



DISCERNMENT

By Rt. Rev. Mark Davies, Bishop of Shrewsbury

to the written contributions in the Diocesan Phase of Listening

A TIME FOR LISTENING

Thank you to everyone who has contributed written reflections in this time of listening with evident love for the Church and concern for her mission. In the words of the Apostle James, *"It is for us to be ready listeners ..."*ⁱ Pope Francis indicated that this listening begins in reverent silence before God which is the prayer of adoration.ⁱⁱ The numbers who took part in meetings or chose to submit personal 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 in this prayer. In the synthesis brought together by a lay team co-ordinated by Barbara Davies, the Diocesan Lead for the Diocesan Listening Phase and Canon Jonathan Brandon, the Episcopal Vicar for Mission and Evangelisation, we 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' means being able to recognise and choose what is truly good. Pope Francis explains 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 and the currents of its thought yet recognising that the spirit of our time (zeitgeist) can mislead us into embracing what only appears to be good. We will find a sure guide for this discernment in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the Popes who followed the Council. Our Lord promised we would never be alone in our 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 to 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 us reach the goal of our lives, which is for every one of us to become a saint, to finally enter 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, it would be a fatal mistake to think that diluting or obscuring the Christian moral vision will somehow help souls and draw our contemporaries into the life of the Church. How much they now look to us for our witness and the example of our faithfulness.

A NEW FAITHFULNESS

The need for renewed faithfulness has strongly emerged from this discernment. I read of the pain at the falling away of children and grandchildren from the life of the Church. We all feel deeply the pain and recognise the immense harm of scandals and betrayal of vocations. This must surely lead us to even greater faithfulness in

responding to Christ's call in all our vocations. In my first Pastoral Letter, I echoed the prayer of the Apostles who said, "Lord, increase our faith!"^{ix} Increased faith and faithfulness will always be our greatest need.^x The founding generation of our Diocese turned to Mary, Help of Christians in their desire to be faithful; and it is with renewed devotion to Our Lady, that we must seek this same faithfulness in order to say 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 in mind and heart with Christ and His Church and so enable us to understand and live our Catholic faith better. I am inviting 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 that we have 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 the desire and need for clergy and lay people to work together. This has been the great strength of our parishes. It was especially moving to read personal accounts of such working together during the pandemic when teams of volunteers enabled the re-opening of our churches. We have different vocations, but we recognise that everyone is called to participate in the vast fields of apostolate and mission. 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 apostolate. It is the Lord who is again sending us into every town and place where He Himself is to come.^{xiii} This has been the call of the New Evangelisation in our increasingly de-Christianised society.

"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 service of the Diocese 12 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 our participation in mission. This must be accompanied by the conviction Our Lord wanted us to share as He gave us the Holy Eucharist: "*Without me you can do nothing.*"^{xv}

ⁱ Jas. 1:19

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

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