

Diocese of Plymouth



“A Precious Place of God’s Grace”

*Looking to 2025 in terms of parish structures,
availability of priests, provision of sacramental life and the resources needed to
meet the evangelising mission of the Church in the Diocese of Plymouth.*



**Bishop Mark and the Bishop’s Council
1 November 2020**

Introduction

“Given that the Church is mandated by Christ to be missionary, evangelising and outward-looking, a reform of her structures is continuously required in order to respond to the challenges of the day. Naturally, this involves a certain reorganisation in the way the pastoral care of the faithful is exercised, so as to foster greater co-responsibility and collaboration among all the baptised.”¹

It is within this context that *“A Precious Place of God’s Grace”²* has been written. Looking towards the future, Bishop Mark and his Council are motivated by a desire to ensure that the parishes and communities within our Diocese are formed and resourced to enable them to be faithful to the Church’s missionary mandate. As a consequence, it will be essential to establish the most appropriate pastoral structures so that our communities can respond effectively to the particular challenges which already face us today and can be prepared to face those which lie ahead of us.

Although it is the fruit of considerable reflection and consultation, particularly with the Deans and the Trustees of the Diocese, this document is very much a “work in progress” and will continue to evolve as the process of discernment and discussion by the clergy, those in consecrated life and the lay faithful at deanery and parish levels takes place. This transformative engagement is vital so that the vision set out within the document will be owned and promoted by the whole Diocesan Church.

Whilst a particular aim of this document is to provide a vision on which those who are tasked with advising the Bishop about pastoral appointments can fulfil their responsibility effectively, its wider and more fundamental aim is to provide our pastoral communities at local level

¹ Presentation of the Instruction *‘The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church*, by Monsignor Andrea Ripa, Undersecretary of the Congregation for the Clergy, 8 July 2020.

² The title of this document, which describes the spiritual reality underpinning our parish structures, is taken from the teaching of Bishop Mark in *“Go...Make Disciples”*: A Pastoral Message from Bishop Mark O’Toole, May 2017, p.3.

with the opportunity to reflect on how they can be enabled to develop as communities of disciple-making disciples and to foster a unity of vision regarding our Catholic mission and life.

The document is divided into two parts. The first and most important part sets out some fundamental theological and pastoral considerations based on the teaching of Pope Francis and his predecessors, a number of departments of the Roman Curia and of Bishop Mark. An acceptance of and engagement with this teaching will be the source from which everything else will flow. The second part then sets out a number of key factors in our Diocese which will need to be considered in making decisions concerning the renewal of our parish structures, followed by some principles and priorities which will guide those who have responsibility for diocesan governance. These factors and principles are not intended to be in any way exhaustive. Indeed, it is likely that others will become apparent as a result of further consultation and reflection.

“A Precious Place of God’s Grace” is intended as a framework within which this dialogue can take place. It is offered by the Bishop and his Council as a service to our clergy and laypeople at local level, so that they can be fully involved in the journey of missionary conversion in which we are all engaged.

On this Solemnity of All Saints, let us entrust this process of reflection on, and renewal of, our parish communities and structures to the intercession of all those holy men and women, who found in these precious places of God’s grace, nourishment and companionship on the path to holiness.

Part One

Theological and Pastoral Considerations

The Call to Missionary Conversion

Inspired by the seminal work of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, in which the Holy Father calls for a thorough-going missionary conversion³, Bishop Mark set out his programmatic vision for the Diocese of Plymouth “*It is the Lord*” expressing his desire that we “move from ideas to concrete reality” in the pursuit of our call to become “missionary or disciple-making disciples”⁴. With regard to our parish structures, Bishop Mark invited parishioners to ask themselves the challenging question: “Would it make any difference if our church wasn’t there?”⁵ This question is a way of assessing whether the parish community is fulfilling its mission of forming those who are practising their faith to see themselves as evangelizers, and who are reaching out to those Catholics who have fallen away from the practice of the Faith and no longer come to church. Moreover, it is a way of asking whether the community which has a church as its focal point has any impact on or outreach towards those who do not believe or who have yet to hear the message of the Gospel.

In this way, the Bishop highlighted that the simple presence of a church building or parish structure in a particular place is no indication or guarantee that the Catholic community there is actually equipped for - or engaged in - the essential missionary task of the Church, expressed through the proclamation of the Gospel, in worship and prayer, and in

³ “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 self-preservation”, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, 24 November 2013, art. 27.

⁴ “*It is the Lord*”: Pastoral Message to the Diocese of Plymouth delivered to the Clergy of the Diocese on Friday 6th February and to the Delegates at the ‘Gather’ conference on Sunday 8th February 2015.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.8.

active loving service, especially of the poor⁶. Bishop Mark made the point again in his Second Pastoral Message “Go...Make Disciples” when he stressed: “...a local church which is not making disciples is failing in a fundamental aspect of its life. And the question we must ask ourselves, therefore, is: ‘are our parishes places that make disciples?’”⁷.

The Parish in Catholic Life

Recognising the centrality of the parish structure to Catholic life, the Bishop notes: “It is predominantly within the boundary of the parish that Catholics live out their faith; where we build our homes, raise families; minister to the elderly, the sick and bereaved; accompany the young and educate our children. The parish is, therefore, the precious place of God’s grace, a place in which every baptised Catholic is called to deepen their own love and friendship of Jesus Christ and, at the same time to ‘make disciples’. It is not a matter of either having a deep relationship with Jesus or going out to help others encounter Him. It is both”⁸.

The new *Directory for Catechesis* notes that the parish structure itself developed as a result of the missionary expansion of the Church⁹. The parish is a Eucharistic community “founded on the pillars of the word of God, the sacraments and charity, which in turn presupposes a network of services, ministries and charisms...Parishes manifest the face of the people of God, who opens himself to all, without preference of persons”¹⁰.

The *Directory* reminds those who are called to discern the development of pastoral provision in a diocese to reflect on how much has changed since many of its parish structures were formed, due to the impact of phenomena such as urbanisation, nomadism, migratory movements and

⁶ cf Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, art. 25(a): “The Church’s deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable”.

⁷ “Go...Make Disciples”, p.3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁹ Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation, *Directory for Catechesis*, 23 March 2020, art 298.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, art. 299.

the drop in the number of clergy. But, instead of viewing these changes with dismay or being discouraged by a spirit of defeatism¹¹, we are encouraged to embark on “a process of missionary conversion” which must not be “limited to maintaining the status quo or guaranteeing the administration of the sacraments but presses forward in the direction of evangelisation”¹².

The Complementarity and Collaboration of Priests and Laypeople

It is now a truism to say that the parish is not primarily a structure but rather a community of people, called together to praise God and to serve others. Indeed, Pope Francis reminds us: “When we speak of *the people*, we are not speaking about the structures of society or the Church, but about all those persons who journey not as individuals, but as a closely-bound community of all and for all”¹³. Within a parish community Bishop Mark stresses that it is: “...key to remember that there is an important sacramental complementarity here between the ordained and the baptised”, having previously noted that: “The parish priest cannot do everything by himself, neither should he. Working alone, it is hard to remain motivated. We run out of energy or focus. Different people bring different gifts. But together we can support and move things forward”¹⁴.

Indeed, in its recent *Instruction*, when emphasising the need to move from the missionary conversion of the people to the necessary conversion of pastoral structures themselves, the Congregation for the Clergy warns

¹¹ cf Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants at the International Meeting *The ‘Church Goes Forth’*. *Evangelii Gaudium: Reception and Perspectives*, 30 November 2019: “Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us not be held back by our fear of making mistakes or our fear of following new paths...Let us not allow ourselves to be infected by the defeatism according to which everything is going wrong: it is not God’s way of thinking...In order not to let ourselves be robbed of the enthusiasm of the Gospel, let us invoke its author every day, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of joy that keeps missionary ardour alive, that makes life a love story with God, that invites us to attract the world only with love, and to discover that life can only be possessed by giving it”.

¹² *Directory for Catechesis*, art 300.

¹³ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God, *Christus Vivit*, art. 231.

¹⁴ “Go...Make Disciples”, p.7.

against the “clericalisation of pastoral activity”, going on to state, with a reference to Vatican II’s *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*¹⁵:

“When it is acknowledged that the state of the People of God is that of the dignity and freedom of the children of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in his temple, this inspires practices and models by which all the baptised, by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit and their infused charisms, become active participants of evangelisation, in the style and modality of an organic community, together with other parish communities or at the diocesan level. In effect, the whole community, and not simply the hierarchy, is the responsible agent of mission, since the Church is identified as the entire People of God”.¹⁶

However, even in the context of this more collaborative understanding of parish life and mission, the presence of the priest within a parish community, whether physically resident or not, alone or as a member of a team, remains of central importance. This is true because, in terms of a truly Catholic ecclesiology, the priest is a sign of the intrinsic bond of the local community with the diocesan community and with the Bishop and, through the Bishop, of its communion with the Bishop of Rome, the Successor of St Peter. It is also true at the pastoral level, since the priest is the one who exercises the primary care of souls, principally expressed by preaching the Word of God, by the celebration of the Sacraments, especially the Mass, and by his pastoral leadership of the community¹⁷. He is the one charged with the task of keeping alive the *missionary dynamic*, so that all the members of the community might fulfil their baptismal calling and become the protagonists of evangelisation¹⁸.

¹⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, art. 9.

¹⁶ Congregation for the Clergy, instruction, *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Church*, 27 June 2020, art.38.

¹⁷ Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction, *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community*, 4 August 2002, arts. 18-26.

¹⁸ *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community*, art. 39.

Thus, all the pastoral structures at parish level presently contained in canon law, as flexible as they are, require the ministry of a priest¹⁹ even when, due to the limited number of priests available, it is not possible to appoint a parish priest, and a permanent deacon, a lay religious or layperson is entrusted with a share in the pastoral care of a parish instead²⁰.

The Conversion and Renewal of Pastoral Structures

Against the background of the contemporary challenges facing parishes, and with an emphasis on the continuing value of the parish understood as a “community of communities”²¹ which is inclusive, evangelising and open to the poor, in its recent *Instruction* the Congregation for the Clergy has set out in detail the various options available for the renewal of parish structures. In addition to the options already available in canon law, the *Instruction* formally recognises the possibility that, if the circumstances suggest it and after consulting the Council of Priests, the Bishop can create “*Pastoral Units*” within deaneries composed of a number of parishes. The internal structure of these groupings is quite flexible and can be determined on a case-by-case basis within the general principles of canon law dealing with parishes, as long as such structures prioritise evangelisation and promote a more effective pastoral care²².

Likewise the *Directory for Catechesis*, after noting that many parishes today are engaged “in renewing their relational dynamics and making their structures open and less bureaucratic”, emphasises that these new structures of pastoral organisation within a diocese are being formed to, “...provide for the expansion of ministerial participation. Present with various characteristics, they have the aim of implementing evangelisation

¹⁹ cf canons 517§1, 526.

²⁰ cf canon 517§2.

²¹ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, 22 January 1999, art. 41.

²² The *Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community*, arts. 54-60. In art. 61 the *Instruction* also foresees the possibility of grouping together two or more deaneries into a “Pastoral Region” under the leadership of an *Episcopal Vicar* if such an arrangement would improve the pastoral effectiveness of a particular area of a diocese

with an organic and comprehensive pastoral approach, in an innovative and creative way”²³.

Giving its sanction to this structural flexibility in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church, the *Instruction* states unequivocally that it is no longer an option simply to maintain the *status quo*: “...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”, leading parishes to become “self-referential and fossilised”²⁴. Change, therefore, is not an option.

However, reflecting the pastoral approach consistently adopted in the teaching of Pope Francis, the *Instruction* strongly advises that the principle of “gradualism” be adopted in the area of parish restructuring and renewal: “In these cases, it is not a matter of indecisiveness, but of the flexibility needed to be able to achieve a true reform. Accordingly, one should not act ‘hastily’ in an attempt, as it were, to bring about immediate reforms by means of generic criteria that obey a ‘rational decision’ to the detriment of those who actually live in the territory. Every plan must be situated within the lived experience of a community and implanted in it without causing harm, with a necessary phase of prior consultation, and of progressive implementation and verification.”²⁵

In addition to this ecclesial teaching, it must be acknowledged that the present pandemic has forced all of us to reflect on what is most essential in our lives and has provided additional challenges in living and proclaiming our faith. Whilst it has prompted us to develop the use of the internet and social media to maintain our sense of community and to provide opportunities to worship in new ways, it has also highlighted certain vulnerabilities in our present structures and the need for a greater

²³ *Directory for Catechesis*, art. 301.

²⁴ *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community*, art. 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 36, quoting from Pope Francis’ *Presentation of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia*, 22 December 2016.

adaptability to the missionary needs present in our society. The Covid-19 pandemic leads us to recognise, as Pope Francis has emphasised, that we are “all in the same boat, where one person’s problems are the problems of all”²⁶. This provides an added impetus to evangelisation, as we recognise that “no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together”²⁷.

The Process for Pastoral Provision

It is within this context too that any process for pastoral provision and the deployment of priests within the parochial structure of the diocese over the next five years must be interpreted. Therefore, it is hoped that this document will also act as a flexible tool, setting out agreed priorities to underpin a sustainable process of pastoral appointments over the next five years and beyond.

With the limited number of priests available for appointment as parish priests at this time, it will be necessary to give priority to those parishes and ministries which already play - or could potentially play - a key role in a certain area of the diocese²⁸. New or renewed styles of priestly ministry will be needed to provide the necessary pastoral ministry of a priest to those parish communities which will either be asked to share the ministry of the same parish priest or be served by a priest serving and living in a neighbouring parish. Even though it is no longer an option simply to “carry on as before” and changes will have to be made, any changes must be carefully discerned and the local communities and the clergy themselves provided with the necessary formation to understand the changes which might lie ahead.

Hence, the need for a process arises, so as to avoid making abrupt and purely reactive decisions with the danger of causing potentially

²⁶ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, on Fraternity and Social Friendship, 3 October 2020, art 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, art. 32.

²⁸ These parishes might not necessarily be the biggest in terms of numerical size nor situated in the principal town or city of an area. Sometimes it will be simply due to its location in a particular pastoral territory.

irreparable damage to a particular community. Similarly, we need to keep a focus on the central importance of promoting *missionary conversion* in the decisions that are made. By defining some parameters, issues can be addressed in a longer-term manner and within a wider context. There will always need to be flexibility and adaptability in anything that is proposed, not least in order to welcome priests who will come to us, either from our seminarians presently preparing for the priesthood (this year there are five), or from dioceses abroad or from Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, coming to serve in the Diocese.

Any eventual scheme for pastoral provision in a particular deanery, based on the principles and priorities set out in this document, will need to have various “categories” of parishes or churches which will determine, amongst other things, those parishes which will have a resident parish priest and those which will be served by a priest living elsewhere. A scheme might also include a proposal to group a number of parishes into a Pastoral Unit, served by a pastoral team of clergy and laypeople. Such changes to pastoral structures will need to be introduced gradually, as the reality on the ground develops and circumstances change, and it is intended that this process will inform decision-making on how the structure of a deanery might evolve over the next five years²⁹. There needs to be an honest appraisal of the present reality we find ourselves in, whilst also reaffirming our unshakeable trust in the Lord who guides our steps and who sends to His Church those who are needed for our on-going evangelising mission to the world.

As those entrusted with the oversight of the parishes within their deaneries, and therefore those most familiar with the pastoral needs of the deanery as a whole, the involvement of the Deans in the on-going discernment of parish structures and pastoral appointments within their respective Deaneries will be essential. Ideally, this will go hand-in-hand

²⁹ The idea of a “five year window” is simply another way of saying “the foreseeable future”, which will certainly change as time passes.

with a realistic self-assessment, undertaken by each existing parish community, of its ability to fulfil and develop the fundamental aspects of parish life and mission.

In summary, the discernment of a structured approach to pastoral provision over a number of years:

“...demands that the historical parish institution not remain a prisoner of immobility or of a worrisome pastoral repetition, but rather it should put into action that ‘outgoing dynamism’ that, through collaboration among different parish communities and a reinforced communion among clergy and laity, will orient it effectively toward an evangelising mission, the task of the entire People of God, that walks through history as the ‘family of God’ and that, in the synergy of its diverse members, labours for the growth of the entire ecclesial body”.³⁰

³⁰ *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community*, art. 123.

Part Two

1. Some Key Factors to Aid Discernment

Various factors enable - and other factors inhibit - the carrying out of the mission entrusted to our diocese. Among these are:

- **An effective and unified focus on mission at all levels:** The effectiveness of the Church's mission requires a constant emphasis at diocesan, deanery and parish levels on evangelisation, pastoral care, the needs of the poor, our Catholic schools and university chaplaincies, the promotion of vocations, the formation of the clergy and their on-going welfare, and the training and support of the various forms of lay ministry. Particularly with reference to the clergy, it is of fundamental importance that there is a shared unity of vision in their approach to mission as set out in the first part of this document.
- **Priests:** There has to be a realistic acceptance that, for the foreseeable future, the numbers of priests available for pastoral appointments will be fewer than in the immediate past. There is therefore a consequent need to focus on the priest's essential sacramental and pastoral role. This will require alternative means of supporting mission and of valuing the skills of lay people, especially in terms of diocesan and parish administration. At the same time, with absolute confidence that God continues to call men to serve the Church's mission³¹, we need to put energy into promoting and fostering vocations to the priesthood in the diocese and also to welcome warmly those priests who come to work in our diocese from elsewhere.

³¹ cf *Christus Vivit*, arts. 274-277: "If we are indeed convinced that the Holy Spirit continues to inspire vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, we can 'once more cast out the nets' in the Lord's name, with complete confidence. We can dare, as we should, to tell each young person to ask whether this is the path that they are meant to follow", art. 274.

- **Laypeople:** The decline in the numbers of committed laypeople is much more concerning, in scale and depth, than that of the clergy³². As noted by the Vatican *Instruction*, due to cultural factors such as increased mobility and the growth of the internet: "...the parish finds itself in a context whereby the territorial affiliation is increasingly less evident, where places of association are multiplied and where interpersonal relationships risk being dissolved into a virtual world without any commitment or responsibility towards one's neighbour"³³. This not only leads to the lessening of a dedicated commitment to a specific parish or community, but also to a radical decline in the membership of those Catholic lay organisations, such as the Catholic Women's League and the Knights of St Columba, which were traditionally the backbone of parish life and pastoral activity.

Due to changes in social mores, it is often more difficult to find volunteers to undertake committed parish roles. For example, grandparents are often called upon to provide childcare to their grandchildren because the parents are working. All this means that other ways need to be found of providing support for communities, especially for those which are small and more isolated.

- **Demographics:** Our diocese stretches over three counties, with very varied demographics, ranging from small rural communities, often consisting of a large percentage of retired and older people, to densely-populated urban centres which have a greater range of age-groups and social groupings. This variety has consideration implications on the nature of a parish and its ability to sustain a fully-developed Catholic life and mission. There are also areas of considerable wealth and areas of great deprivation in both rural and urban contexts throughout the diocese.

³² This decline has been brought into sharper relief by the noticeable number of Catholics who have not returned to regular attendance at Mass after our churches were re-opened following the Covid "lockdown". So there is now also a mission to those Catholics who no longer feel the need to participate physically at Mass.

³³ *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community*, art. 9.

- **Demands of Administration:** Parishes and other communities are increasingly subject to compliance issues determined by civil law, which mean that these communities have a need for professional and on-going support and assistance from dedicated lay officers, who will take on the responsibility of fulfilling these obligations at the local level, thereby freeing the clergy to concentrate on their essential pastoral and sacramental role. The grouping of parishes, either in formal or in temporary ways, can facilitate this provision of these lay officers.
- **Diocesan Trustees:** There is a need to match resources to established diocesan priorities and thereby enable mission through support to our parishes which are the key providers of evangelisation, liturgy and charitable works. To ensure that this happens and that the vision contained in this document is shared and will be supported by them going forwards, the on-going involvement of the Diocesan Trustees in this process will be essential.
- **Diocesan and Parish Property:** There needs to be investment in the provision and use of property to meet the needs of mission and of the parish communities, for example by setting up appropriate parish offices and meeting rooms and developing IT resources, whilst not forgetting our obligation to provide in sustainable ways for the needs of the poor and the marginalised.

2. Some Implications for Diocesan Governance

The Trustees of the Diocese have established the following list of priorities which will inform their governance strategy:

- ❖ the fostering of the new evangelisation at all levels of the Diocese
- ❖ the development of youth ministry
- ❖ the promotion of Faith formation and vocational discernment
- ❖ the promotion of the well-being of the clergy

- ❖ the improvement of our church buildings and the securing of parish life
- ❖ the support of the Liturgy and liturgical formation, with a particular concern for the central role of the Cathedral in the life of the diocese
- ❖ the development and on-going support of the mission of *Caritas Plymouth*
- ❖ the support of education and places of education, especially the Catholic schools of the diocese
- ❖ the sustaining of the work of the Diocesan Chancery and Diocesan Tribunal

Having an agreed set of principles and priorities is important for when it comes to making decisions at the level of governance, particularly with regards to the investment and allocation of resources. These same principles and priorities will also determine the response to issues which are due to causes outside of the Church's control, for example, new compliance issues which arise from civil or canonical legislation, the sudden death of a key individual, or the occurrence of an unforeseen matter requiring major financial expenditure.

In addition, the following matters will have implications for the implementation of these established priorities:

Clergy-related Matters

- **Places for Formation:** At least one - but ideally two - "formation parishes" should be pinpointed within each deanery, where the parish priest appointed is someone willing and able to mentor an assistant priest, a transitory deacon, a seminarian on pastoral placement or a student on a propaedeutic year.
- **Welcoming of Priests from Outside the Diocese:** A clear process for the induction, inculturation and mentoring of priests from other countries and cultural backgrounds needs to be in place to enable

them to carry out their ministry effectively and to ensure the cohesiveness of all the clergy working in the diocese.

- **Different Models of Clergy Living:** Where there are a number of priests working together to cover a larger geographical area, it will be important to establish the most appropriate structure to promote their priestly life and shared ministry. For example, whilst acknowledging the longstanding custom of our diocese, dictated by its geography, of priests living on their own, a particular situation might suggest that it would be more appropriate for them to live together in the same house, albeit suitably adapted to ensure that each priest has his own space. Alternatively, as often happens in other countries, it might be more appropriate for each priest to live in a different building in a different part of the area covered by the parish or parishes. Flexibility here is key.
- **Development of “Travelling Missions”:** As happened in parts of the diocese in the earlier decades of its establishment following the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850, the development of some sort of travelling mission to those more isolated areas where there is no resident priest might be considered.
- **Priests who have resigned from Ecclesiastical Office:** The relatively significant number of priests who will be resigning from ecclesiastical office, due to age or illness, will need suitable accommodation and support, in recognition of their years of dedicated ministry in the diocese. They remain a much-valued blessing for our Diocesan Church, and their wise and on-going contribution to the life and mission of the Diocese cannot and should not be underestimated. In places where these same priests generously agree to undertake some form of pastoral and sacramental ministry in a stable manner, there needs to be negotiated agreements in place which set out clear parameters.
- **Permanent Deacons:** A greater discernment and valuing of the role of permanent deacons, in terms of the proclamation of the Word of

God and the service of charity particular to their vocation and in terms of pastoral administration, is needed both at parish and at diocesan levels.

Pastoral and Administrative Support

- **On-going Formation:** On-going formation and education is needed for both the clergy and the laypeople, akin to the professional development of staff in our Catholic schools. Funding to provide this formation will be essential for parishes and keyworkers.
- **Dedicated Lay Officers:** As noted above, the provision of qualified, committed and competent lay people to support the mission of the diocese and its parishes will be increasingly important as time goes on. This development brings with it questions concerning formation, governance and accountability which will need to be carefully addressed.
- **Diocesan Curia:** The primary role of the diocesan curia is to support the mission of the Church, which is carried out through the parishes, schools and other organisations and charities of the Diocese. It will have an increasing role in promoting good practice and offering training and resources to enhance the Catholic life of the Diocese and its local communities.

Parish and Other Pastoral Structures

- **Parish Structures fit for Mission:** A parish cannot only be a place to go to for Mass, but must be enabled and able to support a full Catholic life and mission in terms of evangelisation, catechesis and formation, liturgy, the development of initiatives connected with *Caritas Plymouth*, ecumenical endeavour, marriage and family accompaniment, and the administration and management of buildings. Some form of self-audit should be undertaken in all our parishes to assess their present state of health with regards to this

vision of essential life and mission and to highlight areas where particular support and development are needed.

- **Catholic Schools:** The presence of a Catholic school within a parish is an important consideration when pastoral provision is being made. A Catholic school is a community of faith that has at its foundation “an educational initiative characterised by evangelical values”³⁴. It makes the Church visible above all in the fields of education and culture. Catholic schools are an integral part of the mission of the Diocesan Church and so: “One must not, therefore, exclude or marginalise its Catholic identity or its role in evangelisation”³⁵. Its Catholic identity must be supported by the pastoral structures created in a particular area, since it is from that identity that a Catholic school derives its unique vocation as “a genuine instrument of the Church, a place of real and specific pastoral support”³⁶. In making decisions, therefore, it is vital to remember that our Catholic schools participate in the evangelising mission of the Church and are privileged environments in which Christian education is carried out.
- **Universities:** Universities and University Chaplaincies are precious and key ministries for reaching out to young adult Catholics and for tapping into their zeal for the Faith. Universities also provide a unique context for evangelisation and a place where matters of faith can be explored and developed in a challenging academic environment. As Pope Francis acknowledged: “Universities are outstanding environments for articulating and developing this evangelising commitment in an interdisciplinary and integrated way”³⁷. Due importance, therefore, needs to be given to the three University Campuses in our Diocese when discerning the appropriate allocation of priests and resources.

³⁴ *Directory for Catechesis*, art. 310.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 311.

³⁶ Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 28 December 1997, art. 11. Quoted in *Directory for Catechesis*, art. 311.

³⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 134.

- **Communities in Holiday Areas:** Some parishes and churches in holiday or coastal areas are often depleted outside of the holiday season and may not be able to sustain themselves as separate pastoral structures. However, the great opportunities for mission and evangelisation at peak holiday times should not be underestimated and will require considerable thought and investment of resources.
- **Volunteers and Employees:** Parishes, especially those which become “key parishes” in an area, will require large scale investment in terms of time and resources in the training and support of volunteers. The numbers of those who generously volunteer to take on roles with our parishes varies widely across the Diocese. It will be important to be pro-active in approaching suitable individuals directly to invite them to take on particular roles.

In addition, some formal employment of key laypeople in local administrative and pastoral roles will be necessary, as is already happening effectively in some places in our Diocese. This will be particularly important in those parishes asked to look after other places which are unable to sustain their life and mission on their own. Some central resources may also need to be available to assist these latter communities.

- **Buildings:** It is vital that existing buildings are matched to the needs of each community. Some investment in key parishes will be necessary to enable them to flourish. In other places, the movement of population from the original place of settlement and the rapid growth in housing developments and “new towns” in some areas of the Diocese might indicate the need for new churches and buildings. Properties which are no longer needed or suitable for parish or diocesan needs could be repurposed to respond in innovative and exciting ways for charitable works under the umbrella of *Caritas Plymouth*, thereby strengthening the Diocese’s outreach to those most in need.

Conclusion

The issuing of this document marks the beginning of a journey of discernment and development, which must involve the wider and active collaboration of the clergy, those living a consecrated life and the lay faithful. This process will then feed into a revision of the document, which will, in turn, lead to the formulation of some more practical proposals regarding pastoral provision for each Deanery of the Diocese.

In other words, it is intended that this document should become the catalyst which encourages real communication and a sharing of wisdom amongst the faithful and communities of our Diocese. Calling for a growth of a *culture of encounter* and the search for true wisdom in the wider context of our information-laden society, the Holy Father exhorts us: "...that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone. This becomes an aspiration and a style of life"³⁸. How we can achieve this, he explains: "Together we can seek the truth in dialogue, in relaxed conversation or in passionate debate. To do so calls for perseverance; it entails moments of silence and suffering, yet it can patiently embrace the broader experience of individuals and peoples"³⁹. The dialogue which is engendered by this document will feed into decisions concerning necessary changes to our pastoral structures.

A preliminary consultation has already taken place with the Deans and the Diocesan Trustees and a program of consultation and on-going formation is planned for the clergy of the Diocese and for the clergy and lay faithful together.

The timeline to enable this wider dialogue to take place is as follows:

³⁸ *Fratelli Tutti*, art 216

³⁹ *Ibid.*, art 50.

- ❖ **25 November 2020:** Discussion by the Council of Priests
- ❖ **December 2020:** Initial formation for the clergy and discussion at deanery meetings
- ❖ **January 2021:** Initial formation for the clergy and laypeople together, followed by discussion at local and parish levels
- ❖ **February 2021:** Feedback and discussion between the Deans and Bishop's Council
- ❖ **February 2021:** Specific proposals regarding the renewal of pastoral structures formulated for each deanery for discussion at deanery and parish levels
- ❖ **March 2021:** Feedback and discussion between the Deans and the Bishop's Council
- ❖ **April 2021:** Revised Document and Specific Proposals regarding the renewal of pastoral structures issued by the Bishop and his Council.

Of necessity the timeline for this initial period of consultation and formation is tight because of the need to have a preliminary framework ready for those pastoral appointments which will need to be made over the summer of 2021. However, it is intended that reflection and formation on this document will be on-going.

Returning to the vision of Pope Francis with which this document began, and in which it is rooted, the Holy Father encourages us to become a more discerning Church. With regards to future pastoral provision and the missionary conversion of pastoral structures within the context of evangelisation the exhortation of the Holy Father is clear: "Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel"⁴⁰.

Such discernment will lead, on one level, to necessary and achievable changes in pastoral provision across the diocese. However, on the wider and more aspirational level, it will hopefully be experienced as an

⁴⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium*, art 20.

important step in the process of that *missionary conversion* which will form us into a Church of *disciple-making disciples*, a creative project in which we are all involved as we look to the future of our Diocese.

“Great changes are not produced behind desks or in offices. This means that everyone has a fundamental role to place in a single great creative project: to write a new page of history, a page full of hope...”⁴¹.

A Prayer for Missionary Awareness and Commitment⁴²

Heavenly Father,
when your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ
rose from the dead,
he commissioned his followers
to “go and make disciples of all nations”
and you remind us that through our Baptism
we are made sharers in the mission of the Church.

Empower us by the gifts of the Holy Spirit
to be courageous and zealous
in bearing witness to the Gospel,
so that the mission entrusted to the Church,
which is still very far from completion,
may find new and efficacious expressions
that bring life and light to the world.

Help us make it possible for all peoples
to experience the saving love
and mercy of Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, forever and ever.

Amen.

⁴¹ *Fratelli Tutti* art. 231, in which Pope Francis addresses the processes of change which lead to lasting peace.

⁴² A Prayer by Pope Francis for the “Extraordinary Mission Month – October 2019”, commemorating the centenary of the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* of Pope Benedict XV, 30 November 1919.