

Towards greater clustering: "MAY THEY ALL BE ONE"

These are notes from the meeting of the Diocesan Council of Laity on 10th November 2007 which focused on how we might further develop clustering among our parishes. Bishop Michael and the Council of Laity invite Parish Pastoral Councils and other parish groups to discuss these thoughts and ideas, and to implement some of the examples of good practice.

'The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no-one claimed for their own use anything they had, as everything they owned was held in common' (*Acts of the Apostles, 4.32*)

Bishop Michael introduced the topic by highlighting the fundamentally Catholic nature of the topic. Almost inevitably, some priests and people have come to identify 'clustering' with 'preparation for merger', and this may account for some of the reluctance to move forward with clustering at local level. But clustering is something which should be happening even if we had plenty of priests to continue indefinitely the present parish structures.

Some parishes have already formally merged over the last four years (Burnham Market & Walsingham; Holy Apostles & the Cathedral; Our Lady of Lourdes with first St Oswald's and now with All Souls, Peterborough; Bretton & St Oswald's). Further mergers are planned for summer 2008: Cromer & Sheringham, Sawston & OLEM). There are bound to be more in the future, and the most likely are openly listed in the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* (pp. 63-64).

But there is far more to 'clustering' than 'preparing for merging'. Parishes should be drawing more closely together simply because this is the truly Catholic way to be the church. There may be a better word than 'clustering' (although no-one has yet produced a convincing one), but the principle lies at the heart of the meaning of being 'catholic'.

The fundamental unit of the Catholic Church is the diocese, not the parish. We are a community of Catholics from across East Anglia gathered around the Bishop and our mother church, the Cathedral. Ideally we should gather together each Sunday at a central location, with all 20,000 of us at a Mass celebrated by the Bishop, united with all the priests and assisted by all the deacons. This is obviously not very practical! Therefore we have parishes as 'portions' of the diocese entrusted by the Bishop to the pastoral care of priests. A parish is not an independent unit, loosely linked in a diocesan federation; it is an integral part of the diocese. Just as a diocese and its bishop have to be truly open to and united in faith and love with other dioceses and their bishops, so any truly Catholic parish and its priest must be open to and united in faith and love with all other parishes and priests in the diocese. Inevitably, dioceses work particularly closely with neighbouring ones (East Anglia is well supported by Brentwood, Westminster and Northampton on a number of issues); the same should be true of parishes. It is a positive gift to the life of the Church, rather than an extra burden and responsibility. Unity and catholicity are essential marks of the Church at every level.

Bishop Michael offered three illustrations, all of which were used at Midday Prayer during the meeting. Firstly, at Mass, we reach out to our immediate neighbours at the Sign of Peace, as a sign of our communion with one another; perhaps neighbouring parishes should see themselves seeking to do the same to one another. Secondly, in the early Church, the Acts of the Apostles (2.42-47; 4.32-35) presents a community in which individuals lived together and owned everything in common, seeking to share their life together; that should also be an inspiration to parish communities. Thirdly, Jesus' great prayer for the unity of his disciples (John 17.20-23) is often and rightly used as a call to work for unity among divided Christians, but it also applies to strengthening the unity within the Catholic Church, including within each parish and among parishes; such unity is not only for our own sake, but so that the world might believe in the Lord who loves us. The more we are united in love, the more visibly we proclaim God's saving love to our world.

Bishop Michael reinforced this teaching with three paragraphs from the latest report of the Methodist/Roman Catholic International Commission on the nature and mission of the Church. The document stresses the 'connectional nature' of the Church. Just as there can be no such thing as private or individualist Christianity, so there can be no truly Christian community which tries to exist in isolation from others: 'To be Christian is to be joined together in Christ... To be truly ecclesial, each community must be open to communion with other such communities...' The document also affirms an idea which lies at the heart of 'clustering': 'Communion is much more than co-existence; it is shared existence'. Parishes should not simply exist side-by-side, believing the same and doing the same; they should seek to share each other's lives, to share resources, to grow in unity and love with one another. This is really what clustering is about. Whatever we call it, 'clustering' is an integral part of the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan*, and our agreed way of moving 'Forward and Outward Together in Christ'.

Finally, Bishop Michael reminded us of what is written in the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan*:

'No parish family, therefore, is an isolated, self-sufficient unit. Our very catholicity demands an openness to one another, and a sharing of life and mission. There is no room for narrow parochialism in the Catholic Church. Every parish is an integral part, a living cell, of the diocesan family, and every parish must be open in faith and love to all the other parishes, especially neighbouring ones.' (p. 26)

The Diocese now has an approved official Policy on Clustering and Merging Parishes. Stage One is about clustering with no immediate view to merging, and makes recommendations which should currently be being implemented across the diocese. Stage Two is about clustering with a view to merging by a set date. The Council of Laity meeting focused on Stage One: clustering as something affecting all parishes, regardless of any possible future merger. How can we better draw our parishes together into a truly Catholic unity? The Deanery plays an important part in this, as well as smaller groupings of parishes. Some people do not yet know which parishes they are meant to be clustered with!

It is recognised that the distances between some clustered parishes is a major obstacle. In theory, urban parishes should be easier to cluster effectively than rural ones. Much depends on the attitude of the parish priest.

After the group discussions, various comments were made and suggestions of good practice offered:

1. There is a need to present positively the theological reasons for clustering (hence the attention given to this on the first page). Priests and people still need to be convinced that clustering merits serious attention and energy amidst the many other demands.
2. Re-examine Sunday Mass times so as to avoid unnecessary duplication of times and enable one priest to cover a neighbouring parish when needed.
3. Each parish to publicise the Mass times of neighbouring parishes (e.g. in the church porch, magazine, website)
4. Priests to 'swap altars and pulpits' occasionally
5. Joint sacramental programmes (Baptism, RCIA, First Reconciliation & Communion, Confirmation, Marriage)
6. Joint Reconciliation Services, special celebration Masses, retreat days for Ministers of Communion and Readers
7. Joint Confirmation Celebrations
8. Inter-parish social events; get-to-know-you meals
9. Joint retreats, days of recollection, pilgrimages, outings, adult religious education programmes
10. Sharing parish resources and personnel (from photocopiers to organists)
11. Employing personnel on a shared basis (secretary, admin, estate manager, youth worker, etc)
12. Drawing together local groups such as CWL, UCM, SVP, J&P, etc for joint events
13. Joint youth activities
14. Invite representatives from neighbouring Parish Pastoral Councils to all or occasional PPC meetings.
15. Better publicise and invite to each other's parish events
16. Links on own parish website to neighbouring parish websites
17. Encourage deanery level meetings of chairs of PPCs/Council of Laity representatives
18. 'Minister for Clustering' appointed in each parish? This person would be responsible for ensuring exchange of parish information with neighbouring parishes, encouraging people to attend each other's events, etc.
19. Deanery Days, with stalls from each parish, etc
20. Our schools have a key role to play in clustering, as many draw together children, families and clergy from more than one parish.

Part of the purpose of clustering is to help to build sustainable communities for the future, so that each distinct community is strengthened and enhanced while at the same time growing in a truly catholic unity with neighbouring communities. This should help such communities to be able to continue even when they no longer have a resident priest, and perhaps even no longer a weekly Sunday Mass. Even within each parish, there needs to be a greater sense of 'connectivity' or 'communion': the internal unity of parishes needs more work, especially when there are a number of places of worship with distinct communities.

We need to learn from parishes where clustering and merging has already taken place, both from the good practice and from some of the problems. If handled badly, we can lose people altogether. Clustering requires sensitivity.

It was stressed that 'clustering' is an aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit who is the bond of unity in the Church. The Spirit is always the One who draws together and unites – sometimes this will be by shaking up our established attitudes and structures. To be truly Catholic always involves growing in unity with one another – as individuals and communities.

Jesus prayed: 'May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one. With me in them and you in me, may they be so completely one that the world will realise it was you who sent me and that I have loved them as much as you loved me. (John 17.20-23)