



**Pastoral Letter**

***To be read at all Masses on the First Sunday of Advent 2007***

***1 & 2 December 2007***

My dear Friends

Advent is a time of preparation to receive the greatest gift of all: the gift of Jesus Christ to our world. We spend much time getting ready for Christmas in many different ways. One thing we do is to buy gifts which we pass on to others as a sign of our love or to show that that person is special to us. I remember a friend telling me that he always gave something that was precious to him. He didn't go out and buy an expensive present to show how much he thought of a person; instead he would give them something he had made with his own hands or give a personal possession which he valued very much. He gave me a fountain pen which his father had given him. It was very precious to him and I still have it and treasure it. At Christmas, God gives us his son, Jesus Christ. That is a gift unlike any other. Of course, it is the most precious we are ever likely to receive, but it is not a gift for hoarding or keeping only to ourselves: we must pass on the gift of Jesus Christ to others.

Over the last three years our Diocese has been working hard on our pastoral plan. The difference that this has made to our parish and school life is very noticeable to me as I travel around the five counties that make up the Diocese of Nottingham. Most parishes now have parish pastoral councils, finance committees or other groups that take responsibility for much of the day to day administration. Our parishes and schools are also much more aware of their mission as Catholics in the modern world and this is characterised by an active concern for the disadvantaged in our midst, as well as those overseas in the developing world. Living the Gospel in this open way has led to the forging of strong links with other Christian communities as well as with the wider civic community in our localities.

Several of our parishes which have shared a parish priest have grown closer to each other as they share present day experiences and a past history, resulting in new and stronger Eucharistic communities. Opportunity has also been created to deepen the

spiritual lives of all our people through drawing on the many spiritual traditions represented in our diocese. So, this could be time for self-congratulation at what has been achieved. After all, together we have faced up to the challenges of the last three years well and there is much of which we can be proud. But, of course, there is much still to be done.

A recurring theme through the period of implementation of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan was a genuine worry about the future. How will our Catholic Church fare in this increasingly secular culture? Will our parish, which is so important in our lives, still be there in years to come? What is the future of Catholic Education? So often we read in the newspapers that aspects of Catholic life are under threat, and indeed sometimes they are. The Catholic Children's Society in our diocese is working hard to find a way to continue its excellent work in the face of the government's sexual orientation regulations. The decline in vocations to the religious life and the priesthood has meant that we do not have a resident parish priest in every parish and, quite understandably, our people feel that the future of their parish is threatened. But we have shown in the last few years that parishes can flourish if our people take more responsibility leaving the priest more time for his sacramental and pastoral duties.

I believe that we need not worry about the future if we all take a part in passing on the precious gift of Jesus Christ to others. Some people have asked me when I am going to produce a master plan for reorganising the diocese. That day may come some time in the future, but I do not believe that now is the right time for such a project. We must continue to build up our existing parishes through formation in faith and for leadership, for all our people. In that way our parish communities will be strong and self-confident so that they continue to look outwards to a world that needs to know Christ, and not become too concerned with their own future.

In St Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus gives instructions to his disciples, as he sends them out into the world, he reminds them, 'freely have you received, freely give'. (Mt 10:8) Those words encourage every one of us to hand on our faith to our children, to our friends who do not know Jesus, to support developing countries, and most importantly of all to take an active part in our own neighbourhood and society.

On 16 February next year there will be a Diocesan Day to celebrate the three years of our Diocesan Pastoral Plan, and the day will be entitled *Handing on our Faith*. That theme is the on-going mission which Christ has given all his disciples including you and me. Think, just for a moment, how you hand on your faith. In your family you do this by teaching your children how to pray, and you tell them about Jesus. At school, our faith is lived out in the school community, and your children continue to grow in this friendship with Jesus as they develop a love for all his people. In your parish this is celebrated in the liturgy and the sacramental life of the Church. All three places, home, school and parish are where we get to know Christ and hand on that friendship to the next generation. In addition to this we have a responsibility to pass on our faith to others who do not know Christ. We should not keep our identity as Catholics hidden from those we meet at work or in our everyday lives. If we live according to the Gospel, working for peace in our society, welcoming the stranger, and seeking justice for the disadvantaged in our midst then we will be bringing Christ's love to the world. That is for many Catholics the most effective way to share the precious gift we receive at Christmas: the gift of the Christ-child, the Prince of Peace.

You will all have much to do preparing for Christmas with your friends and your families. Please spend a little time in prayer during this season of Advent asking our Father in heaven how you can best share the precious gift of his Son with others.

May you all have a blessed Advent,

**Right Reverend Malcolm McMahon OP**  
**Bishop of Nottingham**