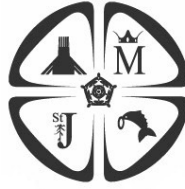


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PASTORAL LETTER

To be read in all churches and chapels of the Archdiocese of Liverpool on the First Sunday of Advent, 29 November 2009.

My dear People,

Let this Advent Letter begin with an Advent prayer we make at every Mass: 'As we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ.' At the very time I felt that these words should shape what I share with you today five things happened:

Five young men died in one incident in Afghanistan: how can we wait in joyful hope?
One of our priests dies ages 46: how can we wait in joyful hope?
Unemployment among young people touched a million: how can we wait in joyful hope?
Someone visited me to tell me of growing redundancies, negative equity among house-owners, re-possession of homes, collapse in income received through investments. How can we wait in joyful hope?
And one of the greatest friends any Archbishop could ever have, Norman Jones my driver and so much more died suddenly of a heart attack. How can we wait in joyful hope?

My only answer is in the word hope: hope is not the same as optimism; optimism is reflected in a song popular after the great depression in the 1930s. 'Happy Days are here again.' Its feel is: soon everything will return to normal; it will be like it used to be. That cannot be true for the families and friends of those young soldiers, or for those who have a burden of debt in their mortgage, or been declared redundant, or seen their income fall drastically; and certainly not for me without Norman.

Hope says, because Jesus is risen, the same as he always was yet different too, there can be a new creation, new ways of living, new wonders. For very many Christmas this year cannot be the same as last Christmas. But the word of God today proclaims what is possible and cannot fail: 'May the Lord be generous in increasing your love and make you love one another and the whole human race as much as we love you.'

This same spirit is the reality of our journey called Leaving Safe Harbours. It grew out of the inevitability of change: we could not just go on as before; there has been for many bereavement as their parish has merged or a church filled with precious memories has been closed. There has been death. But because we are an Easter People, that is a people not called to be optimists, but a people who day by day are invited into our Lord's risen, new, unexpected life, the signs to give us joy are precisely not where we have managed to hang on to the way things were, but where new ways have been carefully undertaken and begun to bear fruit.

Let me give you some examples:

Pastoral Areas are learning to work together in new and exciting ways: in sacramental celebrations and their preparations: in retreat days and evenings, in the on-going formation of Eucharistic ministers, readers, and catechists. Isolation is breaking down. Priests are working together and parishes are collaborating. There are signs of shared concern for justice and peace, and the confidence that grows when together we reach out to those who are in need through joint SVP groups. In some places where activities were failing due to lack of numbers, a spirit of collaboration has brought new life and new fruits. And in this same spirit the Pastoral Area Working Groups have enabled people to take their rightful place as together we shape the future. And since there is an ever louder call from the Holy Spirit to serve precisely by the witness of our unity, it will be good to see ever more sharing with our sisters and brothers in the other Churches and Christian communities. To seek to do together whatever we can. This is much more than being efficient; it is an imperative from our Lord to heal a broken world.

All of this has called for a great sense of generosity from many people and priests. I thank all those who have undertaken extra tasks and responsibilities and those preparing development plans so that each Pastoral Area can discern and lay the foundations for the future. It is so clear that the circumstances differ from one area to another: Warrington is not Wigan; Liverpool is not the Isle of Man; Chorley is not Kirkby. It is no surprise that things are developing in different ways and at different speeds. So, for example, in Liverpool the declining population presents us with some extremely difficult issues. Where an Area is in the early stages, other Areas would say: do not be afraid; new ways are possible; there is hope.

When we set out on our journey it was not possible to provide all the help and support that was needed. Now, through our re-invigorated Pastoral Formation Department and through our Vicariate for Evangelisation, we can provide what is needed. Our new Diocesan web site, still in its infancy, will give you a chance to see what is on offer and what resources you can now call upon. If your area has not yet started please get in touch with Father Philip Inch; he will co-ordinate the help needed.

At the end of January I will be going with all the other Bishops of England and Wales for the five-yearly visit we make to give an account to the Holy Father and his advisors of our stewardship. In preparation for that I have had to send of a report. I end this letter with the final page of that report:

'The over-arching issue is demographic. The decline in the population of the diocese continues inexorably. Warning was given on the day I wrote this that nationally unemployment could rise to over 3 million in the next two years. Almost certainly we will see more people leaving this area, where for decades employment has been precarious, and with

that decline the general poverty but especially cultural, intellectual, poverty will increase. It is also certain there will be fewer priests and many fewer religious than in the past.

‘The most pressing challenge is to be a church that proclaims hope. The virtue most needed, but already evident in the priests and people is endurance, patient endurance, and fidelity. Among priests and people I discern authentic religious vitality and a pattern of formation emerging that enables us to live faithfully before the Lord who died to gather into one the scattered children of God. The need, addressed especially in the pastoral plan which we call “Leaving Safe Harbours,” is to “heal fragmentation.”’

I am sure all of this is true to the spirit of Our Lord’s words today as our agenda for Advent: yes, indeed at this time: ‘nations are in agony bewildered by the clamour of the ocean and its waves; men dying in fear as they await what menaces the world.’ But we choose to take our stand before the Son of Man: so stand erect, head held high, because in him we find life and hope. In this season whatever others may do we shall watch ourselves, lest our hearts become coarsened with debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of life: we shall stay awake, praying all times and the spirit of our prayer shall fearlessly be: ‘As we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ’.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patrick Kelly". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P' and a cross at the end of the line.

Archbishop of Liverpool