

Living in Communion

A Vision for the Diocese - First Reflections

A response to the process of conversation proposing an orientation for the ongoing life and development of the Diocese.

On September 17th, 2005 we had the Diocesan Eucharistic Celebration at Aylesford. It was a great occasion and very well supported. It came at the end of the Year of the Eucharist which had been proclaimed by Pope John Paul but who died earlier in the year. To my mind, one of the most moving moments during that day came in the afternoon when we were gathered in worship of the Blessed Sacrament. After a reading from the Gospel, we all knelt in silent prayer. It was as if the whole Diocese was for a few moments united in looking beyond itself to Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Saviour. I recall that moment now because it seems to me to answer some basic questions that came up in the consultation process: What are we for? What are we trying to achieve? Many people said that we need to be clear about that before we start developing plans and strategies for future work. The answer is that we are here to worship God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. We are those who gather in faith and who do so in a world that seems to have lost faith. As a local Church, we are a sign and sacrament of the reality of faith for the world in which we live. The image of a people gathered and supporting each other in worship is a powerful one and can act as a guide and a stimulus to us now and in the future.

Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter for the new millennium, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (NMI) was intended to be a guide and support for dioceses as they reflect and plan for the future. I want to recall some key points from this document since they provide us with an authoritative guide and framework for our own situation. I think it will be valuable to remind ourselves of these ideas which, in any case, take us back to the day in Aylesford when we knelt together in prayer before the Lord.

"It is important, however, that what we propose with the help of God, should be rooted in contemplation and prayer. Ours is a time of continual movement which often leads to restlessness with the wish of 'doing something for the sake of doing'. We must resist this temptation by trying to 'be' before trying to 'do'."

This may seem obvious but in fact it goes against the grain for many of us. It is not an excuse for inertia but simply an acknowledgement that in the Church this is the only way that change and development can have any real depth or spiritual momentum.

What is striking about this document is the way in which it explores contemplation as contemplation of the face of Christ. Personal engagement of heart and mind with Jesus is the key. The supreme prayer of the Church is the Eucharist, the Mass, and a recurring theme in the Diocesan Conversations was the importance of the Eucharist – that it be celebrated joyfully and worthily and that the Eucharistic community should be a welcoming one. NMI stresses the importance of the Sunday Eucharist – it speaks of it as the "weekly Easter" when we gather together to meet Jesus.

This is a beautiful vision and yet we are all aware – and this came up many times in the conversations – that we live in a world in which the priorities, agendas, and life-style of people are at odds with the values and beliefs of the Church – a world in which, as I have said, many people seem to have lost faith. We can feel at odds with our society. But the document makes an important point about this situation. It says:

"Is it not one of the 'signs of the times' that in today's world, despite widespread secularisation, there is a widespread demand for spirituality, a demand that expresses itself in large part in a renewed need for prayer."

This statement seems to me to suggest a very clear priority and one that corresponds with aspirations voiced in the Vision process. Rejection of the Church is rarely a rejection of prayer. The response to this is contained in one of the most striking paragraphs of the document:

“Yes, dear brothers and sisters, our Christian communities must become genuine “schools” of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion until the heart truly “falls in love”. Interior prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history. By opening our heart to the love of God, it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God’s plan”.

This is really key. Our parishes, chaplaincies, schools and communities need to be schools of prayer, and only then can they be places of mission. Being united in prayer, prayer which builds up to and flows from the celebration of the Eucharist, creates a unique bond between people which we call “communion”. Communion literally means participating together in the same reality, and that reality is Jesus Christ. The document makes this point explicitly when it refers to the Church as “the home and school of communion”. So all our communities need to seek to be places in which we can at least begin to find a relationship with God in prayer and so begin to discover a place of profound belonging.

This document also gives some indications of a practical nature and I wish to note these since they give some key parameters for our work today. It says:

“It is above all in the actual situation of each local Church that the mystery of the one People of God takes the particular form that fits it to each individual context and culture.”

This should remind us of the need to be grateful for the particular ethos and traditions of our local Church, of our Diocese, respecting the achievements of our predecessors while building on their work in order to move forward. We need to acknowledge the resources that we have as gifts and opportunities.

Section III begins with the question put to St Peter in Jerusalem immediately after his Pentecost speech: “What must we do?” (Acts 2, 37). It is a question that has not gone away. The document gives some indications about how to go about answering it.

“It is not, therefore, a matter of inventing a “new programme”. The programme already exists: it is found in the Gospel and the living Tradition. It is the same as ever. Ultimately it has its centre in Christ himself who is to be known, loved, and imitated, so that in him we may share the life of the Trinity and with Him transform history until it is fulfilled in the heavenly Jerusalem.”

However the document also says

“But it must be translated into pastoral initiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community... It is in the local Church that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified – goals and methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for necessary resources – which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach peoples, mould communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to society and culture.”

This is clearly a long-term project and the document is clear that it must proceed by stages. As an initial step, I will set up a group to explore the needs and resources in our Diocese at this time. Growth must be organic and not be experienced as an imposition. This is especially the case in a large, complex and diverse diocese such as ours. We have great cultural and ethnic diversity which must be respected while we also seek to establish a stronger sense of unity and communion in which all parishes, communities, chaplaincies, schools, agencies and structures play their part together.

“I call you friends”

I want now to develop further some of the ideas already expressed and to touch on some of the issues that came out of the reports of our various conversations. First, though, I wish to share a scriptural theme that I hope will complement and enrich the Vision presented so far. It is the theme of friendship and I wish to share some thoughts on this for two reasons. First of all, communion and friendship are both biblical themes and intimately connected. Both words refer to the bonding between people that is the fruit of shared life and of participating in things together. Secondly, it seems to me to be a theme that can integrate and draw together many of the issues that were raised under the heading of communion, mission and facing a common future.

It is, of course, part of the teaching of Jesus:

“You are my friends if you do what I command you. I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master’s business; I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father. You did not choose me, no, I chose you, and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last.”
(John 15: 14 – 16)

Jesus speaks of those who follow him as his friends. In the tradition of the Church, the saints have often spoken of the spiritual life as one of friendship with God. Christ reveals himself to those who believe in Him, he bestows his gifts on them and discloses the will of God for each one of us. This is the friendship he offers and to which he seeks our response.

Let us return, first of all to the Eucharist. It is the supreme moment of friendship with God who reveals himself through his Word and feeds us with his Body and Blood. We exchange the sign of peace with whoever is near us, as a sign of the friendship and communion we share. Friendship with God is what grounds true spiritual friendship among Christians. Spiritual friendship is a rich theme in the Christian tradition. It is a theme which gives a theological underpinning to concerns about welcoming and inclusivity. This is especially important in view of the way our Diocese has been enriched by the presence of people from many different countries. They have much to teach us about what it means to be a ‘school of prayer’.

Everyone should be made to feel welcome at the Eucharist including those who, for whatever reason, do not receive Holy Communion. We must also bear in our hearts all those who have no faith. Christ died for all and our constant prayer must be that the hearts of all will be opened to Christ’s saving love. We should be able to include everyone in the embrace of friendship and in our common hope for the coming of God’s Kingdom, when Christ will be all in all and the conflicts and divisions of our present time will be finally overcome.

The Eucharist is a key focus for the Word of God, which is an integral part of the celebration. The Eucharist is the privileged setting for hearing God’s word. It is therefore vital that the scriptures should be read at Mass audibly, clearly and with real understanding of their meaning. This should be a priority. Thought and preparation are vital if people are to hear and receive the Word of God. But the scriptures also need to be read and pondered outside the liturgy. This is vital for personal formation in the faith, a concern expressed by many and one to which I will return. The Lord wishes to speak to all of us personally through his Word, which must be a living Word. To help with the process of formation, I have decided to promote the *The Walk with Me* programme which offers scripture readings and reflections during the major seasons of the Church’s year. For Advent it will include an introduction by myself. Many parishes already use it and have found it a great blessing. I hope many more will do the same.

But our spiritual growth in communion and friendship will always be communal as well as individual. There are many groupings, societies and organisations where Catholics come together to support each other and grow together in faith. I wish to offer my strong support for the traditional associations that continue to enhance and strengthen our spiritual life and Catholic identity. I also encourage the more recent groupings that are clearly the work of the Holy Spirit in our times. We all need support and encouragement. I am convinced that smaller groups within the wider Eucharistic community will continue to be a vital part of the life of the Church as a School of

Prayer. Cell groups, prayer groups of different kinds and scripture sharing groups help to consolidate the life of the Church as a School for Prayer and as a locus for spiritual friendship.

As well as building up the community, however, we need to reach out to those who are not part of our Eucharistic community. Here I think the theme of friendship is particularly helpful. In the first place this means evangelisation which the Pope has recently reminded us is the basic right and responsibility of all Catholics. The truth that is revealed to us through God's Word is truth for all humanity and we should feel free and confident in sharing our faith with others. In order to do this, however, we need to know our own faith and so I return again, to the question of formation in the faith. There is no doubt that in recent decades there has been a breakdown in the effective transmission of the faith. This is not the place to go into the complex and contentious question of why this has happened. What I do think we need to do is to take full advantage of whatever is available and accessible for our faith formation. It is important to bear in mind that the principal means of formation in the faith is the Eucharist and, especially the Sunday Eucharist. As far as other aids to formation are concerned, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Compendium to it provide a complete exposition of Catholic faith and I commend any initiatives to study and reflect on them. There are courses offered by our own Christian Education Centre (CEC) which is also preparing Sacramental Guidelines as an aid to parish catechesis. Although it is not possible for everyone, I commend the initiative of those who have taken advantage of the high quality teaching available for example at Heythrop, St Mary's, Twickenham and the distance-learning courses at Maryvale in Birmingham. The resources are many and varied and the CEC will be happy to advise anyone who wants to find a way of developing their understanding of the faith. In this context, I wish to commend all those involved in teaching the faith in our schools and in catechetical work in our parishes. Their work is indispensable for the life and future of the church. An evangelist must be schooled in prayer and knowledge of the faith so that he or she is able to give what they have received.

Outreach to others involves other things and here, too, the theme of friendship is helpful. It involves collaboration and common witness with our fellow Christians in other denominations. In recent times, for various reasons, there has been a certain weariness about ecumenical relations. We need to remind ourselves – as Pope Benedict has done on numerous occasions – that we cannot give up on the quest for Christian unity however problematic that quest may seem to be. Today we also reach out to members of other religions, not in order to find unity of faith but in the search for peace and social cohesion both here and throughout the world. This kind of outreach is, in the nature of things, less structured but we should be open to such opportunities of friendship with members of other religions as may present themselves. Nor should we be shy about sharing our faith with them. We will be respected all the more for doing so.

Outreach is also to those in need – the sick and housebound, people troubled in body or mind, as well as the victims of injustice, inequality and prejudice both here and abroad. A spirit of friendship should also extend to those who, for whatever reason, no longer come to Church or are no longer involved in its sacramental life. A spirit of friendship can bring great healing even if we are not able to resolve all the problems people may have in their relationship with the Church. It also provides a hospitable context for conversion and renewal of life.

Further thoughts and some practical points

Still within the vision of communion and friendship, I would like to mention some specific issues that are vital for the life and development of the Diocese.

In the first place I wish to affirm the importance of the parish as the basic unit of life in the Diocese. In today's world a key to parish life is collaboration – collaboration between priests, deacons, religious and people. Every parish should have basic structures as required by the Canon Law of the Church, notably a Finance Committee (c.537) and some kind of Pastoral Council or Forum as the Parish Priest judges best for the particular parish (cf.c.536).

The Deanery is becoming ever more important. Sometimes people are unclear about what a deanery is. In practice, the way to develop a sense of deanery is not by explaining it but by developing forms of collaboration between the parishes of the Deanery. Some deaneries have developed deanery newsletters, websites, leaflets with Mass times. Some have practical forms of collaboration in sacramental preparation and other areas of pastoral life. This is to be encouraged in our present situation especially in view of the prospect of there being less priests to serve the area. Patterns of collaboration and possible patterns of changing pastoral provision will depend very much on local circumstances and resources. It is good, though, that some deaneries are identifying and exploring the possibilities and opportunities in their area. Consultation with the Area Bishop in progressing this will be important for coordination and consistency since each deanery is an organic part of a pastoral area and of the Diocese as a whole.

As from January 2009, the pattern of visitations in the Diocese will change. In each pastoral area all the parishes in one deanery will be visited before moving on to the next deanery. It will take time for the whole pastoral area to be visited but when all the parishes in a deanery have been visited this approach will provide an opportunity to take stock of the situation in the deanery as a whole, discerning the changes and developments that may be necessary. The details of this new approach have yet to be worked out but similar arrangements have proved useful in other dioceses.

The recent conversations raised the subject of buildings and their care. This is a matter that can be a concern to priests and people and ways of supporting them in this area will be explored further.

The Council of Priests is an important instrument for consultation and thought is being given to ways in which it can become more effective in the future.

As well as parishes and deaneries a crucial and integral part of the life of the Diocese is our schools. It is where tens of thousands of our young people experience the communion of the Church, are formed in their faith and prepare to play their full part in the life of the Church. Parish-school relations are vital and it is important that the schools themselves feel fully part of the life of the Diocese. Chaplaincy in schools is especially important for developing the life of the school as a "school of prayer". Many of the major issues facing the Church today – particularly the interface between the Church and the secular world - are part of the daily life and experience of our schools. They are vital to our life and future.

Recently the Agencies of our Diocese met together and it was important for them all to hear about the work of the other agencies. The meeting helped to develop a sense of solidarity and common purpose in the service of the Diocese and it is important that their work continues to be better integrated and cohesive. I am grateful to all of them for the work they do. This is not the place to talk about them in detail. I will simply refer to some issues that recurred in our conversations.

The consultation process referred frequently to the question of Vocations and the Vocation Office will be developing resources to help parishes promote vocations. It goes without saying that vocations to the priesthood are vital to the future of the Church and the fostering of vocations should be the responsibility of the whole community. It also needs to be remembered that we all have a vocation, priests, deacons, religious, members of associations of consecrated life, all God's

people. We need to develop a “culture of vocation” and hopefully this new initiative will help to create this.

A vital vocation is, of course, the vocation of marriage. We must do all we can to promote marriage and family life since it is the breakdown of marriage and the family that lies at the root of so much trouble in our society. The family is fundamental to the life of the Church and Pope John Paul described it as “an intimate communion of life and love” (*Familiaris Consortio*, 17).

I have mentioned school and college chaplaincies but would include in the communities of our Diocese, indeed among the “schools of prayer” our hospitals and prisons. It is important that we have a sense of solidarity with people in these institutions and support the work of our chaplains in any way we can.

The question of our young people also figured frequently in the consultation process and I wish to stress the importance of Youth Work and especially of support of the Southwark Catholic Youth Service. St Vincent’s Centre at Whitstable provides excellent programmes for parish and school groups. The young people of our Diocese have much to offer, both now and in the future. Our Youth Service is well placed to provide support and advice to both deaneries and parishes in the work of enabling our young people to take a full and active place in the life of the Church.

To begin planning for the times ahead, as I have already mentioned, I will be setting up a Pastoral Development Group – a group of people that will assist me and the Archbishop’s Council in taking stock of developments, discerning the needs and resources of our Diocese as we look to the future. It will meet for a period of twelve months and then be reviewed.

Of course there are many other excellent ideas, proposals and suggestions that came up in our Diocesan Conversations. It is not possible to mention them all here but this is by no means a final or definitive text but does I hope offer a vision, a framework and a sense of priorities.

To sum this up let me recap and say that the Diocese is a network of “schools of prayer”, prayer which finds its full expression in the Eucharist. These must be communities of welcome and formation where people can find space to grow in friendship with God and with one another – communities characterised by collaboration and trust and where all are respected and gifts are fostered. This local Church must be one that “reaches out into the deep” – a phrase used in NMI – reaching out in evangelisation, dialogue and service. In this way our Church will be a “sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate communion with God and of unity for the whole human race.” That quotation from the Second Vatican Council should be a constant guide. Our Church must be a beacon in the world. As well as being aware of our present reality we must recognise that as a Diocese we are the bearers of a tradition – a repository of faith and sacramental practice. We should be proud of our heritage. But we must also look forward, eagerly awaiting the coming of Christ whose face we contemplate each day in prayer. We must be confident and secure in our identity and not be too easily discouraged by the many things that can seem to weaken and undermine us. For we are a people who seek the glory that is in the face of Christ and it is in that alone that we will ultimately find rest.

Finally let me end where I began, at Aylesford. On 27th June 2009, we will have another Diocesan Day at Aylesford, this time to celebrate the closing of the Year of St Paul that Pope Benedict has proclaimed from 28th June 2008 to 28th June 2009. I will ask a group to prepare this day and make it a real opportunity for us to hear the Word of God together and celebrate our identity as a School of Prayer in the service of the Church and the world. But let us all prepare through prayer both for this day and for the future life of the Diocese.

+ Kevin

+Kevin McDonald
Archbishop of Southwark
on 2nd February 2008
the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord