

### Address to Deacons

When I was ordained a deacon in 1983, I remember returning from the English College Rome for the summer, eagerly looking forward to my parish placement in St. Chad's, Cheadle. But the first thing I did when I got back was to go to Mass next day in our parish church, St. Vincent's Altrincham. I remember walking up the road excitedly with Mum and Dad and then bounding into the sacristy to offer my services. It was Fr. Denis on the Mass; I proudly announced I'd just been ordained a deacon and was ready to serve. "Uh! What on earth is a deacon?" he asked. I began mentally reaching for *The Idiot's Guide to Holy Orders*, when he added: "And what does a deacon do?" Cut down to size, as we processed onto the sanctuary, he made me sit next to the altar boy. He let me read the Gospel but stood behind me looking over my shoulder!

I do think the Church, especially our wonderful Diocese of Portsmouth, has moved on these last 30 years – at least in most places! We have 45 deacons in the diocese and 10 in formation. I know too we currently have a number of potential candidates. I've said in the past that I could envisage a deacon in every parish, not to forget deacons in specialised ministries and deacons in the Diocesan Framework. I am very grateful to Fr. Peter Hart and his Team for all they do for the care of vocations to the diaconate, and for all they do for the on-going pastoral care and formation of you, deacons and wives. I also want to thank each one of you personally for all you do, for your loyalty to me, for your example, and for your service of the faithful, especially the poor.

It's a year since we last met together here at Marwell and just over two years since I became Bishop. Over the last year, I've been visiting many of you at home: if I've still not been out to visit you, please give Hannah a call to arrange it. I've started visiting our schools. We have 76 schools in the Diocese, including 23 Independents, and I'm half way through a two-year visiting programme. As you know, our diocesan Schools Department is currently headless; we're undertaking a review but I do ask your prayers that in time we'll be able to find and appoint a suitable Director. I've also begun parish visitations. We have 100

parishes and I intend to visit about 12 a year. The Holy Father has just declared a 15-month long *Year of Consecrated Life* – the Vatican has longer years than we do – so over the next months I want to visit our 40 religious communities. Some are ageing communities, but in 2015 - I mention this just in passing – we'll be welcoming to the Diocese some new religious orders, particularly to work in evangelisation.

So I want this morning to look ahead and to offer you, as deacons and deacon wives, 3 points for 2015.

### 1. New Evangelisation

First of all, New Evangelisation. Our chief task continues to be NE. You may recall the Four Diocesan Priorities I outlined many months ago: that each person, each parish community, each Pastoral Area and Deanery, each school and every ministry within the Diocese is called:

1. to seek out and draw in the un-churched and the unbelieving;
2. to develop life-long discipleship, spiritual growth and a living relationship with Jesus Christ, above all, in the Holy Eucharist;
3. to discern the gifts, charisms and vocations God has given us;
4. to form and support existing and new 'creative apostolates'.

I been a priest for 30 years and lived in dioceses and situations where everyone would say: We don't know where we're going! We have no vision! We need a plan! Well, this is the plan: the work of new evangelisation, an evangelisation new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression. I don't wish to dragoon people or force them into a mould. I fully accept people travel at different speeds. So in saying our first priority is NE, I simply wish to set the direction of travel, one that please God will release energy and enable the Church in our Diocese to flourish with joy and new hope.

So NE will be the focus in 2015 and Fr. Mark Hogan is preparing some prayer materials to keep this intention before us. Prayer is the key, that everything we do is based on prayer. Indeed, as I've said before, we need to put all the resources of our Diocese at the service of helping people to pray, to find God, to experience the love of God, to commit to God, to learn the art of praying, to develop a personal-passionate friendship with Christ, to grasp personally what his death and

resurrection means, to have a sense of being personally chosen by Christ to be His disciple. As Catholics we have huge resources for this in our two millennia of spiritual theology, in the lives of the saints, in the wisdom of the clergy, and in our rich Catholic Tradition.

Essentially, NE means a new encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ and a renewed sense He has called us personally to be His disciple. This requires a change of mind-set from maintenance to mission. It's not about *doing* lots of new things, but doing the things we do, and the things we have to do, with a new mind-set, a new attitude, a new approach. In the past, our clergy were trained to be Chaplains to the Catholic community and our people were trained to become sacramental consumers. Today, every member of the Church is called to become a missionary-disciple with the clergy, priests and deacons acting as mission-directors. Before, the focus was inward-looking on the Church of the Lord. Today, it's outward-looking on the Lord of the Church. It's about witnessing in the world so that everyone may have the chance to hear the Gospel, to come to faith, to receive salvation. So ask yourself: Is our parish community in maintenance-mode, or mission-mode? Is it always the same people at Mass, or do parishioners often bring new people, their friends and neighbours? Is everyone at Mass getting old, or are there lots of youngsters there? Are we focused on our community, the holy-huddle, or are we reaching out into the wider community, seeking out the lost and non-churchgoers?

In the summer we invited Sherry Weddell from the Catherine of Siena Institute to visit the Diocese and to launch the Called and Gifted Programme. The Called and Gifted Programme is designed to help ordinary Catholics in the parishes to reflect on their relationship with God, to recover a stronger sense of being a missionary disciple and to discern the gifts, talents and charisms God has given them for service. I think those of you who were at the Conference at Botley Grange would agree, it was a great weekend. Currently our diocesan Called and Gifted Team has 12 teachers and 20 interviewers, and 12 parishes have signed up for 2015. But I hope in time we'll reach thousands of people across the Diocese, to identify and release their gifts for service at home, at work and play, in the parish and in the Framework.

## 2. Review of the PAs in the Light of NE

A second pointer for 2015, following on from NE, is the review of our Pastoral Areas, the establishment of Deaneries and the new governance structures for them. One of my favourite passages in *Evangelii Gaudium*, is Paragraph 27, where Francis says:

“I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures, can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her [own] self-preservation.”

He continues:

“The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth, and in this way to elicit a positive response from all whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself.”

This to me sums up well the purpose of the review of the PAs.

In the period after Vatican II, in order to establish more participative structures, the Church proposed the establishment of pastoral councils and committees. Yet, without care, especially in our Western world, the culture of councils and committees often borrows unwittingly from business practice and from democratic models. These easily lead to factions and friction between individuals, even between clergy and laity. While in the document *Developing the Pastoral Areas* I left it to each PA to work out the best way forward, I’m now actively encouraging the adoption of a new model, the Evangelisation Strategy Team, for PAs and Deaneries and at parish level. In other words, let’s replace our Parish Councils and Pastoral Councils with Strategy Teams.

The Evangelisation Strategy Team should comprise the clergy plus a truly representative spread of the faithful: young, middle, wise and seasoned. It ought to include a teacher from school and a religious. Beware of having ‘bruised apples’ or those with fiery agendas: you need people able to collaborate and work together as a team. The purpose of the Strategy Group is not to administer, to discuss minutes or organise rotas of Readers, but to dream up the vision, to think

outside the box, to enable and sponsor simple, do-able mission-projects at local, area and regional level. This means first a good knowledge of the situation and its needs, an understanding and appreciation of what is happening already, then an identification of priorities and an assessment of the resources needed. We're not talking 'rocket-science' here. It might be that the parish has a lot of young families: What about organising a family picnic day? Or a lot of retirement homes: Could we set up a young visiting group? Or inactive Catholics: Could we use new media to reach them? Or keeping the church open for prayer and Eucharistic adoration? Or devising a leaflet with Mass times for a new housing development? Or running a Theology on Tap session in the local pub? Or having a parish stall on a Christmas Market? There can be lots of new ideas and strategies to help re-present the Gospel, meeting people where they are and proposing in a new, perhaps unexpected way, the offer of salvation.

Deaneries: as you know, we are re-establishing Deaneries. What is new here - and I think radical - is the reason why we are doing this. It is not in order to bring in another level of bureaucracy or to re-align the Diocese with Canon Law, but rather to enable us to address the strategic pastoral needs of a whole region with regard to the new evangelisation. It's about supporting the lay apostolate, witnessing to Christ in the places and contexts in which people live, work and play.

So forgive me now introducing a bit of Greek, the word areopagus. It originally referred to a hill in ancient Athens where civic magistrates and religious leaders gathered. In Acts 17, St. Paul, wandered around the Areopagus and saw all the statues, including one *To an Unknown God*. He was then able to proclaim the Gospel: 'What you worship as Unknown I proclaim to you.' We might note that most of the intelligentsia laughed at him, but some did listen and said they wanted to hear more. Today then, the task is to identify some of the local and regional areopagi, the crossroads, the market squares, the meeting places, the centres, the cultural sectors where people gather, work or pass through. We might think of hospitals, medical centres and care homes; schools, colleges and universities; the regional and local media; Young Offender institutions, immigration and detention centres; sporting venues; shopping malls; libraries; new housing developments; transport nodes such as stations, ports and airports;

hotels, B&Bs and conference facilities; business and industrial complexes. We might also think of dialogue with the other Christian communities, outreach to ethnic communities, the promotion of interreligious friendships, and developing good relations with civic leaders and local government. All these form different types of areopagi, secular places to which Christ sends us to bring the Gospel.

After identifying the local areopagi, we then need to ask: How can the Catholic Church be present in these areopagi? What can we do for evangelisation? How can we serve people's needs, especially the poor and those in difficulty? In some cases we could act ecumenically or interreligiously. We must take care not to take on too much. We often have limited resources. We need to think of simple, do-able, projects.

To me a big example of an areopagus is the new Reading station with its extra 8 platforms. Did you know its footfall is now 15.5 million passengers a year? The issue is: Is there anything we can do to engage with it? Could we have a chaplaincy or a leaflet? There are also hundreds of staff working in the station, the depots, those building the Crossrail sheds and the new flyover. What are we doing for the workers? Surely there are Catholics among them we could network? Are there not other Christians, people of religion and people of good will? Then again, for some people, stations are sad places. It's worth remembering what Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium*, that we should go out onto the margins, proclaiming the Gospel, reaching out person to person to the most needy.

NE is not the work of the clergy but the faithful. The clergy are the mission-directors and facilitators; the faithful are the missionary disciples. The faithful need to find in us inspiration, leadership, formation and support. NE means reviewing the things we do and doing them in a new way, so there is always a clear connection between what we do and the Person of Jesus Christ. It means forming intentional disciples. It means enthusing our people to the lay apostolate so they can witness to the joy of Christ at home, at work, at play, and wherever they go. I must admit though, this is a massive attitudinal shift for many Catholics.

### 3. Diaconate

Thirdly, let me say a few words specifically about the diaconate in our Diocese over the coming months and 2015. 3 things.

First, I'd like us to continue working at Liturgy. As I said last year, the Church's liturgy has a special role in the NE. We know this instinctively. For baptisms, weddings and funerals can be unique moments for proclaiming the keygma, for evangelisation, for reaching out to the unchurched. But so too is the most sacred liturgy of all, the Mass. For an outsider coming in, the Mass can be a powerful experience. This is why, as deacons we should make it our business to carry out the sacred actions and to proclaim the sacred words exactly in accordance with what the Church asks of us, so that anyone present for the first time can receive exactly what the Church intends. But more than this, we also need to develop, each one of us, a graceful ars celebrandi, the art of celebrating. The liturgy is a sacred art-form. It has a style. In the sanctuary we should stand, sit, speak and move liturgically, for the Person who celebrates the liturgy is not me, but Jesus Christ. As liturgical ministers we should be, in a sense, invisible in the liturgy.

At the Confirmation Masses and also during Visitations, I think there is still some way for us to go on this, both priests and deacons. I have it in mind to update the Diaconal Handbook on the Liturgy. I'm going to ask Fr. John Chandler, our Diocesan MC, to offer some more in-services on liturgy to ensure not only we are doing the right things, but also that we are attending properly to the ars celebrandi. I must also mention, Canon Dominic Golding is thinking of writing to deacons systematically to invite you to serve at a 1000h Sunday Mass in the Cathedral and then to stay for lunch. It would be a way of becoming familiarised with the Cathedral liturgy, but it would also promote the diaconal vocation. If you have any thoughts on this, please email him.

A second diaconal matter for 2015 is deacons' wives. A number of you have said how you miss opportunities for meeting with other deacons wives for prayer, support and fellowship/sorority. I wondered what you thought? It need only be an occasional gathering, prayer followed by a coffee, and time for chat and discussion. Would someone be willing to coordinate or volunteer to be the initial host, set a time and place, and

then maybe another could follow. I'm sure it would not be difficult by email, if Fr. Peter were able to make contact details available.

Indeed, maybe deacons themselves might like to meet from time to time regionally? It would be easy with the new Deanery structure, to organise regional support groups and informal gatherings, maybe two deaneries together. Would somebody be willing to volunteer as initial host, set a time and place, then another host-volunteer to follow.

And thirdly, on another matter, a word about the Synod next October on the Vocation and Mission of the Family. I've just returned from a magnificent Colloquium on the Complementarity of Man and Woman. It was in Rome organised by the CDF. The holy father opened it. They produced some beautiful videos on marriage and these are now on our Diocesan Web-Site (which incidentally is about to be completely overhauled). The Colloquium called Humanum involved some leading thinkers and speakers, Catholic, non-Catholic and other religions, e.g. Dr. Jonathan Sachs, former Chief Rabbi, Rick Warren, the evangelical pastor, Michael Nazir-Ali, former Bishop of Rochester, and others. This week, I will issue a Pastoral Message, with some reflections on it.

Clearly, the Church over the months ahead will be giving much thought to the vocation of marriage and the care of those in difficulty. I'm finding in Pastoral Visitations that a lot of people on the ground are talking about the issues. For instance, in Andover the other week, a divorced and remarried woman came up to me and asked whether she could now go to Communion. As married deacons (those of you that are), you may find yourselves on the front line. You have an important pastoral role. You need to be able to articulate the Church's teaching in a new way, proclaiming the Gospel of the family, but at the same time to show care and compassion for those in irregular situations. We'll have to wait and see whether the Church is able to gain greater wiggle-room on some of the more difficult issues. But you can read my thoughts on all of this in the forthcoming Pastoral Message.

One thing I did want to mention here – this is breaking news! – is that next May, I've invited to the Diocese the relics of Blessed Louis and Blessed Zelig Martin. Blessed Louis and Blessed Zelig are the parents of St. Therese of Lisieux, the first married couple to be beatified. (Perhaps



there are some more here?). I don't know the programme for the visit yet. It's two days, one at the Cathedral, the other for the north of the Diocese, at Christ the King Reading. This saintly married couple is a great model for all married couples. I hope their prayers will help us reflect on the joy of marriage and the family and enable us to praise God anew during this year between the two Synods.

### Conclusion

Let me end by thanking all of you profoundly, on behalf of Our Lord and His Church, for all you do as deacons, for all you do as deacon-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. There is no need for despondency, even though we face serious challenges. As we have said so often before, Christ *is* the Way; He *is* the Truth; He *is* the Life (John 14: 6) and even at this moment, His Holy Spirit is at work in people's hearts, wooing them towards salvation. It is not the 'product' on offer that is defective, but the ability of people in a busy, secular consumer-culture to hear the call. That is why today, within the great Catholic Tradition, if we are to communicate imaginatively the Person of Jesus to the peoples of our time, if we are to enable them to reach that true, genuine, lasting human happiness and fulfilment for which they long, if we are to communicate effectively the *evangelii gaudium*, the joy of the Gospel, we need to pray for enormous creativity. Indeed, through Mary Immaculate and St. Edmund our Patron, may the Lord in His mercy graciously hear and answer this prayer. Amen.