

ADDRESS TO DEACONS

I always look forward to this annual meeting with you, my deacons, deacons of our Diocese of Portsmouth. It's hard to believe it's a full year since we were last here; they say time passes more quickly the older you get! It's a great blessing to have over 30 deacons in active ministry in the Diocese, together with 14 in formation. It would be wonderful to have a deacon in every parish. But deacons are also needed in special ministries, and some work in the Diocesan Framework. Indeed, it's interesting looking down the list of deacons in the Directory, noting the responsible tasks deacons fulfil. This is not exhaustive, but here are some examples:

- prison chaplaincy;
- academies support work;
- marriage and family life;
- support of the clergy;
- diocesan Trustees;
- school governorship;
- diocesan finances;
- vocations promotion and vocational discernment; and
- canon law services.

There are many other roles deacons play in parishes, schools, hospitals. I thank each one of you personally for all that you do, for your loyalty to me, for your example, for your prayer, and not least for your service of the Christian faithful, especially the poor. I am also very grateful to Fr. Peter Hart and his Team for all that they do for the on-going pastoral care and formation of you, deacons and wives, and also for all they do for the care of vocations to the diaconate. Let us pray for more vocations.

A deacon is a servant, in imitation of Christ the Servant, and I wanted to appeal to you on behalf of *Caritas Diocese of Portsmouth* for your help. Caroline Virgo has listed some of the roles where a deacon and a deacon's wife would be invaluable. These are not necessarily long-term projects but any help you could give would be much appreciated. Can I ask you in prayer to consider these appeals? Most of us are running already at over-capacity, but if something needs doing it's always best to ask a busy person! I especially commend to you the *Apostleship of the Sea* project. Our Diocese is a maritime Diocese and so we have a special responsibility for seafarers. There are also some urgent needs in the Reading area. Please reflect on this and be generous.

Meanwhile this morning as your Bishop I want to add some thoughts of my own to the topic you have been studying this weekend, the call to new evangelisation.

Recently, a priest lamented to me that of the 40 candidates from his parish for Confirmation, only 2 continue to practice, with another 3 or 4 occasionally. Yet last year, they had had a wonderful Confirmation course, with lots of fun and an overnight retreat. They had also had an uplifting celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Cathedral. What had gone wrong?

I gave a provocative response: “You catechised them and you sacramentalised them - but did you convert them?” Conversion is a blunt term for a process that might be sudden and dramatic or for most, gradual and incremental. But in the first place evangelisation is about conversion. It is about meeting Jesus Christ and being transformed by him. Evangelisation is first about conversion, then catechesis and formation, and then sacramentalisation. Over the last century or so, as Catholics in Britain, our parishes and schools have been good at these second and third aspects - at catechising and sacramentalising - but what about the first, what about converting? Because the tribal Catholic culture of the past has now evaporated, many of our young need conversion. In fact, while some would resist, many are open to it, and, if they come to church at all, for instance, for Confirmation, they are expecting the Church, the catechists, the priest or the parish, to *try* to convince and convert them.

The Jesuit priest, Fr. Robert Spitzer, head of the *Magis Centre*, explores what he says are the four chief blocks to faith that millennials have:

- Does God exist?
- If God exists, why is there so much suffering in the world?
- Was Jesus an historical Person? He was surely a good man, a prophet, a religious leader, but was He really the Son of God?
- And what about science and religion, faith and reason? Is it not science that gives us the Truth – or at least what works – whereas religion, is it not chiefly private opinion? Why is Christianity supposedly true, and not Islam?

Spitzer adds a fifth block to faith for young people today: busyness, constant mobile phones, texting, *Instagram*, checking the internet; there’s never a moment’s rest. Spitzer argues that the young today *want* to know that God exists; they want to learn how to pray; they want to meet Jesus in Person; they want to learn how to use the Scriptures to enable union with God; they want to build up a friendship with God. But they do need answers both to their own personal questions and also to those fundamental blocks to faith, such as: Does God exist? Why suffering and evil? Was Jesus really Divine? And how can science and religion be correlated?

So we need to work at *converting* young Catholics, not just catechising them and preparing them to receive Sacraments.

This also applies to adult Catholics. In her book *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Sherry Weddell, refers to Pew Surveys revealing how 45% of *practising* Catholics - those always at Sunday Mass, leading parishioners, even those undertaking prominent ministries in the parish – are unsure God is personal, or that they can have friendship with God or feel only a weak sense of God’s presence. Think of it like this: next Sunday at Mass, almost half of the people there have little sense that God is personal, that God loves them, that God wants friendship with them! Many Catholics seem not to have been evangelised. As a priest, I have always made enabling and encouraging people to attend Mass as a key aim in ministry. As a hospital chaplain, whether someone was a practising Catholic or not made a huge difference: the aim was to lead the not-yet-practising to become practising. What I have come to realise in recent

years is that converting people ought to be the first aim. Otherwise, they will come to Mass, practice for a while, but then ultimately drift away, because fundamentally they have not been converted.

Recently I spoke at an evening conference in London. The main speaker was Sherry Weddell. So many people came that the talks had to be moved into the church, with people standing along the side-aisles. Weddell's point was that the era of tribal Catholicism is now over. We can no longer rely on the culture, the family, school and parish communities implicitly to convert the young during the process of catechesis for sacraments. We cannot presume that making children attend Mass, take their First Holy Communion or later attend a Confirmation programme, they will be converted and as adults one day will wish to hand on the Faith to their offspring.¹ The "Catholic Egg Syndrome" no longer works. (A Catholic hen lays a Catholic egg; the Catholic egg hatches into a Catholic chicken; the chicken grows up and eventually lays its own Catholic egg, which hatches into another Catholic chicken, and so on). The collapse of tribal Catholicism in this early 21C is stark and clear. Youngsters are leaving the Catholic Church in droves, and they are not returning. This is despite having wonderful Catholic parents, Catholic schools and Catholic parishes. What was striking at the conference is that after Weddell had spoken, the questions from the audience seemed completely *off-piste*. I began to realise that no-one had really understood the point; they had failed to grasp the paradigm-shift she was speaking of. Some thought that what was needed was a deeper exploration of the *Catechism* or a course with lots more self-expression and questions. One elderly person said that what would really keep the young on-board would be for parishes to organise a monthly disco.

In many parts of the world deemed 'mission-territories,' the Church has built up a considerable expertise in how to evangelise and convert. In Western Europe, however, following a mediaeval world that was completely Christianised, and here in England, after the restoration of the hierarchy, following a church-community founded largely on Irish immigration, it is now many centuries since the Church was in a situation demanding mission-skills. Even so, many of the new ecclesial movements, such as the Neo-Catechumenal Way (now in Paulsgrove), Communion and Liberation (in Southampton and Maidenhead), the Stella Matutina Sisters (at Grayshott) do grasp the paradigm-shift and the challenge of new evangelisation. They are building up experience and expertise. On the other hand, many of us parish clergy and parishioners have a long way to go. We need to learn good practice, to distinguish the steps and stages, to differentiate types of people, to develop strategies and programmes, to evaluate what works and what doesn't. Weddell herself differentiates stages of conversion in a person's journey to faith: first, friendship and trust. This leads to curiosity, then to openness. Openness leads to a further stage of seeking and

¹ See S. Weddell *Forming Intentional Disciples. The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, Our Sunday Visitor: 2012) 15-47. Cf. M. Sweeney and S. Weddell *The Parish: Mission or Maintenance* (Colorado Springs, Catherine of Siena Institute: 2000) and S. Weddell *Making Disciples; Equipping Apostles* (Colorado Springs, Catherine of Siena Institute: 2000)

then the question of whether to make a commitment. These stages need filling out with a discussion of the strategies that people find successful.

There are no easy answers here. We are all finding our way. New evangelisation implies a huge paradigm-shift in our thinking with far-reaching consequences for all our pastoral works and programmes, for our schools and parishes. All of us know that past ways of working no longer work although we are unsure how to proceed. But as a parish priest or catechist, would I have the courage to abandon or to change the First Communion programme or Confirmation programme for something different, perhaps a smaller, more targeted formation-group of parents and children? I am not sure. Yet finding new ways forward must be the key task of the next years: how to shift gear from being introverted, tribal, focused on maintaining past ways of working into becoming a creative, missionary, evangelising Church of service and mission, less concerned with numbers and structures, and more with individuals and conversion.

Conclusion

Let me once again thank all of you profoundly for all you do as deacons, for all you do as deacons-wives, and for all that you deacon-students aspire to be: for your witness, your example, your fidelity, your hard work, your love. The Lord has blessed our Diocese of Portsmouth with outstanding human resources, clergy and laity, and with huge potential. We face massive challenges, but without despondency. *The harvest is rich* here, which is why we need constantly *to ask the Lord of the harvest to send more labourers to his harvest*. Jesus Christ is our Lord and Saviour (2 Pet 3: 18), the Light of the World, the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 8: 12; 14: 6). Even now the Holy Spirit is at work in the hearts of every person living in our Diocese, wooing them towards God, towards Christ, towards full communion with the Catholic Church. Let us pray, through Mary Immaculate and St. Edmund our Patron, for an abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As the Year of Mercy draws to a close, may everyone find in the Heart of Christ that true, genuine, lasting human happiness and fulfilment for which they long.

Thank you for listening.