

# REACHING OUT TO LESS-ACTIVE CATHOLICS

main thoughts from the Diocesan Council of Laity, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2005

- **‘Welcome’ is central.** We need warmly welcoming parish communities, with some people especially responsible for making newcomers and returning Catholics welcome (a dedicated group of ‘greeters’) but also with the whole worshipping community taking on their responsibility for hospitality. An ‘open approach’ is vital. (see *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* pages 8-20).
- **Sensitivity is always needed.** Each ‘resting Catholic’ ended or drifted away from regular participation in the Mass for a different reason. Some wish to remain reasonably anonymous, and need to be given the space simply to slip into Mass without any fuss. Others need the opportunity to discuss their reasons for leaving. Gentle support and encouragement is needed, rather than undue pressure and badgering. Finding out why they left is the first step to finding the best way to encourage them to ‘come home’ and then to help ease them back into a greater sense of belonging to the Catholic community. We should gently encourage whatever level of commitment is really possible (e.g. monthly Mass) rather than demanding too much too soon.
- **We need to find them first!** A carefully-organised parish census can be a good start. Developing the ‘link scheme’ proposed in the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* (p. 66), with local link people getting to know local Catholics and inviting them to social activities in their houses, can be a good first contact. Schools and hospitals are also key opportunities for contact, as are sacramental celebrations, funerals, etc. Parish registers are a useful source of information (e.g. Baptism Registers). Catholics at Mass on Sunday can be asked to inform us of other Catholics they know who live locally. A visitors’ book in the church asking for addresses may provide another source of information about local Catholics who drop into church to light a candle, etc.
- **Once found, they need befriending.** Drawing people back into the life of the church often needs patience and perseverance, requiring the ‘gift of time’. Personal contact is the key. We need to spend time ‘alongside’ Catholics who are not active members of the parish, befriending them without pressure. There is no conflict between ‘being alongside’ and ‘evangelisation’. Jesus spent much of his time simply visiting people and spending time with them. His loving presence attracted people to him and opened them to his message. We can learn a lot from his approach. The inspiring personal example of someone ready to give time to be a friend is most likely to draw people back to church life.
- **We need good liturgy, prayerful, welcoming and full of the joy of the Resurrection.** When people return to Mass for the first time, it is essential they experience something which draws them in and makes them want to return. Every parish can work to celebrate Sunday Mass better. This is especially important for all those responsible for aspects of the celebration of Mass: the priest in the way he presides and in his preaching; the way readers prepare for and exercise their ministry; the reverence with which Lay Ministers of Holy Communion distribute the sacrament; the role of musicians, choirs and music groups in helping the whole congregation to participate and in creating a prayerful atmosphere, full of the joy of Easter. [In his comments after the discussion, Bishop Michael reminded everyone that Pope John Paul had stressed the need for every Sunday Mass to be a truly communal celebration with ‘the festive character appropriate to the day commemorating the Lord’s Resurrection’. Pope John Paul had written: ‘It is important to be ever mindful that communion with Christ is deeply tied to communion with our brothers and sisters. The Sunday Eucharistic gathering is an experience of brotherhood, which the celebration should demonstrate clearly, while ever respecting the nature of the liturgical action. All this will be helped by gestures of welcome and by the tone of prayer, alert to the needs of all in the community’ (*Dies Domini*, n. 44). If we all work together to ensure every Sunday Mass is like that, people are more likely to keep coming to Mass and those who return will want to stay.]
- **Families must be made welcome at Mass.** This can be helped by a Children’s Liturgy during Mass, and also by a monthly Family or Children’s Mass in which children are as fully involved as possible. If the children are made welcome, and feel a sense of joyful belonging, their parents are

likely to want to stay as well (see *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* p. 17-18). The needs of single people also need to be remembered.

- **Welcome people after Mass.** It is good whenever possible to provide tea and coffee after Mass (G&T was also suggested!), as this can be an opportunity for those Catholics at Mass to bond, and for newcomers and returning Catholics to get to know other people (as long as regular members of the parish make a point of being pro-actively welcoming to new faces!).
- **Welcoming people of other languages is important.** Mass texts and newsletters for Portuguese, etc, can make them feel more welcome. An occasional reading at Mass in their language, or prayers and songs, is also a good idea (see *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* page 15).
- **Help with transport should be provided.** Elderly people, and single parents, among others, often need help to get to Mass. Every parish should have a 'minister of transport', responsible for organising a network of people who can give lifts to different Masses.
- **Make full use of all opportunities for welcome.** These include parish social activities, contacts through school (especially parents at primary school), children's sacramental programmes.
- **Use a full range of communications.** Flyers, welcome packs, Christmas & Easter cards, yearly or half-yearly 'adverts' in local newspapers (full or half-page).
- **We need to 'market' the Catholic Church better!** Positive presentation of our Catholic Church (parish, diocesan and universal) is very important. We should make full use of opportunities to present church activities in local newspapers, radio and TV. This is the role of the Parish Communications Officer. We also need to make the most of advertising possibilities, for example posting the times of Sunday Masses at holiday camps, hotels, B&Bs, etc. Such 'marketing' needs to present the Catholic Church as it is today in a positive light: some people need to know that the church has changed, and that their experiences of the past (which may have put them off) are no longer so relevant today.
- **Go public more visibly!** Alone as Catholics, and together with other Christians, we need to be more public about our faith, rather than restricting it to the four walls of our church buildings (e.g. a live crib at Christmas; youth Mass on the beach or in the park; Good Friday witness).
- **Work ecumenically when appropriate.** This can be particularly fruitfully for carrying out a census of a local area, or delivering cards or flyers with times of services, etc.
- **Besides drawing people back to church, we also need to work better at keeping those we have, especially young people.** Young adults need special attention, in parishes and university chaplaincies. This will be the key topic for the November meeting of the Council of Laity.
- **Catholics need more help with sharing their faith.** If Catholics are to reach out to others, they need a deeper understanding of their faith. There is need for better adult religious education. Programmes like CaFE can help because they combine education with social gathering. Religious education in our Catholic schools must also ensure a good grounding in Catholic teaching.
- **Prayer is central!** The whole Catholic community must pray for those who do not come regularly to Mass. Individual Catholics should pray regularly for 'resting Catholics' they know personally (family members, neighbours, work-mates, etc). The further development of prayer groups in parishes can help with this: Rosary groups, other prayer groups in homes, etc. We need to pray more for the gift of faith: for ourselves and for others.
- **Formation and training for welcomers and visitors should be provided.** This is particularly important for those who are to visit people in their homes or in hospital. Such people need to be chosen carefully, and properly prepared.
- **There was general agreement to avoid using the word 'lapsed' about Catholics who are not regularly at church.** Suggested alternatives are 'less active' or 'resting' Catholics.

**THIS DOCUMENT SHOULD NOW BE USED FOR DISCUSSION & ACTION AT PARISH LEVEL**