

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – TUESDAY, 11TH AUGUST, 2026

PROFESSOR TINA BEATTIE – writer and Catholic theologian

Good morning.

Later this week, Catholics around the world commemorate the Feast of the Assumption, the belief that, at the end of her earthly life, the Virgin Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven. In countries where Catholicism retains a strong cultural influence, the Assumption is a national holiday celebrated by whole communities with processions and festivities, but in our secularised society, it's a niche religious occasion observed only by Catholics and some Anglicans.

I recently visited Walsingham in Norfolk, with Catholic and Anglican shrines dedicated to Mary. In the Middle Ages, this small village was a major pilgrimage site comparable to Rome or Jerusalem. Catholicism was deeply embedded in medieval culture, with liturgical seasons, pilgrimages and popular devotions marking out the year. As Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reminds us, pilgrimages offered opportunities to escape the rigours and conventions of everyday life, often with forms of behaviour more conspicuous for their impropriety than their piety.

Christianity in this country today is arguably more discreet, associated with morality rather than sacramentality. It occasionally breaks free of these domesticating constraints to fuel new forms of nationalism, but when people insist that we're a Christian nation, I don't think they have in mind the rumbustious excesses and extravagant devotions of the medieval Church.

People sometimes speak of believing without belonging, or of being spiritual but not religious, reflecting the opinion that faith should be private and personal, but I wonder if belonging without believing is also a common experience. I once met a nun who told me she had lost her Catholic faith but she liked being a nun, and her advisors had told her that was fine. Belonging to a community relieves the burden of needing an intense personal faith in order to identify as a Christian. The communal dimension of faith weaves us into religious traditions that bring people together across time and space. As the New Testament reminds us, 'whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen'.

As a practising Catholic, my faith waxes and wanes, but I derive great comfort from belonging to a vast community of all cultures, races, and nations. From the outside, Catholicism can appear to demand conformity to unbending doctrines, but it's home to an abundant diversity of personalities, practices and relationships.

As James Joyce said of the Catholic Church, "here comes everybody".