

## Address To Pastoral Area Councils on Saturday 20th March 2021

It is good to have this opportunity to share some thoughts with you this morning. First of all, and above all, I want to thank you most sincerely for what you do in the Pastoral Area Councils throughout our diocese. It was good to have an opportunity to meet with some of you before Christmas to look at your mission statements. Today, we are hoping to take things forward and to deepen and enrich the life of the Pastoral Area Councils.

You have been working in your areas for a number of years now. How challenging this must have been over the past twelve months. And yet, there are some wonderful testimonies of how creative and imaginative our parish communities have been during this challenging year. If I might focus on two particular experiences; the development of online communication possibilities, using various digital platforms to celebrate liturgy, to pray together, to offer catechetical programmes, and other ways of reaching out to people with pastoral support. These must surely continue beyond the pandemic. The second experience I want to highlight, is the remarkable and generous ways in which communities and individuals have reached out to those in need with practical help. In an increasingly secular society, this has been a marvellous witness to the Gospel. We will build on this with the development of Caritas Northampton.

And so to where we find ourselves now. My thoughts are presented in two broad areas. The second set of thoughts are around process, the mechanics of how the Pastoral Area Councils might operate over the coming years. The first set of thoughts are more focused on vision, what the diocesan vision should be and therefore how this vision might guide the diocesan structures moving forwards.

I was recently in a forum meeting with four other brother bishops. An Irish Bishop shared two images which gave me much food for thought. The first one is this. When you want to build a boat, he suggested, you don't start by thinking about the boat itself but the immensity of the sea.

His second image was also associated with the idea of the sea. People who live on land build roads and these are fixed ways across the landscape. Jesus chose fishermen to be his disciples, and fishermen go where the fish are.

These beautiful images strengthen my conviction that we should not start our reflection with the structures and institutions. Or to put this another way, I do not sense we should think about the pastoral area councils without thinking about the purpose of the Church in our world today, the immensity of the task which lies beyond the boat. And secondly, whatever structures and institutions we put in place, we have to have the courage to ask ourselves, are these fit for the purpose of missionary discipleship.

There is another way we might ease into reflecting upon our pastoral area councils. Is our thinking about them Christocentric or Ecclesiocentric. The first is more dynamic, it is focused upon listening to Jesus and thirsting for the Holy Spirit to give us the gifts we need to live in the kingdom of God ourselves, and to bear witness to the Gospel to others. In other words, to be outward looking. The second approach is very much focused on the institution, it is looking at everything from the perspective of how the Church is serving my needs.

An Ecclesiocentric approach asks the question, what do we want *from* people. This leads us to become preoccupied with numbers, how many people are in our churches. It also

tends to focus on what we are doing and how successful we are. A Christocentric approach asks the question, what do we want *for* people? This leads us to become preoccupied with how can we get out there into our local communities to share the good news of Jesus Christ. It tends to focus more on what the Lord is doing than on what we are doing.

I came across these words in a book by Fr James Mallon. And I think they sum up what being Christocentric really looks like,

‘Parish renewal requires that we embrace the apostolic identity of the entire people of God, helping a people encounter the love of the Father in Jesus Christ, experience the power of the Holy Spirit, discern their gifts, and receive the formation they need to live a mission- and holiness-focused lifestyle.’ (Divine Renovation, Beyond the Parish, 140)

So let me offer you a yardstick by which you might measure the success of your work in the Pastoral Area Councils, and indeed, I might measure my episcopal oversight as the Bishop. It is quite simply this, are our parish communities flourishing? This is what servant leadership leads to, the experience of renewal described by Fr Mallon. And of course, in case you were wondering, this is not something new. This has been the constant teaching of the papal magisterium and the Second Vatican Council since the 1950s.

And now to my second set of thoughts, around the idea of process. Some years ago now, when I was a parish priest, there seemed to be a problem with the presbytery plumbing system. I won't go into details, but there was a horrendous blockage. I got Dyno-Rod out to look at the problem. The chap spent a few hours with his rods and all seemed to be well. A few days later, it was quite obvious that the problem had not been solved and all was very definitely not well. Fortunately, a retired builder in the parish also had some rods. He spent a few hours on the job, and declared that it was far more challenging than he had originally thought. It took him the next few days to dig up the front drive and trace the problem almost back to the road. The problem had been developing for some considerable time, hidden underground, but it was only when it reached the kitchen, it was clear that something had to be done about it.

In a similar way, the Church has been experiencing a problem over the past fifty years. And I would name the problem in this way. The Second Vatican Council, resourced by the Scriptures and the early Church Fathers, had rediscovered a model of the Church which is less institutional and more dynamic, focused on mission and what the Lord has provided his Church with to fulfil this mission. We might as well have stuffed all this down an underground pipe and let it rot away until now. Fifty years later, the structures are no longer suitable for the work at hand. They need renewal.

So what is the keyword in the Church's self-understanding in the Council documents? There are probably a number of words, but I would suggest one of the most principal ones is communion. Through baptism, we are brought into communion with the Holy Trinity, with each other in the Church, and we are invited by the Lord to share this communion with others.

Pope Francis has a very clear understanding of this, and uses another word from the Council by which the structures in the Church can build Communion. This word is synodality. This is the theme of the next synod of bishops in 2022. I would like to share with you a rather long quotation from Pope Francis, but I think it is worth sharing and

may provide some guidance for our understanding of how our Pastoral Area Councils may develop in the coming years. I will let you read these words for yourself:

‘We find here four essential characteristics of ecclesial life: listening to the apostles’ teaching, first; second, the safeguarding of mutual communion; third, the breaking of the bread; and fourth, prayer. They remind us that the Church’s existence has meaning if it remains firmly united to Christ, that is, in community, in His Word, in the Eucharist and in prayer - the way we unite ourselves to Christ. Preaching and catechesis bear witness to the words and actions of the Teacher; the constant quest for fraternal communion shields us from selfishness and particularisms; the breaking of the bread fulfils the sacrament of Jesus’ presence among us. He will never be absent - particularly in the Eucharist, He is there. He lives and walks with us. And lastly, prayer, which is the space of dialogue with the Father, through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Everything in the Church that grows outside of these “coordinates” lacks a foundation. To discern a situation, we need to ask ourselves about these four coordinates: how in this situation these four coordinates are present - the preaching, the constant search for fraternal communion, charity, the breaking of the bread (that is, the Eucharistic life), and prayer.

Any situation needs to be evaluated in the light of these four coordinates. Whatever is not part of these coordinates lacks ecclesiality, it is not ecclesial. It is God who creates the Church, not the clamour of works. The Church is not a market; the Church is not a group of businesspeople who go forward with a new business. The Church is the work of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent to us to gather us together. The Church is precisely the work of the Spirit in the Christian community, in the life of the community, in the Eucharist, in prayer... always. And everything that grows outside of these coordinates lacks a foundation, is like a house built upon sand (see Mt 7:24-27). It is God who creates the Church, not the clamour of works. It is Jesus’ word that fills our efforts with meaning. It is in humility that we build the future of the world.

At times, I feel tremendous sadness when I see a community that has good will, but takes the wrong road because it thinks that the Church is built up in meetings, as if it were a political party. “But, the majority, the minority, what do they think about this, that and the other... And this is like a Synod, the synodal path that we must take...” I ask myself: “But where is the Holy Spirit there? Where is prayer? Where is communitarian love? Where is the Eucharist?” Without these four coordinates, the Church becomes a human society, a political party - majority, minority - changes are made as if it were a company, according to majority or minority... But the Holy Spirit is not there. And the presence of the Holy Spirit is precisely guaranteed by these four coordinates. To evaluate whether a situation is ecclesial or not ecclesial, let us ask ourselves about these four coordinates: life in community, prayer, the Eucharist...how is life developing along these four coordinates. If this is lacking, the Holy Spirit is lacking, and if the Holy Spirit is lacking, we are a beautiful organization, humanitarian, doing good things, good, good...even an ecclesial party, let’s put it that way. But it is not the Church. It is for this reason that the Church does not grow with these things: it does not grow through proselytism, as any other company, it grows by attraction. And who provokes attraction? The Holy Spirit. Let us never forget Benedict XVI’s words: “The Church does not grow through proselytizing, she grows by attraction”. If the Holy Spirit is lacking, who is the one who attracts [people] to Jesus, the Church is not there. There might be a beautiful friendship club, good, with good intentions, but not the Church, not synodality.’

So what does all this mean for our Pastoral Area Councils. First of all, they are an exercise of ecclesial communion, synodality if you will. To this end, they are more than business meetings. I would suggest that we need to develop a constitution for our Pastoral Area Councils, from which a standing agenda is produced. This will enable a clear line of direction to be developed across the diocese. Pastoral areas used to be called deaneries. This term relates more to the cluster of clergy in an area of the diocese. I am delighted that we now talk about pastoral areas. Somehow, this is a more inclusive term, involving all the baptised and celebrating their various charisms and skills, natural and supernatural.

I would propose that every gathering of a Pastoral Area Council develops our understanding of discipleship and pastoral ministry and care within the pastoral area. To this end, I am suggesting that there is some significant time of spiritual reflection and formation every time the Council gathers. Resources will be prepared and made available to facilitate this.

In these very practical ways, the Pastoral Area Council develops a capacity for synodality.

And finally, because there is still something of the deanery about all this, clergy working together across a number of parishes, we have to give some thought to what this will look like in the next few years. Through some changes that have already taken place with regard to the clustering of parishes, and because of the generosity of dioceses and religious communities from Africa and India, we cannot really say yet that we are short of priests here in the Diocese of Northampton. But a leader must lead his team up the mountainside to join him on the summit. From that vantage point, I can see what the future holds. And our clergy resources will be stretched even more.

To enable us to prepare for that time, we are making some adjustments to the pastoral areas. The Chilterns area has already been amalgamated into South Bucks. This should not mean the excellent work of the Chilterns Pastoral Area Council should not continue along the lines it has developed over the past few years. The central Bedfordshire area, neatly aligning with the Civic governance area will be divided. The two Northampton areas Will be amalgamated with a few parishes going to North Northants.

And so to a final thought, bringing together my two areas of reflection, vision and process. For years we have been hearing about two models of being Church, mission or maintenance. It is increasingly clear, this is a false choice. We are not maintaining the numbers we have been used to. There is only one option, and that is mission. Hence my decision to establish two agencies in the diocese, continuing the work of Bishop Peter's Walk Humbly with your God process and the beginning of a journey regarding social needs outreach. In the days ahead, you will be hearing more about Mission Northampton and Caritas Northampton.