

**Archbishop's House
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Pastoral Letter

To be read on 3rd December 2006,
The First Sunday in Advent

My dear People,

We enter once again into the season of Advent and as we do so we begin a new liturgical year in the life of the Church. Advent is a beautiful season since it embodies and expresses the hope that is central to our lives as Christians. This hope characterizes our lives in a world which experiences so much conflict and suffering. Indeed, it is precisely the suffering of so many of our fellow men and women that is the great stumbling block to faith for many people today. How can a just God allow innocent suffering? As I said in a previous pastoral letter, there is no easy answer to this question. Yet men and women of faith continue to put their faith in God's promise, the promise contained in God's word and spoken in today's reading by the prophet Jeremiah:

"See the days are coming – it is the Lord who speaks – when I am going to fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah." The promise is that: "Judah shall be saved and Israel shall dwell in confidence."

As Christians we are those who live in faith in God's promises, who "dwell in confidence" even though that may be very difficult at times. Sometimes we may struggle to feel confident about the future of the Church. In recent times, there has been much public debate about the role of faith and religion in our society and in some quarters it has brought to the surface both fear and anger about religion. Yet, despite the problems of recent times, the Catholic Church still commands great respect in this country.

Our schools, for example, are held in very high regard. But fears for the future persist and they centre particularly on the fact that over the next few years we will have fewer priests than we have been used to having in the past.

We must, of course, pray for vocations and I would strongly recommend the practice of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament for an increase in vocations. But alongside prayer for vocations we need to discern plans and strategies for living with a situation of fewer priests. Two things should be said about this. First of all, there is no need to be alarmist. Compared to many places we are in a good position. Secondly, we must not see this problem in isolation. This could lead us to view the present situation of the Church in entirely negative terms. The Holy Spirit is at work constantly in our personal lives, our parishes and our communities. In fact, visiting parishes and encountering the love and fidelity of you – the people of the diocese of Southwark – is invariably a joyful, enlivening and encouraging experience for me. The rich variety – especially the racial and cultural variety – is a special blessing and gift for our diocese. Many blessings are being given even though there will always be some degree of struggle and conflict.

This leads me on to informing you that I have initiated a process of reflection and consultation throughout the diocese during Lent next year. That is some time away but I am introducing it now, at the beginning of the Church's year, so that you can reflect and – most importantly of all – pray about it. Prayer cards are available and I invite you to take one. The

purpose of the process is to share ideas about the future life of the diocese: to take stock of our resources and discern how best to use them. I have written a paper entitled: *Towards a Vision for the Diocese*, which is now on the diocesan website (www.rcsouthwark.co.uk). In the New Year, leaflets will be available outlining the process.

In my *Vision* paper, I have sought to draw together some key ideas for people to engage with and reflect on. With this document is a programme for discussion of three particular issues. These are: "Growing in Communion", "Reaching out in Mission", and "Facing the Future". The third is an invitation to reflect on how we will respond to a situation in which it is increasingly difficult to provide the kind of pastoral provision as when we had more priests. The purpose of the third topic is not necessarily to make specific, concrete proposals but to take counsel together about principles, about collaboration, about resources, and to look at different strategies and possibilities. But this topic, as I have indicated, is to be preceded by discussion of our role and purpose in the Church today – Communion and Mission. How do we build up the life of the Church? How do we reach out beyond our community to evangelise people who have lost their faith, or have no faith. How do we reach out to other Churches, other religions, and to the world in general? Reflections on these issues will create the right context for addressing the issues in the third topic. Issues like how to develop a strategy of coordination and collaboration to sustain the life of the Church in the area where a particular parish may not have a resident priest. There are various models that have been used in other parts of the country, such as clustering or grouping parishes together, and this discussion will provide an opportunity for people to share their thoughts. The way in which the consultation process will be organized may vary from place to place. Parishes within a deanery may wish to work together, for example. I would simply extend an invitation to join in any meetings, conversations or gatherings that may be organized in your parish or

deanery. Priests and deacons have already begun discussing these issues and that will be of assistance to them in facilitating the discussions among the laity. Your contribution is very important since all the baptized and confirmed have received the gifts of the Holy Spirit that enable them to make a contribution both to this process and to the ongoing life of the Church.

The fruits of the whole consultation process will be brought together in each deanery and taken forward from there. This will, I hope, provide me with the material for a fuller Vision statement as well as ideas and strategies that can be used in deaneries in future planning. I say this because it seems clear to me that in our diocese any planning for the future needs to be discerned locally on the basis of human resources, building plant and so on. At this stage I simply invite you all to think generously and creatively in complete openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I stress this last point because we must always bear in mind that the future is in God's hands and that we live in expectation of the fulfillment of his promises. In the spirit of Advent, there should be nothing anxious about our reflections. But, rather, an openness to what God will give and provide: "Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell in confidence."

With my blessing and warm greetings,

+Kevin

Archbishop of Southwark

*Given at St George's Cathedral,
Southwark
on 7th November 2006,
the Feast of the Dedication of the
Cathedral*