

Visitation Report North Oxford Deanery October 2017 – March 2018.

We have come to the end of another series of Visitations in this deanery, and as always it has been fascinating to get an insight into how so many people live their faith. I am afraid that the series of visits to parishes has been disturbed by the weather and also by ill health. There is not much that can be done about that. This means that two visits have still to take place: at Kidlington, which will be this weekend and in Witney, which will take place in September. The Archbishop has visited two parishes, Greyfriars and Ss. Gregory & Augustine, while I have visited all of the other parishes.

I do not write individual reports to every parish after the visitation. I have always found this very difficult but instead write a longer report covering the whole of the visitation. This I am asking the Parish priests to bring to the attention of their parishioners in whatever way they feel is best in their parish. The report should be available, however, for everyone who wishes to read it.

General Impressions

I was made very welcome in every Parish I have been in. Thank you. There can easily be a sense of nervousness as you approach a parish and wonder what people are thinking. It is also noticeable that there is a greater sense of belonging to the archdiocese of Birmingham than there was in this area when I arrived over eleven years ago.

The general situation in the deanery is very good, with a very vibrant and active faith-life in every parish which I have visited. It is impressive how much activity is carried out by lay-people, and I will return to that later in the report.

Liturgy

There is a good standard of music and liturgy in almost every parish, and people are enthusiastic about taking part in the liturgy. May I gently point out that it is not forbidden to practice music and singing, and that in some places the introduction of new hymns would help enliven the liturgy. Thank you also to the many alter-servers. Everywhere there is a difficulty in knowing how many servers will attend. I am well aware of the difficulties but if possible, more training should be given in some parishes. While speaking of the liturgy it should be part of the pattern of the liturgical preparation in parishes to see that vestments are cleaned now and again and also kept in proper repair. Vestments which are worn out should be disposed of in a suitable way, rather than just clogging up cupboards.

Lay Activity

As I have said I have been very impressed by the responsibilities taken by lay-people in many parishes. This is very positive as the number of ordained clergy is shrinking. Big steps have been taken in this regard, but I suspect that as in all new situations the proper balance has yet to be achieved. On the one hand there are those places where the Parish Priest has delegated responsibility for some field to members of the parish but then withdraws the delegation when he is not fully in agreement with the action taken. The other end of the spectrum is found where people are active in many fields and the Parish Priest seems uninterested in what is going on, so that people are left wondering whether what they are doing is right.

Achieving balance is difficult. The clergy need to give leadership but without suppressing real initiative just because it is not quite what they would have done. In other words, we are looking for real dialogue, where all involved are willing to listen and to change. It is not a true dialogue where you believe you know the answers before you begin, nor is it a meaningful dialogue which never draws a conclusion as to what should be done. Let me repeat, however, that I am overall very impressed by the amount of lay activity taking place in all sorts of fields.

Parish Activities

I do not think that there was any parish where there were not some activities taking place beyond the liturgy. There were all sorts of groups for people to meet in, study circles of all sorts, various parish committees, groups of young people, pensioners, mothers and toddlers, catechists, evangelisation groups, groups to organise the ministry of extraordinary ministers of the eucharist and visiting the sick, and many more. I would point out that there is the possibility for training for many of these groups through Maryvale in Birmingham. They are often quite willing to organise courses locally. Some parishes even have groups to organise the social life of the parish in all its forms, and this again is an initiative to be encouraged.

I would like to draw your attention to three areas here.

Social Outreach

The first is about social outreach. Again, virtually every parish has groups who were working with other people either locally with a hands-on approach to the local problems for the homeless, for refugees and immigrants, for food banks. There was consciousness that perhaps several hundred hospital workers would be arriving from the Philippines and from Kerala, and that these people would need a welcome from local parishes. There were also many groups doing their best to find resources for projects abroad. These were sometimes projects which were attached to the parish itself or through organisations such as CAFOD and Aid to the Church in Need. Both of these organisations are keen to have a local representative in each parish, and where these do not exist I would encourage parishes to find suitable people. Every parish needs to give priority to the social outreach of our parishes as the diaconal service is central to the mission of the Church. Much of this work was being carried out ecumenically, and that is to be encouraged.

Youth Ministry

The second area is that of our ministry to young people. Our diocese, when others were cutting back on youth ministry, has invested heavily in this area. From the point of view of Oxford there are two problems. The residential services for youth ministry are at the northern end of our diocese. This means that it seems far away to take groups there. I can only say that within the area some people are doing this. It is not impossible even if more difficult than if you live say in Staffordshire. Here there needs to be more cooperation between parishes. This is something which perhaps could be organised on a deanery level. The other area is in the recruitment of a youth officer for Oxford. We are again in the situation of looking for a new officer. The problem is not the job in itself, but that Oxford is now one of the most expensive places to live in Britain, not least the cost of housing. This seems to be the major problem, and we are trying, in cooperation with the diocese, to do something about this. Also the youth officer in this part of the diocese is somewhat isolated from the other parts of the diocese and his or her colleagues in Birmingham.

Ecumenism

The third area is that of ecumenism. In many places that has been delegated to lay-people. That is good, but the clergy cannot just leave it there. They should also be taking part at least some of the time; not least in meeting their colleagues from other churches and denominations. I would ask that there should be an active role for the clergy in all parishes in doing this.

Administration

Some points about administration. Many priests told me that the number of telephone calls they received has diminished quite considerably, while the number of emails they received has increased markedly. This change in the way that people communicate with us has the advantage that we can answer as and when we wish. It is, however, important that people do get an answer, and that we set aside time for the task of answering all the emails that come in.

I was frequently thanked for the help that parishes had received from the central administration in Birmingham. Someone said, "they always seem so friendly", just waiting to help us. Thank you for that. I will pass it on. There was also appreciation of the new staff who have been employed, which was experienced by many as a positive step forward for the diocese. There were also thanks that the diocesan accounting system now seems to be fully operational.

Structural Development

The area of this deanery will in all probability in the next twenty or so years go through enormous changes. Tens of thousands of new houses are likely to be built within Oxfordshire, many of them within the area of this deanery. The southern pastoral region of the diocese has a group monitoring this development, which could mean for the church the possibility of building new schools, and perhaps even churches. Your Dean, Fr. John Hancock, is a member of this group and is actively making sure that your interests are to the fore. We have professional help in these matters, but we do need your cooperation. If you become aware that within your parish a major development is planned (say a development of 1,000 or more housing units) or is taking place, then would you let us know. It is better for us to receive the same news several times than not to receive it at all. At this stage it is impossible to say what this will mean for the development of the diocese.

Vocations

This brings me to the number of priests in your deanery. The number of priests in the diocese is shrinking. This year about ten priests will retire and we are going to ordain two. You can see the problem. This means that parishes are going to have to share priests. At this stage we have no plans to close any parish, but we cannot guarantee that there will always be a resident priest in every parish. I have already said how good it is that lay-people are realising their vocation as baptised and taking a much more active role in their parishes, and this must continue.

It may be necessary to look at the times of masses so that parishes can quickly help one another should a priest become ill. This is also a matter which must be taken up at deanery level. In this deanery the religious priests living in Oxford are often willing to help and I would thank them for this valuable service.

We must also continue our work for vocations. This means continuing with vigour the prayer which takes place in many parishes for vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life. It also means encouraging the younger members of your families, whether you are parents or grandparents, to consider such a vocation. One of the success stories of our diocese has been the number of permanent deacons which we have. I am afraid, however, that that is not true in Oxfordshire. The deacons whom we have are excellent, but we do need many more of them. I ask both parishioners and clergy to give careful thought to this matter.

Deanery Identity

I wrote in the last visitation report about deanery identity. I am not sure whether that has advanced very much. This is in the first place not a matter for the clergy but for the laity. I need to think beyond the boundaries of my own parish and see what I could do with others. I have already spoken about the need for cooperation in youth ministry. There are good examples already of such working together as with the preparation for marriage. Other areas might be that of administration, of RCIA, almost any other catechetical programme, social events, ecumenical service, etc. The only limitation really is that of imagination.

Conclusion

May I conclude, by repeating what I said at the beginning that this deanery has much to be proud of. The faith is alive. It is going to need to be, because of the developments which we are expecting. As new sisters and brothers arrive in our midst we are going to need to welcome them among us. I would also ask that this report should be one of the points of consideration as you plan your activities, It is impossible for such a report to be comprehensive, and I may have things wrong, but even that can be a useful spur to further thought about what we need to do.

Thank you again for all your kindness to me and let us prayer for each other as we continue our pilgrimage back to the Father and as part of the Kingdom yet to be fully realised.

(Rt. Rev.) William Kenney CP

Auxiliary Bishop of Birmingham