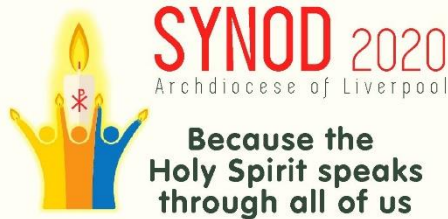


## REFLECTING ON THE SYNOD RECOMMENDATIONS (17)



### Property

#### A theological statement

When you come right down to it, a parish budget is a theological statement. It tells us who we are and what we intend to do. It reflects what we believe and how we're going to put that belief into practice. Likewise, the property owned by the Church must reflect our priorities and beliefs because they're a large part of our budget.

We Catholics have a strong sense of ownership when it comes to our buildings. Much of the money we contributed over the years to support the parish, even when times were tough, and money was scarce, was spent on buildings; we spent our money on bricks and mortar. The buildings belonged to us, the people. Those are our relatives out in the graveyard. We baptised our children here. This parish is where we've always belonged. This sense of "belonging" is decisive for us. We might say that "we're from Warrington," but we say that "we belong to St Stephen's." We belong here in this parish; it's our home.

Now, of course, these days there are many new people in every parish who may not hold quite so tightly to the building. But for those of us who've been around for many years, we have seen parish priests come and go, we've witnessed travelling missionaries appear now and then, and that's all fine and good, but when it comes down to what lasts, the building is the stable foundation of our faith. It belongs to us, the people. We built it.

And it follows on this that we might also say to ourselves, "So, don't you dare change my building. And above all, don't you dare close it." And yet, like the budget, our buildings and land must reflect our purpose and theology as Church. We have repeatedly considered here the fundamental mission of the Church, as we should in a Synod like this. Let's return to that section from Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* and look at the paraphrase of article 6. It's an excellent summary of our real mission:

"God gave those first disciples everything they would need to remain fully attentive to the mystery that they had experienced during Jesus' lifetime. Thus, did they baptize those who came to believe in Jesus and the saving power of his life and death. Thus, too, did they share the Eucharist, the full celebration of the presence of Jesus. It was both in their loving actions and their worship that the first disciples came to know their profound call to "be Church." From that very first day until now, we have never stopped announcing the

Word, baptizing those who believe, and celebrating the Eucharist."

So that is our mission and our work and our goal. Do we need church buildings to do this? Actually, no. Do they serve our purposes well? Of course, they do. But we have noted over the years that newly-founded parishes or ones who lost their church building to fire or storm, grew much stronger from losing their security and having to scramble to survive. Many more volunteers came forward in these parishes, there was healthy and vital energy, their outreach was exceptional, contributions were more generous, laywomen and men played critical roles, the parish welcomed everyone, stranger and friend alike, and it was all because they needed each other so much. Like Jesus who had nowhere to lay his head (Luke 9:58) these parishes became strong because they had nowhere to call home.

## REFLECTING ON THE SYNOD RECOMMENDATIONS (18)

### Parishes and Deaneries

#### Collaboration

When we begin to think about renewing and strengthening deaneries three words spring to mind which can guide us on the road forward. The first is "collaboration" which stands in contrast to a modern idea that any local parish can somehow "go it alone" in terms of ministry and planning. In truth, there is no such thing as "going it alone" when it comes to pastoral ministry. To work together with others, which is what the term collaboration means, requires humility and confidence at the same time. Humility helps us see how much we need each other to accomplish the work of Christ in today's world. Humility prevents us from being threatened by the work of our partners. Confidence helps us trust that each player—whether priest, deacon, or lay minister—has gifts to contribute which are divine in origin. Confidence helps us see the future as bright with possibilities when we collaborate. With humility and confidence, the Synod has made a clarion call for a dynamic approach to organizing and utilizing deaneries to meet local needs.

#### Service

The second word that springs to mind is "service." The purpose of the deanery is to serve better. The call to be servant leaders and ministers may well be the most radical of all Jesus' teachings. When it is the driving force behind collaboration, the outcome in the deanery is remarkable. The attitude of service which we learn from Jesus means that we commit ourselves even when it means we won't "get our way," to whatever best serves the community. We all need an attitude of service as we reform deaneries and work collaboratively. Having the attitude of service requires generosity and self-giving ministry. Generosity teaches us to put the good of all in the first place and ourselves in service to that. It asks a lot of us, to be sure, but it also gives us a sense of well-being. And self-giving ministry takes all the pressure off our shoulders because we find that, when we act for the good of others, others will join us. The Synod is asking all parishes in the Archdiocese to step forward with

generosity and self-giving service to chart a pathway forward that best meets the ministry needs of today's Church.

### **Covenant**

The third term that we put into practice as we shift away from defending our parishes and come together as a deanery is covenant. To understand this, let's turn to the teaching on marriage at the Second Vatican Council.

The documents at the Council that treat marriage define it as a covenant which is a considerable departure from the 1917 Code of Canon Law which saw marriage only in terms of a contract: somewhat legal, a bit chilly, and the language of business— but not of love. Marriage is a covenant that implies equal partners, each offering warm love and devotion to the other, and each acting with the generosity and self-giving love as well as the humility and confidence in each other that we saw above.

In shaping a deanery, we aren't signing any contracts but we are entering into a "covenant of love." Covenant is a biblical term which brings to mind God's relationship of faithful love with us. The remarkable covenant between God and us took its most tangible form, of course, in Jesus of Nazareth. His self-giving love was real and powerful. His collaboration with his apostles has lasted to this day in what we now call "the Church." And his ministry of service, demonstrated so powerfully at the washing of the feet, is now our only real model for ministry. So, parishes in a deanery enter into a covenant with other local parishes, a covenant of service, collaboration, and above all, of love.

Our covenant calls us to give generously of our parish life to support the needs and welfare of our neighbours. And here is the real miracle in all of this: when we do this, when we give away our assumed security as a parish and join with our neighbours, we all win. We serve more people, and more do the serving. We help more families to form the domestic church. More people learn to pray and study the faith. More parishioners accompany each other. We include, welcome, and love more of the marginalized. And more people come to know and love Jesus.

## **REFLECTING ON THE SYNOD RECOMMENDATIONS (19)**

### **The Church in Today's World**

#### **Stormy Seas**

As we conclude our Synod, we find ourselves in a storm. Like Jesus and his disciples in that boat, we fear we may all be lost. The storm blows and surges around us, pelting us with rain and snow, forcing us to run for cover into isolation and quarantine. Like the disciples in Mark 4, we want to awaken Jesus and tell him that "we are perishing!" But the storm isn't merely the pandemic storm, bad as that is. It's also a political storm as we struggle to know what is true amid so many false claims. It's the stormy rise of nationalism and hate as a culture of contempt sweeps through nations. It's an economic storm as we cope with unemployment and the loss of

financial security that only last year seemed so sure. The poor find themselves at the centre of this storm and yet, have no access to the economy. It's an environmental storm—literally massive storms—that threatens to overtake us and destroy the futures of our children. It's a social storm as we come face to face with racism, prejudice, and intolerance which has always slept beneath the surface of society.

#### **We're all in the same boat**

We're in the same boat with those disciples. Can we hear the words of Jesus at once reassuring and challenging? "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" It's important to note here that Jesus wasn't asking the disciples to have more faith in him. Like we do, they believed he could save them. That's why they woke him up, after all! No, he asked them to have faith in each other, knowing that when they trust each other they will live in solidarity and only then will his grace pour out upon them. Together—and we really must stick together—we can steer this ship through the storm. We can re-imagine our world anew. This storm need not destroy us because the grace of Jesus will calm the waters that stir in our hearts and minds, that stir in the world around us.

#### **Solidarity and Grace**

All we have are solidarity and grace but it is more than enough for us. Let us embrace one another selflessly and generously as we walk forward down the road. Let us put aside our selfish desires and demands to work for the common good, not merely of Catholics in the Archdiocese but for all God's people. Let us seek out those on the margins, the ones who feel unwelcome and outside, and, carry them in our arms, bringing them into the warmth and security of our love. Let us not quibble about who should be welcome and who should not at our liturgies. Instead, let us open our arms to embrace all who seek us out. Let us use all our resources and property to care for the immigrants and refugees among us, to feed the hungry and educate the children, to offer mercy to those most in need of it, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. In short, let us accompany one another in solidarity empowered by Jesus' grace to offer each other comfort and safety in the storm.

On March 27, 2020, Pope Francis blessed the world with a message from the piazza of St Peter's in Rome. The piazza was eerily empty and quiet that night—rain swept and chilly—as people stayed in their homes. He stood there alone and reflected on the story in Mark 4 of the disciples and Jesus in that storm at sea. "Like the disciples in the Gospel," he said, "we were caught off guard by this unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realised that we're all in the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time essential and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other... We, too, have realised that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this." Indeed, this wise insight of Pope Francis helps us all see that we cannot think only of ourselves and that we must think creatively about how we will move forward on the road together.

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