

What Kind of Church?

John McKinnon May 2003

What God Wants For The World

Jesus has given us a fair idea through his life and teaching what God wants for our world.

Briefly, God's will is:

- to give us life
- to save us from sin
- and to reconcile us to himself and to each other.

In other words God wants us to have life, and have it to the full, and to begin that experience immediately. God wants to heal and free us from all those pressures, attitudes, habits and structures that get in the way of our living fully. God wants us to live together in harmony and to help each other to live in freedom. Each of us has a great capacity to love. What shall we do with it?

Why The Church?

The purpose of the Church is to help each Christian to use fruitfully our capacity to love, in line with the hopes of God. Equally its purpose is also to help the rest of the world to do the same thing. While the Church has no monopoly on love, it confidently teaches it and is strongly committed to it.

If it is to succeed in its task of helping us to help each other to live life fully, then our Church needs to be a real community. We need to interact with each other, to keep our vision clear by constant reference to the Gospel, and to empower and set each other free to use our capacity to love as fruitfully as possible. Foremost among the communities where the Church takes practical shape are the family and the parish.

The Vatican Council said, "The Church is a community of life, of love and of truth". It continued, "It is sent into the world to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth". Our planning for the future will try to make this ideal more and more real. We want our Catholic communities to be alive and to be life-givers in the midst of the world.

Given that things are changing, what are some of the important things of parish life that we want to preserve as far as possible as we shape our future diocese?

Community Is Basic

We appreciate community life, so we want to foster those things that will help us to support each other in our lives as Catholics. What make us supportive communities that are worth preserving? Questions of size, the frequency and quality of our gatherings, the things we do together, and the way we share our faith and encourage each other's action in the world are all important.

Eucharistic Community

The sacraments remind us who and what we are. They bring us into deeper contact with the empowering love of God. The Eucharist has a unique place among them. The Vatican Council called it "the fount and apex of the whole Christian life". We have traditionally accepted the

centrality of the Eucharist, though we may not always have appreciated why it is so important. We have not always seen it as a sacrament that calls for an informed and active participation but rather as something whose effect was virtually automatic. Nor is Eucharist a private devotion but something that the community does together.

The Lord's Day

We have also seen that Sunday, the Lord's Day, is important. With other Christians over twenty centuries we have marked the Lord's Day by gathering together to celebrate Eucharist, not only to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus but to share in it.

As the availability of priests becomes less in the years ahead, it may not always be possible to celebrate Eucharist on the Lord's Day in all our accustomed communities.

Parish Structures

According to the Church's Canon Law, the parish is the basic administrative and pastoral unit. Many of the parishes in the diocese are either made up of more than one local community or have a number of Sunday Masses.

With fewer priests, parish boundaries can be readjusted to include more local communities; or present parish boundaries can be kept and the parish have someone other than a priest (namely a religious or lay person) to administer it.

Ministry In Tomorrow's Church

The certainty of fewer priests brings into sharper focus the question: Who can do what in our communities of the future?

The Vatican Council encouraged the close collaboration of priest and people. It insisted that lay people are gifted and responsible members of the Church by virtue of their baptism. The vitality of the community requires that lay people use the gifts they have and assume appropriate responsibility for the life of the community. This would be equally necessary whether priests were plentiful or scarce.

With the exception of some sacramental ministry, many of the tasks formerly (and even now) done by priests can be done just as effectively, and sometimes better, by religious or lay people. This development has the advantage of freeing priests to concentrate on those things that only they can do or can do best.

Many lay people are already involved in the area of child and adult education, not only as religion teachers in schools but as sponsors and instructors in RCIA and other programs. They increasingly participate in the liturgy where a variety of formal lay roles have developed. These roles and public ministries can be expanded even further.

Some parishes have full-time or part-time professional religious or lay pastoral associates. Already in the diocese, two parishes are being administered by religious sisters, with sacramental ministry being given when needed by priests from neighbouring parishes.

These developments give great hope that the future will see a much more alive and varied Church ministry where people's gifts and expertise are recognised and utilised.