



DIOCESE OF SALFORD

Pastoral Letter of the Right Reverend John Arnold Bishop of Salford

To be read in all Churches on the weekend of 30th/31st January, the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I hope that you had a good celebration of Christmas however you spent it and I wish you well for 2016. As this new year unfolds, may the grace of God who came to save us, enable us together to face the tasks that lie before us.

I am writing this letter to you for two specific reasons. The first concerns my meetings to be held this week of all the priests of the Diocese to consider the next stage of our consultation process. The initial stage of the consultation went well and I was able to make a number of decisions in line with the wishes expressed by so many people. Now we must move to consider what needs to be done in rationalising the number of parishes so as to provide the best possible distribution of priests for sacramental and pastoral work. This, I understand, will be a difficult time for many. Despite what the media may say, there is no shortage of priests. There will certainly be fewer priests but the ratio of priest to people here remains one of the highest in the world. We must ask questions about how best we build missionary parishes where good liturgy provides for the sacramental life of the community and there is a practical and realistic response to the pastoral needs not only of the members of the community but for the wider communities in which we live.

The meetings with the priests in this coming week will be very important and I ask your prayers that we can determine a clear plan for taking things forward. When we know and agree on what needs to be done then we can be clear and focussed in determining just how we do it. The meetings this week will be followed by separate discussions in each of the eight deaneries to draw up a plan which will be open to comment and discussion before any final decisions are made. I am asking the priests to help me in planning these changes because they know the parishes and you, the people of this Diocese, much better than I do. They know the geography of the Diocese, the location of schools and hospitals, the transportation links. Your own experience and prayer will assist your priests in helping me.

That simple prayer "Stay with us, Lord, on our journey" still fits so well. We are most certainly on a journey and we need to be going in the right direction, assisted in our every step by the Lord. This prayer seeks the best decisions, not necessarily the more convenient, expected or familiar

ones. Let's pray that change will make us stronger and more effective in living and proclaiming the Gospel.

The other reason for writing to you is closely associated with our development of mission parishes. It concerns the work of Caritas which is, essentially, the Gospel at work in a very practical way. As a church we have a privilege and a pressing duty to confront the social ills that surround us: poverty, homelessness, addiction and the plight of migrants and refugees. Our Diocesan Caritas is already doing excellent work in many parishes but it needs to grow, so as to be more effective and have a greater impact.

The gap between the rich and the poor, both at home and abroad, grows wider. War and violence, and the denial of human rights has displaced millions of people world-wide and the number of migrants, refugees and people seeking sanctuary in Europe last year exceeded one million. They risk their lives because they are desperate. This is a humanitarian crisis not experienced in Europe since the end of the Second World War.

In our own Diocese of Salford, Caritas is already at work for refugees and asylum seekers. Caritas is also assisting with food banks, day centres, night-shelters and numerous specialised projects to help those in many kinds of need. Pope Francis asks us to reawaken our conscience, to see the face of Christ in the human faces of those in need. Works of charity are at the heart of our missionary and evangelising faith.

The Year of Mercy is a particularly important time for us to reflect on just how we can bring God's love and mercy to care for the poorest and those most in need. I have invited Caritas, Diocese of Salford, to coordinate our response to the refugee crisis and work in partnership with our parishes, schools and voluntary organisations. A special collection is being taken this weekend and I ask you to be as generous as possible. This money will be vital in furthering the work of Caritas Refugee Response. Pope Francis challenges us to be a "Church of the Poor for the Poor".

In conclusion, we are at a crossroads. How best are we to build strong missionary parishes to proclaim the Gospel – in word and in deed – in the society in which we live? I am confident that our discussions and our prayer will show us what we need to do and how we need to do it. Thank you for all that you are doing, in so many different ways, to be the ambassadors for Christ that St Paul declares us to be. Future generations will be grateful for our determination to succeed and prepare the way for them.

"Stay with us, Lord, on our journey"

May God bless you all.



✠ John Arnold
Bishop of Salford