



THE DISCERNMENT OF A PASTORAL PLAN FOR THE DIOCESE OF LEEDS

Introduction

Not long after the news of my appointment as Bishop of Leeds, I was asked by someone if I had a “vision” for the Diocese. At that point in time, I was unfamiliar with the clergy and faithful for whom I was to become both a servant and shepherd, and so I responded: “I do not have a personal vision for the Diocese of Leeds. Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ has given us his own vision and mission for his Church.”

I knew though, that the real question I was being asked was if I had an overarching “plan” for the diocese (as distinct from plans which addressed the immediate and medium-term needs of the diocese). In my heart and mind, I was, and am, quite clear that the formation of such a long-term plan must be based on Christ’s vision for his Church and be faithful to the authentic teaching of the Church’s magisterium. I know too, that it is important firstly to discern how best to listen to, and better understand, what the current and future challenges are for the lay faithful, men and women religious, and the clergy of the diocese.

In our diocese, we are blessed to have many good and faithful clergy, committed and dedicated lay faithful, vibrant parish communities, active organisations, a thriving family of schools, and projects which reach out to the poor and marginalised both locally, nationally, and internationally. However, there are significant challenges that we know we will have to face together. The world is beginning to look a very different place too after the experiences of the pandemic. As we anticipate the future of our Church and society, we must therefore spend time to discern together the needs for our diocese and to plan-ahead.

Vision, Mission, and Values

When I reviewed the development of pastoral plans in other dioceses around the world, I noted the tendency among many to adopt models which originated and have become popular in the corporate world. These models often focus on a process which leads up to the publication of statements that aim to spell out the vision, mission and values of those corporate businesses and institutions. The statements attempt to manufacture a corporate ethos or “brand” and communicate the values which the organisation wishes to embody. They really took off in the 1980’s, trying to give a more human personality and common moral purpose to secular and results-driven business institutions. Corporate “action plans” are then

drafted based on these statements to incorporate the strategies and desired outcomes that will give effect to the institution's vision.

Since then, the model of the successful corporate business branding and identity has often been held up for other organisations to emulate. Subsequently a whole range of institutions including hospitals, schools and charities have adopted corporate language and practice. As members of Christ's Church, however, we do not need to manufacture our own vision and mission, nor determine our own set of values. Our vision, mission, and values are not something we subjectively or collectively decide and constitute for ourselves; they are given to us by Our Lord himself:

- ***Our Vision***

In his priestly prayer in St John's Gospel, Christ reveals his encompassing vision for his Church. He prays to his Father: "I do not ask for these [disciples] only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."¹ This is Christ's vision for his Church: a place of personal encounter between God and his people. The Church is to be "the house of God in which dwells His family; the household of God in the Spirit; the dwelling place of God among men; and, especially, the holy temple."² It is where God is in union with his people and they in communion with one another, "the family of God's children"³ which reflects "the genuine nature of the Church" and makes known "Christ's living presence in the world"⁴.

- ***Our Mission***

The mission of the Church was given explicitly by Christ to his apostles before His ascension: "Go, make disciples of all nations."⁵ It is a mission which the Second Vatican Council described in this way, "The Church has received this solemn mandate of Christ to proclaim the saving truth from the apostles and must carry it out to the very ends of the earth."⁶ The Church is by its nature missionary, the body of Christ on earth, and "the universal sacrament of salvation"⁷ and "her mission" is "to shed on the whole world the radiance of the Gospel message."⁸ The Church's mission is, 'to evangelise'.

¹ John 17:20-21

² *Lumen Gentium* §6 (1964)

³ *Gaudium et Spes* §40 (1965)

⁴ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* §48

⁵ Matthew 28:19, see also Mark 16:15, Luke 24:48, and John 20:21

⁶ *Lumen Gentium* §17

⁷ *Ibid.* §48

⁸ *Gaudium et Spes* §92

- ***Our Values***

The values of the Church are proclaimed by Christ himself in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout the course of his teaching to his disciples. In the Beatitudes “the way of Christ is summed up”.⁹ The virtues, the “habitual and firm dispositions to do the good”¹⁰ which enable us to follow Christ’s way and make these values expressed concretely in our lives and actions, flow from the three great theological virtues of faith, hope and love (*caritas*).¹¹

As a Church we are members of one body: a *corpus*, not a corporation. We are a family, not a firm. So, the starting point for us to look to the future and discern a pastoral plan for the diocese is not the production of statements but, whilst constantly invoking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in prayer, to begin a journey together on a path of renewal and ongoing ‘conversion’, which is the source of renewal.¹²

The Church undertakes this path of renewal by “discerning the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel”¹³ and by responding to those human and cultural realities that genuinely anticipate the good news of God’s kingdom. The Holy Spirit arouses the personal and communal *sensus fidei* to assist this pastoral discernment of what may be genuine expressions of the Gospel.¹⁴ Our path of renewal, therefore, will be undertaken together; it will be a journey where we listen to, and learn from, each other.

A Path of Discernment Towards Pastoral Conversion and Renewal

Listening and learning as we walk together as Christ’s disciples is what Pope Francis has described as a “path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”¹⁵ We must be clear though, that the dynamic of discernment on this “path of synodality” is not the will of the participants, but the will of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Father says that, “Synodality is not looking for a majority, an agreement on pastoral solutions that we have to make”; rather, he says, it is a path which leads to making choices “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶

Over the past five years, I have been trying to prepare us gradually in a variety of ways to start our journey along this path. At the last two annual clergy conferences, I spoke about the need

⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church §1697

¹⁰ Ibid. §1803

¹¹ Ibid. Cf. §1813

¹² *Evangelii Nuntiandi* §15 (1975)

¹³ *Gaudium et Spes* §4

¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium* §12

¹⁵ Address given at the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015

¹⁶ Audience with the members of the National Council of Italian Catholic Action, 30th April 2021

for us to consider how we can listen to the challenges that face all the faithful as they try to live out and give witness to their faith in today's world. During each parish visitation I made in those years, I have preached about the role of the lay faithful and the parish (comprising home, church and school) in giving witness to their faith in their local area and community.

A Diocesan Pastoral Council has been established to "assist the apostolic work of the Church ... in the field of evangelization and sanctification or in the charitable, social, or other spheres", to "... promote the mutual coordination of various lay associations and enterprises"¹⁷ and "to study and weigh those matters which concern the pastoral works in the diocese, and to propose practical conclusions concerning them".¹⁸ The Council has been asked to consider how best we can undertake a path of listening and discernment.

A Youth Leadership Team known as "The Twelve" has also been launched, made up of young people from ages 13 to 18 from the Diocese of Leeds. Their role is to collaborate with the bishop and give a voice to young people in the decision-making affecting the future of the diocese.

Central to my thoughts and preparation has been the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation¹⁹ that gave expression to the reflections of the 2012 Synod of Bishops on "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith". Writing about an "ecclesial renewal which cannot be deferred", Pope Francis said: "I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. 'Mere administration' can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be 'permanently in a state of mission'."²⁰ The Holy Father went on to say: "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 evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. 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."²¹

The thinking of the Synod Fathers and the "dream" or vision of Pope Francis is what has been called by some a shift from "maintenance" to "mission"; that is, a path of pastoral conversion and renewal, a change of heart and mind as to how we give witness to our faith as a Church,

¹⁷ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, §26, (1965)

¹⁸ Canon 511, Code of Canon Law

¹⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013)

²⁰ *Ibid.* §25

²¹ *Ibid.* §27

both universally and locally. This is not then just a vision that originated with the current Holy Father but is built upon the magisterial teaching of Popes St Paul VI, St John Paul II and Benedict XVI on the need for both a renewal of discipleship and new forms of evangelisation in the modern world.

Discipleship and Evangelisation

The path of pastoral conversion and renewal begins with renewing our call, as baptised followers of Jesus Christ, to discipleship; to a deeper understanding of what the essential mission of the Church is and our individual vocation in that mission.

Pope St Paul VI famously said: “We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.”²² Evangelisation is everything the Church is and does.

Pope St John Paul II recognised that there are many in the world who, although baptised in the Catholic Church, have abandoned the practice of the sacraments or even their faith. He called therefore for a “new evangelization”, “new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression.”²³ The new evangelisation is a call to each Catholic to deepen his or her own faith, have confidence in the Gospel, and possess a willingness to share the Gospel. It is focussed on “re-proposing” the Gospel to those who have experienced a crisis of faith due to secularisation or those who have been baptised but never personally encountered Jesus Christ in faith. It calls for creative ways of communication and of community living because that is where faith needs fresh embodiment: “When faith is shared, faith is strengthened.”²⁴

Pope Benedict XVI emphasised also the importance of a personal encounter with Christ for passing on our faith: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”²⁵ “Likewise” he said, “at the root of all evangelization lies not a human plan of expansion, but rather the desire to share the inestimable gift that God has wished to give us,

²² *Evangelii Nuntiandi* §14

²³ Address to CELAM, 9th March 1983

²⁴ Message for World Mission Day, Pope St John Paul II, 1992

²⁵ *Deus Caritas Est* §1 (2005)

making us sharers in his own life.”²⁶ Moreover, “... the new evangelization is not a matter of redoing something which has been inadequately done or has not achieved its purpose, as if the new activity were an implicit judgment on the failure of the first evangelization. Nor is the new evangelization taking up the first evangelization again, or simply repeating the past. Instead, it is the courage to forge new paths in responding to the changing circumstances and conditions facing the Church in her call to proclaim and live the Gospel today.”²⁷

Pope Francis has renewed that same call to forge new paths: “The Church which ‘goes forth’ is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative ... and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast.”²⁸

The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community: From Parish to Mission

In my preaching during my parish visitations, I have tried to emphasise the importance of personal witness and the need “to forge new paths in responding to the changing circumstances and conditions facing the Church in her call to proclaim and live the Gospel today”. In the homilies, I have quoted two lines (highlighted in the text below) from the larger description by Pope Francis on the role of a parish in evangelisation today: “The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be ‘the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters’. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. **The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers.**”

The Holy Father goes on to state: “We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.”²⁹

²⁶ *Ubicumque et Semper* [Establishing the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation] (2010)

²⁷ *Lineamenta* for the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelisation §5 (2011)

²⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* §24

²⁹ *Ibid.* §28

A key aspect in this description is the part which a parish should play in encouraging and training all “its members to be evangelizers” and be “completely mission-oriented”. Too often, bishops, priests, deacons and religious are regarded as the ones who “do” the evangelisation and the lay faithful “do” the discipleship. Following Christ and placing him at the centre of our prayer, our relationships, and all we say and do is not only the way of “discipleship” to which every baptised member of the Church is called, but it is one of the principal ways in which we make Christ known to others. It is the way in which we evangelise. We are called to model our lives on Christ and so become a reflection of him to those around us.³⁰ This is why the unity and collaboration of the clergy, religious and lay faithful within the local Church is so vital for our mission, and the witness we give to our communities, our society and our world.

An important contribution to our diocesan discernment and path of pastoral conversion and renewal must be the “*Instruction*” published by the Congregation for Clergy: “*The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church*”.³¹ Emphasising that mission is the guiding principle for renewal, the document states that:

“...the current Parish model no longer adequately corresponds to the many expectations of the faithful, especially when one considers the multiplicity of community types in existence today. It is true that a characteristic of the Parish is that its rootedness at the centre of where people live from day to day. However, the Parish territory is no longer a geographical space only, but also the context in which people express their lives in terms of relationships, reciprocal service and ancient traditions. It is in this ‘existential territory’ where the challenges facing the Church in the midst of the community are played out. As a result, any pastoral action that is limited to the territory of the Parish is outdated, which is something the parishioners themselves observe when their Parish appears to be more interested in preserving a nostalgia of former times as opposed to looking to the future with courage ...Moreover, mere repetitive action that fails to have an impact upon people’s concrete lives remains a sterile attempt at survival, which is usually welcomed by general indifference. If the Parish does not exude that spiritual dynamic of evangelisation, it runs the risk of becoming self-referential and fossilised, offering experiences that are devoid of evangelical flavour and missionary drive, of interest only to small groups. The renewal of evangelisation requires a new approach with diverse pastoral proposals, so that the Word of God and the sacramental life can reach everyone in a way that is coherent with their state in life”.³²

³⁰ *Redemptoris Missio* §42 (1990)

³¹ 20th July 2020, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/07/20/200720a.html>

³² *Ibid.* §16-§18

While then, as established canonical structures, our parishes clearly have an important continuing role to play, it is also true that they need to have the flexibility and ability to adapt so that they can more effectively fulfil their role in the mission of the Church in the future. Moving “from parish to mission” is the constant dynamic which must, therefore, underpin the direction and life of our parish communities.

The First Steps on the Path

One of the surest ways to foster dissatisfaction in the engagement of people in any sphere, is the failure to manage expectations. The first steps (the process of discernment) on the path of pastoral conversion and renewal for our diocese will, then, need to be focused on understanding and forming the expectations of both clergy and lay faithful about how the parishes of our diocese will support the mission of the Church in the future. This will require initially:

- The formation of a Steering Group, comprising a team of clergy and lay faithful, which will collaborate with me in drafting a roadmap for the path which will lead to a pastoral plan for our diocese.
- A robust communications strategy which will set out what the steps will involve.
- The training of facilitators who will lead “listening sessions” at a local level with both clergy and faithful to learn about the range and nature of their hopes and expectations for the parishes and life of the diocese. (The paper attached ‘*From Parish to Mission*’ has been commissioned by the Diocesan Pastoral Council to explain the rationale for these listening sessions and to suggest how they can be taken forward.)

It must be emphasised that these first steps are not about looking at diocesan-wide parish reorganisations, amalgamations, or changes to present structures; they are not about “maintenance” but instead concern formation of the hearts and minds of individuals and communities for “mission”. The entirety of the structures may well have to be considered, but not yet.

While these are only the first steps on a path, they are perhaps the most important part of the journey to the future development of a detailed pastoral plan for the diocese. For this reason, it will be crucial that both the clergy and lay faithful are fully engaged in these first steps.

Four significant “coordinates” will be needed for these first steps in our diocesan path of discernment: prayer, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, ecclesial communion and the Eucharist: “Everything in the Church that grows outside of these coordinates lacks a foundation ... Any situation needs to be evaluated in the light of these four coordinates. Whatever is not part of

these coordinates ... is not ecclesial. ... The Church is not a market; the Church is not a group of businesspeople who go forward with a new business. The Church is the work of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent to us to gather us together. The Church is precisely the work of the Spirit in the Christian community, in the life of the community, in the Eucharist, in prayer ... always. And everything that grows outside of these coordinates lacks a foundation, is like a house built upon sand."³³

Conclusion and Recommendation

I know that the priests and deacons of our diocese will be focussed in the months ahead on the pastoral challenges of re-building their parish communities as they emerge from the restrictions of the pandemic. At the same time, there is a general recognition in society that things will not simply return to the way they were. It would be opportune therefore for this process of discernment to begin and for the listening sessions to commence sometime in Lent or Easter 2022, depending of course on the wider circumstances and context of our lives at that time.

I ask the clergy of the diocese to think and pray about the steps above and I recommend that the attached paper '*From Parish to Mission*' be discussed at the next deanery conferences. I have already spoken to the Deans about the need to embark on this path and I hope that they will lead the discussion with the clergy in their deanery in a way that is constructive and fruitful.

**✠ Marcus
Bishop of Leeds**

Feast of the English Martyrs, 4th May 2021

³³ Catechesis on Prayer, General Audience, Library of the Apostolic Palace, 25th November 2020