

Association of Religious

Little Sisters of the Poor

25 April 2015

Questions and Responses

Introduction: Very many thanks to Sr. Barbara for making it possible for me to join you this afternoon...

Some of you may remember the fascinating lectures and discussions that took place in the French Church in London in the late 1960s after the Vatican Council. The place was packed to listen to Peter de Rosa, Hubert Richards, Anne de Souseberghe (then Sister Romaine, now still flourishing at the age of 110) unpacking new approaches to Scripture, Tradition and the Teachings of the Church. Most of the people thirsting for knowledge and inspiration were male and female religious. It seems to me there is no doubt that Religious took 'Renewal and Aggiornamento' more seriously than many others in the Church.

This year, 'A Year of Consecrated Life' also reminds us of the presence, commitment and witness of Religious in our world. It is interesting to note in this week's Tablet, that while the number of men inquiring about diocesan priesthood in this country is decreasing, the number of women seeking to explore religious life is increasing...

Forward Together in Hope is an invitation to every Catholic in the Diocese to explore how they can deepen their sense of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in a changing world and changing Church. Today is simply an opportunity to explore with you how you can make a contribution to this 3 year programme in our diocese.

The process we have devised is rooted in all the talking and planning and exploring that has gone on in our Diocese since the 1990s. We have also looked at programmes and initiatives in other dioceses and other countries. We have tried to develop something that is specific for our Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, that is equitable and transparent and that invites every Catholic to participate

All the Documentation is on our website, and all future documentation will be available on line as well as CD. In the week beginning with Pentecost Sunday the Questionnaire will be made available to very community for exploration and completer before Advent this year. I hope that you're able to make a significant contribution to the parish discussions and meetings that will take place later this year.

1 Will there be copies of documents provided that are more accessible for people with various disabilities?

We are trying to ensure that *Forward Together in Hope* is as inclusive as possible. We are also very much aware that our small team, Tony, Nancy and myself, are not experts in so many things and are relying on the help of colleagues and volunteers to compliment what we are able to do. So, for example, a former ITN producer effectively produced the DVD for us. What I would say is that those of you who have particular gifts in designing and developing appropriate documentation would be a real gift to us. If you feel you can help us in any way with this, please feel free to contact us and we will see what we can do together. Our next print deadline is very soon, but it certainly won't be the last one. There will certainly be opportunities to help us in the future.

2 Whatever happened to the Pastoral Congress?

The National Pastoral Congress took place 35 years ago in Liverpool. It was the result of two years of planning and consultation about the 7 key headings provided (Worshipping Community, Ecumenism, Evangelisation, The Body of Christ, Marriage and Family, Education and Justice – if my memory serves me correctly) in every diocese in England and Wales. Two thousand people met for 3 days. The resulting document was entitled 'The Easter People'.

Good question! One response to it is simply that the energy of the Catholic Church in England and Wales was taken up over the following two years in preparing for the visit of Pope John Paul 11 in May/June 1982. The discussion and reflection, however, continued in more local groups, though many people felt that the initial enthusiasm and drive was lost.

Forward Together in Hope is very different. It is only one diocese, and the invitation is to every single Catholic in the diocese to contribute to the discovery and discussion about how we move into the future.

3 What if there are some parishes that haven't actually heard of it?

It is quite likely that some communities are only very vaguely aware of what is happening. It has been mentioned at every Council of Priests meetings since last October, every Council of the Laity meeting and every deanery meeting. Bishop Seamus produced a Pastoral Letter last November and every parish has been invited to provide a lay contact, who is responsible for encouraging the priest and community to take it seriously by finding ways of distributing the information. It has been featured regularly in the Northern Cross.

Last November I began to visit every parish in the diocese (over 170 of them, hopefully within the time allocated, 3 years...) to explain what we are doing and why we are doing it.

If it is the case that there is a parish not aware of it, I'd be delighted to hear of it and will find a way of addressing it.

4 What about young people? Where are they? What are our schools doing?

In the Questionnaire that will be available from Pentecost onwards (May 24), there are various opportunities for the community to think about young people. Indeed the final heading is totally devoted to young people. As we say in the Booklet, 'Young People are not just the 'future' of the Church; they are very much part of the present...' Every community will have the opportunity to explore how they can engage with young people not only in relation to the Questionnaire, but in relation to the Church as a whole.

There is also the opportunity to explore how the local schools, local families and the worshipping community relate to each other and how they can deepen their relationship with each other.

If lying behind the questions is the single question: 'Why don't our young people go to Church?' I suspect that many of us have some clear ideas as to why they don't, we just don't yet know how to develop 'community' and 'worship' within which they feel they belong. It is perfectly natural for the young and the questioning to rebel and 'excuse themselves' ...it is much more difficult for us to re-engage with each other after that stage has passed.

If you feel you would like to make any further contribution to our programme, please feel free to contact us at hope@diocesahn.org.uk or 01912433304.

Many thanks once again for the opportunity to be with you.

Jim O'Keefe