

VISITATION NOTES – COVENTRY & NUNEATON 2022

I want to thank Canon Tom for welcoming us here at Christ the King tonight and for organising our time of prayer and reflection at the beginning of this deanery Visitation. I also thank all the priests and deacons of the deanery for gathering here tonight and all the representatives of the different parishes across the city and the Nuneaton area.

The last Visitation of the Coventry Deanery was in 2014-2015 and the last Visitation of the former Rugby Deanery, which included the Nuneaton area, was in 2018-2019. On both occasions I joined Bishop William Kenney to visit the parishes of the deaneries over a number of weekends. At the end of each Visitation we celebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving and held meetings to share some of our conclusions with the clergy and the parishioners.

There has been much change in the intervening five years – some of it planned and some of it unforeseen. The coronavirus pandemic has left us all in a very different place from the end of 2019 and we are still struggling to recover from its impact and the effects of the restrictions that were in place.

The return of the congregations to our parishes has been gradual and overall we reckon that about two-thirds of parishioners have made the return for Sunday Mass in the parish church. We clearly have a challenge ahead to draw families and the more vulnerable older parishioners back to church.

On a practical level that means that some parishes are also struggling financially with regular income down and expenditure due to rise because of the increase in fuel bills over the winter. At the same time clergy are very much aware of the financial difficulties facing parishioners over the coming months.

Since the last Visitation we introduced and we've been developing the diocesan vision and planning so that we can be prepared for the changes that are likely to be needed in the coming years. The shape of your deanery has changed and we have planned this Visitation so that it echoes the diocesan vision statement which says:

***We are called to be a Catholic diocese which is:
faithful to the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ
full of missionary disciples who work together co-responsibly***

***in vibrant communities of faith,
joyful in their service of God and neighbour.***

There are four areas that I am asking us all to focus on: Evangelisation, Formation, Liturgy and Worship and Social Outreach.

During the Visitation we shall reflect on these four themes with the parish clergy, with the different parish groups and organisations that we hope to meet and with individual parishioner.

It's also important that young people and families are a particular area of focus for all that we do. The universal call to holiness finds its first expression within families and its first recruits among young people. Catholic education and our diocesan youth services play an important role in serving families and young people. The links between the family, the parish and the school are vital to ensure that the faith is handed on.

Central to the diocesan vision is the faithful working together of clergy and parishioners. This is already a vital part of parish life and we will witness many fruitful example of it during the Visitation weekends.

But we shall need formation for clergy and lay faithful to help us adapt to new patterns – not just of collaboration but also of being co-responsible for parish life, where decisions can be taken together for the good of the parish's mission (and always respecting the provisions of Canon Law about pastoral care and the responsibilities of governance).

I'm aware that as we look at the life of the new deanery we may need to face some difficult questions – questions about where our clergy are based in the future and the extent of their pastoral responsibilities, bearing in mind that our clergy numbers are predicted to be smaller in five years time.

We need to look at the patterns of church-going – especially in urban settings where churches may be only a mile apart. Can we sustain that level of provision for very much longer or do we need to look again at how our church properties are used to support evangelisation and outreach?

Alongside the vision and planning we have also been walking the Synodal Pathway. The findings of our parish discussions have already provided all the material for our diocesan report – and that in turn has now been fed

into the national report from England and Wales. All those findings will be used by the Holy See to produce the material for next year's Synod of Bishops in Rome.

But the material we have gathered across the Archdiocese is now helping us to plan for our own diocesan mission over the next five years. These weeks of Visitation will give us an opportunity to test the insights of the Synodal Pathway against your day-to-day experience of Catholic life.

One of the greatest national changes we have witnessed since the last Visitation happened only two weeks ago, with the death of Her late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth. The various Commemoration Services in our own cities and across Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Funeral Services on Monday and many of the speeches reflecting on the late Queen's life have emphasised her deep Christian faith as the basis for her faithful service of the nation.

The King has also spoken about his own faith and his wish to support all faiths across the kingdom. We need to take up his invitation to work together – first with our fellow Christians to witness to Jesus Christ and to continue the work of evangelisation here. Then with the other faith communities to foster local friendships and to work together as much as possible for the common good of our neighbourhoods.

The Visitation must not be inward-looking – it must be a work of evangelisation in itself. It is not a distraction taking time and energy away from your parish priorities but it is for noticing and encouraging all these good works – and finding and enabling ways of sharing them across the parish communities of the deanery.

Once again, I thank Canon Tom, Fr Benedict, the parish deacons and all the parishioners of Christ the King and Our Lady of Lourdes with St Augustine's for your welcome and hospitality tonight – and I would ask Canon Paul to say a few words about the Visitation and some of the practical details that it involves.

✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham