



DIOCESE OF SALFORD

Pastoral Letter of the Right Reverend John Arnold Bishop of Salford

*To be read in all Churches on the weekend of 11th/12th June 2016,
the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time.*

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I have written to you several times about our consultation and the need for change and, although our administrative steps and decisions are important, we must constantly remind ourselves not only of the vision that we have in mind but also the means and resources that we have to nurture that vision and make it a reality.

I believe that as we adopt changes in our parish structures we will in fact connect with a renewed sense of life and purpose in our communities and release much energy for good. There has been a lot of talk about “missionary parishes”. What are they? What does “mission” mean? All parishes are in fact, by their very nature, called to be missionary, and our parishes already are missionary, with much good ministry and activity but we have to keep asking how we might strengthen that mission in a changing world. I see two dimensions to this.

Jesus’ final instruction to his disciples before he returned to the Father was that they should “go out to the whole world and proclaim the good news”. It was no doubt a daunting challenge to simple men who had never been far from their homes. That challenge is also addressed to us and we must discover how we may “go out to the whole world”. We have to make a statement about what we believe. As Christians, we firmly believe in the dignity of human life, at all its stages. Therefore, we must care for those whose lives are threatened by poverty, loneliness, drug and alcohol addiction, human trafficking and diverse social ills. These exist in various forms in all the urban and suburban areas where we live and work. We must discover where we can put into practice the Commandment to “love our neighbour”. There are already numerous initiatives in our Diocese, some shared with other Faith groups, which do great work and want to expand to do more. What might each parish community identify as a local need, for its own mission? There are care homes where friendly visits brighten the day. There are children in our schools requiring individual coaching and tuition. There are the lonely and housebound to be befriended. And there are plenty of young people who would benefit from group activities and places to socialise with friends in a safe environment. It’s quite a challenge! Together we can grow as missionary parishes but it will need not just the priests but each and every one of us working together. I promise, as your Bishop, that the Diocese will provide the formation and assistance that will help each of us in our task.

I believe that the commitment of our Catholic community can make a strong statement and achieve a great deal of good. What a wonderful sign that would be to our secular society where government policies and legislation do not succeed in creating a just and good society. We have a great challenge from Pope Francis who asks us if we “have the courage to go out there and to walk with others, even while they are still walking away from the Church?” People may not be walking away in anger but simply because they feel lost and uncertain. Some will

have simply drifted away and may be unsure of how to find their way back or of what welcome they will receive. Witnessing to our Faith may give them comfort and direction in their lives.

My second thought is this: If we really are to be “missionary” then we have to be concerned with the inner life and energy of our parish communities. If we are to achieve great things “out there” then I think we have first to strengthen ourselves within. And the secret to that strength is our prayer. There is a great deal of evidence that parishes which encourage Eucharistic Adoration find new life and purpose. The presence of Christ Himself, in the form of the Eucharist, is central to all we believe. Christ is with us. Pope Francis insists that Jesus gazes on us and loves us. We are invited to be in His presence and soak up that love and that energy. I would ask that all that happens in our parishes should be based first on prayer. Where there is not already a specific time for Eucharistic Adoration, is it possible to start with an hour of Adoration each week, or even each day? Where it is already a part of each day, can we increase the hours? Simple adaptations to the church sanctuary can make the setting for adoration safe and secure, and many churches have small chapels which can be separate from the body of the church and safely left open all day. Encouraging our people to join rotas or just to call in for a few minutes to sit and pray before the Eucharist creates a new priority of prayer.

What other initiatives for prayer might there be in our parishes? Beyond the authentic and vibrant celebration of Mass and the Sacraments, we can learn so much from one another and I suspect that most of us – including me – would say that we have much to do to improve our prayer life – repairing, renewing, re-inventing the way we speak to God or simply place ourselves in his presence and allow Him to speak to us. Are there groups that reflect on the Sunday readings, or scripture texts? Are there groups that simply come together to pray for their needs and the needs of others? Is there someone ready to gather a few friends together to pray? That is all it takes to get started and there are any number of books about how we might pray, to help us on our way.

So, there is the foundation of our missionary parish. We start with prayer and that gives us a clearer insight into what we need to do and provides us with the strength to do it. A community that prays together, particularly in the presence of the Eucharist, will discover its own priorities and find the means to respond. Let’s thank God for all that is already achieved, for the life within our parishes and for all the good work already done as we proclaim our Faith in good works in our wider communities. I believe that God is calling us to achieve great things in His Name and wherever I go in our Diocese of Salford I feel the willingness and determination to achieve more.

Very soon, I shall be asking for your thoughts and comments on my proposal for future structures of our parishes. I will consider all that you have to say and, after the summer, I will make a decision for a plan for our Diocese. Please pray for me, for our priests and for all our parishes in this time. Please reflect and talk about prayer and mission in your own community. Whatever we do to help our Church to build and grow must be founded first on prayer which will ensure the presence and the strength of the Holy Spirit to achieve all that is being asked of us. With my sincere thanks for all the good that is already being achieved. Let us pray for one another and be sure to ask that the Lord stay with us on our journey.

Yours devotedly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "+ John". The plus sign is positioned to the left of the name.

✠ John Arnold
Bishop of Salford