PASTORAL LETTER

Advent 2009

"Stay awake…to stand with confidence before the Lord"

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Today's Gospel invites us to 'Stay awake … to stand with confidence before the Lord'. We 'stay awake' by paying attention to the many ways in which God is present and active in our lives and the lives of others, and we are able to 'to stand with confidence' if we respond in faith to that presence and action of God. Our diocesan Pastoral Plan, *'Go Out and Bear Fruit'*, is one of the ways in which we are trying to 'stay awake' and 'stand with confidence before the Lord'. We all have a duty to build on the rich heritage of faith we have received so that the faith, which is so precious to us, can be handed on to the generations who come after us.

One of the key strands of the Plan is the reorganisation of the diocese into twenty four Pastoral Areas. The development of Pastoral Areas is central to the implementation of the Pastoral Plan. They enable us to be more effective in deploying and making best use of the resources God has given us. They have the potential to enhance our Communion and strengthen our sense of Mission.

At the beginning of Advent last year, I announced that during 2009 I would be making a series of visits to the leadership groups of all the Pastoral Areas. Those visits took place between January and July and have proved to be one of the most worthwhile tasks that I have undertaken during my time as Bishop. Each visit gave me information as to how the various parish communities in each Pastoral Areas were making progress towards uniting with neighbours and thus becoming more interdependent. We have to work together collaboratively and generously for the achievement of the Communion and Mission to which Christ has called us. The days when parishes could afford to be fiercely independent have gone.

To my great satisfaction, the visits revealed immense commitment and enthusiasm from the lay members of the pastoral groups. This is a key factor for the future flourishing of the diocese.

But, in this Year of the Priest, I cannot emphasise too strongly that our priests and deacons are always going to be crucial to the life of the diocese and never more so than now, as we set about the implementation of the Pastoral Plan. Their dedicated pastoral ministry ensures that Communion and Mission are at the heart of all we do. Priests and deacons are vital to the development of the life of the Pastoral Areas. The effective functioning of Pastoral Areas also ensures that the pastoral ministry of clergy does not always have to be weighed down, and even overburdened, by the demands of "office."

This increasing involvement and collaboration between priests, deacons and laity is a salutary reminder of that long standing tradition that the Church can never be simply a clerical preserve. The whole body of the faithful - bishop, priests, deacons and the laity – together form the baptised community which constitutes the Church today. We now have a clearer and shared vision of what the Church is – the Body of Christ, in which everyone has a unique part to play

Bearing in mind that relationships should come before structures, the continuing implementation of the Pastoral Plan needs us to work hard at those relationships that already exist or are emerging. They are the key to the new structures, which will evolve gradually. We need to continue to build them up within and beyond our Pastoral Areas through the sharing of resources, working and praying together and actually loving and caring for each other. We may have to be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the Gospel, for example, being challenged to give up or share something dear to our own community for the greater good of the whole Pastoral Area.

My pastoral visits in 2009 were designed to encourage the implementation of the Pastoral Plan. They were also occasions of great encouragement for me personally, and I will be repeating them between mid-February and the end of June 2010.

I wish you all every joy at the start of this Advent season and, in the words of today's Gospel, I pray "we should stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man." (*Lk 21:36*)

I wish you all every blessing and happiness at this time. May the Lord be with you all.

To be read and made available at all Masses celebrated in the diocese on the weekend of the First Sunday of Advent, November 28th/29th 2009