



## **PRESENTATION TO THE MEETING OF PRIESTS**

**Monday 18<sup>th</sup> February 2013**

1. A very warm welcome to you all – and thank you for giving of your time to come to Nottingham for this meeting. Some of you were also here yesterday for the Rite of Election – 160 or so people declared their intention to join the Church at Easter by Baptism or Reception – and we will all gather for the Chrism Mass in a few weeks' time, so it is good of you to have made the time in your busy diaries.

Not all our brethren can be here today, and we especially remember those who are on pilgrimage with their parishioners, to celebrate the Year of Faith, in Rome and the Holy Land.

We also remember our sick and retired brothers, and we pray particularly for our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI as he prepares to retire from the Petrine ministry. As you know, there will be a Mass of Thanksgiving in the Cathedral at 7.00 p.m. on Friday 1<sup>st</sup> March, and you and your parishioners are all welcome – please let Father Geoffrey know if you are coming.

One other announcement: please remember to take your packages of prayer cards for distribution next Sunday, and also take them for those of your deanery who aren't here today. They are to be given out during Mass next weekend, after the

homily or before the blessing, and there will be a prayer to accompany this – Father Andrew will email it to you this week.

As you will see from the timetable on the screen, most of our morning will be in discussion rather than a talk from me. Following my talk, there will be 45 minutes of deanery-based discussion; then deaneries will, if they wish, feed the points which they have made back to us all, and we will then have a wider discussion. You will see on the table a feedback sheet; I would be grateful if you could give this to Father Andrew at the end of the meeting so that a précis of the points can be made – this will be prepared in such a way that individual contributions are not identified because it will, along with the PowerPoint presentation and my talk, be available on the diocesan website. I would also appreciate it if your deanery scribe could record on the sheet who is present from your deanery at today's meeting.

2. Let's remind ourselves of what this process is about, our goal if you like – renewing our structures so that they better serve our mission. Fifty years ago, Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, and a period of renewal was begun.

Of course, many are still debating the Council and its perceived successes and failures, but it has had a profound effect on us all, a 'second Pentecost'. And the Holy Spirit, who blows where he wills, disturbs us.

One of the things that the Council Fathers called for was a renewal of diocesan structures. In the Decree on the Bishops, the Council Fathers called for a renewal of the diocesan structure of the Church – their boundaries and the distribution of clergy – because 'the welfare of the People of God must be served as perfectly as possible' (CD 22); if that is true of

dioceses, it is even more true of parishes, because it is in our parishes that people live, learn and practise their faith.

In fact, the Council explicitly asked bishops to look at providing dioceses 'with a new internal organisation' (CD 22). At times this has meant building new churches and establishing new parishes – we think of the parishes that were established in Victorian times and the post-war years; at other times, this has meant reconfiguring our structures so as to provide chaplaincies in schools, universities and hospitals, and recognising that population shifts mean that it is no longer possible to maintain large and expensive plant for relatively fewer people. After all, our buildings should serve our purpose: the proclamation of the Gospel, worship of God and service of our brothers and sisters.

To commemorate the Council and the promulgation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Pope Benedict XVI called for a 'Year of Faith'. Many of you were in the Cathedral when we celebrated the opening of the Year of Faith last October. *You are Living Stones* is one way of our Diocese celebrating our faith – there are others, such as the Bishops' Certificate of Catechesis, the conference on Vatican II organised by the Adult Formation Office and the DES next summer, and so on – and not forgetting the day-to-day life of our parishes, which itself proclaims the Gospel.

3. *Why You are Living Stones?* The phrase comes from Scripture, and reminds us that we are, all of us, rooted in Christ, and in him alone. In the words of St Peter, 'Coming to him as to a living stone... chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (2 Pet 1:5). By referring to the Church as 'living stones', it is a reminder that the Church is made up of living people,

who themselves represent Christ in the community – and, indeed, the community in Christ.

4. In Baptism, we were all anointed ‘prophet, priest & king’, and all of us – the Pope, other bishops, priests, deacons, religious & laypeople, whatever our ministry or job title – share in Christ’s mission as Prophet, Priest & King. Vatican II emphasised among other things the role of the lay apostolate, ordinary people proclaiming the Kingdom of God in the world in which we live. That is, if you like, our baptismal consecration:

- Proclaiming the Gospel – the prophetic mission
- The sacrifice of praise – the priestly mission
- Witnessing with faith-filled lives – the kingly mission

Our parishes are the visible sign of the Church in the Diocese; our church buildings are where the faithful gather to hear the Word of God, worship him and renew their commitment to serve their brothers and sisters. As priests, we have a special role in guiding the faithful entrusted to our care in this, and as St Peter says elsewhere in his First Letter, those holding roles of leadership in the Church should ‘never be a dictator over those entrusted to their care, but an example that all may follow’ (*1 Pet 5:3*).

5. Because we all share in this common mission, in which we each have different roles to play, *You are Living Stones* has been guided by two principles:

- Organic development – development is always best when it is not forced from above, but when it comes naturally over time by people working together and growing in communion with one another; and

- Co-responsibility – we all have an active part to play in preparing for the future, sharing our gifts and talents to build up the Body of Christ, and not simply by waiting to be told what to do by the Bishop and the parish priest.

It is a human instinct to like being told what to do – even if we then spend our time complaining about it! We wait for the Pope, the Bishop or parish priest to tell us what to do; our Protestant friends wait for the Bible; MPs wait for the party whip – and so on!

6. However, *You are Living Stones* is not, and never has been, a blueprint, a done deal, a top-down and centrally-imposed plan, a closure programme for churches and parishes, and a fixed tablet of stone for the future. Some of you may have preferred a blueprint, not least because it's always easier to implement other people's decisions and push blame upwards – but that would, as I have implied, go against the two principles which I have just outlined.
7. On the other hand, *You are Living Stones* is, has been, and will be a prayerful reflection, a consultation, realistic, faith-filled, community-based, celebratory & preparing for the future. It is a challenge, and takes us out of our comfort zone; very few people like to see change, especially when they think it might increase their workload. After all, turkeys do not vote for Christmas!

However, *You are Living Stones* is not just about parochial structures – it is about enabling our deacons, religious and parishioners to better use their gifts as well so that we **all** – priests and people – 'run' our parishes, under the guidance of the parish priest. By involving people and by working together, I hope that you will be relieved of some of your more onerous duties so that you will be freed up to exercise your prophetic,

priestly and kingly ministry more effectively. As Pope Benedict has shown us this week, we need our strength to serve the People of God.

8. I am very pleased that *You are Living Stones* has involved people throughout the whole Diocese – every single parish has contributed something to the consultation at deanery level, and every deanery has contributed something at diocesan level. In addition, schools, university chaplaincies and the various commissions have been able to make a contribution.
9. Having read through all the reports, it is obvious to me that the process has, as I'd hoped, been rooted in prayer, celebrating what we have, reflecting on past, present & future, sharing good practice and focussed on renewal and growth. I cannot emphasise enough that *You are Living Stones* is not about the management of decline – far from it. Necessity is the mother of invention, and, as the Church has done for two millennia, she can use the circumstances of the time to equip herself better to fulfil her ministry. We are a missionary organisation not a letting agency.
10. Each parish and deanery has had its own model of consultation, developed at a local level to meet local needs. For some parishes, there have been questionnaires. Other parishes have held meetings. In some parishes, the consultation has been done on a more formal basis than it has in others. What has been important is that everyone has had the opportunity to have their say – another reason why I wanted to meet you all this morning – and I am grateful to all of you for giving voice to your parishioners.

Most, but not all, reports have been submitted on a deanery-wide basis. Some of these have concentrated on structures, while others have looked primarily at sharing gifts and

resources. Some of been very detailed, and others just a few pages. Most have been positive and practical, and show a willingness to prepare for a future which will be very different from the present.

The reports really do reflect the diversity of diocesan life – urban and rural, young and old. And the consultation has not just been about helping the Bishop’s Council to get an overall picture – it has also helped you and your parishioners to understand better your own parishes, your gifts, what you can all offer to each other – and to God.

11. So, what conclusions can be drawn from the consultation?

First, there is a willingness to accept the principle of co-responsibility, the idea that we must all – priests & people – take on a more active role. In particular, lay people of all ages and backgrounds will have an increasingly important role to play in building up the life of the Church and welcoming people into the life of the community; while there are some who will prefer to be more passive recipients than active receivers, we do need to continue to encourage people to take up their rightful place.

12. There is, on the other hand, resistance to accept co-responsibility in practice – as I said, many people still prefer to be told what to do. A lot of people do not have the confidence to put out into the deep – one reason why we set up the Bishop’s Certificate in Catechesis.

13. There is a realistic appraisal of clergy numbers: the age profile is increasing at the same time that the number of priests working in the Diocese is decreasing – and will decrease further.

14. There is a critical examination of each parish and deanery's strengths – and possibly a not-so-keen appraisal of their weaknesses. We can see a real parochialism, both positively, in that our people love their parishes, and negatively, in that they sometimes build a wall around them.
15. This negative side of parochialism can lead to NIMBYism – change and mergers and developments and working together are fine, as long as they're on someone else's patch! After all, if you really want to upset your parishioners, just move the time of Mass...
16. There is among our people a genuine and heartfelt appreciation for the ministry of priests, deacons & religious – and for the great community spirit which is found in most of our parishes. They realise that priests in particular work hard and they want to support them, even if they do not necessarily know how to do this! So, thank you to you all for everything that you do.
17. Above all, we can see a desire to build on what we have got and to prepare properly and realistically for the future. So, what have we got?
18. Currently, we have:
  - 108 parishes, 17 of which do not have a resident parish priest and 10 of which are run by members of religious institutes;
  - 83 diocesan priests who are currently parish priests or assistant priests – and a further 11 who are doing other work in this Diocese or abroad;

- 10 priests who are incardinated into other dioceses & 5 priests into the Ordinariate are working in our Diocese;
- 29 retired priests;
- 38 permanent deacons in active ministry in our Diocese and 2 transitional deacons;
- 7 priests belonging to the Polish Catholic Mission in England & Wales working here, plus a priest belonging to the Byzantine Catholic Church;
- 29 priests & brothers in Mount Saint Bernard Abbey; and
- 25 priests from other religious institutes and societies of apostolic life.

We must also not forget the faithful witness of the religious sisters who live and work in our Diocese.

19. The present demography of priests in ministry is roughly:

- 75+ 12
- 65-74 24
- 55-64 28
- 45-54 22
- 35-44 8
- 25-34 0

We also have two transitional deacons and five other seminarians. People still want to be priests and deacons – maybe not as many as they once did, but that probably reflects the demography of our congregations. For example, University chaplaincy is, in particular, a great source of vocations and

where many people commit themselves to the Church for their adult life – one reason why we are developing the role of lay chaplains. So, the future is actually positive.

20. Preparing for the future means that, in the first place parishes will have to work together. Neighbouring parishes will be called upon to support each other and share their catechetical, liturgical and social life.
21. Fewer parishes will have a resident priest: a parish may have to share its priest with another parish, working together under his pastoral care. It is unrealistic to expect a priest to do everything in one parish and again in another – e.g., two Masses a day, two sets of Easter Triduum, two First Holy Communion and two RCIA processes, and so on. Two parishes working together with one parish priest is already happening in some places, e.g., Beeston & Wollaton, and Spalding & Holdbeach – and, most recently, Newark & Southwell. There will be more of this.
22. There will have to be fewer celebrations of Mass on Sunday. At the moment, the number of Masses does not reflect the changing demography of Catholic life. According to the 2012 statistics, we have 292 Sunday Masses with 32,248 people attending – an average of 110 Mass-goers at each Mass. I am grateful to all those who sent in their 2012 return on time. It actually takes a lot of work to collate all the information and send it off to Rome and the Bishops' Conference. We estimate that there are approximately 155,000 Catholics living in the Diocese.

As priests take on more responsibilities, Mass times will have to change, but we will do our best to guarantee at least one celebration of Mass in each church each weekend.

23. Some smaller parishes will have a resident priest with extra responsibilities. A parish may have its own priest, but may have to share him with the Curia or a chaplaincy. In addition, we will have to take into account the relative capacity for increased work of older priests. We have to be realistic – another reason why it's important to help our parishioners to 'own' their parish more actively than maybe some of them do now.
24. Some parishes may be united in a 'team ministry': a number of priests may live in one presbytery to care for a large parish with more than one church or a group of parishes; this is similar to the arrangement here in the Cathedral, St Augustine's & St Patrick's.
25. Lay people will be called to a much more active role: this is not just a case of 'helping Father', but living out of Baptism. The grace of Holy Orders is not necessary for the apostolate, while it is to guide the apostolate. There is plenty that lay people can do in our parishes to help us proclaim the Gospel, build up the Body of Christ and serve the community. You can all think of examples. But it is important that the work is spread, so that one particular person or group do not think that they are 'in charge' and that the priest is an inconvenient visitor.
26. More work has to be done in outreach – evangelisation, catechesis & schools. There is a real thirst for Jesus Christ, and we have to work together to proclaim his Good News both within the Church and to the wider community. Ask any of our university chaplains about the strength of faith of some of our young people, and you'll be amazed. Our schools have a big role to play here, and one of the challenges we face is the disconnection between what happens in our churches at the weekend and what happens in our schools in the week.

27. Deepening our communion: in the words of Vatican II's Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests, 'Through the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel, the People of God are called together and assembled' (*PO 2*). As priests, we are called to call the People of God into being and give them increase: every aspect of our life and ministry is ordered towards the glory of God and the good of his holy Church. Whether we're preaching at Mass, taking Holy Communion to the sick or cleaning the drains, we're giving glory to God and serving our brothers and sisters.

28. In the light of all this, the Bishop's Council has looked carefully at the suggestions which have been made and come up with a proposal of which parishes should work closer together in the presumption that they will eventually share a parish priest or fully unite – it will be distributed now.

Also being handed out is a sheet which shows the Mass attendance from last October's count, the number of Masses in each church according to the current *Yearbook* and the estimated capacity of each church according to figures held in Willson House. Please see Father Andrew if the number of Masses and the estimated capacity are wrong!

29. What we want to discuss today is how this can be done? What do you, as the parish clergy, think? What suggestions do you have? If you don't think something is workable, why not? What would you do in its place?

30. The next stage of *You are Living Stones* begins today. This is not a consultation with a finite end, because it is on-going. The next stage is threefold:

- Parish consultation: At a parochial level, please **share the progress so far with their parishioners** and invite responses

to questions. The principle of co-responsibility suggests that all parishioners should be able to be actively involved in this discussion. I will speak about this in a pastoral message on the Third Sunday of Lent and there will be a hand-out that Sunday similar to the one distributed last Advent. These meetings should be planned now and held, ideally, before Easter, and specific questions for discussion will be distributed by email this week. I have already asked deans to ask each parish priest what form their parochial consultation will take.

- Special deanery meeting: I have asked all deans to arrange and chair a **special deanery meeting**; all priests, deacons, religious, chairs of parish pastoral councils and head teachers of Catholic schools in the deanery should be invited, but a further open invitation should be issued to all parishioners in the deanery so that any who wish to do so may attend. Deans should let Father Andrew know the date of their meeting. A written report of this meeting should be made and sent to me by Friday 19<sup>th</sup> April 2013 in order that it can be discussed by the Bishop's Council.
- Working group of deans: Finally, at a diocesan level, I will be establishing a **working group of deans** who will advise me on and oversee the on-going implementation of *You are Living Stones*. I am pleased to tell you that Father Paul Chipchase, Father Stephen Dye, Father Michael O'Donoghue, Canon Colin Taylor & Philip Ziomek have agreed to join this group. They will speak about it at the meeting of deans in May and the Council of Priests in June.
- **Deacons, religious and younger priests** will be asked to meet to discuss the implementation of *You are Living Stones*, and I will be organising this in the near future.

- Each of our **diocesan commissions** will be asked to discuss *You are Living Stones* at a forthcoming meeting, and its representative report its conclusions to the Diocesan Pastoral Forum.
  - It falls to me to approve any proposed changes of structure. I should point out that if a formal parish merger or church closure is ever proposed, there would have to be a specific consultation of the parishioners and the Council of Priests. Please reassure your parishioners that just because we are suggesting the some parishes ought to work together that they will find themselves merged with another parish, or their assets transferred to another parish, or the like – that cannot and will not happen.
31. So, to conclude, the aim of *You are Living Stones* is celebrating and strengthening our unity – giving us new purpose in the service of the Gospel.
  32. Transforming our words and our lives to demonstrate that the Kingdom of God is at hand – better equipping ourselves to proclaim the Gospel.
  33. Remembering that the Church is not here to serve herself, but to serve God and the world – bringing Christ to the community and the community to Christ.
  34. Evangelisation of those who have not embraced the Gospel, using effective means, appropriate to our own era, while always respecting those whom we serve – we live in a very fast-moving world, as Pope Benedict acknowledged this time last Monday, and we need to be ready to embrace the world so that others may hear the Good News of Jesus Christ.

35. Finally, it means:

- Being realistic – there is no point our saying, ‘If only,’ or ‘In an ideal world’. There never has been an ideal world;
- Being practical – just as a good gardener prunes his plants to make them grow, we too may need to prune our plant to make it grow. As Christ himself said, ‘Unless a grain of wheat shall fall upon the ground and die, it will remain a single grain’ (*Jn 12:24*);
- Being faith-filled – we pray for the Church, but we don’t worry about her – ‘the gates of hell shall not prevail against it’ (*Mt 16:18*). After all, if we truly believe that Christ has died, risen and will come again, we can place our hope in him. He will guide our way.

By doing this, we will ensure that our structures are renewed to facilitate the Church’s prophetic, priestly and kingly mission, so that we too may be renewed to engage in that mission.

Rt Rev Malcolm McMahon OP  
Bishop of Nottingham