

Pastoral Letter to be read out and/or made available on the  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
[11/12 February 2023]

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The readings at our masses this weekend speak of the wisdom and authority of God - if we trust God and are fashioned by His grace then we will go forward with confidence and hope.

Four years ago wide discussions and consultations led to our Vision Document [*Shaping our Future*] but pandemic lockdowns and world events have held back our progress. Beginning immediately, I think we need to reclaim the fruits of the hard work and discernment that went into the creation of that Vision.

I want to emphasise that it is a vision of hope despite the very difficult wider context in which we find ourselves. It is a vision that speaks of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ in our Diocese and exploring new ways of doing that in our parish partnerships.

As I go around the diocese I am greatly encouraged and delighted by what I see and hear. In parishes and schools the generosity and witness of laity and clergy are astonishing. Whether in the celebration of the Liturgy or pastoral care, authentic Catholic Life is celebrated and God's saving work is furthered.

However we are also facing new and serious challenges. Since the pandemic many have not returned to the practice of the Faith. There have been major shifts in the Catholic populations within the diocese. Some churches and schools have seen their local active Catholic numbers plunge; in other places we are seeing the opposite.

The Vision Process described active Parish Partnerships and these are already strong in some parts of the diocese. Collaboration around catechetics, music and Catholic organisations is widespread but we need to develop and formalise many of these links.

Both in the Vision process and in the more recent reflections on the Synodal Church concern was expressed for the wellbeing of our clergy who give so generously in their ministry as priests and deacons. All our parishes are facing increasing demands in areas such as Health & Safety, Safeguarding and Finance. Many of us are discovering that these challenges can only be met in partnership with others.

Underpinning all this is a vision of the people of God working together to care for one another and to share our faith with as many people as possible. One great project in your partnership would be to employ a Parish Partnership Youth Coordinator. The Brentwood Catholic Youth Service can help here if you look at the Resources section of their website.

*Shaping our Future* speaks of supporting our renewal by using all of our combined resources to the best of our abilities. As we go forward we must recognise that we will not be able to maintain and repair all our buildings.

The Synodal Pathway led by Pope Francis emphasises the particular role of the diocesan bishop who must discern the signs of the times and determine ways forward after listening carefully to the people of God.

If we are to ensure a flourishing Catholic presence in East London and Essex for future generations we need to renew and restructure in line with the Vision document-

‘As parish partnerships work together... everyone will need to be very bold. Reach high in your aspirations and dreams’.

I have asked Steve Webb, our Director of Development, to talk to all parish partnerships about how implementation of the Vision Document *Shaping our Future* can be taken forward. I recognise that each partnership is unique and at a different stage. As this Pastoral Letter is read in all our churches this weekend he will be writing to all Parish Priests, Stewards of the Gospel and others closely involved in this process.

Today I want to restate my thanks to everyone who contributed to the creation of our Vision and to reaffirm that it remains the way forward for us to renew and restructure our diocese.

The world is rapidly changing and the future is always uncertain but God’s care for His Church never fails - ‘They are happy who do His will, seeking Him with all their hearts’.

Yours in Christ and Mary,

+Alan Williams, sm  
Bishop of Brentwood