

## **We are living through a time of great transition for the Church**



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I greet each one of you on this New Years' Day with peace and joy. I pray that 2012 will be full of blessings for you and your families. I have been so blessed myself to meet so many of you as I travel around visiting our schools and parishes. Here I find myself in deep admiration of the rich faith of our 21,000 and so men, women and children who regularly celebrate Sunday Mass in the Diocese.

We are living through a time of great transition for the Church in which Christianity changes from a religion adhered to by the majority out of social convention to once again being a way of discipleship deliberately chosen by some, but not all; chosen by the faithful out of conviction.

At the beginning of this New Year I would ask you to join me in grappling with the two-fold task of planning how our diocese's parishes and schools adapt to these new circumstances and secondly to make ourselves ready to launch into the challenge of the New Evangelisation.

Firstly; Our people have been 'on the move' for some time – parishes in wonderful neighbourhoods that 25 years ago were teeming with large, young families are now quiet and empty, while parishes in outlying areas seem to be thriving. Older parishes with extensive church buildings struggle to keep them in repair as their numbers shrink, while other parishes cannot find room for meetings, education and worship. As the number of priests reduces, so we have to be creative and careful in their appointments, so that all can benefit from their essential ministry.

Besides, the state of the economy and the demands on our resources make it imperative that we take stewardship of our finances, properties and buildings very seriously – as they serve the most important thing – the mission of the Church.

At times, we are tempted to say, 'Forget about all this planning for the future. Let's just keep things as they are and let nature take its course.' That is certainly very tempting because it's comfortable and undemanding, but Our Lord does not call us to be comfortable and concerned about our own selfinterest, He calls us to live and love as He lives and loves - to the point of sacrifice!

In 2012 we will need to address some demanding questions that will grow larger the longer we put them off: Is it right or sustainable to expect our Mass-going population of 21,000 to support our schools and colleges in which often the majority of pupils, and sometimes teachers, are not practising Catholics? Is it time for us to admit that we can no longer maintain schools that are Catholic in name only?

Faced with fewer priests and smaller congregations where should our parishes and schools of the future be located? What will they look like? Where should we consolidate and merge others?

We will not be able to find answers to these questions by human effort and planning alone, but only through a faith that seeks the will of the Father, through the grace of Christ and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

This leads us to the second task; the Year of Faith. Pope Benedict has called us to celebrate from October 2012 a Year of Faith to help us all to appreciate the precious gift of faith, to deepen our relationship with God and strengthen our commitment to sharing that faith with others.

All of us know someone - a friend, family member, classmate, work colleague or neighbour - who used to be a practising Catholic, but isn't any more. For some who initially heard the incredible proclamation of Christ alive in the Church, the message has become stale. The promises of the Gospel seem empty or unconnected to their busy lives today. So, what is our response? Surely our love and concern for them means that they should be the primary object of our missionary or evangelising efforts, our energy and resources. The Church only exists to evangelise – that means buildings, churches, parishes, schools and colleges are only valuable insofar as they help the Church in that mission of salvation!! How can we as parishes, schools and colleges – as the Diocese - support this sorely needed New Evangelisation?

Brothers and sisters, I would really appreciate your written reflections - and positive suggestions – on the above tasks which face us in the 2012 and beyond.

May the prayers of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, by her inspiration and counsel, clear our hearts and minds of anxiety, distraction and obstacles so that we might respond to the Lord's call.

With a prayer and a blessing,

*+Michael Campbell OSA*

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