

*“What will this child turn out to be?”* Those were the words of wonderment and joy spoken by the neighbours and friends of Zechariah and Elizabeth as they witnessed the unusual circumstances surrounding the birth of their son, John the Baptist: the fact that he had been conceived at all! by a hitherto barren wife way beyond the age of child bearing; that he should be called John and not Zechariah, and that his father should suddenly regain the power of speech after ratifying in writing what his wife had decreed about the naming of their son. The reaction to the birth of Christ’s forerunner and herald was made in response to a unique and miraculous event in the history of humanity. But along with the initial joy which should arise when every child is born, there also come thoughts of the future for the new baby: hopes and dreams running through the minds of parents, family and friends about what this little boy or girl will turn out to be. What will they become? What will they achieve in life? Of course answers to such questions are all conjectural because none of us are able to look into the future with any certainty. The only truthful answer to such wondering is, “God alone knows.”

And indeed it is Almighty God who does alone know the potentiality of every single child from the very first moment of conception in their mother’s womb. That potentiality is infused by God into the soul of every person when, with the cooperation of husband and wife, He brings a new life into being. That Divinely given potentiality is to become a saint, the only reason why God loves anyone into existence. For a saint, by definition, is someone who is enjoying, for the rest of eternity, the fullness of life and joy in heaven, sharing by invitation in the life of The Trinity, the life of The Three Persons in The One God, a life of perfect love. The desire by God for all of us to be with Him in heaven was clearly expressed by His Son, Jesus Christ, at the Last Supper. When trying to reassure the unease of the Apostles, He said, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still, and trust in me. There are many rooms in my Father’s house; if there were not, I should have told you. I am going now to prepare a place for you, and after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you with me; so that where I am you may be too.”*

Whatever we might become or achieve in this fragile, uncertain and short-lived part of our life, whether we experience success or failure, health or sickness, die young or old, alongside fulfilling our responsibilities, making good use of the talents which God has given us, and enjoying the goodness of His creation, there is only one goal to aim for with all our strength, only one legitimate ambition we should all, single-mindedly, strive to fulfil, and that is to become a saint. Such a status is what the Father wills for all of us. When we pray the Prayer which Jesus taught us and say, “Thy will be done” we are praying to be a saint. This is not spiritual presumption or pride but what the Father wants, and to coyly think, “I could never be become a saint” is denying the power of God’s grace to help us overcome every temptation, weakness and sin which plague all of us and which try to undermine that resolve to forget the past and to strain ahead for what is still to come; to weaken us as we race for the finish, for the prize to which God calls us upward to receive in Christ Jesus (cf Saint Paul). But to say, “I could never become a saint” might also imply that I do not really want to make the

efforts necessary to achieve heaven, that in this life I would rather take the lower, easier road which will eventually lead us, if we do not abandon it, to the only other ultimate alternative to heaven, which is hell.

Of course the legacy of defective “vision” and a penchant for taking the easy way out left to us by Original Sin is going to be with us all through our lives here, and so it will never be easy to gain that prize of heaven, sainthood. As Our Lord said, Anyone who wants to follow Me (in this life and then into heaven) must pick up their cross every day. But He also said, I will be with you always, every day, like a shepherd watching over his sheep, like a mother hen sheltering her chicks, I will not leave you as orphans. And so, nothing happens in our lives without Almighty God being fully aware of the laughter or tears which situations cause us; nothing happens in our lives without Almighty God either allowing or causing it to happen (and we know for certain, through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, just how much He loves us and therefore how He will never cause us suffering), and nothing happens in our lives without Almighty God using it to help us to get to heaven, to become saints. So, as we take stock of the Catholic Church in the Western Hemisphere and in particular our Diocese of Brentwood, we are certain that Almighty God is also fully aware that we have fewer priests today and fewer laity attending Mass than “yesterday”; He knows too, that this will be the likely trend for the immediate future and that it will not be viable to provide the number of Masses which are currently celebrated, He is fully aware that the status quo is not sustainable.

The Restructuring aspect of The Vision Document spells out what may happen within Parish Partnerships if the present trend of fewer priests and fewer people coming to Mass every week continues, the likely reduction of Masses and the venues where they can be celebrated, and therefore the greater inconvenience caused and efforts required to participate in the most important and central act of Catholic thanksgiving, worship and praise, the source and summit of the Christian Faith. Almighty God though, who is fully aware of this gradual decline of priests and practising Catholics and the subsequent consequences, has allowed this to happen for reasons which we may not fully understand in this life. But there does appear to be a pattern of inconsistency in the history of Salvation going back to Old Testament times. Here we find a periodic rise and decline in the fortunes and numbers of God’s chosen people until, at the time of Christ’s coming, the once mighty nation of Israel is reduced to a “handful” or a “remnant” of faithful followers of Yahweh, the *anawim* - the “poor ones”, like Mary and Joseph. This pattern has continued in the new Israel, the Catholic Church, and it seems about every 500 years or so a decline through apathy or persecution follows a period of a flowering of the Faith. Once again, though, we need to remind ourselves that whatever happens in our lives is for our eventual, eternal benefit; God only allows or causes things to happen to us to help us, if we want to, to get to heaven, to become saints. An easy statement to make, but if it is to be sincerely accepted, will require us to have a very deep faith, a tremendous trust in God’s wisdom and His love for us. And if our faith, through daily Renewal, urged by the Vision Document, is that strong, we

ought to see that the Almighty is providing an exciting future ahead in our Diocese for laity, priests and those living the Consecrated life because the hand of God is inviting us to travel down paths of refinement, different from what we are used to, but, nonetheless, roads which will eventually lead all of us to sainthood, to heaven.

*“What will this child turn out to be?”* What will we turn out to be? There should be only one answer, because there is only one answer, a Saint! This is what God wants for us and why He brought us into being, this is what any sane, rational, normal human being should desire with all their hearts. Léon Bloy (1846-1917), a French novelist, essayist, pamphleteer, and poet, who at one time had an intense hatred for the Catholic Church and its teachings before undergoing a dramatic religious conversion, was inspired to write, *“The only real sadness, the only real failure, the only great tragedy in life, is not to become a saint.”* The Vision Document holds up a mirror to us showing the reality of the significant changing circumstances of our Diocese and provides guiding frameworks for Parish Partnerships to make the necessary, mature responses to the “new” situation in the life of this part of the Church. Such, Spirit-guided, positive responses must be made in order for us to remain faithful to fulfilling the responsibilities entrusted to us at our Baptism, to continue and indeed to increase our efforts to Evangelise, to announce Jesus Christ to all. The greatest tragedy for us will be that, if through not seriously applying the Renewal aspect of The Vision Document in our lives, we either begrudgingly accept a new way of living out our Catholic Faith as envisioned by Restructuring or, even worse, we reject the practice of our Catholic Faith by not making the effort to come to Mass or to receive the Sacraments. If we react in such a negative and immature way we shall throw away the very means and opportunity which Almighty God has given us to deepen our love, thanksgiving and commitment to Him and to our neighbour, the essential works needed to help us advance along the road to becoming saints and making other people saints too.

Present and likely future circumstances in our Church are inviting us to embrace with more generosity, more love, the same Cross by which Jesus Christ unlocked the gates of heaven for us. If we fight against the Cross or reject it, we run the same risk of being admonished by Christ as Saint Peter was. After being congratulated by Jesus for having been given the gift of faith which enabled him to recognise and acknowledge Our Lord as the Messiah and the Son of the Living God, Simon was given a new name by Christ, the “Rock,” on which He would build His Church. But when Peter tries to dissuade Jesus from having to undergo His predicted suffering on the Cross, for that misguided, natural reaction he is given a new title by Our Lord, “Get behind Me, Satan”, says Christ to the newly appointed Pope! There is no other way to heaven except through Jesus Christ who is The Way, The Truth and The Life and His way to heaven was The Via Dolorosa which He had to travel before His Resurrection. Along this way we are invited to shed everything which slows us down or hinders us from reaching that place which Christ has won and prepared for us. When we leave this part of our life behind we shall be judged not on what we have achieved, owned (we can take nothing with us, not even our poor bodies), or done, but on how much we have loved God and our

neighbour. The Vision Document and the likely changes it envisages because of the changing circumstances in the Diocese of Brentwood is another opportunity allowed for by Almighty God to help us gain what He wants for all of us, to become tremendous lovers, to become saints!

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