



DIOCESE OF SALFORD

Pastoral Letter of the Right Reverend John Arnold Bishop of Salford

*To be read in all Churches on the weekend of 26th/27th November 2016,
the First Sunday of Advent.*

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As we open a New Year in the life of the Church, on this First Sunday of Advent, there are a number of matters that I wish to bring to your attention, briefly, in this short letter.

I am very pleased to say that real progress is being made in finalising the plan for the Diocese. The “proposal document” published in June of this year brought a wealth of responses and the experience and ideas contained in them has meant that it is taking longer than I had initially anticipated to reach conclusions. So I now intend to have the final document ready for publication on the weekend of 14th and 15th January. Given the responses received, some of the proposals have been adjusted or changed. Where these are now substantially different from what was in the proposal, there will need – for justice sake - to be a time of further consultation within just a few parishes so that priests and people may have an opportunity to consider the impact of these further proposed changes. I firmly believe that this re-structure will strengthen us all for our missionary purpose of bringing Christ to the world in which we live, both in the care we have for one another within our own communities and in the witness we show through our Works of Mercy in the wider community. I am aware that some people think the whole process has been too slow, while others believe it is rushed. I think we are making the right sort of progress considering the importance of the matters being considered. I am sure that we can embrace these changes and, strengthened by prayer and God’s Grace, build up the Church in this Diocese.

There was a clear consensus expressed in the previous Diocesan Consultation in 2015 that we should review the timing of reception of Sacraments and have a clear policy for our preparation for their celebration. I am pleased to say that there is a new policy, effective from this First Sunday of Advent, which draws on and develops the experience and pastoral practice of many parishes. There are guidelines for preparing families for the baptism of a child and a new program for preparation and celebration of Confirmation, intended for children in Year 8 of the High Schools, beginning in 2021. A close alliance between schools, parishes and families will combine so that our young people will grow in a sense of discipleship and develop a strength of

living faith in their lives. A further policy concerning the preparation for the Sacrament of Reconciliation and First Holy Communion is also in preparation.

The people of our Diocese have also expressed a clear desire for the introduction of the Permanent Diaconate. Beginning in January, we will define the sort of diaconal ministry that we need in our Diocese and candidates will be invited to speak either with their parish priest or a nominated priest about an interest in ordination or to simply know more about what it entails.

While I thoroughly appreciate the hesitancy to change and the concerns as to what change may mean for all of us, I cannot ignore the real sense of expectation that it will bring a renewed sense of purpose and energy, particularly in engaging our young people. Two matters have frequently been mentioned in these past months. Many people have expressed an anxiety that the elderly will find it difficult to get to churches if distances increase. I hope that our sense of community will be reinforced by our ensuring that no-one is left isolated or without transportation and that no-one in our parishes will be left feeling lonely or alone. We need to be sure that individuals are not merely administered the Eucharist in their homes and receive parish newsletters, but that they are included in social gatherings and brought to Mass. The other concern is that we must not judge the health of our Diocese by numbers. At times, in his ministry, Jesus drew enormous crowds, in their thousands. But he also persisted and remained consistent in his teaching even when crowds drifted away either because they did not understand or approve of what he said or they were distracted by other matters. In the busy secularisation of our world, many have drifted away but, if we are persistent and constant in our living of the Gospel, in our kindness and care for those around us in need, then people will be drawn back with a new sense of searching and commitment. Pope Francis asks us if we have the courage to walk with others, even while they are walking away from the Church? I believe we have.

We begin this Season of Advent and prepare for Christmas. How good it is to celebrate this Feast with family and friends but let us all take care to remember why we celebrate Christmas and the purpose of all the arrangements and preparations. Christmas becomes a shallow and empty occasion if we forget that “God so loved the world that in the fullness of time he sent His Son to be our redeemer”. Our presents, decorations and parties must never allow us to lose sight of God’s love and His insistence in being a part of our world, to redeem and save us.

I wish you every blessing for this Season of Advent and let us continue to ask the Lord to stay with us on our journey.

With my prayers and good wishes

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "John" with a small cross symbol above the letter 'j'.

✠ John Arnold
Bishop of Salford