

THE ARCHBISHOP'S LETTER – REDUCING THE NUMBER OF PARISHES

INTRODUCTION

- Like all of you here, the Archbishop's instruction dated 10 January 2015 to his 5 Deans to reduce the number of parishes in the Archdiocese from 105 to 30 came as a great shock.
- Informing the Archbishop's view that 30 parishes was the way forward, he highlighted the following:
 - o The lack of priests.
 - o A drop in income.
 - o The fall in numbers attending Mass.
- In his letter, the Archbishop stated that all the clergy attending the meetings [prior to the release of his letter] agreed that the May 2006 document '*Now is the Favourable Time*' should be the starting point for the present deliberations.
- Given that it was some time ago, perhaps you will allow me to remind you about both the drivers and the previous Archbishop's conclusion contained in '*Now is the Favourable Time*'. First the drivers:
 - o The lack of priests.
 - o A drop in income.
 - o The fall in numbers attending Mass.
- You will, of course, note the drivers in 2006 remain the drivers in 2015.
- The difference, however, lies in the very different ideas of how to deal with the same facts:
 - o In his letter to the Deans, Archbishop Leo quotes a sentence lifted (unfortunately, not accurately) out of context from *Evangelii Gaudium*, when he writes: "In that way our parishes will become 'a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of *common* [should be **constant**] missionary outreach'
 - I should like to read the entire paragraph from *Evangelii Gaudium* since our Holy Father had this to say about parishes: '*The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be "the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters" [a quote from Pope John Paul II]. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.*'

- o In his letter to the Deans, Archbishop Leo states: “Finally, I will also publish shortly a separate letter to the entire Archdiocese with a vision for our pastoral future.”
 - In my view, we need to know and to agree the Archbishop’s vision before we start reorganising the structure.
- o Archbishop Leo is adamant that in the future each Parish must have a resident [diocesan] priest and this means some 30 parishes by the year 2035.
 - Basing parishes solely on the basis of the number of priests is, in my view, a retrograde step to the time pre-Vatican 2 when the church was focused on clerics.
 - Making our future structure dependent on a diminishing asset is called deficit planning, which will achieve neither a satisfactory outcome nor an agreed solution.
 - Why stop at a reduction to 30 parishes? If we follow the Archbishop’s logic we could end up with 10 parishes in his next reorganisation.
 - Also, why stop at merging parishes? Why not merge dioceses? Perhaps 2 will be enough? This would, at a stroke, increase the number of priests available to serve the people and reduce the considerable financial and manpower drain that the diocesan curia places on the Roman Catholic lay faithful.
 - I find myself asking how the proposed solution fits with either Vatican 2 or the expressed views of the Holy Father concerning the position of the laity.
- o On the same facts, Archbishop Keith concluded that:
 - “Our parish communities are our most precious inheritance and we have a sacred duty to sustain them and pass them on as our gift to the next generation.”
 - Here, in contrast to Archbishop Leo, the Cardinal starts with a clear vision of the future on which he then builds.
 - I am at one with the Cardinal’s vision in ‘*Now is the Favourable Time*’. In this, as in his other work, the Cardinal showed that he understood the renewal process that followed Vatican 2, particularly regarding the rebalancing of the church away from being about clergy to being about the people’s relationship with God.
 - If you will bear with me, I should like to read you one other paragraph from *Evangelii Gaudium*, which I consider shows that the Cardinal’s vision set out in 2006 is in tune with the views of the Holy Father set out in 2013: “*Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the People of God. The minority - ordained ministers - **are at their service**. There has been a growing awareness of the identity and mission of the Laity in the Church. We can count on many lay persons, although still not nearly enough, who have a deeply-rooted sense of community and great fidelity to the tasks of charity, catechesis and the celebration of the faith. At the same time, a clear awareness of this responsibility of the Laity, grounded in their Baptism and Confirmation does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act, **due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making**.....”*

- In the case of a lack of priests, Canon 526 allows for the care of several neighbouring parishes be entrusted to one pastor.
 - o Interestingly, the Bishop of Motherwell in his recent letter on the future of Motherwell parishes wrote: *“that the proposals will allow for each parish to keep its present identity, which means in many cases one priest will be parish priest of two parishes (as is already the case in a number of parishes)”*.
- It is clear to me that in the case of a shortage of priests, Canon Law envisages the grouping together of neighbouring parishes, which was Archbishop Keith’s conclusion in 2006.
- I was unable to find support within Canon Law for Archbishop Leo’s conclusion that to meet a shortage of priests, the diocesan bishop should create fewer “super” parishes.

FACTS & FORECASTS

- In the 2006 paper, the following facts were given:
 - o No of parishes – 106
 - o No of active diocesan priests – 63
 - o No of parishes without a resident priest – 38
 - o Catholic population - 111,575
 - o Number attending Sunday Eucharist – 32,509
- In the 2006 paper, the following forecast was given for 2015:
 - o No of active diocesan priests – 32-34
- In the 2015 letter, no facts have been provided, but using the 2014 Catholic Directory, I have calculated the following:
 - o No of parishes – 105
 - o No of active diocesan priests – 54 with an additional 27 religious priests
 - o No of parishes without a resident priest – 39
 - o Catholic population – 110,907
 - o I have been unable to find a figure for the number attending Sunday Eucharist.
- You will note that the 2006 forecast, concerning the number of diocesan priests in 2015, was completely wrong and overstated the problem. While it is very difficult to argue with Archbishop Leo’s forecast of 30 or so priests in 2035, this figure would appear to assume that we have no new priests from any source (seminaries, transfers and conversions) over the next 20 years.

REDUCING WORKLOAD OF PRIESTS

- It is clear to us all that we need to do all we can to reduce the workload of our priests.
- Having a super parish rather than 2 or more parishes would certainly reduce the time a priest must spend on meetings with his parish finance council and on administration of the parish’s financial affairs.
 - o Unfortunately, under Canon Law it would appear that the parish priest can not, at present, pass over this work to the laity.
 - o Perhaps the Archbishop could consider approaching the Vatican and requesting some flexibility in the responsibility at parish level for administration?
- However, a super parish would still cover the same geographical area as the 2 or more parishes it has replaced; therefore, the priests will still have:
 - o The same number of sick, elderly and infirm people to visit.
 - o The same number of parishioners he should get to know.
 - o The same number of schools to visit.
 - o The same number of other institutions to visit.
 - o The same number of marriages to prepare for and conduct.
 - o The same number of baptisms
 - o I could go on but I think I have made my point.

- It has been suggested that we could reduce the workload of our priest by having a single parish council for the cathedral and St Andrew parishes.
 - o Unfortunately, Canon 537 requires each parish to have its own financial council.
 - o Therefore, one financial council would require that the 2 parishes were merged.
 - o Once parishes are merged, there would be no requirement for consultation with the Presbyteral Council and the laity before St Andrew's church or parish house were closed or sold – Canon Law protects the Parish and not individual buildings.

EFFECT ON THE LAITY

- The creation of a super parish would leave many parishioners having to travel greater distances to attend Mass.
 - o I have been told by someone still able to drive that this is not a serious problem but I am concerned for the elderly, the infirm and for those who rely on walking, public transport or lifts from other parishioners.
 - o Inevitably, there will be a reduction in those attending the Sunday Eucharist. I have estimated that the church will lose approximately 10% of its current numbers and up to 15% (some £1,000,000) of its parish income.
- So instead of having the priest in Jedburgh driving 46 miles each week to say Mass in Kelso & Hawick, we would see parishioners driving an extra 3000 miles or so collectively each week in order to hear Mass, hardly an environmentally sensible solution.

CONCLUSION

- I recommend that we ask Mgr Michael to relay to Archbishop Leo our strong objection to his 30-parish plan and ask instead that the current cluster (Cathedral, St Patrick's, St Albert's and St Andrew's) and twinning arrangements (St Andrew's with the Cathedral parish) persist subject to the following:
 - o Non-financially viable parishes to be merged with neighbouring financially viable parishes, as was envisaged in *Now is the Favourable Time*.
 - o Twinning arrangements to remain flexible within present clusters.
- Separately, I intend to work both with Mgr Michael and the rest of the Parish Council to obtain the return of our Parish House, which I am not convinced was correctly transferred from the Parish to the Archdiocese.
 - o In this work, I shall need to examine what actions took place when the Parish House was transferred, whether or not the matter was considered by the Presbyteral Council, whether or not the matter was discussed by the Parish Financial Council, the propriety of the transfer, the propriety of the valuation placed on the Parish House, the propriety of placing the resulting funds as a non-interest bearing loan, the propriety of charging the Parish £5,000 per year for the use of just part of its own property and the propriety of failing to pay rent for the use of our Parish House by the Archdiocese.

Keith Parkes
20 February 2015