

THE INTERNATIONAL
CATHOLIC WEEKLY

THE

20 JUNE 2026 £6.50
www.thetablet.co.uk | Est. 1840

TABLET



‘First love, then technique...’

Pope Leo unveils his vision for the Church

Austen Ivereigh

Frank Cottrell-Boyce

The end of the
summer holidays

Joanna Moorhead

The Cardinal-poet
leading a cultural revival

Aili Winstanley Channer

Mariana Mazzucato’s
visionary economics

Catherine Pepinster

Droitwich’s homage
to Ravenna



20 The chorus in John Tavener's *Krishna* at Grange Park Opera

COLUMN



Christopher Howse's Notebook

'The work was on sale for £75,000. There is also a fridge magnet version for £4' / 6

REGULARS

Word from the Cloisters	15
Puzzles	15
Letters	16
The Living Spirit	17

CONTENTS

20 JUNE 2026 // VOL. 280 NO. 9658

FEATURES

4 / 'First love, then technique'

Pope Leo delivered a stark message to Spanish Catholics: if it is to bring the light of the Gospel to the world, the Church in Europe must change / BY AUSTEN IVEREIGH

7 / School's in

Now that school has become a place of safety, what will become of that staple of children's fiction, the summer holiday adventure? / BY FRANK COTTRELL-BOYCE

8 / The Tablet Interview: José Tolentino de Mendonça

The current cultural force at the Vatican explains why he regards himself as a poet first, and a cardinal second / BY JOANNA MOORHEAD

10 / The vulnerable Bede

Since the Reformation, the eighth-century monk has been politicised by both Catholic and Protestant scholars and controversialists / BY PETER MARSHALL

11 / Year of the mouse

There's a tenet in organic gardening that says you must keep your enemies alive: you feed the predators who act as a natural pest controller / BY ISABEL LLOYD

13 / Homage to Ravenna

Behind its unprepossessing red brick exterior, a Catholic church in the Midlands boasts an astonishing display of mosaics and sculptures / BY CATHERINE PEPINSTER

NEWS

24 / The Church in the World / News briefing

25 / US bishops update Dallas Charter on safeguarding

26 / Postcard from Barcelona

27 / View from Rome

28 / News from Britain and Ireland / News briefing

29 / Alarm over MP's threat to recall End of Life Bill

COVER: ALAMY/ABACA/VATICAN MEDIA, ELISABETTA TREVISAN

ARTS / PAGE 18

Television

The best shows of the summer
LUCY LETHBRIDGE

Theatre

Under the Shadow; Are You Watching?
MARK LAWSON

Music

Krishna
ALEXANDRA COGHLAN

Cinema

Familiar Touch
ISABELLE GREY

BOOKS / PAGE 21

Aili Winstanley Channer

The Common Good Economy
MARIANA MAZZUCATO
Can We Be Rich Again?
JEREMY HUNT

Michèle Roberts

Venice Requiem
KHALID IYAMLAHY

Lucy Popescu

Speed reading on refugees and migration

Denis MacShane

Hinterlands
HANNAH LUCINDA SMITH
The Brexit Effect 2016-2026
ANTHONY SELDON

The chief architect of the Catholic Church's reconnection with contemporary art and culture tells **Joanna Moorhead** why he regards himself as a poet first, and a cardinal second

'Most poets have other jobs'

ALAMY/ABACA, ERIC VANDEVILLE

IT DOESN'T FEEL hugely controversial to say that, in 2026, not everything in the Catholic Church is rosy. And yet there is one global arena in which Catholicism is having a heyday. Art! At the world's biggest contemporary art fair, the Venice Biennale, the widely acknowledged best offering is the Holy See's contribution, a soundscape in a convent garden that embodies everything this 2026 Biennale is about (a slowing-down, a rethink, time to pause in a speeded-up, digital world). It was the same at the last Biennale two years ago, when the Vatican delivered one of the most radical and genuine installations, an art exhibition inside a women's prison.

Pope Francis visited the prison; and he also, three years ago, presided over a gathering of more than 200 leading lights of the world of culture – visual artists, musicians, writers, movie directors, architects – in the Sistine Chapel. Artist Anish Kapoor and movie director Ken Loach were among those who took part. Meanwhile, at the end of last year the Vatican opened a contemporary art space a stone's throw from St Peter's Basilica – Conciliazione 5 – with a rolling programme of cutting-edge art.

Some might say it was ever thus – what drove the Western Renaissance, if not the Church? – but the truth is, there had been a bit of a hiatus. The Holy See did not exhibit at Venice until a few years ago, and the last gathering of leading cultural figures at the Vatican before 2023 had been in 2019.

So who has been the architect of this cultural reboot? It would be unfair not to mention Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, former head of the Pontifical Council for Culture, who led the way on reconnecting the Church with contemporary culture. But the current cultural force at the Vatican, president of the Dicastery for Culture and Education since 2022, is a Portuguese cardinal who does his own shopping in the local supermarket (he has a flat outside the walls of the Vatican) and has a successful parallel career as a poet. Step forward José Tolentino de Mendonça, 60 years old, smiley, friendly, approachable and – I have the distinct feeling, when we meet – fun.

IN A MEETING room overlooking St Peter's Square, Cardinal Tolentino – who I have been told is on a very tight time schedule – appears to have all the time in the world. The first question I have for him, via his jolly interpreter, is: what comes first? Is he a cardinal who is a poet, or is he a poet who is a cardinal?

I have assumed he will veer towards the former: most cardinals, even those with interesting hobbies, are primarily prelates (and



been on being so). But for Tolentino – whose head-to-toe black outfit somehow feels more cool than clerical – it is clear that poetry is tops. “I was first and foremost a poet,” he says. “I started out writing poetry. Later, I chose to consecrate my life to God. And in terms of being a poet who has another job, I’m not unusual. Most poets have other jobs – T.S. Eliot, for one. Maybe it’s to do with the fact that you can’t make a living as a poet. But

poetry gives a meaning to who we are, to what we do. It’s not the other profession that makes you survive – it’s poetry.”

He was ordained a priest in the same year, 1990, he published his first book of poems, *Os Dias Contados*. He was made a cardinal by Pope Francis in 2019, and he participated in the 2025 conclave that elected Robert Prevost as Pope Leo XIV. He himself had appeared on several observers’ lists as a pos-

sible candidate. As well as head of the culture and education dicastery, he is also a member of the liturgy and doctrine dicasteries – so how on Earth does he find time to write poetry as well? “I consider poetry – or my writing of it – a kind of laboratory experience,” he tells me. “I write poetry because out of my daily life I find the elements to write my poetry. In an absurd way we have to admit I’m prefect of a large dicastery and a lot of my daily work is administrative and bureaucratic – it’s about rules, problems, issues. In that sense, a lot of my work sounds quite non-poetic. But I’m profoundly convinced that a true poet can find inspiration in any work. You transform the non-poetic into the poetic.”

Born on the island of Madeira, Portugal, the youngest of five children, his family lived in Angola before returning to Portugal when he was nine. “I was blessed with a childhood that was close to classical professions, close to the ancestral world,” he says. “My father was a fisherman, like the fishermen of the Bible.” Another early influence was his grandmother. “She couldn’t read or write but she knew classical texts: the old songs and the old writings. She was the first person to introduce me to the works of poetry. I grew up amidst an oral culture, where the first form of poetry was oral. I was born in that world, and I’ve moved into another world. But I don’t want to betray the old world – it had a huge influence on me. My grandmother couldn’t read and write, and she introduced me to a true form of literature – a literature of the human heart, with a form like no other. She was a deposit for a world of enchantment; she was where I could go to find this literature.”

TOLENTINO CLEARLY had a much-loved childhood: though he adored his grandmother, “for every man the first woman we love is our mother”. When I ask him whether his parents are still alive, he tells me they are “alive in my heart”. He remains close to his relatives, returning to Portugal whenever he can, recently baptising a great-nephew.

His work to keep culture at the centre of the Church’s life has its roots in something he read as a teenager. “I remember it so clearly: it was from a professor of philosophy, and he said God was dead because the great works of art were disappearing, and it was a sign God was not a generative force on a culture level. I remember the power of that thought: the sentence went into me, I let it live inside me and question me, it became a force inside me. Looking back, that sentence changed my life. It’s the key through which my life was decided and defined. I’m convinced that without art, without culture, we condemn the world to God being dead. Art and culture talk to us – they prove the generative force of God.”

But culture is not his only focus: he is also head of the Catholic Church’s vast educational operation. So what is his primary objective

for that brief? “On top of the pile for me is that education is the right of every human being – no human being for whatever reason should be excluded from its possibilities. I say that because we calculate that millions of children – especially girls – are systemically excluded from the education system.”

The Church, says Tolentino, has been a force for the democratisation of education across the world. And it has been successful on many fronts: “Catholic schools are sought out for their quality, and they’re often innovative – at the forefront of change. The Church has fought hard for a holistic education: the human person is integral. Education isn’t just about learning and skills, it’s about being formed as a person.”

Since he has mentioned inequality for girls in education it seems entirely fair to ask him about women’s inequality in the Catholic Church: Catholic feminists like me would argue that for the Church to be credible when calling for equality for girls, it has to provide opportunities for women to be true leaders (and I am not talking about a token handful of top Curial officials). At this point, for the first time during our time together, Tolentino disappoints me: he reels off pat the usual cop-

out line about how the Church embodies feminine qualities. “It’s a mother, a teacher, a caregiver – that’s all associated with women.”

MAYBE HE SEES the dismay on my face, because next he looks at me very directly with his dark, piercing eyes, and for a long time, before changing tack. “I’m not trying to dodge your question,” he says eventually. “If you are asking me whether I think that at the level of positions of influence there’s a deficit of women, my answer is yes. And we can feel that gap. I think this aspect of reinforcing the situation of women in the Church is something that is a vision many of us have and are beginning to share.”

Coming from a cardinal, this is radical stuff: I will leave this room more hopeful than I entered it. But now I really have taken up enough of the cardinal’s day. To wrap up the interview I have two final questions. First, what is his biggest fear, in the world of today? “The fear I have is that the poor will become poorer and the richer will become more insensitive. It’s a realistic fear – AI is going to increase the gaps and injustices.”

And what about his biggest hope? He looks out of the window at the basilica before responding. “As a believer, the greatest hope I have is in the unwavering patience of God. Because every morning, God gives us the rising of the sun. God isn’t finished yet.”

‘A true poet can find inspiration in any work. You transform the non-poetic into the poetic’

Contemplative Study and Sabbatical Program

Envision your sabbatical filled with silence so that you can rest and renew. The atmosphere of the Sonoran Desert is one of spirituality that is anchored in a contemplative attitude and approach towards life.

2026
 July -August 21
 October 4-December 11

2027
 March 7-May 14
 July 18-August 27
 October 3-December 10

Redemptorist Renewal Center
 Phone: 520.744.3400 ~ Tucson, AZ, USA
 Email: office@desertrenewal.org
 www.desertrenewal.org