

## INTO THE FUTURE -1

For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil,

to give you a future and a hope. *Jeremiah 29.11*

This paper builds on the work commissioned by Bp Edwin Regan to create a Pastoral plan (Put Out Into The Deep) that takes the Diocese into a sustainable future. My approach may be different to his but I believe it is soundly rooted in the fact that at the centre of Catholic life is the Eucharist; that is, the celebration each Lord's Day of the Sacred Mysteries in the midst of the community of the faithful. Anything less is at best, second best. With lively and committed individual and community faith and a degree of reorganisation, no Catholic person in the Diocese should have to settle for anything other than the best for the foreseeable future

It is a sad fact that the Church in England and Wales has over the period of its modern history – the last 150 years, largely failed to grow from within or by evangelisation of the communities among which it has been part. We are only where we are to-day, thankfully, by the fact of waves of migration of Catholic people from other countries. Our Catholic communities have not grown from within, have not produced native vocations to the priesthood and religious life in anything like sufficient numbers to maintain the parish structures that our forbearers have handed down to us. Indeed if we look at the diminishing sizes of many parish communities we have to ask, 'Have we handed on the Faith for the last two generations?' because if we have why are there not more of our parishes vital in practise, evangelisation, and growth?

I am dealing in this paper with the number and locations of churches. Along with this, but as a separate exercise, there must be the consideration of parish boundaries and the territory that priests would be expected to have jurisdiction over and responsibility for. To this effect a professional review is to be undertaken to consider Diocesan asset management in all its aspects.

### **The Present Situation (September 2015)**

There are in the Diocese: 40 (+ or -) parishes. (7 of which are owned and/or run by Religious)

65 (+ or -) churches

2 Communities of cloistered nuns to whom chaplaincy is provided

103 Sunday Masses

15 Active Diocesan Priests (of whom 3 are beyond retirement age (75 years))

2 Diocesan priests on loan

7 Religious/Mission priests (2 of whom are beyond retirement age)

9 Overseas missionary society's priests (2 fewer than pledged)

3 parishes currently without a resident priest

There are also a variable number of Religious priests working in valuable non-parochial ministry who are able to assist some Sundays to supply Mass in parishes, additionally some of our Diocesan priests in retirement help to keep the present schedule of Masses across the Diocese alive.

This situation is not sustainable, the current model of church that we have is not realistic and we don't have the time to evolve to another model; there has to be radical but I hope creative change. That change has to begin immediately! By 2020 there will only be 10 Diocesan priests under retirement age. Due to pressures upon their own Congregations religious superiors and provincials are at liberty to close houses and withdraw from their parish work in the Diocese, either because of how they discern and see their own vocation, apostolate, or mission developing, or simply because of rationalisation within their own Congregation because they too are fewer in number.

### **A Little bit of History**

A number of churches in the Diocese were founded and built as 'daughter' churches or 'chapels of ease' within parishes in the 1950s to mid-1960s. They largely served a tourist, holidaymaker congregation that commonly arrived on a Saturday midday by train or coach, stayed a week and departed the following Saturday. At that time only something like 1 in 5 households had a car. The situation has dramatically changed, now there are no rail services to many of these places and often households have two or more cars. If visitors can drive a hundred miles or more to their holiday destination they can drive five (or less) to ten miles or get to Mass. We are most grateful for what those visitors and the in-comers to the Diocese have brought in so many ways, but I repeat again, where is the indigenous growth in the past and more especially now? The post-war period was perhaps the one time of real growth in the Church in these countries, but that was commonly fuelled by migrants and refugees. The bishops of the time saw a great renaissance of the Catholic Church and developed a philosophy of expansion and growth; land and building were relatively inexpensive, employment was high and easy to

come by. Within the lifetime of many of those same bishops the opposite became the fact of life.

In the last thirty years (just two more than the age of the Diocese) the number of parishes has been reduced, with amalgamation arrangements reducing the number by eight; seventeen centres (church, chapel of ease, Mass centre or convent; a number of which had been parishes before previous amalgamations) have been closed or cease to be used, a further six seasonal or occasionally used churches/venues have ceased. Still we have an inheritance of churches with no sustainable community to fill them, but expectations ride as high now as ever before to have a convenient church nearby.

### **Geography and Terrain**

The geography of North Wales is rural and coastal. The only town with a population of more than 50,000 is Wrexham, most have a population of less than 30,000. With little exception the towns form a linear pattern, viz. Deeside, the coast including Anglesey, the valleys. This means any sort of collective identity does not generally exist, each town has its own identity as it is not a district or part-of a bigger entity. The distance between towns increases on the coast the further west/southwest, and the further away from the coast one goes.

### **Ways to ensure Mass is still celebrated in the greatest number of places with the fewest number of priests**

The first and simplest way of achieving this is that churches with more than one Sunday Mass but with the capacity to accommodate all who attend Mass, MUST reduce the number of Masses, thereby freeing the priest to travel to another town or church to celebrate with and for a community there. Bishop Edwin asked for this twice during his time as Ordinary.

Secondly, those smallest of daughter churches or congregations have to face the closure and loss of their church or Mass-centre.

Thirdly, a rationalisation of Mass times between neighbouring parishes/churches, both within and beyond each deanery, would enable one priest to celebrate Mass in another as well as his own parish/church; or two priests to celebrate Mass for three parishes.

Fourthly, where two churches are close together, but one could accommodate both congregations one of those two similarly would have to close.

Fifthly, if the solution proposed in the above is not possible, one of the two could be demolished and a bigger new church built; the other is then closed and sold off to pay for the new. This could be cost neutral to the parish and the Diocese.

Sixthly, to some parishes a sensitively designed extension to the existing church is built to accommodate a greater number of people from a larger parish territory.

Seventhly, an altogether new church is built at a central point to serve three or more existing church communities.

The first, second, third and fourth ways could be enacted almost immediately and I will propose some changes take place commencing on the first Sunday of Advent 2015. In the first instance I will communicate with those directly affected by such changes. Ways, five, six and seven require further thought and realistic assessment in a number of regards.

Some of these changes in churches and Mass times could further result in the formal amalgamation of existing parishes or the placing of two existing parishes under the ordinary authority of one parish priest. Significant alteration, suppression or establishing of parishes can only take place after consultation with the Council of Priests (CL 515§2)

(As appropriate there will be a need to negotiate too with religious Regional Superiors or Provincials.)

With a reduction to around 40 churches (which may not be the 40 parishes as they are at present) there could be the celebration of Sunday Mass every week for at least a decade on the projected 20-25 priests. This would inevitably mean some of the faithful would have to travel further, but no one further than the furthest that has currently to be travelled by some in the Diocese to attend Mass at the moment.

These changes will never be easy but I believe there is here a coherent proposal that will ensure the greatest number of people will still have the celebration of Mass each Sunday in a church reasonably near to where they live. In some cases people will have to travel further; in others they may have to adapt their Sunday or Saturday regime in order to get to Mass, but if the commitment to do so is there then they will. Changes will be particularly hard if it is a daughter church that is deemed to remain open while the parish church is closed.

Each change will be notified to the parish or parishes individually. In an attempt to minimise disruption to the life of a parish, but still recognising the magnitude of the change, some changes may only take place when a priest retires, is transferred or redeployed.

### **Practical Realities**

The annual pastoral returns indicate a trend of declining numbers attending Mass, except in those areas where there has been a significant inward migration of Catholics, and little growth from within parishes or from evangelisation by parishes.

Activities within churches or use of the churches between Sunday Masses is not significant, especially in those places where the priest is not resident. The churches are not even open for some part of the day although the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, the secondary purpose of which is to facilitate adoration and prayer. This is contrary to Canon Law (Can.937). Many parishioners don't want any weekday activities regardless of what they are; other communities are so small that running viable activities is not a reality.

The question of financial viability of many buildings is an issue. If capital expense work is required from where is the money to come? The asset management review will identify the full extent of this issue, but it becomes increasingly difficult to justify the expense of those buildings the doors of which are open for little more than two hours out of every 168; in any other model they would be described as redundant and a luxury. Every pound that is being spent on such buildings or kept in reserve for those buildings is not being spent on catechesis and formation, pastoral care or evangelisation.

### **Theological Reflections**

Canon Law states, *A parish is a certain community of Christ's faithful, stably established within a particular Church, whose pastoral care, under the authority of the diocesan Bishop, is entrusted to a parish priest as its proper pastor. (515§1)* Historically and for a variety of reasons, some good some not so good, the Church in this Diocese has a disproportionately large number of churches for the number of Christ's faithful. The consequences of this are many and have had detrimental effect upon the life of the Church, not least in the celebration of the Liturgy. There has been both an individualisation of the sacraments generally and a fracturing of the Eucharistic community into many parts, or more correctly a failure of it to come together in the first place. Not only is there a dissipation of the one parish into different communities but this can lead to a failure of the Sacred Mysteries being celebrated with the dignity, catechetical fullness and understanding that the Roman Missal calls for simply because the community is too small. Pope Francis provides an inspiring description of the parish in his *Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in To-day's World*; he says, 'The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility ... 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. ... it is a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey.' But he concludes, '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.' (*Evangelii Gaudium* #28)

Canon Law is clear about the obligation of the faithful to assist at Mass on 'Sundays and other holydays of obligation'. Assistance at Mass is obligatory, except for a 'grave cause'.

The use of the expression 'grave cause' indicates that the obligation is a very serious one. For obligations that admit more readily to exceptions, canon law usually uses expressions such as 'just cause'. 'Whenever and wherever Mass cannot be celebrated on Sunday, the first thing to be ascertained is whether the faithful can go to a church in a place nearby to participate there in the Eucharistic mystery. At the present time this solution is to be recommended and to be retained where it is in effect; but it demands that *the faithful, rightly imbued with a fuller understanding of the Sunday assembly, respond with good will to a new situation.*' (Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest #18. My emphasis). As it is the parish, not individual churches or chapels of ease or Mass centres that is the basis of the community, it is to the parish the bishop is obliged to entrust a parish priest. The bishop can only do that insofar as he has priests to appoint, and in order that those priests are able to celebrate Sunday for the parish community it would be necessary to reduce the venues to a manageable number. With the number of priests available it is incumbent upon the bishop to provide reasonable opportunity for the faithful to fulfil their obligation to attend Mass, an obligation that disappears when it is objectively impossible to do so. Those objective impossibilities may not be dramatic (age, health, responsibility, weather, terrain and distance) and conditions may well vary from person to person. However the faithful, individually and as a community, should not be too light in assessing their difficulties and should be willing to make reasonable sacrifices in order to assist at Mass.

## **Conclusion**

The model of the church we have inherited is, in business terms, no longer fit for purpose and failing now in her mission. Pope Francis is critical of those who 'remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past' (*Evangelii Gaudium* #94). I invite you to join with me in this radical but I hope creative approach to the continued celebration of the Sacred Mysteries in the parishes of the Diocese into the next decade and beyond. I humbly present these proposals as a coherent whole, based in a principled way to reform the Diocese to the glory of God, the growth of the Church and the good of the whole community. Like the work that was commissioned by Bishop Edwin and the proposals he made and enacted, they will only be effective when considered as a whole however difficult and hard that may be when they touch the life, practice, and church of a particular parish community.

*† Peter*

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*Bishop of Wrexham*

*Saint Deiniol (d.584) Bishop. 2015*