

PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP

(Please read and/or make available for the weekend of 10/11 September 2022)

Dear Brothers & Sisters,

Learning to rely on the mercy and love of God is vital for our journey in faith. We may feel rather lost amidst the challenges of the world – especially at the moment. Like those in the parables searching for the sheep and the coin, God searches for us.

The Prodigal Son may remind us of some people we know, young and old, running away from Jesus and the Church, and immersing themselves in all sorts of trouble. Today is Education Sunday, and the theme comes from St Paul: “May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ enlighten the eyes of our mind, so that we can see what hope his call holds for us” (Ephesians 1.17-18) . Our teachers and school support staff work with such immense dedication, and Jesus Christ is at the centre of our Catholic schools. Today I pray for everyone who works in our schools, and every family served by our schools, and I ask you to do the same. These are not easy times for young people and families, and our schools are very often a vital place of sanctuary and hope, as well as offering outstanding opportunities.

As we navigate challenges in family life, in our schools, and in the world, there is a very great deal which needs our prayer. In these weeks the relics of St Bernadette of Lourdes are visiting many places in England, Wales and Scotland, including coming to our Diocese – to Brentwood Cathedral and Wanstead – in October. The story of St Bernadette is another radical example of hope in troubled times; Our Lady appearing with grace, love and hope to a teenager who was ill, and living in poverty. This is our faith – a faith of great consolation in troubled times. Spend time with the relics if you can – to be close to St Bernadette and Our Lady of Lourdes is to be close to Saints who understand the deepest struggles and joys of our lives.

You will remember the Diocesan Vision process, and you will be aware of the International Synod – a journey for the whole Church, guided by Pope Francis, rooted in the way that we listen to each other, with hearts attentive to the Lord. Many parishes had conversations at the start of 2022, shaping our Diocesan reflection for the Synod. It contained such positive insights as this – a quote from a parishioner: ‘The Church offers the world a strong moral and ethical compass and is leading the messaging on climate change and support for refugees, the poor and marginalised’. There was great gratitude for our clergy and their efforts towards a welcoming and inclusive Church.

Along with the positives, there was also clear recognition that as a Diocese we face significant challenges. The synod conversations reflected ‘Overwhelming concern for the pressures placed upon clergy and their wellbeing’. We continue to recover from the pandemic, and in some parishes as many as a third of the congregation has dropped away. How do we bring people home? As you look around, today, in your parish, do you notice a particular person who is missing? Could you be the one to invite them home, to invite them back to the welcoming arms of a loving God?

Within the Synod and Diocesan Vision I have a particular responsibility. The guiding document for the Synod says, “In every diocesan synodal process the Bishop is charged with discerning, with a shepherd’s heart, the next steps on the pathway of communion, participation and mission”. Today, at the start of a new academic year, we move towards the next steps, even as we tread carefully knowing how fragile things are for so many people.

In the weeks and months ahead you will hear more about how the Diocesan Vision is taking shape, as Priests and Stewards of the Gospel meet together again and renew the conversations and decisions about Parish Partnerships.

Those conversations and decisions will be taking place in the midst of challenging times, for the country and for the world. It is worth remembering that previous generations of Catholics in Essex and East London also faced very great challenges; communities around the London docks were bombed in the Second World War; new town communities in Essex have often faced struggles with the cost of living, and rebuilding family life after being moved miles from where they grew up.

Nonetheless, those who have gone before us gifted us parishes and schools; in our turn, we are called to continue to develop and strengthen our Diocese, to be a beacon of hope as we spread the Good News of Jesus Christ in Essex and East London. Please keep the Diocesan Vision process, and the Synod, very firmly in prayer.

Through it all, lean on today’s readings and Gospel; remember and be consoled by the deep truth that God never fails us even in the most difficult of times – and that he will search for us, wherever we find ourselves. In the powerful words of St Paul: ‘May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ enlighten the eyes of our mind, so that we can see what hope his call holds for us’.

With all good wishes and prayers,

In Christ and Mary,

+Alan Williams, sm
Bishop of Brentwood