

Dear Archbishop Cushley  
23/04/15

Recently a friend reminded me of comments made by Gerry Hughes SJ in conversation with Brendan Walsh and published in the Tablet, 25th October 2014. In the article Gerry Hughes suggests that when we read a Church document rather than analysing it we should notice our feelings and think from our own experience about what we feel. Within this context I have read *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis, (2013) and your own pastoral letter 'We have found the Messiah' (2015) and feel the need to express my reactions, thoughts, and deeply held concerns.

Firstly *Evangelii Gaudium* fills me with hope, enthusiasm and a real sense of evangelism encouraging every member of the Church to engage with the joy of their faith and to spread that joy with a new vigour and energy. Pope Francis recognises that all the members of the people of God by virtue of their Baptism have become missionary disciples, all the baptised whatever their position in the Church are '*agents of evangelisation*' (EG Paragraph, 120.) The Pope continues:

*'It would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelisation to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelisation calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptised'* (EG Paragraph, 120.)

The encyclical is full of encouraging statements about a Church which is focused on evangelism and of the need to bring together all our gifts and ministries from wherever we are in the Church thereby forming a more distributive type of leadership where we are all recognised as equal and supported to foster and develop a missionary communion, to be permanently in a state of mission following the ideals of the first Christian communities.

Pope Francis also takes time in the Encyclical to focus on the strength of communities particularly parish communities. It is clear that the Holy Father regards the construct of the parish faith community as the foundation of the Church and its renewal, it is a sacred institution which we should treasure and develop as the focus for the proclamation of the Gospel and the evangelism of our world.

*'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 evangelisers. 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'* (EG Paragraph 28.)

This of course cannot be achieved without the necessary commitment and investment in education and training of the laity to equip and empower them to embrace with full confidence their rightful roles and responsibilities given to them in Baptism. (This is a point I will return to in my suggestions for the future.)

What a wonderful opportunity and hope the Holy Father gives to all the baptised in this encyclical, in sharp contrast to the feelings generated when I read the

pastoral letter 'We have found the Messiah'. There are so many statements I question, not least, that the 'Church is the goal of all things.' It is my humble understanding that Jesus became incarnate to bring the good news of salvation for all, to announce a kingdom which we would begin to build here on earth and crucially a kingdom of good news for the poor. I have missed that the mission of Jesus was to found a Church. Is the Church that the early communities founded not a vehicle for the mission of Jesus rather than the end in itself? It begs the question if there was no Church as we understand it, are you suggesting that there would be no Jesus, no salvation and no kingdom?

I also have to take issue with your argument that if there is no priest there is no Eucharist and if there is no Eucharist there is no Church. This does not reflect the experiences of many of our baptised brothers and sisters across the world who live in vibrant communities of faith without the regular presence of a priest or the celebration of the Eucharist. Again the Holy Father reminds us in his encyclical,

*'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' (EG Paragraph 102.)*

It seems to me that your letter takes no cognisance of the above rather it retreats to a pre Vatican 2 model of one cluster/one Church/one priest instead of a model of a cluster with one priest alongside multiple communities exercising their baptismal responsibilities and gifts which is routine in many parts of the world. Why should this archdiocese be so different? Why would you wish to close down thriving parish communities who live the joy of the Gospel and could continue to work so ably in leadership with the ordained ministry?

Overall I feel saddened reading the pastoral letter and I feel it reads in such contrast to the words of the Holy Father as I have indicated. The model of re organisation suggested in 'We have found the Messiah' is limited to a reductionist, self-conserving model of Church based on the number of priests and a further re-clericalisation of the diocese. There is no evidence of a deep critical reflection on the current situation or any blue sky thinking or of the excitement and vision of Vatican 2 which was based on a de-clericalisation of the local Church and an increased development of the laity to use their Baptismal responsibilities in leadership with the clergy in the evangelical mission of the Church. Basing the existence of parish communities on the number of priests is a backward and I suggest a very ill informed step. It does not sit comfortably with the spirit of the Gospels, Vatican 2 or indeed the recent writings of the Holy

Father. I might add that I am surprised that the richness of *Evangelii Gaudium* and its potential to inform and direct the current way forward in this archdiocese is largely ignored, there is one quote on the inside cover of the pastoral letter but nothing in the body of the text which follows.

In conclusion I offer the following suggestions to inform the way forward:

- Engagement in an archdiocesan wide process of discernment and consultation focused on the way forward with clear guidelines and timelines.
- Re-engage with the vision and principles written in the report 'Now is the Favourable Time' (2006)
- Deeper engagement with *Evangelii Gaudium* for direction and sustenance to inform the way forward. The document could be used as a basis for discussion and feedback across the parishes in the archdiocese.
- Begin to scope out a systematic plan of education and formation, envisaged in Vatican II, to equip and empower the laity to embrace their Baptismal responsibilities and share their gifts in the service of their communities.

I have grown up in this archdiocese and I believe the Holy Spirit is currently providing us with an opportunity to rebuild the Church and its core evangelical purpose. Let us not retreat to old clerical models which God does not seem to be strengthening with vocations. Could it be that the Holy Spirit is calling us to do things differently, to think out of the box, to be courageous? Vatican II thought so, the Holy Father is asking this in *Evangelii Gaudium* so why can't the archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh?

Kind regards and prayers

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