

# Diocese of Hallam

## Pastoral Letter

To be read at all Masses  
On the weekend of the Feast of The Ascension 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

Today's feast celebrates Jesus 'coming full circle.' He came to us from the Father to accomplish his own unique mission and now he returned to the Father having achieved what he was sent to do. It must have been a particular joyous moment for Jesus but one of the most difficult moments for the disciples on their journey with Jesus. Their Master and Teacher who had opened their eyes and had been taken from them in a most horrific way and returned from the dead and had walked with them. Now, it would seem, they are going to lose him for a second time.

But today's feast is also about 'passing on the baton'. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus set out his stall announcing that the Kingdom of Heaven was close at hand, calling the people to repentance and to believe in the Good News. Now the responsibility for the task/ministry was being passed on to the apostles and disciples. He mandates them to continue his saving work, drawing all nations to the truth of the gospel. He knows that his life's project will only continue if those whom he commissions are committed to make it work.

Matthew reminds us that Jesus' mandate to his disciples, then and now, is to go, to make disciples, to baptise, and to teach.

**To go:** Communion and Mission are intrinsically linked. At the end of every Eucharist, for example, we are dismissed with these or similar words: "Go forth. The Mass is ended."

**To make disciples:** As Jesus called the fishermen and trained them up as "learners", imitating his way of life and, little by little, understanding his message, his followers ever since have been entrusted with the responsibility of calling others and training them to understand his message and follow his ways.

**To baptise:** Baptism is not an optional extra for the followers of Jesus. Rather it is the public and visible way by which we are marked out as his disciples and share in the name of the living God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**To Teach:** The Gospel of Jesus promotes a lifestyle that is different. As his disciples we are to give the time and energy to learning and practising this lifestyle ourselves and sharing it with new disciples.

Last weekend marked the third anniversary of the announcement of me as your Bishop. It has been an interesting period in my life to say the least! As I have moved around the diocese, I have been touched by the warmth of your welcome and encouraged to see for myself the many good initiatives that are happening in the parishes. It has been my special joy to visit the schools in the diocese.

But as I have moved around the diocese I have also observed for myself a diocesan structure created to serve a mass-going population of over 30,000 when the diocese was set up and now serving a mass attendance of under 12,000. My judgment is that the present cannot be sustained and the work of renewal can no longer be deferred.

In *Evangelium Gaudium*, Pope Francis spells out my role as Bishop in this regard:

The Bishop must always foster this missionary communion in his diocesan Church, following the ideal of the first Christian communities in which believers were of one heart and one soul. (Acts 4:32). To do so, he will sometimes go before his people pointing the way and keeping their hopes vibrant. Other times he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. And yet at other times, he will have to walk with them, helping those who lag behind – above all – allowing the flock to strike out on new paths.

With this in mind, in recent weeks there have discussions and consultations across the diocese about the future of the diocese in general and about the shape of our parish communities, in particular, and, how we might, given our present resources, make them 'a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey and a centre of missionary outreach.' EG28. Some of these discussions have concluded and decisions taken. Other discussions are on-going and there will be more difficult decisions to be taken at the end of these. I know that my name will be held less than 'hallowed' over the next few weeks and months that lie ahead!

Inevitably, there will be a sense and experience of personal loss for some as we look to the possibility of mergers and closures. Of all, I seek understanding, flexibility and spirit of self-sacrifice. I genuinely fear that not to act now, would risk the future of our diocese. I am conscious, too, that one day I will have to give an account of my stewardship as the Bishop of the diocese.

One thing I wish to make clear is that the decisions I have already made and will take in the future are not about managing decline, but rather preparing and planning for the future of the diocese, so as to enable it in the years to come to effectively carry out Jesus' mandate in this corner of the Lord's vineyard: **to go, to make disciples, to baptise and to teach**. Above all, we must not give way to pessimism for we have his promise in today's gospel, 'And look, I am with you always; yes, until the end of time.'

Yours sincerely in Christ, the Redeemer.

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