Instruction "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church",

The Congregation for the Clergy, 20.07.2020

I. Pastoral Conversion

3. Pastoral conversion is one of the central themes in the "new phase of evangelisation" that the Church is called to foster today, whereby Christian communities be ever more centres conducive to an encounter with Christ.

The Holy Father, in this regard, recommends that: "If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (Mk 6:37)".

Our work as Catholic Christians is about helping each other to share the good news of Jesus with others: sometimes in words, sometimes by just being here, more often by what we do and how we are.

II. The Parish in a contemporary context

7. Since its inception, the Parish is envisioned as a response to a precise pastoral need, namely that of bringing the Gospel to the People through the proclamation of the faith and the celebration of the Sacraments. The etymology of the word makes clear the meaning of the institution: the Parish is a house among houses and is a response to the logic of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, alive and active among the community. It is visibly characterised then, as a place of worship, a sign of the permanent presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his People.

9. As a living community of believers, the Parish finds itself in a context whereby the territorial affiliation is increasingly less evident, where places of association are multiplied and where interpersonal relationships risk being dissolved into a virtual world without any commitment or responsibility towards one's neighbour.

10. It is noteworthy how such cultural changes and the evolving territorial ties are fostering within the Church, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, a new discernment around community, "which consists in seeing reality with the eyes of God, with a view to unity and communion". The whole People of God must urgently embrace the Holy Spirit's invitation to begin the process of "renewing" the face of the Church.

Parishes were created to serve a particular local community and its shared life. Now we are all of us much less tied to a local area.

Many current parishioners were born, and many will die, elsewhere.

People who consider themselves members of our parish live here, mostly, but mostly work elsewhere. Mass media and social media are means by which all of us engage with others in other places, even the world over. Sometimes these are the most important ways we engage with others.

III. The value of the Parish today

11. In virtue of this discernment, the Parish is called upon to read the signs of the times, while adapting both to the needs of the faithful and to historical changes. A renewed vitality is required that favours the rediscovery of the vocation of the baptised as a disciple of Jesus Christ and a missionary of the Gospel, in light of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent Magisterium.

12. The Council Fathers were prescient in writing: "the care of souls should always be infused with a missionary spirit". In continuity with this teaching, Saint John Paul II specified that: … "evangelisation is the cornerstone of all pastoral action, the demands of which are primary, preeminent and preferential". Subsequently, Benedict XVI taught, "the parish is a beacon that radiates the light of the faith and thus responds to the deepest and truest desires of the human heart, giving meaning and hope to the lives of individuals and families". Lastly, Pope Francis recalled how "the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelisers".

13. In order to promote the centrality of the missionary presence of the Christian community in the world[16], it is important not only to think about a new experience of Parish, but also about the ministry and mission of priests, who, together with the lay faithful, have the task of being "salt and light of the world" (cf. Mt 5:13-14), a "lamp on a lamp-stand" (cf. Mk 4:21), showing forth the face of an evangelising community, capable of an adequate reading of the signs of the times and of giving witness to coherent evangelical living.

The parish and its community is still essentially called to serve the Gospel, to be evangelical. But new realities call us to do this in new ways, responding to how our 'world' is.

IV. Mission: the guiding principle for renewal

16. Given the above-mentioned changing realities, their generous dedication notwithstanding, the current Parish model no longer adequately corresponds to the many expectations of the faithful, especially when one considers the multiplicity of community types in existence today. It is true that a characteristic of the Parish is that its rootedness at the centre of where people live from day to day. However, the Parish territory is no longer a geographical space only, but also the context in which people express their lives in terms of relationships, reciprocal service and ancient traditions. It is in this "existential territory" where the challenges facing the Church in the midst of the community are played out. As a result, any pastoral action that is limited to the territory of the Parish is outdated, which is something the parishioners themselves observe when their Parish appears to be more interested in preserving a nostalgia of former times as opposed to looking to the future with courage. It is worth noting, however, that from a canonical perspective, the territorial principle remains in force, when required by law.

18. The renewal of evangelisation requires a new approach with diverse pastoral proposals, so that the Word of God and the sacramental life can reach everyone in a way that is coherent with their state in life. Ecclesial membership in our present age is less a question of birthplace, much less where someone grew up, as it is about being part of a community by adoption, where the faithful have a more extensive experience of the Word of God than they do of being a body made up of many members, with everyone working for the common good (1 Co 12:12-27).

25. The 'culture of encounter' is conducive to dialogue, solidarity and openness to others, as it is person-centred. Naturally, a Parish must be a place that brings people together and fosters long-term personal relationships, thereby giving people a sense of belonging and being wanted.

26. The Parish community is called truly to master the "art of accompaniment". If deep roots are planted, the Parish will become a place where solitude is overcome, which has affected so many lives, as well as being "a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey and a centre of constant missionary outreach".

We are bearers not only of a Gospel message, but called to help people to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ themselves – whoever, wherever they are, and whoever and wherever we are.

This requires that we ourselves have made that personal connection with Jesus – though his gift of himself to us, for example in Scripture, Sacrament, Prayer, or Church. And be careful to remain in lived relationship with the Lord.

To do the work he entrusts to us we need to learn the 'art of accompaniment' – being people ready to reach out to others, to meet and come to know them where and how they are, They are people loved by God – whoever, however they are – and they are our neighbour, who we are called to love: even if they treat us as enemies.

V. "A community of communities": A Parish that is inclusive, evangelising and attentive to the poor

27. The subject of the missionary and evangelising action of the Church is always the People of God as a whole. The Code of Canon Law emphasises that the Parish is not identified as a building or a series of structures, but rather as a specific community of the faithful, where the Parish Priest is the proper pastor. Pope Francis recalled that "the parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration", and affirmed that it is "a community of communities".

28. The various components that make up the Parish are called to communion and unity. When each part recognises its complementary role in service of the community, on the one hand, we see the fulfilment of the collaborative ministry of the Parish Priest with his Assistant Priests, while on the other hand, we see how the various charisms of deacons, consecrated men and women and the laity, cooperate in building up the singular body of Christ (cf. 1 Co 12:12).

29. The Parish is a community gathered together by the Holy Spirit to announce the Word of God and bring new children of God to birth in the baptismal font. Assembled by the pastor, the Parish celebrates the memorial of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord, bearing witness to faith in charity, living in a permanent state of mission, whilst ensuring that no one is excluded from the salvific, life-giving message. Pope Francis expressed it thus: "The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelises, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptability, it continues to be "the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters". This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. [...] We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented".

VI. From the conversion of people to that of structures

The pastoral conversion of structures implies the understanding that "the faithful Holy People of God are anointed with the grace of the Holy Spirit; therefore when we reflect, think, evaluate, discern, we must be very attentive to this anointing.

The pastor who willingly serves his flock with generosity, must instruct the faithful, however, in such a way that each member of the community feels responsible and directly involved in caring for the needs of the Church in a variety of ways and in a spirit of solidarity, which the Church requires in order to carry out her pastoral service with freedom and efficacy.

41. The mission required of the Parish, as a central driving force of evangelisation, concerns the People of God in its entirety: priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, and the lay faithful, each according to their respective charisms and the responsibility that corresponds to them.

Our parish has its buildings and its way of managing our finances etc.

But our parish IS the community: clergy and laity in all our variety. A parish council needs first and foremost to be about helping this community become what the Lord calls us to receive and be made new by the Gospel, and to carry out the work of sharing the Gospel with others.

VII. The Parish and other subdivisions within the Diocese

42. The pastoral conversion of the Parish community, in terms of mission, takes shape and finds expression in a gradual process of a renewal of structures; consequently, different forms of shared pastoral care emerge, as well as forms of participation in it that involve the entire People of God.

We are not the Church alone, here in Boldmere.

We are a parish in the local Church, that is the Archdiocese of Birmingham, under the pastorship of Archbishop Bernard; we are a member parish of the the Deanery of North and East Birmingham; and of the Catholic Sutton Coldfield cluster of parishes.

VIII. Ordinary and extraordinary ways of assigning the pastoral care of the Parish community

62. In the first place, the Parish Priest and the other priests, in communion with the Bishop, are a fundamental reference point for the Parish community, for the role of shepherds that corresponds to them. The Parish Priest and the presbyterate, who together foster a common life and priestly fraternity, celebrate the sacramental life for and with the community, and are called to organise the Parish in such a way as to be an effective sign of communion.

VIII. g. The Laity

85. The Parish community is composed in a particular way of the lay faithful, who, by virtue of their Baptism and the other Sacraments of Christian initiation, and in many cases by matrimony, participate in the evangelising action of the Church, since "the essential vocation and mission of the lay faithful is to strive that earthly realities and all human activity may be transformed by the Gospel".

In a particular way, the lay faithful, who have a specific secular character, "seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God". They "can also feel themselves called, or be called, to work with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community for its growth and life, by exercising a great variety of ministries according to the grace and charisms which the Lord is pleased to give them".

86. The lay faithful are called upon in our present age to make a generous commitment to the service of the mission of evangelisation, first of all through the general witness of their daily lives, lived in conformity with the Gospel, in whatever environment they are in and at every level of responsibility; in a particular way, they are called to place themselves at the service of the Parish community.

The parish priest is dedicated to his work in the parish and for its community.

The lay faithful have a key role in this – but their life and work is especially focussed on the world beyond the parish, sharing the Gospel there.

X. Bodies of Ecclesial Co-responsibility

X. a. The Parish Finance Council

101. The administration of goods which every Parish has to some extent is an important area of evangelisation and evangelical witness, both in the Church and in civil society, since "all the goods that we have, the Lord gives them to go to the world, to go to humanity, to help others". The Parish Priest, therefore, cannot and must not remain only at this task, so it is necessary that he be assisted by collaborators to administrate the goods of the Church above all with evangelising zeal and a missionary spirit.

106. The Finance Council fulfils a role of particular importance in the growth, at the level of the Parish community, of a culture of co-responsibility, of administrative transparency, and of service to the needs of the Church. In a particular way, transparency should not be understood as a mere formal presentation of statistics, but more as information that is the community's due, and an advantageous opportunity for its formative involvement. Transparency refers to a *modus agendi*, indispensable for the credibility of the Church, especially where there are significant goods to administer.

107. Ordinarily, the goal of transparency may be attained by publishing the annual financial report that must first be presented to the local Ordinary, with detailed indications of income and expenditure. From the annual report, the community as a whole may be aware that these goods belong to the Parish, not the Parish Priest; that he is the steward of them; how they are administered; what the financial situation of the Parish is and what resources are effectively at its disposal.

The Finance Committee helps the parish know what financial resources it has, and works with the priest to promote best use of them.

X. b. The Parish Pastoral Council

108. The current canonical norms leave it to the diocesan Bishop to decide on the establishment of a Pastoral Council in Parishes, but in any case, they may ordinarily be considered as highly recommended, as Pope Francis recalled, "How necessary pastoral councils are! A Bishop cannot guide a Diocese without pastoral councils. A Parish Priest cannot guide without pastoral councils".

109. The theological significance of the Pastoral Council is inscribed in the constitutive reality of the Church, that is, in her being "the Body of Christ", that generates a "spirituality of communion". In the Christian community, in fact, the diversity of charisms and ministries that derive from incorporation into Christ and from the gift of the Holy Spirit may never be homogenised until they become "uniformity, the obligation of doing everything together and all as equals, of always thinking the same thing in the same way". On the contrary, in virtue of the baptismal priesthood, every member of the faithful is created for the building up of the whole Body and, at the same time, the whole People of God, in the reciprocal co-responsibility of its members, participates in the mission of the Church, that is, discerning in history the signs of the presence of God and becoming witnesses of His Kingdom.

110. Far from being simply a bureaucratic organ, the Pastoral Council highlights and realizes the centrality of the People of God as the subject and active protagonist of the evangelising mission, in virtue of the fact that every member of the faithful has received the gifts of the Spirit through Baptism and Confirmation: "Rebirth to the divine life of baptism is the first step; next comes conducting ourselves as children of God, namely, by conforming ourselves to Christ who works in Holy Church, letting ourselves be involved in her mission in the world. To that end, the anointing of the Spirit is provided: 'without your strength, we have none' (cf. Pentecost Sequence). [...] As Jesus was animated by the Spirit for his whole life, so also the life of the Church and of each of her members is under the guidance of the same Spirit".

In light of this fundamental vision, the words of St Paul VI come to mind, "It is the function of the pastoral council to investigate everything pertaining to pastoral activities, to weigh them carefully and to set forth practical conclusions concerning them so as to promote conformity of the life and actions of the People of God with the Gospel", in the awareness that, as Pope Francis recalled, the purpose of such a Council "should not be ecclesiastical organization but rather the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone".

111. The Pastoral Council is a consultative body, governed by the norms established by the diocesan Bishop, to define the criteria of its composition, the methods of election of its members, its objectives and manner of functioning. In any case, in order not to distort the nature of this Council, it is best to avoid defining it as a "team" or "équipe", that is to say in terms that are not suitable to express concretely the ecclesial and canonical relationship between the Parish Priest and the rest of the faithful.

113. The Parish Pastoral Council "possesses a consultative vote only", in the sense that its proposals must be accepted favourably by the Parish Priest to become operative. The Parish Priest is then bound to consider the indications of the Pastoral Council attentively, especially if they express themselves unanimously, in a process of common discernment.

So that the service of the Pastoral Council might be efficacious and fruitful, it is necessary to avoid two extremes: on one hand, that of the Parish Priest presenting to the Pastoral Council decisions already made, or without the required information beforehand, or convoking it seldom only pro forma. on the other hand, that of the Council in which the Parish Priest is only one of the members, deprived de facto of his role as Pastor and Leader of the community.

114. Finally, it is considered fitting that, as far as possible, the Pastoral Council should consist for the most part of those who have effective responsibility in the pastoral life of the Parish, or who are concretely engaged in it, in order to avoid the meetings becoming an exchange of abstract ideas that do not take into account the real life of the community, with its resources and problems.

The Parish Pastoral Council has the role of reviewing, discerning, guiding how best the parish and its members might be best supported to fulfil its vocation to be as Christ, light for the world, salt for the earth.

Conclusion

122. Recalling the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council in the light of recent Magisterium, and considering the social contexts that are profoundly changed, the present Instruction is intended to focus the topic of renewal of the Parish in a missionary sense.

While it remains an indispensable institution to encounter Christ and to have a living relationship with Him and with our brothers and sisters in the faith, it is likewise true that the Parish must constantly face changes taking place in today's culture and in the existential reality of persons, in order to explore creatively new ways and methods that allow it to be at the height of its primary function, that is, being a force of evangelisation.

123. As a consequence, pastoral activity needs to go beyond merely the territorial limits of the Parish, to make ecclesial communion more clearly transparent by means of the synergy between ministers and diverse charisms, structuring itself as a "pastoral care for all", at the service of the Diocese and of its mission.

This means a pastoral activity that, through an effective and vibrant collaboration between priests, deacons, religious and laity, as well as among different Parish communities of an area or region, occupies itself with identifying together the questions, difficulties and challenges germane to evangelisation, seeking to integrate ways, methods, proposals and means suitable to confront them. Such a common missionary project may be elaborated and realized in relation to social and territorial contexts, that is, in communities that are neighbouring or united by the same socio-cultural conditions, or in reference to related pastoral fields, for example, in a group for the necessary coordination of pastoral care for youth, universities and vocations, as already occurs in many Dioceses.

For this reason, beyond a responsible coordination of activities and structures capable of relating and collaborating among them, the pastoral care of all requires the contribution of all the baptised. In the words of Pope Francis, "When we speak of "the people", we are not speaking about the structures of society or the Church, but about all those persons who journey, not as individuals, but as a closely-bound community of all and for all".

That demands that the historical Parish institution not remain a prisoner of immobility or of a worrisome pastoral repetition, but rather, it should put into action that "outgoing dynamism" that, through collaboration among different Parish communities and a reinforced communion among clergy and laity, will orient it effectively toward an evangelising mission, the task of the entire People of God, that walks through history as the "family of God" and that, in the synergy of its diverse members, labours for the growth of the entire ecclesial body.

The present Document, therefore, besides underscoring the urgency of this type of renewal, presents the canonical norms that establish the possibilities, the limits, the rights and the duties of pastors and the laity, so that the Parish might rediscover itself as a fundamental place of evangelical proclamation, of the celebration of the Eucharist, a place of fraternity and charity, from which Christian witness can shine for the world. The Parish, that is, "must remain a place of creativity, of relationship, of motherhood. It is there that this inventive capacity is realised; and when a parish moves forward this way, it achieves what I call 'the parish on the move' "

124. Pope Francis invites us to invoke "Mary, Mother of Evangelisation", so that, "the Virgin Mother may help us to say our own "yes", conscious of the urgent need to make the Good News of Jesus resound in our time. May she obtain for us renewed zeal in bringing to everyone the Good News of the life that is victorious over death. May she intercede for us so that we can acquire the holy audacity needed to discover new ways to bring the gift of salvation to every man and woman"..

We are called to say 'Yes' to the Lord and help other to live that 'Yes'

The old ways have something to teach us, but we need to explore creatively new ways and methods that allow will help our parish, and all its members, to fulfil its primary function, that is, being a force of evangelisation.

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