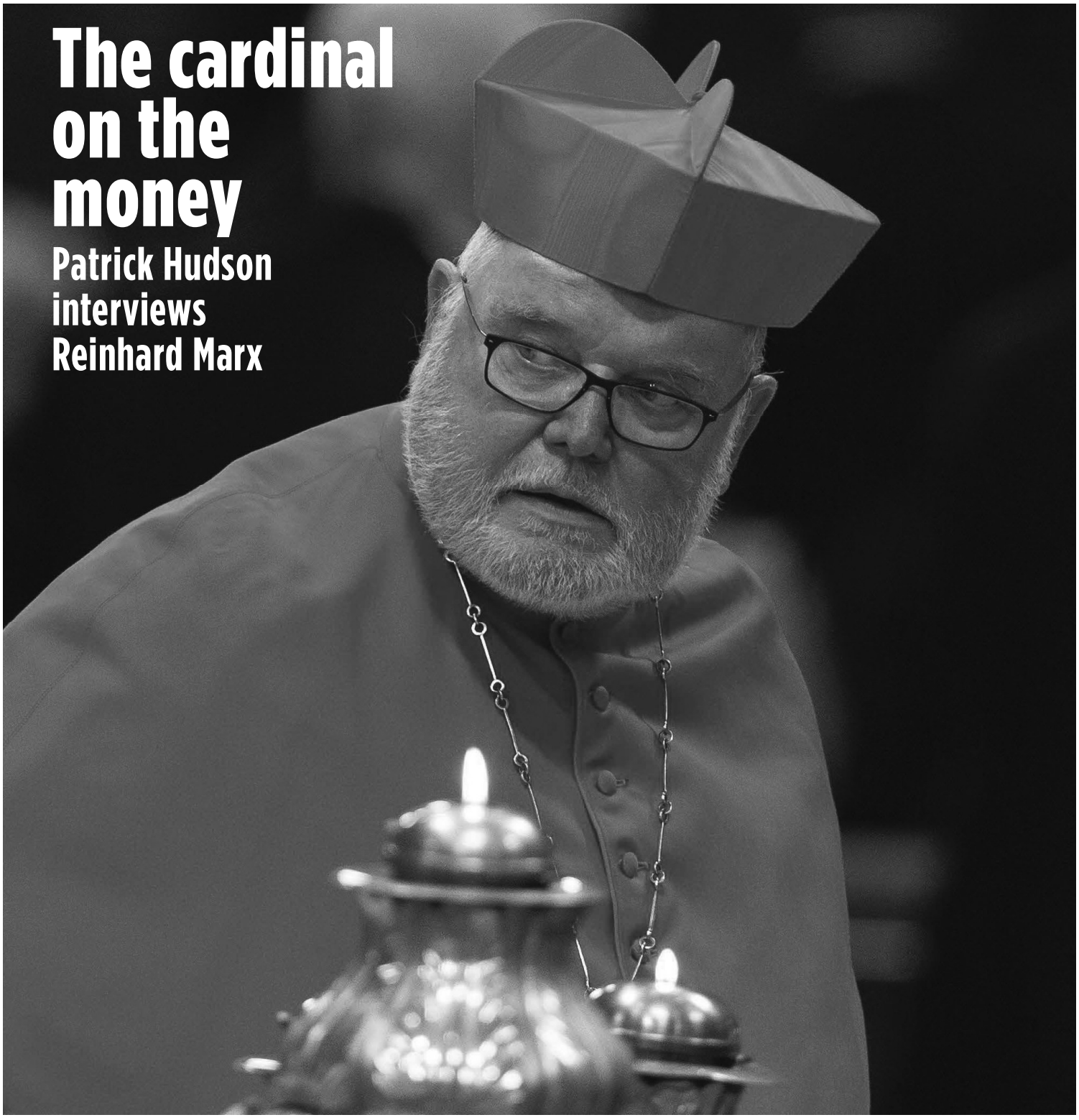
THE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

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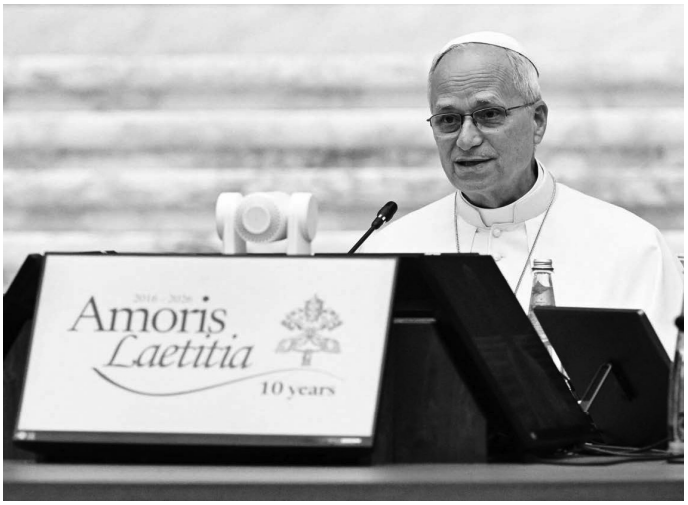
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Amoris Laetitia beyond doubt

Ten years after Pope Francis' landmark teaching on marriage and the family created an uproar among some conservative Catholics, a gathering in Rome of the presidents of the world's bishops' conferences has confirmed that it is now a settled part of the life of the Church / **By AUSTEN IVEREIGH**

'We're in a different place now'

ALAMY/ABACA/VATICAN MEDIA, SIMONE RISOLUTI



A real shift in the Church: Pope Leo XIV addresses the recent 'Amoris at 10' summit in Rome

BACK IN 2012, when the Cameron government sought to redefine marriage by extending it to same-sex couples, I sallied forth in the media to explain the Church's objections. The communications project I ran at the time was inspired by what Pope Benedict XVI called the "new evangelisation", whose basic idea was that the Church in secularised Christian countries should "boldly" – there was a lot of talk of *boldness* – take its arguments into the chilly public square, defying the claims of secularism that the Church was a mere interest group whose beliefs had no claim on public debate.

Getting airtime was easy, it turned out, because after their vigorous statements objecting to the bill, the Catholic bishops of England and Wales opted to give no interviews to defend them, and the studios were delighted to have a sacrificial victim to make what they assumed was their homophobic, theocratic case. Traipsing between the London studios of *Channel 4 News*, BBC2's *Daily Politics* and Al-Jazeera among others, I set out a theology-free, common-good position. First, the bishops were upholding a definition of marriage as conjugal (man plus woman), exclusive, open to life and committed for life as the best way to raise children of biological parents in a stable, permanent relationship. Second, this longstanding *meaning* of marriage had been upheld in law and culture, by both Church and State, because it was uniquely beneficial for those involved as a school of love, but also – given its outcomes for children, etc. – for society as a whole. Third, redefining marriage stripped out those properties, reduced it to a love union based on emotional satisfaction, rendered incoherent the state's support for it and dethroned it as a cultural model and ideal for young couples. Which, I explained, fourth, was bad news for everyone.

I didn't get much of this out: the very idea that marriage could be defined in this way and "imposed" by the Church outraged the other studio guests. Surely, they spluttered, marriage was "about love", and was all love not equal? Did gay couples not also make commitments? In the green room before we both went in to be grilled on BBC Radio 4's *Moral Maze*, the then head of Stonewall, Ben Summerskill, ribbed me about the Catholic Church's "obsession with sex". For most gay couples, he told me airily, marriage was primarily "about" companionship and support. Sex just wasn't important. "You've given me another reason for being here," I told him. "If marriage isn't a sexual institution, what the heck is it?"

Later I reflected on the quixotic absurdity of trying to debate the *telos* of marriage on UK television in the early twenty-first century: that horse had not just bolted, but emigrated. But as the child of messily divorced Catholic parents, who had himself only recently married after chaotic years of commitment-phobia, I was troubled by something else: the distance between the norm I believed the law should defend and the reality on the Catholic ground – not just in my own life, but in that of almost everyone I knew. The statistics across the western world confirmed that baptised Catholics were as likely if not more than everyone else to cohabit and divorce – a point my studio interlocutors charitably didn't make – and if practising Catholics did better it was because the cohabiting and divorced had mostly stopped practising. (Since then, divorce among Catholics has declined sharply, but only because so many fewer are getting married.)

THREE THINGS became clear to me at that time, which I was also hearing from the sidelines at bishops' synods in Rome. The first was that, even though the cultural meaning of marriage had mostly collapsed, the Church continued to act with a neo-Christendom mindset, assuming that people learned marriage from the example of kith and kin. But this was no longer true and, having recently attended them, I knew that, as Pope Francis said in 2018, "three or four meetings in the parish church cannot be defined as 'marriage preparation'". The second was that, in such a context, the bid to uphold indissolubility through the law alone – the discipline of the sacraments backed by a tribunal to assess nullity – risked Pharisaism, laying burdens but making no effort to help people bear them.

At ground level that might not be true: pastors guided couples and nursed them through failure. But they did so in an institutional and legal setting that left few pastoral openings in practice, especially for those who came (back) to faith after remarrying and starting new families, and who, for different reasons, could not seek an annulment. John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio* in 1981 had agreed that not all situations were alike and called for careful discernment, but resisted giving this any practical effect: admitting irregular couples to the sacraments would lead to "error and confusion", he wrote. In the eyes of church law, therefore, all were per se adulterers in mortal sin barred from the sacraments unless they left their spouses or forwent sex with them.

Then came Pope Francis, who believed the issue could no longer be brushed under the carpet, and who had supported the Latin American Church's call in 2007 for a special accompaniment of the separated and divorced, and better marriage preparation. His main concern was the weakening of family ties in society generally, noting in *Evangelii Gaudium* that strengthening marriage and family was core to the Church's evangelising mission "to heal wounds, to build bridges, to strengthen relationships". The fact that the Church was failing in that mission led him to call a two-part Synod on the Family in 2014 and 2015, the biggest deliberation in the Church since Vatican II. Unlike the synod of

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1980, when bishops were told what not to say, or quoted the Pope back at himself, Francis told them at the start of the October 2014 gathering to speak up honestly, even if the Pope wouldn't like it, and to listen with humility to each other. They gradually learned to do that, and to hold together the gospel tensions of truth and mercy. It was wild at times, but bore great fruit. The family synods were where modern synodality, born in Latin America, shook up the universal Church, allowing the Spirit to crack open new horizons.

What happened was a "pastoral conversion". As Francis confessed in his 50,000-word post-synod teaching *Amoris Laetitia*, the Church had too often "wasted pastoral energy in denouncing a decadent world" rather than actually helping couples enter and live out commitment. "We have long thought that by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families," he wrote. *Amoris Laetitia* is full of grace and practical *pastoralità*. It calls for the Church to follow God's lead to come close, listen and help people grow: into commitment, out from failure, developing consciences, learning to love. Without altering doctrine – every page of *Amoris* affirms marriage as I had described it in those studios – Francis allows space for the Church to enable people to get there and live it out, using principles such as mercy, discernment and gradualness. A remarkable fourth chapter, written by Francis himself, is the heart of the exhortation: a meditation on St Paul's famous Corinthian description of true love. Francis carefully explains how each feature is lived and learned in the praxis of marriage and family.

Amoris is a landmark church teaching, one of the most significant of the modern era, a road map to build marriage from the ground up in a culture where it is everywhere in decline. But the Church was not ready to receive it. The uproar over its attempt to give practical effect in the external forum to the discernment John Paul II had called for led to large parts of the conservative Church in the US turning its back on Francis, accusing him of surrendering to modernity. Chapter 8 of *Amoris* asked pastors to apply law and doctrine carefully, keeping in mind both the law and concrete circumstances, and spelt out the criteria for doing so, adding in a discreet footnote that helping people grow in grace and charity "can include the help of sacraments". Yet only a handful of bishops' conferences – in Europe, only Malta, Germany, Belgium, Austria – came up with guidelines to implement the provisions, despite Pope Francis confirming as authoritative those of the Buenos Aires region, which could easily be copied. In 2023, seven years after *Amoris*, the Vatican asked bishops' conferences to "agree on some minimum criteria to implement the proposals of *Amoris Laetitia*" in order to "help priests in the processes of accompaniment and discernment regarding the possible access to the sacraments of some divorced persons in a new union". It's not clear if any did.

Equally uncertain has been the take-up of Pope Francis' call for the full-scale "marriage catechumenate" sketched out in *Amoris*. The old model presupposed a culture that formed people for marriage, but Francis believed that the Church had to form people modelled on the Early Church journey into faith, beginning with a basic evangelisation and concluding in a mystagogy of the first years of marriage. Marrying couples had a claim on the Church's time and resources as much as clergy do, he believed. In 2022, the Vatican produced *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*, which spelt all this out; but while many dioceses have noted it, few seem to have done much with it.

AND YET, as the recent week-long "*Amoris* at 10" summit in Rome showed, there has been a real shift in the Church, one that signals that the pastoral conversion it called for has taken root. "*Amoris* was an invitation to pastoral conversion: listening before judging, discerning situations with an open heart, facilitating the encounter with God's mercy," as Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta put it at the final press conference. Speaking on and off the record to people present in the Paul VI Hall, it is clear that there is no going back: "We're in a different place now" was a commonly heard phrase. Indeed, the purpose of Leo XIV calling the presidents of the world's bishops' conferences together – 111 out of 115 came – was precisely to take stock of that new place, to listen deeply to the "stories of what God has done among us", as he put it to them in his opening address. With his genius for gently enabling visionary Francis-era teachings to land, Leo himself modelled the pastoral approach of *Amoris* in those remarks, holding together the ideal with the pastoral realities and searching for what God is doing there. This was not about relitigating the controversies around *Amoris*, but harvesting its fruits in order to assist its implementation.

Amoris was an invitation to pastoral conversion: listening before judging, discerning with an open heart

Key to the meeting was its synodal method, which is emerging as the modus operandi of the Leo era: this is the third such episcopal global gathering since his election, and follows two consistories of cardinals. An Irish theological expert at the meeting, Fr Eamonn Conway, author of a new book on synodality called *Changing to Be Faithful*, told me it showed that "this is the normal way now that the Church dialogues, discerns and decides". Avril Baigent, director of the UK's School for Synodality, served as a facilitator. She was struck by how the meeting was "a very interesting experiment on how you reflect on a document", receiving it by discernment, such that it bears fruit in concrete action and processes.

Although organised by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, the summit's machinery was the task of the synod office: 16 round-table language groups (mostly English, Spanish and Italian), each with a facilitator, using conversation in the Spirit, following 40 minutes of three daily inputs, from a couple, a bishop and an expert, with the last two made public. Each table produced a daily synthesis which was fed to a group of theologians responsible for "reading" the fruits, collating them and stitching together a final report. It was intended to make this public at the meeting's end, but Leo – after being whisked into hospital for emergency lung cancer surgery – asked to be given time to read and reflect on it first.

In this way, the method supported the objective: the pastoral conversion involved in the reception of *Amoris* is intertwined with the synodal, missionary conversion which Francis and now Leo are seeking to bring about. Nowhere was this clearer than in a powerful 10-minute video by one of the new stars of the global Church, Cardinal Pablo David, Bishop of the Diocese of Kalookan in the Philippines, which covers three populous cities on the outskirts of Manila. "We have learned that what first appears to us as an irresponsible and dysfunctional family can look very different when we enter the home and listen to its story," he began. What followed was an account of the conversion of the Church's learning a whole new approach: pastors walking the streets and listening, creating mission stations and small communities in places the parish did not reach, enabling communities to form that are capable of carrying fragile families. It was full of pastoral conversion. "Accompaniment," he said, "is not merely what a priest or pastoral worker does for a family. It is what the Christian community gradually learns to become around that family."

"Listening", "accompaniment" and "discernment" have entered the Church's language, along with respect for consciences and context, while other words that categorise without nuance have become less common, such as "irregular" and "living in sin". "Fragility", used in *Amoris* to describe particular pastoral situations, is increasingly recognised as the basic trait of all family life today. "The experience of fragility raises the question of whether we are able to remain close to one another when life no longer corresponds to what had been hoped for, and whether we can recognise the work of grace even in situations marked by limits, wounds and apparent failure," as Leo put it in his opening remarks. The strong presence of the global missionary Church – most of the English-speaking tables had seven or eight Asians and Africans, and just two or three Europeans and North Americans – underlined this shift. Cohabiting young people nervous of commitment is one challenge; families torn apart by violence, poverty and migration is another. And how would you classify 15-year-olds marrying to avoid brutal

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military conscription, as happens in the diocese of one of the bishops at the summit?

Another shift is the place of families themselves in the Church's witness and proclamation. "Many said: we're ministering not just *to* families, but we're ministering *with* families, and we are in a sense empowering and enabling families to embrace their share in the mission of the Church," Fr Raymond Lafontaine, a Canadian facilitator, told me. "Families are no longer viewed as merely recipients of pastoral care, but as subjects or agents," Fr Conway agrees, adding that often "the role of the pastor shifts from judge to guarantor of processes of discernment that only the people themselves can make."

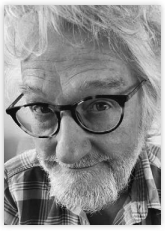
THERE WERE isolated attempts to reopen the debates over Chapter 8, but they met an overwhelming view in the room that the interpretation of that question is settled. But implementation of discernment processes remains poor. Some bishops are annoyed that the issue has been devolved on to them without clearer consensus from above, while pastors often feel they are left alone to deal with complex circumstances. Leo may now feel he has to encourage more to be done here as part of his confirmation of *Amoris* in the life of the Church. "An anticipated fruit of this meeting," thinks Fr Conway, "is that dioceses that are not providing this kind of companionship or accompaniment are being called upon to do so."

Leo may also want to encourage bishops to embrace the catechumenal approach to marriage formation. Fr Lafontaine saw a consensus emerging "that marriage was an opportunity for a kind of primary formation", one that was "not only catechumenal but mystagogical in the sense that that it's not sufficient merely to prepare couples for marriage and then have that stop at the time of the ceremony". Small basic communities in poor countries offer such support and sustenance, but in the individualised West, full-on formation is needed, beginning with basic evangelisation, which sees the wedding as a waymark, not the finishing line.

And here is the great evangelising task that Francis believed the Church was missing. What emerged "in a big way", said Dr Baigent, was this opportunity to bring the Gospel to bear on a hurting world, one even more precarious and unstable than a decade ago. "It wasn't just 'Here is this Catholic teaching in a world that isn't marrying' or 'We need to get these young people back into being married again'," she said, "but 'What is the opportunity to present this in a world which is lonely?'" The sense was that "the Church has got a gift here for the world" and it was past time to unwrap it. As Francis almost said in *Amoris*: if not the Church, who?

Austen Ivereigh is a fellow in contemporary church history at Campion Hall, Oxford. The inputs from the summit, including Cardinal David's video, are at: www.amorislaetitia.va/en.html

The Tablet Development Fund Appeal 2026



The Tablet Lecture is one of the highlights of our year. It's a moment for us to meet readers, friends and supporters and to reflect on who we are and what we're for. It was an honour to have Archbishop Paul Gallagher KCMG, the foreign minister of the Holy See, with us to deliver the lecture this year, to have the broadcaster Julie Etchingham leading the discussion and to have the apostolic nuncio to Great Britain, Archbishop Miguel Maury Buendía, among our guests.

As Archbishop Gallagher was speaking, Pope Leo was recovering from the operation that removed a cancerous tumour from his lung. It felt as if a friend we all knew was sick in hospital. This is a moment when it sometimes feels as if we are hanging on to our humanity by a thread. Not only Catholics and fellow Christians but many people outside the Church see in Pope Leo a lonely defender of the dignity of every human life, of the rule of law, of honesty and decency in public life, of our common home and our shared humanity. He seems able to reach into the Scriptures and the wisdom of the Church and find the words and stories that express the truths we all share. He is an Augustinian friar, and the world is yearning for the particular Augustinian genius that brings together community, friendship, peace, contemplation, mission, reading and conversation, and service to the poor.

"Your work is more vital than ever," Pope Leo often says to journalists. Earlier this year, in his first encyclical, Pope Leo said, "The first contribution we can make towards a more humane civilization is to be mindful of our words." That's what *The Tablet* is for. To weigh, to refine, to polish our words. To speak with freedom, with responsibility, with care for others. To bring some of the joy and beauty of creation into people's lives. And to ask awkward questions – the Church needs its doubting Thomas as well as its Peter and Paul.

In a tumultuous media world in which every independent magazine and newspaper is fearful of its future, *The Tablet* has been able to survive and prosper thanks to the extraordinary loyalty of its readers and subscribers. But growth is the surest evidence of life, as John Henry Newman wrote. We're committed to continuing to produce one of the most lively and agile – as well as one of the oldest – weekly magazines in the world. But there are new opportunities for us to enrich our storytelling and analysis, increase our reach to younger people and to English language speakers in every part of the world: short films and videos, podcasts, webinars and live events and debates.

Thank you for all you have done to help make the success of *The Tablet* possible. *The Tablet* has a dazzling future as well as a venerable history. But we need your help to make our continued growth possible.

Brendan Walsh, Editor of The Tablet

Please do give whatever you can afford towards our Development Fund. Every penny gets invested back into *The Tablet* to ensure its sustainability for generations to come.

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