

BBC Radio 4's "Thought for the Day" - 24th December 2010



Pope Benedict XVI gave the following message

Recalling with great fondness my four-day visit to the United Kingdom last September, I am glad to have the opportunity to greet you once again, and indeed to greet listeners everywhere as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ. Our thoughts turn back to a moment in history when God's chosen people, the children of Israel, were living in intense expectation. They were waiting for the Messiah that God had promised to send, and they pictured him as a great leader who would rescue them from foreign domination and restore their freedom.

God is always faithful to his promises, but he often surprises us in the way he fulfils them. The child that was born in Bethlehem did indeed bring liberation, but not only for the people of that time and place - he was to be the Saviour of all people throughout the world and throughout history. And it was not a political liberation that he brought, achieved through military means: rather, Christ destroyed death for ever and restored life by means of his shameful death on the Cross. And while he was born in poverty and obscurity, far from the centres of earthly power, he was none other than the Son of God. Out of love for us he took upon himself our human condition, our fragility, our vulnerability, and he opened up for us the path that leads to the fullness of life, to a share in the life of God himself. As we ponder this great mystery in our hearts this Christmas, let us give thanks to God for his goodness to us, and let us joyfully proclaim to those around us the good news that God offers us freedom from whatever weighs us down: he gives us hope, he brings us life.

Dear Friends from Scotland, England, Wales and indeed every part of the English-speaking world, I want you to know that I keep all of you very much in my prayers during this Holy Season. I pray for your families, for your children, for those who are sick, and for those who are going through any form of hardship at this time. I pray especially for the elderly and for those who are approaching the end of their days. I ask Christ, the light of the nations, to dispel whatever darkness there may be in your lives and to grant to every one of you the grace of a peaceful joyful Christmas. May God bless all of you!

Pope John Paul II and the Lepers

When Pope John Paul II visited South Korea in 1984 he was scheduled to make a brief stop of an hour on Friday 4th May on Sorokdo Island that lies just 650 yards from southern extremity of the mainland.

It is a pine-covered patch of land whose pleasant beaches belie the fact that they surround the country's biggest leper colony, where the hundreds of patients are generally kept far from the rest of the population. The protocol called for the Pope to enter the pavilion where the patients were gathered, give a brief speech on the meaning of suffering, then leave.



Pope John Paul II on Sorokdo Island 4/5/1982

Lepers without hands, some blind and many hobbling with sticks, eagerly awaited the arrival of the Pope amongst the rain-swept pine trees. Tears rolled down shrivelled faces as his helicopter flew overhead before landing. They emerged from the shelter of the trees as the Pope threw open his arms and called out to them in Korean "My beloved friends, I embrace you". In a state of high excitement they cried out as the Pope walked among them, placing his hand on the head of each one. He seemed absorbed in the need to make physical contact with these solitary and broken people.

The Pope waved away security men who were anxious to escort him to a waiting car, and continued with his thoughtful stroll among the trees. He was then driven to the colony's refectory, where he knelt to wash the feet of fifteen lepers.

Arturo Mari, Pope John Paul II's personal photographer who accompanied him everywhere, recalled that day when he gave an interview to Associated Press, a few days before the Pope's beatification on 1st May 2011.

He touched them with his hands, caressed them, kissed each one. Eight hundred lepers, one by one. One by one. For me he was a man of God. I can guarantee you he was a living saint, because everything I could see with my eyes, hear with my ears, you cannot believe that this man could do so much.

Gift of Bees to the Holy Father

Italy's largest association of farmers, Coldiretti, has given the Holy Father eight hives of bees for the farm at the Apostolic Palace in Castel Gandolfo. The gift is a token of gratitude to Benedict XVI "for his constant encouragement of the daily work of those who cultivate the earth". These will join the three hives that already pollinate plants and produce honey, and will yield about 600 pounds of honey a year. Coldiretti explains that "bees play a vital role in the planet's ecosystem ... a third of human food production depends on crops pollinated by insects, 80% of which are bees".

Castel Gandolfo is considered to be a model farm because it unites traditional production methods with modern technology. It has 25 dairy cows, 300 hens and 60 cockerels as well as an ancient olive grove that produces 3000 litres of oil a year, an orchard of apricot and peach trees and a greenhouse for ornamental flowers.



The gift of bees

Society for the Maintenance of the Apostolic See

On a visit to Rome for the Holy Year, in May 1925, Francis Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster

(1903-35), mentioned to Pope Pius XI his idea of founding a Society in Britain to help the Pope, and His Holiness gave his approval. In October 1926 the ***Society for the Maintenance of the Apostolic See*** was established by Cardinal Bourne with the object of uniting Catholics in this country to help the Holy Father by prayers, work and charitable offer-

ings, in support of his universal apostolate. The Cardinal appointed Father John Waterkeyn, Rector of Our Lady of the Assumption and St. Gregory at Warwick Street, London as executive director and Viscount Fitzalan of Derwent, the younger brother of the 15th Duke of Norfolk, as President.

In 1927 Cardinal Bourne visited Poland, Venice and Vienna, and then went on to Rome. It was the four-hundredth anniversary of the beginning of "the King's Great Matter" which

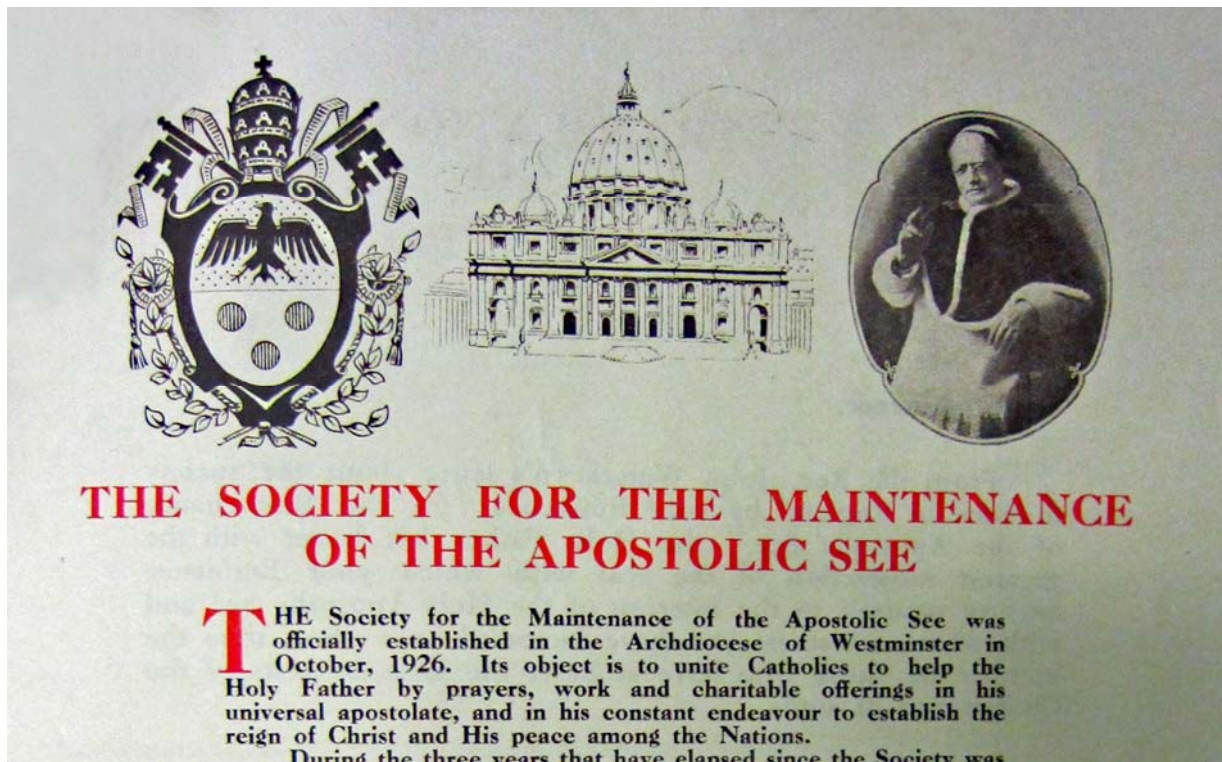
led to England's separation from Roman unity. The English pilgrims presented Pope Pius XI with a loyal address, and in reply he recalled the happy time when he was the Prefect of the Ambrosian Library in Milan and had spent time in England on academic research. Cardinal Bourne then presented him with an offering of £500 from the newly formed Society.

Pius XII, sent a telegram expressing Pope Pius XI's satisfaction.

A "Holy Father's Day" was celebrated annually across the country on the feast-day of Christ the King when the Papal Colours were displayed and the SMAS took collections that were dispatched to the Pope. In 1938 Cardinal

Hinsley took over the Presidency of the Society, followed by Cardinal Griffin in 1943. During the war funds accumulated as communications were blocked, and in 1949 £5000 was sent to the Holy Father. The Second World War virtually killed the Society, and although there were efforts to persuade the

Catholic Union to take it over, Cardinal Griffin sadly wound it up, the Society that had served the Holy Father so well for nearly a quarter of a century. 30 years later several members of the Catholic Union set up a new society – *The Friends of the Holy Father* – with somewhat similar objectives.



All dioceses in England and Wales were involved and by 1931 there were 7000 members. Funds came from subscriptions: 15 guineas for Life Members or annual subscriptions of £1. The SMAS established a federation with the French *Volontaires du Pape* after which the Pope's Secretary of State, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, later Pope

The Friends' pilgrimage to the City of Constantine the Great - October 2011

Despite the systematic dismantling by the Ottomans of vestiges of Christianity in Constantinople, (Istanbul) there is still much to see. Forty Friends of the Holy Father including seven priests, led by Fr. Nicholas Kavanagh, made the pilgrimage in October. We recalled several famous popes who had had experience of the City and also recalled and honoured two Fathers of the Eastern Church, St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory the Theologian from Nanzianzus. We celebrated daily Mass in some of the city's modern Catholic churches, where we were kindly welcomed by the priests who described to us their work in these flourishing parishes.

The buildings of Constantine have mostly vanished, to be replaced in the 6th century by the incomparable temples raised by the Emperor Justinian the Great. The most breathtaking of all, the Church of Haghia Sophia, Justinian's triumph, built by him in just five years and consecrated in AD 537, retains some magnificent Byzantine mosaics, whereas the church of Haghia Eirene – Holy Peace – has been stripped of decoration. The Great Palace has completely disappeared above ground, but one enormous mosaic floor is

preserved in situ below the Mosaics Museum, that gives a glimpse of life in the Byzantine city when at the zenith of its power. The huge Column that Constantine raised in his Forum to commemorate the foundation of his "New Rome" in 330 survives, but is situated today in a municipal coach park !

One of the most beautiful of the Byzantine churches is Holy Saviour in Chora that was redecorated in the 14th century with unrivalled displays of mosaics and frescoes recounting episodes in the life of the Virgin Mary and her Divine Son, the finest such Byzantine work to be seen anywhere.

Several popes visited Constantinople. The first was **Pope Vigilius I** (537-55) who was summoned there by Justinian for doctrinal debates. In 579 Pope Pelagius II sent the monk Gregory, the Abbot of St. Andrew's monastery in Rome, as his ambassador to the Imperial Court to seek military help to withstand the threat of the pagan Lombards who were endangering Rome. He stayed there for seven years but the embassy was ultimately unsuccessful and he returned to

Rome. He was elected Pope in 590, later to be acclaimed as **Pope St. Gregory the Great**. For centuries after there were no papal visits to Constantinople.

Within the City stands a fine bronze statue of **Pope Benedict XV** (1914-22) who served his pontificate in search of peace and the relief of suffering during the First World War, sending representatives to both sides in the quest for peace. He helped to establish a hospital on the Turkish-Syrian border where wounded Turkish soldiers were treated. On the Pope's death in 1922 the Turkish State raised this statue in his honour in the courtyard of the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Istanbul, with a dedicatory plaque to the "benefactor of all people, regardless of nationality or religion".



Pope Benedict XV – statue in Istanbul

In addition to the Cathedral we visited the Church of St. Anthony of Padua where Mgr. Angelo Roncalli, later **Pope John XXIII**, preached during his ten-year tenure as Apostolic Nuncio to Turkey. Ten years that included the duration of the Second World War, 1939-45. He learned to speak Turkish and used it in the liturgy and in official documents which earned him the respect of government officials. Turkey remained neutral and Istanbul became a centre of international intrigue and espionage. The Nuncio was well placed to carry out the instructions of Pope Pius XII in the cause of peace and the relief of the suffering millions across Europe. He worked closely with Chaim Barlas, the director of the Jewish Agency Rescue Committee in Istanbul, sending the Pope's interventions to many countries under Nazi domination. He used private couriers, Turkish diplomats, truck drivers and businessmen to carry messages and money across war-torn Europe. He sent thousands of Turkish visas, Palestinian immigration certificates, even "temporary" baptismal certificates to Hungarian Jews to enable them to join those who were fleeing through Turkey to Palestine.

Pope Paul VI was the first pope in centuries to meet the heads of various Eastern Orthodox faiths. His meeting with Ecumenical Patriarch Athenogoros I in Jerusalem in 1964 led to the rescinding of the 1054 excommunications that led to the Great Schism. They met again in Istanbul in 1967 and on that occasion, on entering Haghia Sophia, the Pope dropped to his knees in prayer. This caused a furore as the building had been recognized for years as a secular museum.

One of the first visits outside Rome by **Blessed Pope John Paul II** was to Istanbul in 1979 to meet the Ecumenical Pa-

triarch of Constantinople, Demitrios I. The two announced the establishment of dialogue between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, the first such deliberation since the Council of Florence (1431-45).

After a visit to Haghia Sophia during his stay in Istanbul in 2006, **Pope Benedict XVI** visited the Ecumenical Patriarchate then joined the Grand Mufti in prayer at the Blue Mosque, the second Roman Pontiff to visit an Islamic house of worship; previously Pope John Paul had visited the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.



Pope Benedict and Patriarch Bartholomew venerate the relics of St John Chrysostom and St Gregory Nazianzus

We called at the Cathedral of St. George at the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Phanar district of Istanbul, where we followed the tradition of kissing the icon in the atrium and lighting a candle before entering. We venerated the relics of two of the most important of the eastern patriarchs, **St. John Chrysostom** and **St. Gregory of Nazianzus**, both 4th century Archbishops of Constantinople. Their relics had been in Rome since the 8th century and were returned to the Patriarchate by Pope John Paul

II in 2004.

One of the most famous railway lines built in the 19th century connects Paris and Venice to Istanbul, the route of the Orient Express. We had lunch at the terminus, the marvelous Sirkeci Station, and later went to the Pera Palace Hotel, the fabulous destination of the rich and famous, including King Edward VIII, King Boris of Bulgaria (who insisted on driving the train himself while it passed through his country), Ernest Hemingway, Greta Garbo and Agatha Christie. Finally in the Orient Bar we sipped and savoured our pre-prandial cocktails to the evocative strains of 20's music.

Finally, a wonderful cruise on the Bosphorus ended at a waterfront restaurant in Üsküdar on the Asian side of the channel, where we were able to survey the magnificent skyline with so many domes, minarets and palaces of this great city – an unforgettable memory of our pilgrimage.

Simon of Cyrene – his home town in Libya



Cyrene in eastern Libya today

The 2011 anti-Gaddafi uprising to topple the dictator who had ruled Libya for over four decades began in the eastern part of the country called Cyrenaica. In ancient times the area was known as Pentapolis— five Greek cities - the most famous and important of which was Cyrene, founded in BC 630, some 130 miles east of Benghazi. One of the city's most famous natives was **Simon of Cyrene**, who figures in the Stations of the Cross. He is recorded in the Synoptic Gospels as having assisted Jesus to carry his Cross on the way to his Crucifixion in Jerusalem : “ ...they compelled Simon a Cyrenian who passed by coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear his Cross”. (Mark 15:21).

Cyrene is today a magnificent ruined city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, next to the village of Shahhat, with a Greek temple, Roman baths and amphitheatre. Cyrene became one of the greatest intellectual and artistic centres of the ancient world, famous for its medical school, learned academies and architecture.

A burial cave in the Kedron Valley discovered in 1941 belonged to Cyrenian Jews and dated to before AD 70. One ossuary was discovered there bearing a Greek inscription that it related to “Alexander, son of Simon”.

The Vatican's Communicators

The Pontifical Council for Social Communications in the Vatican was founded in 1948 by Pope Pius XII to encourage and support the Church in the use of the various forms of media for spreading the Gospel. The first President, Bishop Martin O'Connor examined the complex problems of the audio-visual era and, working closely with Mgr Giovanni Battista Montini at the Secretariat of State, he responded to the changing conditions of society. By 1954 working groups were assisting Pope Pius XII with his addresses on the subject of communications. The international reputation of the small organization became so well established that Pope John XXIII made it a permanent Office of the Holy See.

When Mgr. Montini succeeded as Pope Paul VI he enlarged its responsibilities to include all the problems raised by the cinema, radio, television, the daily and periodical press in the interests of the Catholic religion. In 1973 it was given a new title “the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications” and the presidency was entrusted to Mgr. Andrea Deskur, an old friend of Cardinal Wojtyla. In 1975, using the services of Italian State Television, broadcasts were sent out by satellite. The ceremony of the opening of the Holy Door was seen for the first time not only by a few hundred pilgrims at St. Peter's, but by millions across the globe. In 1978 the Commission had to cope with four exceptional events: the death of Paul VI; the election of John Paul and his death 33 days after; then the election Pope John Paul II.

The president, Bishop Deskur became disabled following a stroke in 1980 and Pope John Paul called the founder of the Radio and Television Centre at Hatch End near London - the

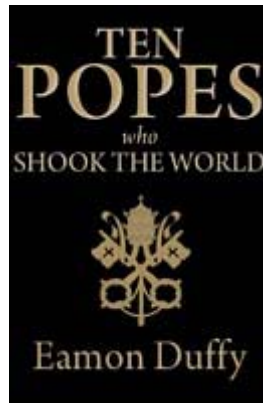
Franciscan Father Agnellus Andrew - a renowned broadcaster whose wonderful voice was well known across the English-speaking world to take over, consecrating him bishop.

Bishop Agnellus was one of the first trustees of the Friends of the Holy Father. He invited six of us to Rome in 1982 where we were introduced to heads of different departments of the Holy See, a visit that was useful in determining the modest role we might play in helping the Pope. When Agnellus, a shrewd Scot, learned that a private television station in Rome had folded and their equipment was up for sale, he snapped it up. He invited the FHF to contribute and we were delighted to provide the first £2000 towards setting up the new Vatican Television Centre.

Agnellus retired in 1983 and was succeeded by Mgr. John Patrick Foley from Philadelphia. In 1989 the Commission was renamed the Pontifical Council for Social Communications and in 2007 Pope Benedict XVI made John Foley a Cardinal. He retired in February 2011 and his successor, Archbishop Claudia Maria Celli, remarked recently that

The Church is called upon to integrate the message of salvation with the new culture that has been created and enhanced by communication ... to follow the rapid changes and invest more in all means of communication through use of the various media available, including television, radio, newspapers and internet ... to prepare devoted and competent Catholics in the field of social communication with the need for being up-to-date and be involved in using the latest media in order to better disseminate the Word of God.

New Book on the Popes



Eamon Duffy, professor of history of Christianity at Cambridge University and distinguished broadcaster and author, has just published a new book *The Popes who Shook the World*. In it he explores the impact of ten popes he judges to be among 'the most influential in history' and gives us lively and very readable portraits of them. He begins with St Peter, the Rock upon whom the Catholic Church was built, followed by Leo the Great (fifth century), Gregory the Great (sixth century), Gregory VII (eleventh century), Innocent III (thirteenth century), Paul III (sixteenth century), and Pius IX (nineteenth century). Among twentieth-century popes, Duffy examines the lives and contributions of Pius XII, who was elected on the eve of the Second World War, the kindly John XXIII, who captured the world's imagination, and John Paul II, the first non-Italian pope in 450 years. The book is published by the Yale University Press, price £14.99.

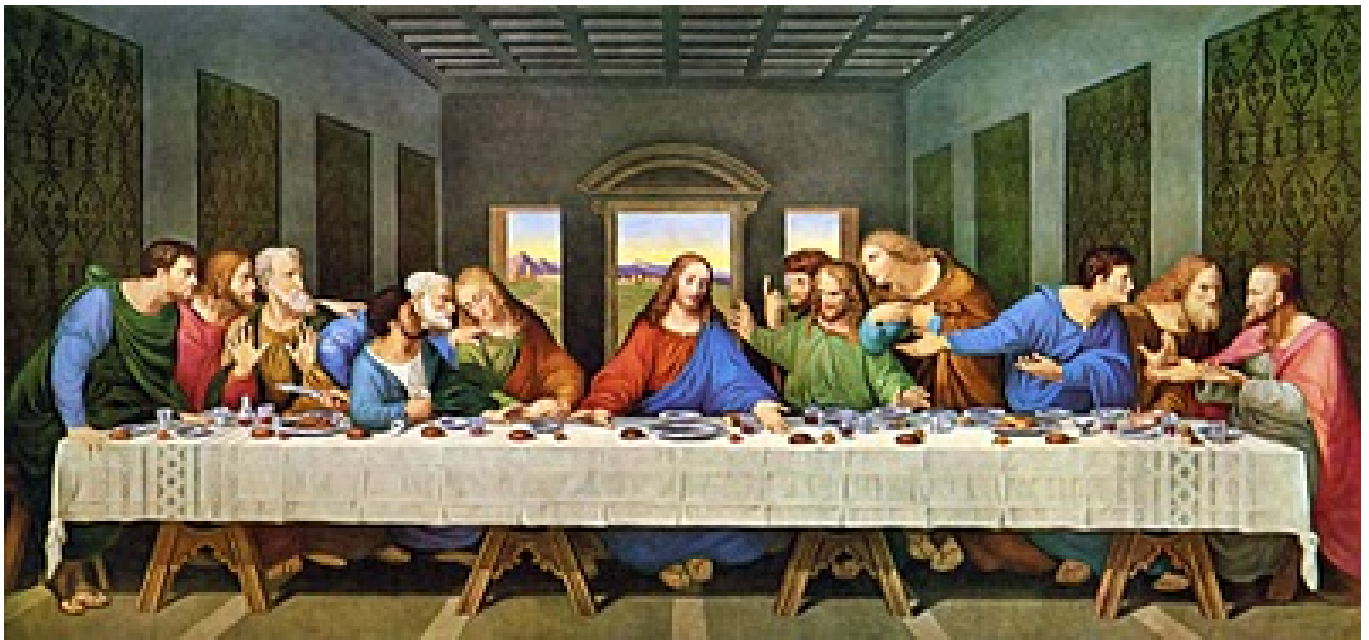
Dates for your Diary

AGM 2012

Will take place on Thursday 14th June 2012 at Vaughan House, Francis Street, Westminster, behind the Cathedral. H.E. the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Antonio Mennini will celebrate the Mass for the Holy Father's intentions in Westminster Cathedral beforehand and honour us with his presence at the Meeting and at the reception afterwards.

F.H.F. Pilgrimage 2012 - to Milan

Will be from 4th to 10th October 2012, to the capital of Lombardy in the north of Italy, to visit places of historic and cultural interest, with time to savour Milan's fashion houses and La Scala. We will visit places associated with three of the early Fathers of the Western Church – **Pope St. Gregory the Great**, **St. Ambrose**, and **St. Augustine of Hippo** who was baptized by St. Ambrose in Milan.



We will see some of the world's greatest art treasures including the UNESCO world heritage site, the Chapel in which Leonardo da Vinci painted his *Last Supper*, with a museum that houses models of machines made from Leonardo's drawings that are centuries ahead of their time. We will visit Monza nearby to see the precious gifts that Pope Gregory sent to the Christian **Queen Theodelinda** of the Lombards whose efforts secured the conversion of her husband and his subjects. Whilst there we won't forget the *autodromo* – the home of the Italian Formula One Grand Prix. One day will be spent on Lake Como, another will see us in Pavia near Milan where we will see the **Arco di Sant'Agostino**, one of the great sculptural shrines of Italy and tomb of the great Saint, and then to the great Charterhouse, the Shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Grace, with its church modelled on the Duomo of Milan.

For further information please write to

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After maintaining the annual subscription at **£15** for many years the Council has decided to raise it to **£20** in order to maximize the usefulness of our gifts to Pope Benedict.

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A HAPPY AND HOLY CHRISTMAS AND A PROSPEROUS NEW YEAR
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