

Sermon for the Mass of the Oils 2004

Last week I was in conference with University Chaplains and when I gave the homily at the closing Mass, I was able to share with them some of the fruits of my sabbatical break of which I wrote in my pre-Lenten Pastoral Letter.

I ended by saying that it had been a time when I began to feel more at home with myself and with the Word of God. I began to understand a little better what it meant to be a disciple. I came to know with greater clarity the truth of the prodigality and extraordinary love and respect that God had for me. I felt that I no longer had to prove myself to myself or to anyone because the Word and the truth of the Word had set me free. I felt ready to put out into deep waters.

This Mass of the Oils represents a celebration of the future of our diocese and I want to invite you all to join me as we venture together into those deeper waters of the Lord's call to discipleship. This venturing with the Lord will lead us to grasp more deeply what it means to share in his Spirit-filled anointing.

We need a map or a chart for this journey – something that will enable us, as individuals and as a diocese, better to seek the face of Christ and follow the call to holiness in communion and mission which he puts before us. We need a pastoral strategy.

I cannot impose such a strategy on high, nor can it simply be driven by particular circumstances. It cannot be based, purely and simply, on the fact that we have a diminished number of priests or that we need to rationalise our parish structures. Concentration on those issues simply gets us into the business of maintenance only – not mission - and it speaks of a way of thinking about the Church that is much too clerical.

Quite frankly, I am not interested in managing decline. I want us to have the opportunity to identify and rejoice in the huge richness of resources that exist in the diocese – resources of faith, of men and women deeply committed to the service of the Lord, men and women of prayer and love. This is where our strength is and, under the leadership of the clergy, this is where any pastoral planning for the diocese has to start. But it doesn't just happen. It has to be principled and firmly based in the mission so clearly defined in the Lord's closing words in the Gospel we have just heard.

Our part in the process has to start somewhere. The quarry for the principles that must underpin our pastoral strategy is to be found, of course, in the Gospels but also, I hope, in my "A Church for the 21st Century". First issued in 1997, it has now been revised, tightened and sharpened – thanks to my sabbatical break and hard work from colleagues who have helped so much in the rewriting. Hopefully, it will be widely available in the early summer.

Pastoral strategies for the diocese develop because we become increasingly aware of the Lord's call to us. We need to ask ourselves searching questions about the *why* and the *how* of proclaiming the Gospel. We need to ask these questions of ourselves individually and as a community because that's the only way we can all own the answers that emerge.

First and foremost, this is a journey into the heart and mind of the Lord and it has to involve everyone in serious and intensive prayer. Without that, "in vain will the builders labour."

But there has to be intensive discussion and consultation too. In the autumn, I want all the major institutions of the diocese – deaneries, parishes, schools and chaplaincies, religious communities

- to be involved in the process. Materials and suggested plans for consultation and discussion will be provided but the work has to belong to all of us. That's the only way that the whole diocese can be engaged in our work of realising our hopes and dreams for proclaiming the Gospel.

Feedback from this consultation will be gathered in over Christmas and then pulled together for further discussions in the spring of next year. My dearest wish is that, when we celebrate this Mass next year, we will have the basic elements of a pastoral strategy for the diocese that will be the fruit of the work and prayer of all who have participated in the process. We will have the beginnings of a plan for the way ahead and it will reflect your ownership, your input, your enthusiasm and your commitment to living out your call to discipleship. We will be really ready to put out into deep waters with the Lord.

It is important to celebrate remarkable achievements – and the development of this plan will be precisely that - and so I propose to hold a Diocesan Pastoral Assembly at the end of July next year for such a celebration. Much planning for this remains to be done but there is a group already at work on this. It will mark the moment when, in all our different pastoral circumstances, – because our diocese is so varied in its make-up – we can move forward together with a strong sense of missionary purpose, proclaiming “the year of the Lord’s favour” with great joy and trust in the Lord.

It is, perhaps, not appropriate for me to boast but I will. I am proud that we have a marvellous diocese with dedicated clergy leading a deeply committed faith community. I could not have embarked on this journey with the passion and excitement that I have, without my deep-seated confidence in you, my fellow clergy and our people. I believe that this development is what many of you have been longing for and I believe it represents God’s call to us.

Bishop Anthony, my predecessor, died 16 years ago yesterday and this prayer is on his memorial card. I say it every day and it is absolutely right for us today:

“Father, pour out your Spirit upon our diocese
and grant us a new vision of your glory,
a new experience of your power,
a new faithfulness to your Word,
and a new consecration to your service,
so that your love may grow among us,
and your kingdom come: through Christ Our Lord.
Amen