

# "O GOD, YOU ARE MY GOD, FOR YOU I LONG" (Psalm 62)

These are notes from the meeting of the Diocesan Council of Laity on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2008 which focused on developing parish spirituality and prayer. Bishop Michael and the Council of Laity invite Parish Pastoral Councils and other parish groups to discuss these thoughts, and to implement some of the examples of good practice.

"The Lord answered: "Martha, Martha," he said, "you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one.

It is Mary who has chosen the better part; it is not to be taken from her."

(Luke 10: 42-43)

Bishop Michael introduced the topic by highlighting the heart of our Christian life: the call to an ever-deeper personal (but never private) relationship with Jesus Christ within the family of the Church, sharing the eternal exchange of love within the Holy Trinity. God is our loving Father, who sees us as his own daughters and sons; Jesus calls us his friends; the Holy Spirit comes to dwell deep within us. Sometimes we can be so caught up in concern for structural and practical matters in our parishes that we become too much like Martha in the Gospel story of the two sisters (Luke 10.38-43). We need Marthas in the church, people ready to give their time, talents, energy and loving enthusiasm to parish life, worship and witness, but Jesus reminds us that it was Mary who had chosen 'the better part' when she sat at the Lord's feet and listened to him. It is usually not a matter of choosing between the two sisters, but rather ensuring there is enough of each of them in our Christian lives. Is there enough of Mary in our personal lives, and in our parish lives? Each of us should be a prayerful person, as a member of a prayerful family and a prayerful parish. No parish can move forward unless its life and work is rooted in prayer: not simply saying more prayers, but a graced openness to God's transforming love so that we enter more deeply into the mystery of God's life. This God of love sees us as his beloved bride – his wife!

Besides our personal prayer, the Church's liturgy is central to our life of prayer together. It is an encounter with the living God in the midst of his Church. It should be a deeply personal encounter, and Catholic liturgy should touch the heart of each person present. There is a long and rich tradition in the Catholic Church of reaching the invisible inner person through the visible and tangible: through art and music; sight and sound; touch, smell and taste. Although we must never reduce the experience of God to our emotions, neither should we ignore people's desire to 'feel' something of the peace, warmth and joy of God's presence in the liturgy, and we can each play our part in this. The disciples came away from their meeting with the Risen Jesus at Emmaus saying 'Did not our hearts burn within us?' Our liturgy must address the spiritual hunger and thirst of God's people. We come together to lift up our hearts to the Father, to be nourished by the Risen Lord, and to drink of the Living Water that is the Holy Spirit. Our parish communities and our liturgy should be the fountain, the living spring, the well from which people can quench their spiritual thirst with the joy of salvation.

So: how can we deepen and strengthen our parishes' prayerful openness to God? How can we lead people deeper into God, deeper into holiness?

**Here are some of the thoughts and examples of good practice which emerged from the discussion at the Council of Laity; some are already included in the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* (pp. 37-38). They are in no particular order:**

1. More opportunities are needed for prayer together, including the development of a wider range of prayer groups but also different forms of prayer services in our churches. Examples cited included monthly Taizé-style prayer, Scripture reflection groups, neighbourhood groups for prayer, Rosary Group, Julian Meetings.
2. Parishes should encourage the praying of the Church's Morning and Evening Prayer. Several parishes already have Morning Prayer before Mass. Others use an extended form of Morning Prayer (adding for example the readings for the Mass of the day) when no priest is available for weekday Mass.
3. Further encouragement of Eucharistic Adoration, for at least one hour in each parish church each week, but ideally for longer if a rota can be arranged. This requires more teaching on adoration at parish level.
4. Once Eucharistic Adoration becomes more established, celebrations of Benediction might regain popularity.
5. New forms of the Stations of the Cross and other traditional services are encouraged. This can often be done ecumenically, especially using the revised Scriptural version of the Way of the Cross introduced by Pope John Paul.
6. Mass with the Anointing of the Sick, followed by refreshments and a chance for the sick/housebound to spend time with parishioners.
7. Ongoing care for the spiritual needs of older people (see Marianne MacQueen's book and DVD).
8. Weekday Mass later in the day for older people (perhaps followed by a simple lunch).
9. Prayer cards and parish prayer intentions for distribution to the housebound so that they can pray for particular parish needs (e.g. First Communion children, the sick, recently deceased, etc).
10. Parish retreats, days of recollection, pilgrimages.

11. A parish pilgrimage to one's own parish church, ending with Mass and a social together, was suggested.
12. Special intentions book at the back of the church for people to add their prayers and petitions.
13. Ideally there should be 'something every day' in our churches, while recognising that daily or even weekly Mass may become increasingly difficult to provide (e.g. time of prayer, reflection, Morning or Evening Prayer of the Church, occasional Mass, Eucharistic Adoration). People from other churches could be invited to some of these.
14. Our churches should be kept open for as long as possible each day, to provide an 'oasis of prayer' for the wider community. Rotas of 'watchers' can be organised, perhaps combined sometimes with Eucharistic Adoration.
15. There should be 'something for everyone'. How can we provide forms of prayer and worship which might attract those who rarely otherwise come to church? Can we learn from other Christian traditions about this? (e.g. Harvest Festivals, special blessing services, etc).
16. We can develop our prayer life locally in an ecumenical way. For example, in villages where there is only the medieval Anglican church, could not Catholics join in the non-Eucharistic services there (e.g. Evensong)? This would be a way of helping to ensure a visible Christian presence in our villages, while remaining fully faithful to our Catholic identity when it comes to taking part in the Mass/Eucharist.
17. Special recognition can be given at the end of Mass when appropriate to parishioners achieving key goals (e.g. graduation, anniversaries, birth child).
18. Many forms of prayer can be led by lay people with suitable preparation and formation. Priests, deacons and parishioners need to be ready to welcome such lay leadership. This is particularly important as we prepare for a future with fewer priests, and Catholic communities increasingly served by lay people for their day-to-day needs.
19. It might be good to bring together in each parish the various prayer leaders and people with experience of different forms of prayer.
20. Better communication is often needed on what forms of prayer services and groups are available in neighbouring parishes (and ecumenically).
21. The parish priest is encouraged to 'pop in' to the various parish prayer groups from time to time, not to 'check up' on what is going on, but to show his prayerful support and encouragement.
22. How can we engage young people in prayer? This should begin with parents praying with their children from birth. Parenting courses should include guidance on how to pray with children. Prayer should always be part of our sacramental preparation programmes with children (First Confession and First Communion, Confirmation). Our Catholic schools have a vital role to play in teaching children and young people to pray. Our parish liturgies should be celebrated in a way which helps and encourages them. But it is above all parents who are responsible for drawing their children into a prayerful relationship with God. How can we better support them in this?
23. Why not try a 'Spiritual Reading Group', with a group reading and discussing the same spiritual book over a number of weeks.
24. The traditional link between fasting and prayer needs to be rediscovered.
25. The internet can be a good way to spend time in prayer each day. There are good prayer sites available. See the 'Prayer' page on our diocesan website ([www.catholiceastanglia.org](http://www.catholiceastanglia.org)).
26. Silence is central to prayer. There are far too many words in our liturgies, and not enough opportunities for sitting in silence at the feet of the Lord. More should be used of the opportunities at Mass for times of silence: for example, at the Penitential Rite; after one or more of the Scripture readings; after the homily; after Holy Communion. It can help, at least at first, if the priest guides people into the silence.
27. Generally, more teaching and guidance on prayer is needed at parish level.
28. Spiritual direction can be a wonderful support to people as they grow in prayer and holiness. Besides priests, deacons and religious, there are an increasing number of lay people trained in spiritual direction. How can we make better use of them, and link such spiritual companions and guides to those seeking support?
29. Personal invitation to prayer groups, services, etc works better than newsletters, etc.
30. While spending time like Mary in prayer, we need to remember that we also meet Jesus in our neighbour.
31. We need to pray together for the prayer life of the parish!