

In the Book of Ecclesiastes the Holy Spirit reminds us: *“There is nothing new under the sun. Take anything of which it may be said, ‘Look now, this is new’. Already, long before our time, it existed. Only no memory remains of earlier times, just as in times to come next year itself will not be remembered.”* In 2004 Pope John Paul II, now Saint, addressed the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Lyons and Clermont on their *Ad Limina* visit to Rome with these words.

*“I would like to reflect with you on the life of the diocesan Church. Since the previous ad limina visits of the Bishops of France in 1997, many Dioceses have thought seriously about the life and role of the parishes. This became necessary due to demographic development and growing urbanisation, as well as to the shortage of priests, whose scarcity will be felt even more in the years to come. In many Dioceses, this work is carried out in the context of a diocesan synod; in others, what might be called a "synodal process" has been started, in all cases seeking the broad involvement of Pastors and faithful to review the parish's place in the life of the Church, including its future prospects. In most cases, the Bishop subsequently decided to re-organise the pastoral structure of his whole Diocese, either by creating new, fewer and better parishes, or by regrouping the existing ones into more consistent groups to serve better the needs of evangelisation.*

*“This pastoral reflection, far from being confined to the administrative reform and to the parish boundaries, has made possible a real process of continuing formation and catechesis with the faithful, enabling them to take on with greater awareness the riches of parish life; in other words, the three important missions of the Church: the prophetic mission, marked by the responsibility to proclaim the Good News of salvation to all, which the Lord himself entrusted to the Church; the priestly mission, which consists in sharing in the one priesthood of Christ through the celebration of the divine mysteries; and lastly, the royal mission, which is expressed in service to all in the manner of Jesus Christ.*

(At Baptism as we are anointed with the Oil of Chrism, the Priest or Deacon says, *‘The God of power and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin and brought you to new life through water and the Holy Spirit. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation, so that, united with his people, you may remain forever a member of Christ who is PRIEST, PROPHET and KING.’* Words added by the contributor)

*“For the faithful to become aware of the true identity of the parish, which is not merely a geographical territory or an administrative division but rather a fundamental Ecclesial Community, implies rediscovering the real identity of the Diocese. Nor is the Diocese merely an administrative district; it is first and foremost the expression of an ecclesial reality: the Diocesan Church, "a section of the People of God entrusted to a Bishop to be guided by him with the assistance of his clergy" (cf. Christus Dominus, n. 11). Consequently, the Diocese is a living entity, a human and spiritual reality, a family of communities made up of the parishes and other ecclesial initiatives in the area.*

*“I would like to stress the importance of this rediscovery of the Church's true nature. She is neither an administration nor an enterprise, but is primarily the expression of a spiritual reality made up of men and women, called by God's grace to become sons and daughters of God, who have entered into a new brotherhood through Baptism which has incorporated them into Christ.”*

What Pope Saint John Paul II said fifteen years ago commending those French Bishops for what they had done and were planning to do in reacting responsibly to the radical changing circumstances in their Dioceses, could be equally applied to our Bishop and the Diocese of Brentwood today. After three years of preparation, priests and people have been presented with The Vision Document for prayerful consideration, discussion and a response in order to help the Bishop in the decisions he will make, ensuring that the Gospel, the Good News, Jesus Christ, is preached more effectively in the changing circumstances of this present time. Perhaps some reflection on those supportive words spoken by Pope John Paul II to the French Bishops and the pastoral guidance he gave them might help all of us as we plan for the future.

One of the concerns raised in discussions on The Vision Document is that *RESTRUCTURING* may weaken or even destroy parish communities. Some think this, in turn, may engender resentment, anger, long-lasting bitterness. And, even worse, the turning of one's back on Christ through disassociating one's self from His Body, the Church, and refusing to fulfil the grave obligation to participate in the Saturday Vigil/Sunday Mass, God's ever present, definitive act of love for the whole of humanity. However, if we have a sound concept of what a true parish community is, as outlined above by Pope John Paul II, and are committed in making the efforts required for *RENEWAL*, this deepening of our intimate personal and communal relationship with Jesus Christ, and making that a paramount importance in our lives, as The Vision Document urges us to do, then a negative attitude and approach to Restructuring ought not to arise, and our deliberations would not then be coloured or restrained by any anxiety for, or misgivings about, the future of parish communities.

A genuine parish community will first and foremost be a sacrament - an effective sign, and therefore a witness to the pre-eminent Community, the Holy Trinity, the Community of the Three Persons in One God, a Community of perfect, everlasting, dynamic, Divine Love. We, who are made in the image and likeness of Almighty God, are called to the only way of life proper to our supernatural nature, the life of love which the Three Persons have for each other and for us. We have seen this perfect love through and in God's only Son, Jesus Christ, His words and His actions; who from the moment He came down from heaven and was conceived in the womb of Mary, always did the will of His Father. He humbled Himself to live our limited, restraining life in all things except sin and unconditionally died an awful death on the Cross for us while we were still sinners. Jesus now helps us to achieve this life of true love by the Gift of Himself and His Holy Spirit, chiefly through the Mass and the Sacraments of the Church. A true parish community will secondly also be a sacrament - an effective sign and therefore a witness to the Universal Church, the Body of Christ which, always

acknowledging the reality of Jesus as its Head, lives in intimate union with Him and does nothing to endanger separation from Him.

To think, to speak, to act like Jesus Christ is the only way to be faithful to and fulfil the threefold vocation given to all by the Sacrament of Baptism; to live as *PRIEST* (a life of sacrifice, offering up our life to the will of the Father), as *PROPHET* (a life of evangelisation, announcing the Father's love and mercy to all), and as *KING* (a life of love which subjugates sin). Through Baptism the awesome dignity of being made the beloved adopted sons and daughters of God the Father and brothers and sisters to Jesus Christ is conferred on us. If we are trying to live to the standards as shown by Christ and which He commanded His followers to keep, it should be easy to see that in a genuine parish community there can be no place for subjective attitudes such as parochialism (a limited or narrow outlook, especially focused on a local area; narrow mindedness), parish politics, petty jealousies, ambition, or the building up, defending and maintaining of little 'kingdoms'. However, given the legacy of Original Sin which weakens humanity in its attempts to love as Christ loves, all members of a true parish community, as well as guarding against succumbing to a dis-ordinate pursuit of Wealth, Power, Pleasure and Honour, the common ingredients in all temptations, will also have frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Striving to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect, as Jesus Christ told us to, may of course only be achieved with the help of Our Lord who never asks us to do the impossible and who, Himself, was tempted in every way that we are, but never gave in. And it is in the Liturgy (the Mass, the Sacraments and the Divine Office) where that assistance of His is supremely and readily available. When we make the effort to participate in the Liturgy we are signifying our desire to strengthen the bond between ourselves, the Body of Christ and He, our head. In the Liturgy, *"It is the one saviour of his body, our Lord Jesus Christ, who prays for us, prays in us, and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest. He prays in us as our head. He is prayed to by us as our God."* The Liturgy also, of course, strengthens and maintains the unity of the Body of Christ, you and I, with each other. The Liturgy, above all other forms of worship, makes possible the reality promised by Christ that, when two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them. Only through the welcome presence of Christ in the heart of each individual member of a parish community, who allows Him to shape their thoughts, words and actions, will it then become a true Parish Community.

If, in the future, prudence necessitates absorption of parishes or disposal of parish properties, this will not mark the end of parish communities, provided that Jesus Christ is welcomed and kept central to any given locale. In the early days of the Church, not dissimilar to present times, when Christians were a minority, there were no churches at all, and it was the custom for the faithful to meet in each other's houses for the 'breaking of bread'. Although through practical considerations the celebration of Mass may at some time have to be confined to central points in the various Parish Partnerships, one of the treasures of the Liturgy, namely, The Divine Office, can still be celebrated often, anywhere and, without a priest! This part of the Liturgy does not

negate the grave obligation to join in the celebration of the Saturday Vigil/Sunday Mass and it certainly does not replace the irreplaceable, but on weekdays, praying the Divine Office together, Head and Body, in each other's houses, would maintain and strengthen every local community of Christ's followers, and enable everyone to enjoy, in this sometimes 'vale of tears', a foretaste of heaven, which the Liturgy of the Church reveals to us.

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