

Visitation Report Rugby Deanery October 2018 – March 2019.

We have come to the end of another series of Visitations in this deanery, and as always it has been fascinating to get an insight into how so many people live their faith. I, on a personal level, have found it very encouraging. There is a real life in this deanery which is spiritual and human. Archbishop Bernard has visited the parishes of St. Anne's in Nuneaton and at Bulkington and Bedworth. I have visited all of the rest of the parishes.

I do not write individual reports to every parish after the visitation. I have always found this very difficult but instead write a longer report covering the whole of the visitation. This I am asking the Parish priests to bring to the attention of their parishioners in whatever way they feel is best in their parish. The report should be available, however, for everyone who wishes to read it.

General Impressions

I was made very welcome in every Parish I have been in. Thank you. There can easily be a sense of nervousness as you approach a parish and wonder what people are thinking. The general situation in the deanery is very good, with a very vibrant and active faith-life in every parish which I have visited. It is impressive how much activity is carried out by lay-people, and I will return to that later in the report.

I struggle to find the crisis in our faith which the newspapers and sometimes other Catholics tell me exists. If we are purely thinking of numbers, then it may be true that there are less people coming than there were. I grew up in the 1950s in Birmingham. I would estimate then that at the Catholic primary school I attended about a quarter of the children could be described as practicing, and at St. Philip's grammar school in a class of 36 we were at most four who went regularly to church on Sundays. It may not be better now, but it is not a new problem which has just descended on the Church. We are a Church which is living in a time of rapid change and that is uncomfortable, but there is much that is positive, not least in the Rugby deanery and that is what we need to concentrate on.

Liturgy

There is a good standard of music and liturgy in almost every parish, and people are enthusiastic about taking part in the liturgy. Some parishes were very good at trying to introduce new hymns, and that is excellent at helping to keep the liturgy alive. Others could learn from that. Some parishes have groups which together with the priest prepare the Sunday liturgy, and can bring new insights to that ministry which the priest does not always have.

The number of altar servers was very impressive. Our way of living now means that everywhere there is a difficulty in knowing how many servers will attend, but despite the difficulties training when possible is necessary. While speaking of the liturgy it should be part of the pattern of the liturgical preparation in parishes to see that vestments are cleaned now and again and also kept in proper repair. Vestments which are worn out should be disposed of in a suitable way, rather

than just clogging up cupboards. This is also the case for altar-servers' vestments. I was asked about what altar servers should wear in a couple of parishes. I, and I emphasise that this is just my opinion, like the use of white albs as it is a reminder of the white baptismal garment which we have all received.

Lay Activity

I have been very impressed by the responsibilities taken by lay-people in all parishes. This is very positive as the number of ordained clergy is shrinking. Big steps have been taken in this regard, but I suspect that as in all new situations the proper balance has yet to be achieved. Achieving balance is difficult. The clergy need to give leadership but without supressing real initiative just because it is not quite what they would have done. In other words, we are looking for real dialogue, where all involved are willing to listen and to change. It is not a true dialogue where you believe you know the answers before you begin, nor is it a meaningful dialogue which never draws a conclusion as to what should be done. Let me repeat, however, that I am overall very impressed by the amount of lay activity taking place in all sorts of fields.

Parish Activities

There were not any parishes where there were not some activities taking place beyond the liturgy. There were all sorts of groups for people to meet in, study circles of all sorts, various parish committees, groups of young people, pensioners, mothers and toddlers, catechists, evangelisation groups, groups to organise the ministry of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist and visiting the sick, and many more. I would point out that there is the possibility for training for many of these groups through Maryvale in Birmingham. They are often quite willing to organise courses locally. Some parishes even have groups to organise the social life of the parish in all its forms, and this again is an initiative to be encouraged. To meet together to have a common meal is not just enjoyable it is a holy thing as we eat together recognising the dignity of every human being by the food we offer each other and our being together.

I would like to draw your attention to three areas here.

Social Outreach

The first is about social outreach. This is part of the evangelisation which the Church by its nature must promote. Every parish has groups who were working with other people locally with a hands on approach to the local problems for the homeless, for refugees and immigrants, for food banks. I was impressed by the number of people who are quietly working visiting the housebound the sick and those in institutions. I looked at my notes from the previous visitation and found that I had said the same then. This is marvellous as it is central to the work of the Church and this deanery is showing over a long period of time its commitment to this apostolate.

There were many groups doing their best to find resources for projects abroad. These were sometimes projects which were attached to the parish itself or through organisations such as CAFOD and Aid to the Church in Need. Both of these organisations are keen to have a local

representative in each parish, and where these do not exist I would encourage parishes to find suitable people.

Much of this social ministry is being carried out ecumenically, and that is also to be encouraged.

Youth Ministry

The second area is that of our ministry to young people. Our diocese, when others were cutting back on youth ministry, has invested heavily in this area. This is now showing results. The Kenhelm Trust is running a whole series of programmes for young people and for those who lead youth ministry. If the programme you need is not there, then get in touch and see what can be done.

What is happening without doubt is not that young people are giving up on the Church but they are being 'catholic' in ways which are sometimes foreign to an older generation. While not abandoning principles that serve us well we should be encouraging what is new so that our young sisters and brothers feel part of the community in the way that they find relevant. We are a pilgrim people and things will always change. We need to embrace the journey and not the places where we pause to rest.

Ecumenism

The third area is that of ecumenism. In many places that has been delegated to lay-people. That is good, but the clergy cannot just leave it there. They should also be taking part at least some of the time; not least in meeting their colleagues from other churches and denominations. I was delighted to see in many places that is just 'natural' that sisters and brothers from other denominations were asked to be part of parish events, not least those who were invited to take part in the visitation.

Administration

Some points about administration. Many priests told me that the number of telephone calls they received has diminished quite considerably, while the number of emails they received has increased markedly. This change in the way that people communicate with us has the advantage that we can answer as and when we wish. It is, however, important that people do get an answer, and that we set aside time for the task of answering all the emails that come in. I was frequently thanked for the help that parishes had received from the central administration in Birmingham. Someone said "they always seem so friendly", just waiting to help us. Thank you for that. I will pass it on. There was also appreciation of the new staff who have been employed, which was experienced by many as a positive step forward for the diocese. There were also thanks that the diocesan accounting system now seems to be fully operational.

Structural Development

The area of this deanery will in all probability in the next twenty or so years go through enormous

changes. Tens of thousands of new houses are likely to be built within the area of the deanery. The southern pastoral region of the diocese has a group monitoring this development, which could mean for the church the possibility of building new schools, and perhaps even churches. We have professional help in these matters, but we do need your cooperation. If you become aware that within your parish a major development is planned (say a development of 1,000 or more housing units) or is already taking place, then would you let us know. It is better for us to receive the same news several times than not to receive it at all. At this stage it is impossible to say what this will mean for the development of the diocese.

The Swedes have a saying that you do not wake the sleeping bear. The results can be unpleasant and unpredictable. I am now going to do just that, and I am prepared for all the brickbats which may, I suspect, arrive. I was asked in several places (usually by lay-people) as to whether there was the possibility of changing the boundaries of this deanery, so that in some way the deaneries of Coventry and Rugby could go together and even that parts of this one could join the Leamington deanery. I intend to ask the Archbishop to give some consideration to this question, and to see whether it is possible or useful.

Vocations

This brings me to the number of priests in your deanery. The number of priests in the diocese is shrinking. This means that parishes are going to have to share priests. At this stage we have no plans to close any parish, but we cannot guarantee that there will always be a resident priest in every parish. I have already said how good it is that lay-people are realising their vocation as baptised daughters and sons of God and taking a much more active role in their parishes, and this must continue. Several parishes have told of their wishes to have a resident priest, not least this parish of English martyrs. These discussions have taken place in a real spirit of cooperation and understanding of the difficulties which the diocese faces. I sincerely thank you all for the kindness shown to me personally and to the various groups in the parishes when discussing delicate matters with views which are deeply held. Again I will make sure that these discussions are forwarded to the Archbishop and to the Vicar General. May I point out that it is not just a matter of getting a priest to celebrate mass. A congregation needs to get to know its priest so that he also becomes part of the community and can give to the community service to the best of his ability

It may be necessary to look at the times of masses so that parishes can quickly help one another should a priest become ill. This is also a matter which must be taken up at deanery level.

We must also continue our work for vocations. This means continuing with vigour the prayer which takes place in many parishes for vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life. It also means encouraging the younger members of your families, whether you are parents or grandparents, to consider such a vocation. One of the success stories of our diocese has been the number of permanent deacons which we have. The deacons whom we have are excellent, but we do need many more. Some are, shall we say, getting a little long in the tooth. I ask both parishioners and clergy to give careful thought to this matter in order to continue with prayer and also information about this vocation.

Deanery Identity

One of the changes which will have to take place is that some matters will have to move onto a deanery level, rather than leaving everything to the parish. If you are running a good programme for sacramental preparation, then share it with the neighbouring parishes. If you are struggling to carry out youth ministry, then ask the neighbouring parish if they have any better ideas. In many places, not just in this deanery, I come across situations where excellent things are going on, but we never tell people about them, and we spend time and resources reinventing the wheel.

Conclusion

May I conclude, by repeating what I said at the beginning that this deanery has much to be proud of. It is a beacon of a faith which is alive. We are living in a time of great change: that is uncomfortable but also exciting. The change is in the first place a matter of seeing what it means to be a Catholic in 2019, and not as it was five, ten, twenty or fifty years ago. The Holy Spirit is leading us: through the changes to ministry which are being demanded of us, because the laity will take over more and more responsibility. This is of course no more than what should happen as we realise the consequences of being baptised and confirmed. We are being shown this, for instance, through our young people, what that means, in new ways of being Catholic. We are being shown this by the ever increasing number of housebound sisters and brothers with the help they need to be accompanied and to receive the sacraments. We are being shown this by the atrocious happenings in our world asking us to show solidarity not only with our own sisters and brothers but with those who are Muslims or Jews. All of us need to really read the signs of the times which are all around us.

As I have mentioned in every parish I have been in, the Archbishop has launched the programme to create a vision for our diocese for the next five, ten or fifteen years, This is not in the first place about structure but about life and faith. Take part in that programme and dare to live the faith now in our time.

May I ask that this report should be one of the points of consideration as you plan your activities. It is impossible for such a report to be comprehensive, and I may have things wrong, but even that can be a useful spur to further thought about what we need to do.

Thank you again for all your kindness to me, and let us pray for each other as we continue our pilgrimage back to the Father and as part of the Kingdom yet to be fully realised.

(Rt. Rev.) William Kenney CP
Auxiliary Bishop of Birmingham