

My Hopes, Fears and Dreams for the Future

[Fr John made this Contribution to the June Meeting of the Council of Priests in 2009, five months after his retiring from formal parish ministry]

My hitting 75 years towards the end of last year prompted me to do some thinking:

- stay on at Horsham?
- or move to something different?

After experiencing some trouble with my heart, my going to Horsham as assistant priest six years ago had been a good move.

Not sharing the responsibility for the parish suited me fine.

I went to Horsham because I felt constantly tired during my latter months in Mildura. The change of appointment worked, though I did still get easily tired.

Had I stayed at Horsham, I could have continued to share the service of

- the major centre itself,
- and the seven small communities attached to it.

As you all know, I decided to move to something different and formally retired from parish ministry.

I wasn't all that happy with my ministry to those small communities, even though, in theory, I accepted the importance of helping them in changing times. In fact, I didn't do much, and I'm not sure why.

I think that I have a difficulty asking people directly to do things (I'm not a born entrepreneur) and then staying around to observe how they respond.

Perhaps, it may also have been tiredness, and the distances, and the inevitable tendency I have to put my own high expectations onto others and thereby stressing myself in the process.

There was also the fear to face up to the possibility that not many of the parishioners might respond - because it was me, personally, and not simply because I was the "local man" and not an "outside expert".

My staying on would have meant business as usual, with, no doubt, further winding down.

I believe that I have found a better alternative for myself.

My response is based on my own belief that small communities are best encouraged, generally, to maintain their own identity, rather than to discontinue worshipping together and simply be absorbed in a bigger neighboring group.

I also believe that priests cannot sensibly be expected to travel to more and more communities on an over-demanding schedule.

Communities will simply have to have fewer Masses and more Assemblies of the Word (and Communion).

This puts a strain on the local communities, and, especially, those laypeople in them who are already showing leadership.

Personally, I think that I would

- be better at,
- feel freer doing,
- and be more motivated,

offering to these small communities,

- from outside,
- on a roving basis,

short, intensive motivational and inspirational sessions, not to individuals, but to the communities, hoping to help them feel more confident and self-reliant. (A bit like old-time missions, but also totally different).

While I still have a bit of life, energy and fire in the belly, I would like to give it a go.

My present idea is to focus on a single day – probably a Sunday – working together for the whole day, and touching three basic areas:

I would like

- to encourage them - by reviewing the experience of the early Christian communities, briefly looking at Philippi and Thessalonica;
(While being a recent experience, the present evolving situation is far from being without precedent in the life of the Church);
- to help them develop a deeper personal relationship with Jesus, because they look like being largely by themselves for the long haul; and if they are to persevere, almost on a vocational level, they need, as we do, on-going conversion.
(Essentially I would hope to help them pray, as individuals, and to reflect on the Scriptures as a community, more confidently and competently.)
- to prioritise mission above maintenance
While needing to exercise ecclesial ministries when the communities worship, their main task is to build the Kingdom in their broader local community.
(Why bother to survive as a community, if not to spread the Kingdom?)

In all this, I would hope to help people to deepen a genuine Eucharistic spirituality, even though their opportunities for Eucharist may be fewer. (I think that Eucharistic spirituality is drawn more from an informed and committed life, than simply from the number and frequency of Masses.)

My hope is not to do this alone, but as one of a team of two or three others.
Of these, I hope that one or two would soon be lay people,
drawn from neighbouring local communities (after consultation with the priests concerned),
and able to bring a credibility and down-to-earth-ness.

In fact, we experimented for the first time yesterday,
at Nullawil,
when Sr Veronica Quinn, from the Religious Education Centre, and I presented the day together.

Our plan is to return there, if helpful, and on request

- to focus on more specialised issues at some later date,
- or to help them to draw on resources, particularly suitable people, already in the Zone.

Before undertaking all this, I spoke to Bishop Peter,
who graciously accepted my pulling out of normal parish ministry.

I floated my dream,
to which he gave his blessing,
suggesting that it would be important that I make contact with the diocesan Director of Pastoral
Planning
in order to integrate the project within the broader vision of Pastoral Planning
already happening in the diocese.

The director has been working with Sr Veronica and me since late last year,
giving shape to the dream.

What is that dream?

I don't know about the long-term, or even mid-term, prospects for our diocese.
This is a dream essentially for the short-term.

I would like to think that the project be seen
to complement the work of priests already caring for multiple communities,
and who find themselves with less time to devote to each,
and probably with decreasing energy levels as they grow older, too.

If the project is found to be helpful,
I would dream of a couple of other teams coming on line.

In the old days,
we priests used to look at our world
and wonder how on earth we could ever christianise it,
or even contribute to making it a more just and compassionate world.

We realised that we could not do it ourselves.
So, we sought to motivate and to energise the laity.

We couldn't reach all of them effectively, either,

so we concentrated on choosing ones we thought were leaders,
and we concentrated on forming and supporting them.

We relied on them to reach out to the ones we could never touch.

Perhaps, something similar may be possible again today.

An extensive, and individual-based, pastoral outreach to ever increasing numbers of people scattered in ever more numerous, and distant, small communities is becoming more difficult.

Rather than try to reach them all,
it might be helpful for those priests who feel able to do so
to concentrate on supporting a few leaders in each community,
and encouraging them to do what they themselves can no longer do effectively.

My fears?

- that no one share my dream;
- that priests may not invite us to work with them;
- that the local communities may not respond to the vision we present;
- that it may be a bit late – many of the laity are getting older, and running out of steam themselves.
- that the focus will be on ministry within the Church, rather than on mission beyond the Church.

But it's up to the Holy Spirit, not us.

We are called to integrity, and to discernment (as best we can) of the Spirit's presence and leading.

And perhaps what we feel as failure
can be God's way of drawing us into the redemptive Paschal Mystery
which we try to celebrate in every Eucharist.