

Bishop Alan Hopes: ‘The next big challenge is going to be defending our Catholic schools’



In this week’s Catholic Herald Bishop Alan Hopes of East Anglia discusses his remarkable journey from the Church of England to the upper echelons of the Catholic Church. He also talks about the biggest challenges facing Catholics in the next five years and what it was like to lead British pro-lifers in the biggest showdown with abortion supporters for years. Here is a sneak peak at the interview:

In your installation homily you said “this particular moment in history” is “a challenging one and often a rather bewildering one for us Christians”. What do you think will be the biggest challenges for the Catholic Church this country over the next five years?

The growth of post-Christian values. Benedict put it very strongly when he talked about relativism and secularism. We know that a lot of that is becoming quite aggressive. We need to respond positively. We need to know our faith. We need to know what we believe so we can respond. Many Catholics say: “We don’t know our faith well enough to be able to respond.” We need to do something about that.

Things we've always cherished and the ways in which Christians have always made a real difference to in the life of the world, are all going to be challenged. We've seen a complete change to society's understanding of marriage over the past few years. We have already seen what has happened with our adoption societies. All these things have happened so quickly. We know that our faith schools are being challenged to conform with so many values that reflect secular and Humanist doctrine. That's where the next big challenge will be, I think. We have to hold on to our schools, because that's the way we educate the next generation in the faith.

If one of the schools in this diocese becomes 80 per cent non-Catholic, I would be very unhappy to put too much of our funds into it

and keep it going. We need to think about how we can educate that 20 per cent, apart from spending all that money keeping the school going.

I suppose in the end we have to look back and see how the Apostles got on in the early Church, their example and the way they lived. We just need to live our values out very close to Jesus Christ, rather than conforming to what we know to be wrong.

In 2012 you took part in a pro-life rally in Bedford Square in central London. What was that experience like?

It was an extraordinary moment. I was aware that beforehand there was a movement to encourage people to come and oppose us. You could see that on various websites. So I knew that the opposition would be quite great. What I was overjoyed to see was the huge crowd that came to support the anti-abortion protest, and doing so quietly and prayerfully. The experience of being in the middle of all that opposition – the shouting, the baying, the screaming and so on – was a really profoundly distressing experience for me. I just had to close my eyes and keep on praying.

I felt that we were all taking on the anger of the protesters, and in some ways there was a very tangible sense of evil present in the opposition to our witness. It was a pity that their protest was not as dignified and peaceful as ours. But it wasn't. They really were agitated. When I came away I had a headache for the whole weekend. I really felt that we had done battle with strong forces that night.

Do you think it changed anything?

Well, that particular clinic closed down within four or five months of that prayer time – though probably only to open up somewhere else.

We know that the power of prayer is great. If we don't pray, nothing will happen. If we do pray, small things will begin to happen. We're winning with the poor women who are pressurised into having abortions for one reason or another. It seems to me that there are more people who are turned away from having an abortion by our prayer than ever before. Unfortunately, we know that there are still about 200,000 abortions every year.

Can you imagine a time when there will be a full pro-life victory?

I would like to see that. We were talking just now about what are going to be the problems for the next five years. I think the agenda that is up and running at the moment is going to take in so many things. For example, at the moment the big battle to pray against is assisted suicide, euthanasia. As with all things, society is so anti any "religious interference". It is extraordinary.

Luke Coppen - Catholic Herald