

Th220514: Meeting of Religious
(Winchester)

THE FRAMEWORK

Thank you for inviting me today – and thank you for all you do, to witness to Jesus in our wonderful Diocese of Portsmouth in accordance with your specific charisms. The presence, witness and activity of religious life within our Diocese immeasurably enriches the Church in this place. Your specific commitment to poverty, chastity and obedience, your individual holiness of life and your willingness to live life in a community, is both a radical counter-sign to our contemporary secular-culture, and also an invitation to all the clergy and people of our Diocese to grow in virtue and holiness. I thank Fr. John for organising this day – and I thank you all so much for your love for the Lord. I have started visiting the religious houses of our Diocese, and hope that soon I will be able to visit you, if I've not reached you yet.

Let me recall what St. Paul says in 1 Cor 12:

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the Church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” (1 Cor 12: 27-30)

Last year we began a total reorganisation of our diocesan administration here in the Diocese, an ambitious endeavour that will take us two or three years to put into place. We call the new structure ‘The Framework for Collaboration.’ The Framework is not really about a bureaucracy but about a new theological vision focused on mission and evangelisation. The Framework is based on teams and over the last months we have been running sets of interviews of volunteers. We've already recruited over 100 lay faithful to belong to the various teams. There are more sets of interviews to come over the next months and in June, under the direction of Sherry Weddell, we'll be running the *Called and Gifted Process*. Gradually we hope to populate all the main Teams, and to get them up and running.

Last autumn I was in Rome for a meeting of new bishops and I tried explaining to them what we were doing. They were fascinated with the project. I believe

we're taking seriously what St. Paul said in 1 Corinthians. We're trying to discern the gifts God has given the people of our diocese, especially the gifts of the laity, in order to identify them, release them and to put them to the greater service in the Church's mission. Many people are doing wonderful work in their parishes and Pastoral Areas, and there are lots of great things going on. At a diocesan level the Framework for Collaboration is meant to help support and direct work going on at the local level.

The context of the Framework is the call to new evangelisation: an evangelisation, Pope John Paul II said, "new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression." What we have today is a new culture, a secular culture, and so to evangelise it, we need a new form of missionary activity. Today, many people know *about* Christ, but they do not seem to know him *personally*, their faith and discipleship is not central to their life or life-changing. Many Catholics are sacramentalised but not evangelised. They may have been baptised and made their First Holy Communion, but they drift away and never practise their faith. They may be connected with the Church through the school but rarely if ever come to Mass. Baptism, Confirmation and First Holy Communion, marriages and funerals, are for many like Rites of Passage.

This is not about numbers, yet there is an urgency here. Christianity, as we know, is in decline in Britain. Indeed, by 2018, Christianity will be a minority religion, less than 50% of the population, and less than 3% of those regular church-goers (defined as once a month). Catholicism too is in major decline, at least in terms of practice. In 1993, there were 1.25M Catholics at Sunday Mass (30%) but last year, 890,000 (under 20%). In Portsmouth Diocese, 30 years ago, 75,000 were at Mass, today, 35,000 despite huge immigration. Many of our congregations are, like their clergy, becoming elderly.

This is a huge subject and one that will dominate our concerns as a diocese over the next years. It prompted me last summer to set out 4 interim priorities for us:

"That each person, each parish community, each Pastoral Area, each school and every ministry within the diocese is called to:

1. seek out and draw in the un-churched and the unbelieving;
2. develop life-long discipleship, spiritual growth and a living relationship with Jesus Christ, above all, in the Holy Eucharist;
3. discern the gifts (charisms) and the vocations God has given the Christian community;

4. form and support existing and new 'creative apostolates'.

Let me add one more point here. In her book *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Sherry Weddell argues that the era of tribal Catholicism is over and that of those who do not practice over half no longer identify themselves as Catholic. Interestingly, a large number of ex-Catholics convert to Evangelicalism. The reasons they give, research shows, are not because of Church teachings, or the abuse-crisis or a marriage issue, but because, they say, their spiritual needs were not being met. Weddell demonstrates how a staggering 40% of practising Catholics say, when asked, they do not have a personal relationship with God. Some do not believe in a loving or a personal God with whom they can have a life-changing relationship, and this despite going to Mass. In any parish, she says, the number of committed disciples is often 5%. If Weddell is correct then the time has come to put all the Church's resources at the service of helping people to pray, to find God, to connect with him, to commit to him, to develop a real, personal-passionate relationship with Jesus, to acquire a strong sense of what it means to be chosen by him. As Catholics we have huge resources for this, not least in the lives of the saints and in two millennia of spiritual theology.

2. The Framework

This is why our new diocesan structure, the teams of our Framework for Collaboration, will be a help. Its aim is to form missionary disciples. The Framework is based theologically on Jesus Christ and his three-fold office as Priest, Prophet and King, that is, his work of sanctifying, teaching and shepherding. On the Framework diagram, the direction of travel is from left to right, with the outcome in new evangelisation. The call of the disciple invites him/her to be part of Christ's Body the Church, to receive formation in the teaching of Christ, and this in turn leads to them being sent as apostles on mission.

So there are three Vicariates:

- Vocation;
- Education; or
- Evangelisation.

The Vicariate 'steers' policies within the Departments and their team-activities. True, teams are sometimes allocated in order to share out the load among the

Vicariates. They might easily sit under another Department. But the location of a team should give a general idea of its aims and purpose.

For example, the Bereavement Team is part of the diocesan Pastoral Care Services, under Chaplaincies in the Department for Clergy of the Vicariate for Vocation. This indicates immediately that they are there to support bereaved people who have been called by Christ to be his disciple (or deeper discipleship). The task is to deepen their sense of vocation that they may receive the consolation of Christ and his Church. This will lead them in time to want a deeper formation in order to be sent on mission.

Teams ideally will be formed of six or twelve members, with ranges of different skills and a mix of different ages and conditions. Some teams will need to set up sub-teams and at times to call in experts to assist. Each team has a Team Descriptor outlining the Bishop's aspirations for that area of diocesan life.

Basically, teams have a two-fold task: to work out policies and to sponsor/enable projects. The task is to set policies and to sponsor/enable projects, that is, to discuss, plan, shape, form and develop new ideas to deepen faith in self and to reach out to others. There needn't be a lot of meetings or a heavy commitment. Most teams will meet once or twice a term. A key thing will be finding out what is going on at local level in parishes and pastoral areas, then linking with them and with key people, supporting them, encouraging them, and devising and enabling new projects.

The purpose of the Framework is to form missionary disciples, first ourselves and secondly others. Each meeting begins with Prayer and Formation. The Formation passage will be a passage from a Church document or other text, determined by the Episcopal Vicar or Head of Department. It will be circulated in advance, along with the agenda for the meeting, introduced by the Chair, then with a round-table discussion of its relevance and application to the work at hand ('what this means for us'). The intention is to form the team-members, to inspire their work, and to stimulate fresh ideas to help them reach out to others. Team business then follows.

Conclusion

The Framework will take a while to roll out and it will expand and develop in the process. It seeks to provide the Diocese with the flexibility we need for the new cultural context and the call to new evangelisation. It is modelled on the Church as a band of disciples. Whilst the chief mission of the laity is to sanctify and transform the world, the new Framework will be composed of mostly lay-led teams, whilst direction and policy will be shaped by the Bishop's Council, assisted by the clergy sprinkled within the departments.

But this is also where I wanted to ask you as religious if you might be willing to be more involved? The principle task is prayer: please would you pray for the work of the diocese and for the roll-out of the new Framework? But also, teams would benefit enormously from the input and expertise of you as religious. I know there are many calls on your time. But would you have a look to see if there is any aspect of the Diocesan work that you might feel you could help with?

It is my prayer that over the next years the Holy Spirit will pour out upon us the graces and gifts we need to grow in faith ourselves AND to reach out to others with the Gospel. Indeed, may every human being within our diocesan area come to know the love of the Heart of Jesus, and in Him to reach that true, genuine, lasting human happiness and fulfilment for which we all long.