

PASTORAL LETTER

9th Sunday of the Year

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Next week, on the first Saturday of Lent, there will be a very special celebration in the Cathedral for the whole diocese. We will be gathering for the Rite of Election, when many from most of the parishes in the diocese will be present to welcome into our midst those who are seeking to be baptised or received into full communion with the Church at Easter.

It is a moment of great significance for us all but especially it is so for our candidates and catechumens. For them, it represents the last chapter of a long journey of faith into the life of Christ and the life of the Church. They have come from many different backgrounds and experiences but all are now enrolled in the life of the diocese and we will all be able to celebrate with them when we come to the Easter Vigil and the Easter Sacraments.

Among our candidates this year, there are three groups of members of the Anglican Communion who, together with their priests, are seeking to come into full communion with the Catholic Church through the Ordinariate. Their priests have resigned from their ministry in the Church of England and they, with their people, will be beginning an intensive period of instruction so that they can be received into the Church at the Easter.

The development of the Ordinariate over the last few months has attracted a certain amount of comment and question and I understand that. All I can say is that I have been dealing with these three groups and their priests during this time and I have been deeply impressed by their sincerity and their desire for full communion with us. The Ordinariate represents new ground for all of us and the Rite of Election gives us all the opportunity to welcome our new-found brothers and sisters into the life of the diocese and to do everything we can to make them feel at home.

The groups come from Reading, the Isle of Wight and Christchurch and it is in those churches that they will be received into full communion. After Easter, those among them who have been Anglican priests will continue their preparation for ordination to the priesthood and I will be ordaining the three of them towards the end of June. I believe that they will very soon become valued members of the Church and I know that they will receive a warm welcome from all. Their joining us is an opportunity for us all to share gifts and faith with each other and they deserve our respect as they truly put their trust in the Lord who is "their rock and their stronghold."

But the process has already started because, among the clergy who are becoming full members of the Catholic Church, there are a number of former bishops. Three of them were ordained to the priesthood by Archbishop Vincent Nichols in Westminster on January 15th. It is my privilege to ordain the former Bishop of Richborough, Edwin Barnes, to the priesthood this weekend in the Cathedral. He has already retired from his episcopal ministry and was received into full communion with the Church on January 21st. He lives in Lymington and I am sure those of you who live in that part of the diocese will soon discover him as a gentle and effective pastor.

There are some who feel that the invitation, made by Pope Benedict to those groups in the Anglican Church who wish to become Catholics, will undermine the good relationships that already exist between us and the Church of England. I cannot speak for the country as a whole but I have to say that our relationships between the Anglican dioceses of Oxford, Winchester and Portsmouth have not been damaged. I have been greatly impressed and edified by the way in which the bishops of those three dioceses have reacted with great generosity and kindness. For all of us, the quest for the visible unity of the Church remains an imperative and not an option.

Speaking to the Bishops of England and Wales at the end of his visit in September, Pope Benedict urged us to welcome the emergence of the Ordinariate and said: "Be generous in implementing the Apostolic Constitution. This should be seen as a prophetic gesture that can contribute positively to the developing relationships between Anglicans and Catholics. It helps us to set our sights on the ultimate goal of all ecumenical activity: the restoration of full ecclesial communion in the context of which the mutual exchange of gifts for our respective spiritual patrimonies serves as enrichment for us all."

To be honest with you I did have my own misgivings and questions about the development of the Ordinariate but I have come now to see this as a unique moment and I welcome warmly those who are joining us. As Catholics, we are privileged to be playing our part in this historic development in the life of the Church. In trusting in the Lord, as today's psalm reminds us, we are called to "be strong and to allow our hearts to take courage because the Lord is a rock of refuge for us all, a mighty stronghold to save us." At the beginning of this Lenten season, let that be our hope and our prayer.

May God bless you all,



To be read and made available at all Masses on the weekend of March 5th/ 6th 2011.