TALK TO HAVANT PASTORAL AREA SYNOD

February 22, 2025

This year I celebrate 50 years of priesthood. People often ask me about how the world and the Church have changed over that period. To illustrate this, at one of the talks we gave last year to update people on the 10-Year Plan, I showed this artefact and asked what it was used for. Very few people knew. I sometimes watch Bargain Hunt while I’m having lunch and in a recent programme the presenter had one of these and was asking people at an antiques fair the same question. Again almost nobody knew until an elderly lady identified it as a darning mushroom; her mother used to use one for darning socks. Nowadays, of course, nobody darns socks. If they get holes you just throw them away and buy more, but we were not well-off when I was growing up and my mother did use a darning mushroom to darn my socks. It has to be said, she was no expert, and I often used to get an itchy sore place on my foot where the darn was. The passing from memory of the darning mushroom is just an example of how the *world* has changed in fifty years.

The Church has also changed much, largely thanks to the Second Vatican Council which moved us from the days of a largely silent Mass in Latin in which the priest faced the wall, to a Mass in our own language where the priest faces us, as a simple example. But some of the concerns we had then are still with us now. I was once supplying in a parish in Arundel and Brighton Diocese and found some ancient issues of The Tablet in a cupboard. One was from the 1930s and in its was an article where a priest was arguing for a move away from teaching children RE through the medium of the so-called Penny Catechism. Children learned the answers by rote, he argued, but once they had made their First Holy Communion, most of them stopped coming to Mass. Sound familiar? He said it was time to abandon the Penny Catechism in favour of a much more child-centred RE programme for our schools. Ironic that nowadays some are campaigning for the return of the Penny Catechism approach citing the very same reasons. In the Church, as elsewhere, what goes around comes around.

Forty-eight years ago when I was still a naive curate, wet behind the ears, I attended a deanery meeting in Windsor. In those days the bishop would send out a subject or theme for every deanery meeting to discuss. That time, I remember vividly, we were asked by Bishop Emery to imagine ourselves forward ten years in time to 1987, beyond the fateful apocalyptic 1984 of Orwell’s fantasy, to a future full of developments impossible to conceive, and to ask ourselves how the deanery might be reconfigured to accommodate a predicted loss of a third of its clergy during the intervening period.

I forget what plans we drew up but I do remember being terrified by the prospect of the predicted decline in the number of priests and the awesome thought that I and perhaps one or two others might have to serve the spiritual and pastoral needs of the people of the seven parishes in the deanery, not to mention its schools, hospitals, prisons, nursing homes and other institutions.

Later, thirty years ago in 1995, I was appointed Vicar General to Bishop Crispian along with Declan Lang. Each February we would begin to plot the clergy moves that would take place the following September. Each year, when we sat down and looked at the number of priests due to retire or who were too sick to continue we would say “This year we will finally reach the stage where the vacancies outnumber the clergy available to fill them even taking amalgamations into consideration and we will simply not be able to staff our parishes and serve the pastoral and spiritual needs of the faithful”. But every year, for the ten years I was involved, by some miracle, we were able to square the circle and fill the gaps. It seemed to be a re-enactment of the miracle of the feeding of the five-thousand only with clergy shared out rather than loaves and fishes.

In the forty-eight years since that deanery meeting and the thirty years since I became VG the same concern over the dwindling number of clergy has been a constant preoccupation. Somehow, by some miracle, until now, we have survived and the Lord has provided for his Church locally, but not without careful management and stewardship from the bishop and his advisors. The ten-year plan is the latest iteration of that stewardship. However, we cannot go on like this for ever and we are rapidly reaching the stage where we can no longer continue in the same way; as Bishop Philip says, “doing nothing is not an option”. The number of priests in the Diocese is predicted to fall by 63% over the next twenty years, that’s a fall from 93 to 59 clergy. Canon Gerard always advises that we should not be over-concerned at these numbers and should pray and have faith that things will improve. However, the shortage of clergy is not the only issue.

In the fifty years since I was ordained, the role the priest and the demands of running a parish have also increased and grown more complex in ways that we could not have predicted when I was in seminary. Consequently, priests of my era feel untrained for the responsibilities we are increasingly expected to manage. Employment law, financial compliance, safeguarding, health and safety, IT competency, estate management, personnel management, school governorship and the unfeasible volume of administration - all these areas have become increasingly complex and regulated so that not only is it difficult to keep up, but all one’s time can be taken up with matters that are not the fundamental remit of the priest. Going back to 1977, even in those days we were beginning to feel this unpriestly pressure. Maintenance was taking over from Mission as the unwanted priority for many priests who felt frustrated in their vocation. The National Conference of Priests that year issued a final report entitled ‘Set Us Free to Preach and Pray’, which says it all. Things have only got worse by an order of magnitude since then.

This is why we need both to centralise more of our activities so that we are not unnecessarily duplicating work in each smaller community that could be managed by a single overarching, coordinating body. Also, more than ever we need to engage the particular skills and expertise of our lay people to cover areas of parish management that clergy are simply not trained for or, let’s face it, are not very good at. This is even true in the area of evangelisation where clergy have particular training and experience, but the demand is so great that we also need the assistance of gifted and trained lay helpers. We also have to admit that levels of competence required in some of these fields are simply not available from well-meaning volunteers, meaning we have to embrace the possibility of employing people with specific expertise in future. This means the whole way we finance our parishes has to be reviewed and revised.

The Ten-Year Plan aims to begin engaging with these issues and has practical recommendations. In carrying the plan forward, we here in Havant are ahead of the game and are among the seven Pastoral Areas that have made most progress in implementing the plan. We hope formally to call ourselves a single Parish this Pentecost. This doesn’t mean that by then we will have completed the plan for our area; it is more a statement of intent to combine our activities wherever possible and work more and more together as a unit, as a family; to begin thinking more and more in terms of being one Parish. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, “this is not the beginning of the end of forming a united Parish; but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning”. To this end, we are here to come up with a name for the new parish to recommend to Bishop Philip, and to adopt a Parish prayer, among other things. But, more about this later.

Another constant over the past fifty years of my priestly life has been the cry from the laity, “what are you doing about our young people?” The article from the vintage issue of The Tablet indicates that even in the 1930s the younger generation were bleeding away from the practice of their faith just as they do today, suggesting that nothing much has changed on that front for at least almost a century. Plus ça change, plus ça la même chose! Inevitably, the same plaint was levelled at the clergy during the three pillar meetings we held in St Joseph’s, St Michael’s and Sacred Heart last year: “what are you doing about the young people?” As one illustration of how we are seriously implementing the ten-year plan, I am going to answer that question by giving an account of the developing ministry to our youth across the Pastoral Area.

Since the question arose, it would seem that there was a perception out there that nothing, or not much, or not enough was being done for the youth in the Pastoral Area. Nothing could be further from the truth. Of course it is true that what we are doing does not exhaust all the possibilities - there is always more that could be done, but I believe that that should and will grow organically from the foundations already in place.

Firstly, let us look at our schools. We are proud to boast three excellent Catholic primary schools and one exceptional Catholic secondary school in our Parish. In this we are especially blessed. All these schools are rated by OFSTED as Good or Outstanding in their RE teaching and the religious ethos experienced within them. This ethos extends to every subject taught and every aspect of school life. The ethos is maintained by inspired, committed and dedicated headteachers, heads of RE and their staff, and is echoed in the chaplaincy teams in all the schools who combine a true zeal for their faith with a love of their pupils and a true pastoral heart in ‘being there’ for students at all times and in every way. “No one is left behind” is the motto. One prospective Year 7 pupil, visiting Oaklands for an open day, said to his mother “everyone here is so kind!”

Chapels in our schools are available to all pupils for private prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, solace and retreat at all times. The chaplains are on hand there to help pupils with problems they are facing. Moreover, our clergy are all deeply involved in the spiritual life of our schools and regularly celebrate Mass for the whole school, individual tutor and year groups, as well as for all staff on a voluntary basis. These Masses are either celebrated in school or in the parish church with pupils and their parents present. Our clergy also visit and participate in RE classes throughout the schools, give talks and QA sessions to Sixth Formers and participate in Mission Days, Carol Services and other whole-school events. Our priests also regularly celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation in all our schools so that the Sacrament is accessible to all and is enthusiastically embraced by pupils; hundreds come to Confession with open hearts and a desire to experience God's love and mercy (over 700 pupils celebrated the Sacrament at Oaklands). Our priests, Headteachers and Heads of RE meet to discuss matters of common interest and concern in respect of the religious formation of our young people, and our priests are on the Governing bodies of our schools.

Outside of the life of the school, our catechesis for Confirmation is parish-based and involves young people from across the Pastoral Area. It is based on Youth Alpha and embodies solid catechetical input, discussion, prayer, fun activities and food. Its success is measured by the over 90% attendance of the young people on a Sunday afternoon over fifteen weeks, and the programme invariably spawns a cohort of young Catholics who want to be involved in the life of the Church and Parish beyond Confirmation. At Sacred Heart and St Edmund’s we have over twenty young people involved in various activities including reading and serving at Mass, stewarding, children’s liturgy and Eucharistic Ministry, welcoming, sacristan duties, managing the screens and live-streaming output. One even runs a monthly knitting club in church, and some of the younger ones have set up a chess club after Mass on a Sunday morning.

Older teenagers also assist in catechetical formation of First Holy Communion and Confirmation candidates. Also, in response to the Bishop’s request to prioritise ministry to youth and young adults, our Pastoral Area Missionary Team have started two new initiatives: a monthly Sunday evening youth-led Mass followed by the NEXUS group for secondary years 10 to 13 (ages 15-18) providing faith, fellowship, film and fun for that age group. For young adults and marrieds the Think and Drink club meets monthly after Sunday evening Mass in a local hostelry to share life and faith in a relaxed and congenial setting.

Whenever we host an event, such as a concert, afternoon tea or barbecue, we are never short of volunteers from this group of young people whose duties range from ticket checking to room set-up, waitering to washing up. We were also pleased to welcome young people and teachers from our schools on a recent pilgrimage to Medjugorje. Needless to say, they are also among those going to the Flame convention with the diocese in March. I’m sure there are other activities I have missed, but I hope this will satisfy those who ask at meetings “What are you doing about the young people?”.

When I look back over my fifty years of priesthood the Church has changed much and I see us having to address the same questions that our forebears in the faith were preoccupied with half a century ago. But this is no reason for complacency. The world needs the witness of committed Christians now more than ever in the past fifty years and Jesus’ call to us to ‘go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News’ is more urgent than ever. It is my hope that the ten-year plan will begin to lay the foundations for a new evangelisation that will truly ‘bring people closer to Jesus Christ through his Church’. Remember, too, we are not alone in this. We are promised the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit and Jesus’ reassuring words, “I am with you always, yes, to the end of time.”