

PASTORAL LETTER

Advent 2008

“Be on your guard, stay awake”

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As part of my celebration of this year of St Paul, I have been spending some extra time re-reading and studying the pastoral letters he wrote to the communities to whom he had preached the Gospel. It is striking that he almost always begins his letters with words of love and affirmation. Today's excerpt from the Letter to the Corinthians is no exception. He writes: “I never stop thanking God for all the graces you have received through Jesus Christ...You have been enriched in so many ways...the witness to Christ has indeed been strong among you...”

After nearly 21 years in the diocese, I feel that I can write to you in a similar vein. It has been a privilege and a joy for me to be your Bishop and every day I thank God for His gifts to you and for the generous support and faithful response you have always given me as we have tried to explore the Gospel together.

In recent years, we have been trying to tease out how we can become even more faithful to the Lord in our witnessing to our Christian faith, both as individuals and as a community. As a result of extensive consultation, we now have our own diocesan Pastoral Plan. It is the implementation of that Plan which particularly concerns us now and some of its implications have far-reaching consequences for how we see and structure the diocese. Those consequences deeply challenge us.

Not the least among the challenges has been the establishment of 24 Pastoral Areas. Our aim and hope in setting them up is that they will help to make us more effective in deploying and making best use of the resources with which God has gifted us for our work of enhancing our Communion and strengthening our sense of Mission.

Although the diocese may look like a loose community of disparate and individual parishes, I make no secret of the fact that the long term aim of the emphasis on Pastoral Areas in the Pastoral Plan is that each Area should eventually become a parish. Contrary to the fears expressed by some, this does not entail the wholesale closing of churches but it does mean developing the collaboration and communion between the various communities in each Pastoral Area so that we can be both more united as a diocesan family and more effective in our witness to the Gospel.

Already three Areas have become canonically established parishes, and, whilst I am very aware that, for very good reasons, different parts of the diocese develop at different speeds, it is my wish – and the intention of our Pastoral Plan – that this should be the eventual pastoral structure of our diocese – 24 parishes - with priests and people working even more closely together for the spread of the Kingdom.

With this in mind, I will be visiting the leadership groups of all the Pastoral Areas in the course of the coming year to see where they are in terms of that long-term vision. These will be visits of encouragement for the future journey and of commendation and affirmation for the considerable steps that have already been taken. Great progress has been made and I thank God for your generous commitment and fidelity to the Lord and his Word, which leads us into His way. It helps us to experience anew the truth of Isaiah's words that the Lord is our Father; that He is the potter, we are the clay and we are all the work of His hand.

For these visits to the Areas, I will be accompanied by the appropriate Vicar General and by a member of the Department for Pastoral Formation. As well as dealing with questions about Pastoral Areas, I will be reminding you all of the centrality and importance of the Eucharist, without which we cannot be truly Catholic. In the light of that priority, I will also be affirming and emphasising the crucial role that has been played, and which continues to be played, by our priests and deacons, for, as St Paul reminds us, we are “truly enriched by our teachers and preachers”. Priests are indispensable to the success of the Pastoral Plan because without Eucharist, Word and Sacrament, celebrated and preached, we cannot flourish. Never stop praying for your priests and deacons; treasure and value them as I do and implore the Lord unceasingly that He will continue to give us all the vocations to priesthood, to the diaconate and to the religious life that we need.

Today, we enter the great season of Advent with its wonderful sense of expectation and joy. As we begin to prepare, not only for Christmas, but for a renewed and enriched experience of the presence of the Lord among us now, listen to the Lord as He exhorts us to “stay awake, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming...he must not find you asleep. I say to you: ‘Stay awake!’”

I wish you every joy and happiness at this time and may God bless you all.

+Crispian

To be read and made available at all Masses celebrated in the diocese on the weekend of the First Sunday of Advent, November 29th/30th 2008