

Questions/Observations from 18 March Launch of 'Preparing the Way'

St Aloysius, Hebburn and St Leonard's, Durham

(Some of the questions were similar, so a compilation response is offered here)

- 1 When it comes to praying in parishes for *Forward Together in Hope*, can we make sure that the prayer is open so that everyone can feel welcome?**

We are all different people and pray in different ways. Parishes and communities develop their own style of prayer that works for them. Please feel free to accommodate the different ways that people pray. No one style needs to fit all... We can all benefit from experiencing different ways of allowing the Spirit to guide us and comfort us, so all our communal prayer needs to be as inclusive and respectful as possible. I would urge those who have the privilege of bringing Holy Communion to the sick, and those who visit the housebound to bring copies of the *Forward Together in Hope* prayer and invite those people to pray with us in their own cathedrals in front of the fire... (see also the Liturgy and Spiritual Resources available with the pack, in particular the 'Anchors' prayer for the housebound)

- 2 There may be a controversial issue in our parishes about collecting data about individuals...What is the legal position about collecting information about individuals and keeping records?**

This question is really about collecting data and information about individuals. It is not envisaged that, regarding *Forward Together in Hope*, information and data will be collected about individuals. The information required is much more likely to be about the numbers of people involved in such things as Children's Liturgy; school attendance; readers; catechists; altar servers and so on. The names of individuals will not be collected.

- 3 What are we going to do about Vocations to the Priesthood? There are only 4 men in formation at the present time. How do we increase this number in the future? There are 10 'Headings' for exploration, not one of them is about 'Vocations'.**

Bishop Seamus noted that once we all appreciate that we are disciples and there is more profound awareness that we are all called by God, then there will be an increase of men responding to the call to ministerial priesthood. What is vitally important is that we become a praying diocese and a praying priesthood, vocations to the ministerial priesthood will flow from this.

It is very interesting to note that Great Britain is 2nd in the 'global league-table' of the ratio of priests to people. We are second after Gozo/Malta. This information is from the Bishops' Conference Secretariat who in turn receives it from the National Vocations Office who receives it from the Vatican. In our diocese we have (according to our most recent Northern Catholic Calendar 2015) 36,661 mass attenders. We also have 109 active priests. Dividing one by the other we have 1 priest per 336.3 'practicing Catholics'. Cardinal Tagle referred to the number of priests and people in his diocese in Manila. There are 3 million Catholics with 40% regular worshippers in 80 parishes and 271 priests – this works out at 1 priest for over 11,000 of those who describe themselves as Catholic, and 1 priest for 4,428 'practicing Catholics'.

There is only one priest in the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. Indeed there is only one priest in the world – Jesus Christ – and all who are baptised share in the priesthood of Jesus. We share it in different ways. Perhaps this is the context in which we need to think and pray about ministerial priesthood. Every baptised person is 'called to discipleship'; this is the 'vocation' unique to everyone. Perhaps the Spirit is guiding us into a deeper awareness of how we are to fulfil our obligations as members of the Priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Seamus added that looking back, there may have been too many priests in our diocese when he first joined us in 1966, and now we are being encouraged to explore how we work together to witness to the person of Jesus in the world. The more we are aware of our responsibility to be disciples, the more chance there is of vocations to priestly ministry emerging.

- 4 If we call a meeting in our parish to discuss this, the same 5 people will come who turn up for everything. The people we really need to reach are the people who come to mass then go away and that's it. It might be that we need to use one of the Liturgies at the beginning of Mass so that we can include more people.**

Forward Together in Hope is a relatively new initiative. It can therefore offer a brand new opportunity to use imagination to include different people in discussion and reflection. One of our hopes is that ways can be found to include those people who are 'resting' or 'on sabbatical' from worship. There may be 2 or 3 generations of people who are still members of the Church but who have not worshipped regularly for many years. Local communities have the chance to explore ways of listening to others – to those bringing children to school in the morning or picking them up in the evening, those who are seeking to have their

children baptised etc. We would like to hear from, or hear the views of, those people who would not normally expect to be included.

It may be an idea to show the DVD during mass, and use this as a way to invite more than the usual volunteers to come and be part of the exploration and discussion about what is in fact **'their' community**. The observations and views of as broad a group as possible is obviously the ideal, so that any responses reflect the whole breadth of those who are involved with the community in any way at all.

5 You mentioned that the DVD would go to all schools. How will schools be involved, will there be a special invitation to them to become involved?

In the pack you have received there is a brief paragraph about 'Education and Formation'. In it there is a strong hint that when the Questionnaire is completed, there will be questions about the relationship between the local schools and the local community. Schools are part of the fabric of the Church and are not separate institutions. In the questionnaire there will be opportunities for Governors, Head teachers and teachers to attend the local meetings and make their contribution to the discussion. We don't want to treat schools as a separate entity but as part of the local Catholic community.

6 Parishes are at different levels of development. Is there a way of encouraging parishes to look at their development in conjunction with neighbouring communities?

Under the heading 'Geography' in the Questionnaire, there will be reference to 'geographic distance' exploring how close communities are to each other. Once the initial questionnaire has been completed, analysed and returned, we envisage communities looking at what is returned in conjunction with their neighbours. We feel that the more people who are involved in this with as broad a vision as possible, the better.

7 Our Church doesn't have the technology to show this kind of thing, so we are encouraging parishioners to come to the celebration of mass in the local primary school during the week. Perhaps the local school chaplain could invite not just parishioners but the parents of the children in the school to come and be part of any discussion that take place... (applause...)

This must be an example of good practice which may well be able to be followed in other parts of the diocese in other communities.

It is also true to say that no one needs the priest's permission to bring people together in their houses to use their own equipment and explore what is being offered via the DVD and PowerPoint today.

8 Is there any particular reference to Ecumenism in the documentation?

Under the heading 'Outreach' we have included relationships with other parts of the Christian family and women and men of other faiths. Pope Francis has frequently called on us to become 'missionary disciples'. We are called, as Christians, to reach out into the world and to make a difference. The development of relationships with our ecumenical sisters and brothers is very much part of our response as disciples. One of the indicators of 'viability' is how we focus our energy and imagination in responding to the needs of people around us, so to get to know, to pray with and to act alongside other Christians bears powerful witness in the world we live in today.

9 There is a great deal to do. Can it all fit into the timescale suggested?

In one way, this is an impossible task! On the other hand it is perfectly sensible to begin it. Our aim with ***Forward Together in Hope*** is to invite as many people as possible in our diocese to engage in this process of reflection on how to become more committed disciples, and to discover how we can nurture discipleship in flourishing communities. At this moment we have no idea what shape these flourishing communities will take. We can only begin to explore where our strengths and weaknesses are as a diocese and make the most of the God given gifts we have in the future. All sorts of 'directions' might emerge: how to encourage communities to use the increasing number of buildings we will have for the benefit of the local community; models and styles of lay leadership and collaborative ministry with priests; closer relationships between families, schools and worshipping communities and so on. We trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit over the coming months and years to show us how best we can move into the future.

There may well be difficult decisions to make in the future, - but at the very least these decisions will be made after a full and careful and honest appraisal of all communities by the communities themselves.

Jim O'Keefe 27 March 2015