



DISCERNMENT

By Rt. Rev. Mark Davies, Bishop of Shrewsbury

In response to the written contributions

A TIME FOR LISTENING

It is a challenging moment when someone asks us to stop and listen. This has been Pope Francis's challenge to us. A challenge, first and foremost to enter into reverent silence before God which is the prayer of adoration.ⁱ Through such prayer we become more attentive to the spiritual and material need around us. In the words of the Apostle James, *"It is for us to be ready listeners ..."*ⁱⁱ

I wish to thank everyone who has contributed written reflections in this time of listening with such evident love for the Church and concern for her mission. The numbers who took part in meetings or chose to submit personal written reflections may have been relatively small. However, the fruitfulness of our listening depends on our renewed attentiveness to the Lord, and many will have shared this prayer. In the synthesis brought together by a lay team coordinated by Barbara Davies, as Diocesan Lead and Canon Jonathan Brandon, the Episcopal Vicar for Mission and Evangelisation, we can hear voices ranging from those of young children in our primary schools, to some of our most elderly parishioners. If at times, we hear contradictory or discordant voices, we can also recognise a shared desire to be more faithful to the mission which Christ entrusted to His Church.

A TIME FOR DISCERNMENT

'Discernment' is a word Pope Francis often uses. It means being able to recognise and choose what is truly good. That is why the Holy Father warns in his Apostolic Exhortation *"Rejoice and be Glad"*.ⁱⁱⁱ that we need *"... to know if something comes from the Holy Spirit or if it stems from the spirit of the world or the spirit of the devil."* The Holy Father insists, *"without the wisdom of discernment, we can easily become prey to every passing trend"*.^{iv} This is far from being a new challenge, as the Apostle Paul had urged the first generation of Christians *"Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to know the will of God, and know what is good, acceptable and perfect."*^v We need to understand the world of our day, yet the spirit of our time (zeitgeist) can mislead us into embracing what only appears to be good. We will find a sure guide in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the Popes who followed the Council. For Our Lord promised we would never be alone in discernment as the Holy Spirit would keep His Church in all truth and remind us of all that He taught.^{vi} The Gospel describes people being struck by the awesome authority with which Jesus Himself spoke. It is with this same authority that His Catholic Church has spoken for 20 centuries on all things necessary for salvation. It is to Christ's voice in the Church that we need be attentive, since as Saint John Henry Newman beautifully wrote, *"Holy Church is his creation, and her teachings are his own"*.^{vii}

KNOWING WHAT DISCERNMENT IS FOR

The purpose of all this teaching which bears divine authority, is to help each of us reach the goal of our lives, which is for every one of us to become a saint which is to finally reach the goal of Heaven. The Second Vatican Council reminded us that all the Baptised must strive in every state and walk of life to attain by God's grace, the perfection of charity and the fulness of the Christian life.^{viii} Right belief (orthodoxy) would be insufficient without this striving for holiness. In times when the Christian moral path is often rejected or misunderstood, it would be a fatal mistake to think that diluting or obscuring the Christian moral vision will help souls or see better results in our mission.

A NEW FAITHFULNESS

The need for renewed faithfulness has strongly emerged from this discernment. I hear the pain expressed at the falling away of children and grandchildren from the life of the Church. We all feel deeply the pain of scandals and unfaithfulness to vocations. This must lead us to a desire for an even greater faithfulness in every vocation. In my first Pastoral Letter, I echoed the heartfelt prayer of the first Apostles who said, “*Lord, increase our faith!*”^{ix} Greater faith and faithfulness will always be the greatest need of our Diocese.^x The founding generation of this Shrewsbury Diocese turned to Mary as the Help of Christians in their desire to be always faithful; and with renewed devotion to Our Lady, we must seek this same faithfulness. Through every changing scene and circumstance may we be able to say to the Lord with her, “... *let it be to me according to your word*”.^{xi}

A DEEPER COMMUNION

Many have expressed how necessary an on-going doctrinal and spiritual formation is to deepen our communion with Christ and His Church and enable us to understand and live our Catholic faith better. This leads me to task the Diocesan Department for Mission and Evangelisation to provide new opportunities for adult formation as our priority in preparation for the Synod of Bishops in October 2023. I also ask, as several have requested, that we have new opportunities to come to a deeper understanding of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council beginning with *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

GREATER PARTICIPATION

It was good to hear of priests and lay people working together. This has been the great strength of our parishes. It was moving to read personal accounts of such working during the pandemic when teams of volunteers enabled the re-opening of our churches and the life and worship of parishes to continue. We have different vocations, but we recognise that everyone is called to participate in the vast fields of apostolate and mission which is contemporary British society. We know that unless each of us is striving for holiness there can be no effective mission and we know that this mission is inclusive of us all since “Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord Himself”.^{xii}

A TIME FOR MISSION

The many practical proposals made for mission indicate a desire to fulfil the lay apostolate for the transformation of our society; and the desire to reach as many souls as possible. Renewed commitment to mission invites us to put our energies into a thousand paths of outward-looking apostolates. It is the Lord who is again sending us into every town and every place where He Himself is to come.^{xiii} This has been the call of a New Evangelisation in our de-Christianised western world.

“WITHOUT ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING” (Jn. 15: 5)

In your submissions, there are also striking calls to return to the Person of Christ and place Him at the centre. Pope Francis reminded us at the beginning of his pontificate that when Christ is not at the centre, everything goes wrong, even when we set out with the best of intentions.^{xiv} At the outset of my own service of the Diocese twelve years ago, I took these words of Saint John’s Gospel as the motto for our time, “*Nothing without Christ*” (Nihil Sine Christo). In daily prayer and by frequenting the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, we will come to know more deeply the primacy of Christ and our vital need of union with Him. If this time of listening in the Diocese leaves a legacy, it will surely be found in our renewed striving for holiness and participation in mission. This must be accompanied by the unflinching conviction which Our Lord wanted us to have in giving us the Holy Eucharist: “*Without me you can do nothing.*”^{xv}

ⁱ Cf. Homily of Pope Francis at the Opening of the Synodal Path, 10th October 2021

ⁱⁱ Jas. 1:19

ⁱⁱⁱ Gaudete et Exsultate 2018

^{iv} Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis Gaudete et Exsultate no. 166 & 167

^v Rom. 12:2

^{vi} Cf. Jn. 16: 13 & 14: 26

^{vii} Firmly I believe and truly

^{viii} Cf. Lumen Gentium Chapter 5

^{ix} Luke 17:5

^x Cf. Pastoral Letter 3rd October 2010

^{xi} Lk. 1:38

^{xii} The Second Vatican Council Lumen Gentium no. 33

^{xiii} Cf. Lk. 10: 1 & The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People of the Second Vatican Council Apostolicam Actuositatem no. 33

^{xiv} Cf. Audience 16th March 2013

^{xv} Jn. 15: 5