

# **"YOU DID NOT CHOOSE ME; NO, I CHOSE YOU" (John 15.16)**

**These are notes from the meeting of the Diocesan Council of Laity on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2010 which focused on promoting vocations, especially vocations to the priesthood. Bishop Michael and the Council of Laity invite Parish Pastoral Councils to discuss these thoughts, and to implement some of the examples of good practice.**

Bishop Michael introduced the topic by stressing that everyone has a vocation – a personal calling - from God, to some special service. Above all, we each have the call to proclaim the Good News to all creation, to be together the living Gospel for all to hear. This includes the particular role of lay people to transform society from within, including at home and in politics, business, education, etc. We need a greater 'culture of vocation' within the Church. Do we bring up our children at home, school and parish to ask themselves: 'What does God want me to do with my life? How can I best serve God and his people? How can I use my God-given gifts in love for God's people?' Special callings within the family of the Church include the sacred vocations to marriage and parenthood (the Council's focus in May 2008); to being a single person who leaves his or her mark on the world; to the religious life; to the diaconate.

The primary focus for this discussion, however, was promoting vocations to the ordained priesthood, for pastoral and priestly leadership service amidst God's priestly people. Bishop Michael has made abundantly clear over the last seven years the inevitable decline in the number of priests in coming years, with the need to change the way we serve the diocese and provide the sacraments and pastoral care. Although a few more priests may join the diocese from other countries, we need to provide our own priests from within the diocese – from each parish.

Many people in the diocese are not aware of what already goes on to promote priestly vocations. Bishop Michael gave a list of the actions and activities already in process (in no particular order):

1. Bishop's Pastoral Letters on Priestly Vocations (including the most recent in April 2010)
2. Diocesan Leaflet on Vocations (to be revised in Autumn 2010 after the priestly ordinations)
3. Diocesan Vocation Cards (4 over the last 6 years; next year's will focus on teenagers and young adults)
4. Schools Vocations Art Competition in 2007 (the winning artwork was used on a card and poster)
5. Bishop highlights vocations work at Diocesan Head Teachers meetings
6. Focus on university chaplaincies (a key seed ground for vocations)
7. Bishop's homily at Confirmation celebrations always includes mention of vocation, as should parish confirmation preparation programmes
8. Bishop's talk at all Parish Visitations includes challenge to each parish to provide priests for the future
9. Articles in Diocesan Newspaper
10. Banner currently being designed for display around parishes
11. At least a monthly time of prayer for vocations in each parish (perhaps time before the Blessed Sacrament or a Mass for Vocations)
12. Diocesan Vocations Team formed (which includes Bishop Michael; Fr David Bagstaff, Diocesan Vocations Director; Fr Christopher Smith, Director of Diaconate; Fr Tony McSweeney, School Chaplain; Sister Lynda from Swaffham; Hamish MacQueen, Diocesan Youth Director; Marion Houssart, Lay Chaplain at University of East Anglia; Val Clark, lay member). This team currently focuses on priestly vocations, but will also work for promoting vocations to the religious life and the diaconate).
13. Diocesan Days of Reflection and Discernment Weekends re vocations
14. Planning vocations road-show to our Catholic schools, which have a vital role to play in promoting vocations
15. Encouraging and facilitating attendance at national events such as Invocation 2010, as well as attending open events at Oscott and other seminaries
16. Make available suitable vocations resources (e.g. DVDs, books, etc)
17. Annual diocesan cycle of prayer for vocations (each parish has a Sunday each year for prayer for vocations)
18. The diocese has tried to make the most of the 'Year of the Priest', including focusing on the priesthood at the Chrism Mass and the Diocesan Pilgrimage to Walsingham, as well as the 'Calendar of Prayer' asking people to pray for one named priest from the diocese each day between March & July 2010.
19. Our seminary students are encouraged to be present at youth events such as World Youth Day and Taizé; their pastoral placements in parishes are also an opportunity for contact with young men thinking of priesthood.
20. Opportunities to work and spend time with the Bishop are encouraged (e.g. Diocesan Youth Council, Taizé)

The most important way to promote vocations, however, is by personal contact and invitation. Priests who are joyful and positive in their ministry have a vital role to play - as inspirers, encouragers and inviters - in getting others to consider whether God might be calling them to priestly ministry. Sometimes, at the right moment, we need to ask directly: 'Have you thought about being a priest?'

The big difference between 2003 and 2010 is that we now have six seminary students for East Anglia, whereas there were none in 2003. Two will be ordained priest in July 2010. But we need many more for the future. Bishop Michael distributed a list of ordinations in the diocese since 1996. There had been none since 2001. Although we would still need to re-structure the diocese, with mergers, etc, our future would look very different even if only one new priest had been ordained in each of the 8 years from 2001 to 2009. Given that on average only half of students who begin seminary formation get ordained (as they rightly discern that their vocation lies elsewhere), we need two students to be accepted each year just to be reasonably sure of only one ordination each year in the future. Ideally we need more than that. Where are they men to come from? From your parish! So – as he put it – 'What are you going to do about it?'

Bishop Michael reminded members that whatever thoughts they might have about broadening who should be allowed to be ordained (e.g. married men, women), the Bishop could only plan for the future within the doctrine (which can develop but not change) and current discipline of the Church. Members then gathered in deanery groups, and reported back.

**Here are some of the thoughts and examples of good practice which emerged from those discussions.**

1. Could local parishes, or clusters and deaneries, have their own vocations teams and representatives? Discernment resources need to be developed. Local areas could also organise vocations events, perhaps in liaison with the Diocesan Vocations Director.
2. It is vital that there be an ongoing focus on vocations in our Catholic schools: St Laurence's Primary School in Cambridge was given as one model of what can be done.
3. A 'culture of vocation' must begin with the family, especially with parents and grandparents. Have parents lost a sense of a growing vocation in their children? Encouraging this should be a part of marriage preparation and developing the expectations of married couples. Catholic parenting courses have a role to play here.
4. Follow-up after Confirmation is particularly important. How can young people be more directly involved in the life and mission of the church? As 'ministers' of one kind or another (Ministers of Holy Communion, Readers, apprentice Catechists and Children's Liturgy Leaders, Altar Servers, etc), but also in the wider work of the Church.
5. The university years are vital as a seed-bed for vocations, as therefore is university chaplaincy. Parishes should be particularly welcoming and attentive to students when they return during university and college holidays. We need to be better at welcoming people back, with our door wide open, when they have been 'away' from church life for a while or have been 'occasionals'.
6. Vocations often emerge in the setting of particular events and gatherings: World Youth Day, Diocesan Pilgrimage to Taize, New Dawn, Youth 2000, etc. Can we learn from this regarding promoting vocations at local level?
7. A question was asked: 'If God is still sowing the seed, why are there not more priests?' There is no simple or single answer. There has been a tidal wave of secularism, materialism and individualism in society since the 1960s, sometimes with a stress on what I can get out of life rather than what I can put into it. Long-term commitment is much more difficult for people (cf. the radical decline in the number of marriages). There has perhaps been an increase of dysfunctional families. Scandals in the Church have not helped, but we should not exaggerate their impact on young people. There has been much 'Church-battering' recently; how do we overcome the negativity?
8. We should not worry about making priesthood seem too cosy and easy: young people like a challenge and an adventure. How can we present the priesthood positively as challenging, demanding but also joyful and fulfilling? How can we 'up' the profile of priestly ministry in a way that is attractive to young people?
9. Why are so many of the audio-visual resources on priesthood rather limited, focusing perhaps too much on the cultic side of priesthood rather than the richer vision recovered from the Scriptures and Church Fathers by Vatican II? Celebrating the Mass and other Sacraments is central to being a priest, but pastoral care, preaching the Good News and building up the Body of Christ in unity are also vital.
10. Ongoing prayer for vocations is essential – at home, at school and in the parish. How can this be developed? The seed of vocation needs constant watering if it is to bear fruit. This includes prayer and judicious encouragement.
11. Social activities for young people are important, as well as encouraging a social conscience among them. More widely, our young people need to be integrated into parish life as fully as possible from baptism onwards, as toddlers, primary school children, teenagers and then as young adults. Where are the young and single on Sundays? This is far from being a new question (it was asked in the 1950s as much as the 2010s). Fundamentally, how can we make our parishes even more welcoming, as communities within which our young people grow up and seek to serve?
12. Perhaps we need to break down old structures regarding who can be ordained and how they are prepared for priestly ministry? We also need to show that priestly ministry is not only parish-centred: it includes ministry to schools, hospitals, prisons, universities, armed forces, etc, as well as occasional opportunities for service overseas. All our diocesan seminarians spend time in Cambodia and the Holy Land as part of their formation for priestly ministry. Occasionally swapping priests on Sundays might give people a broader idea of what kind of people become priests.
13. It is not only young men who might be attracted to priesthood. The Church has always accepted the right candidates with experience of life, adapting their programme of formation when appropriate.
14. We may need a higher visibility of our Catholic faith at home in particular. How can we encourage our young people to be joyfully 'proud and public' about their faith, as a prelude to future vocation and perhaps ordained ministry?
15. Fr David Bagstaff concluded the afternoon by encouraging each parish to 'Grow your own priest' – for the service of the diocesan family. It is from our local Catholic communities that vocations to the priesthood must emerge.