

Homily for The Twenty Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) (18th October 2009)

At a recent parish council meeting somebody suggested that it might be time to compile a fresh register of talents for the parish, that is to say a list of who might be able to help in various different ways in the running of our church community. Of course, I am very happy to do this, and I am very keen that as many people as possible should get involved in the life and mission of our parish family. I know that you might feel you have had enough of filling in questionnaires after the recent one about mass times, but I hope that you had a chance to read the results of that exercise, which was extremely helpful to me and to those of us making plans for the future, so I hope that you will take away the very simple form you'll be given at the end of mass, give it some careful thought, and then return it to The Presbytery.

Before asking your help with another exercise in partnership and collaboration, though, I just want to say a few words about the context of this exercise. I want to offer you some insights into what a parish is all about, and also some thoughts on the vocation of the laity. We recently had a meeting between some parishioners from Petworth and some parishioners from Midhurst to talk about plans for the day when the two parishes will be run by one priest. As I was doing the preparation for that meeting I came across a passage in a document prepared by the Diocese of Lancaster which said this:

'Parishes do not exist for themselves, but as the vibrant presence of Christ and the Church to the local area'.

That, it seems to me, is a very good starting point for what parish life is all about. It is not simply about maintaining existing structures, or carrying on doing what we have always done; it is not primarily about habit and custom, it is first of all supposed to make it clear to the area in which we live that Christ is alive, that knowing Christ is a source of hope and joy, and that we can encounter him through the local church. It is wrong to think of the parish first of all in terms of a structure, or a geographical area, or a building; first and foremost it is the local manifestation of the family of God, the

community of the faithful (Christifideles Laici n.26). People in our towns and villages can read about the Church; they can find out about its views, its history, its vision, its ideas in books or on the internet. If, however, they want to really encounter the Church, to see it in action, they come here, to the local parish. What they find when they do so must, then, be an authentic practical experience of the theory and ideas they have read about. Pope John Paul II wrote this about the parish, about what people should discover when they come here:

...its fundamental vocation and mission, [that] is, to be a "place" in the world for the community of believers to gather together as a "sign" and "instrument" of the vocation of all to communion, in a word, to be a house of welcome to all and a place of service to all, or, as Pope John XXIII was fond of saying, to be the "village fountain" to which all would have recourse in their thirst. (Christifideles Laici n.27).

The parish is a place where local Catholics gather together to celebrate mass. In doing that we lift our thankful hearts to God and we worship him, praying that in doing so we will catch a glimpse of Heaven, a glimpse that will motivate and inspire us for the coming week. We experience a deep sense of community, of connectedness - not only with the people around us, but also with other worshippers throughout the world, and with those who have gone before us. In our parish, as in no other place, we feel we are at home, we belong, whoever we are, whatever we are.

So, what does this have to do with the piece of paper that you will be given on the way out of church today? What does this high sounding vision of parish life have to do with mundane questions about lift to mass, gardening and cleaning? The fact is, that although the priest is often seen as the public face of the parish, in fact he cannot make it work on his own. Without your help, the priest is not able to do his work effectively [*"Their activity within Church communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the Pastors is generally unable to achieve its full effectiveness" (apostolicam actusitatem 10)*]. If the parish is going to be what it is meant to be, the vibrant presence of Christ in the local area, that of necessity involves the activity of lay people as well as the priest. Sometimes that involvement will be with the liturgical life of the parish. In our celebration of the liturgy we present to the world a vision of human destiny, a vision of eternity, and it is essential that we present that to the best of our abilities. So, we need people to sing, to serve, to read, to prepare the church for

mass, not merely as a chore to 'keep things going' but because in doing this they are contributing to giving people a glimpse of the divine. We need people to keep our buildings in good repair not merely because it is good stewardship of nice buildings, but because these buildings draw people closer to God. Lots of people want to get married in our churches, and that is partly because they are beautiful and well looked-after. Hundreds of people come here each year to wedding services, and while they are here we have a chance to present them with a vision of reality, a glimpse of what life is really all about. The upkeep of our buildings is in one sense a sort of evangelisation, because in beautiful churches people have a chance to catch a glimpse of the beauty of God.

In the same way, the activities that people undertake to care for one another (or indeed to care for people outside the church family), or to explore with one another different aspects of the Christian faith, are not simply practical matters intended to keep things going, they are real opportunities to present Christ to the world, to make his presence felt in the lives of others. It is in this spirit that I hope you will take these brief forms home with you, look at them, and take a few moments thinking what you might be able to offer. You may feel that there is nothing you can offer at the moment because the time is not right, life is especially busy, or stressful, or whatever. That is ok. You may have other ideas, other visions, of what the parish could do that are not included in the questions you are asked; that's ok, don't keep them to yourselves, let us know. As I say in the letter you will be given, I will never ask anyone to do anything if they are not happy about doing it, and I hope you will not be offended if you offer your help but it is not needed. Some of you may be able to do things that we need now; other things we might store away for future reference.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that fact that lots of people already do a great deal, not only here in the parish but also in other areas of life. Important as building up the parish is, I recognise that the primary role of the lay Christian is to live a faithful Christian life in the midst of your daily tasks, making your home and your work place that little bit better, that little bit more Christian. Your baptismal priesthood is primarily lived out by making Christ's presence felt in every aspect of life, at work, at home and at leisure. The parish is here to support and encourage that, certainly not to undermine it.

["By reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will.... It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are closely associated that these may always be effected and grow according to Christ and maybe to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer." Lumen Gentium 31.2]