

## **Address to St. Joseph's AGM**

**Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> September 2012**

### **1. Introduction:**

I would like to begin this address by giving thanks to my Provincial and his Council for appointing me to be Parish Priest of this vibrant, dynamic and challenging Parish. It isn't something I sought after but nor was I totally surprised. I say that because, sadly, our pool of likely candidates has got so small.

I want to take this opportunity to thank my own Carmelite community for giving me their support; Frs. Bob and Maurice have put up with me for just over a year, I hope they can hang on for another couple at least. I think I can say that we have worked well as a team, complimenting each other with our different gifts. I have asked Fr Bob to take responsibility for the areas left of the Church, in other words, Chalfont St Peter, Chalfont St Giles, Seer Green and Jordans. I take responsibility for the part of the parish on the right of the Church; Gerrards Cross, Stoke Poges, Denham, Tatling End and Iver Heath. Iver has its own mass centre, so to speak, in the Briggittine Convent; the sisters have their own chaplain who says mass for them and any of our Parishoners who wish to attend.

I would also like to thank Charles Whitehead, as Chair of the Parish Council, and the members of the Parish Council for all the work they do on your behalf and mine. It has been a privilege and pleasure to work with them over this past year, and I can honestly say that there is no way we priests could run this Parish without the present members of the Parish Council. I would like to thank my predecessor, Fr. Tony Parsons, for making my takeover so easy; in particular for the outstanding staff who work tirelessly for the Parish.

### **2. Looking back**

As some of you know this is not my first time in St. Joseph's; in fact it's my third incarnation. I last left here in 1991. It's interesting to come back after 20 years and see the similarities and differences. There are a lot of new faces but also a lot that are not so new; I don't mean old! Just familiar to me over the years! I can say that life in the Parish is that much busier now than it was twenty years ago; then we only had one member of staff helping us in the office. The Chalfont Fair has disappeared to be replaced by a simpler, lower-key Parish Day. To my delight I see that both the Furniture Market and The London Run have kept going. We should be very proud of both these two initiatives. The Catholic Women's League is still going strong, and now we have the St. Vincent de Paul's Society. These two organizations are the backbone of many Parishes, and they certainly are here. I notice too that there are prayer groups of various kinds still thriving in and outside the Parish. Prayer is the soul of any Parish, and as Carmelites, an Order blessed by so many Doctors of the Church, we should be encouraging people to pray. I am a little disappointed that our own Secular Order group which meets here once a month, is struggling to survive.

### 3. My priorities:

Just to share with you how I see my priorities as Parish Priest: -.

- First of all it is the Liturgy, and in particular the Sunday Eucharist. The Sunday Eucharist or Mass is the only experience the vast majority of our Parishioners have of the Parish; just one hour on a Sunday. It means that the Mass should be as well prepared as possible, both liturgically and otherwise. A Sunday Mass or Eucharist is a celebration; it is the celebration of the Lord's Supper, when we commemorate his passion, death and resurrection. It is an awesome event and I chose that adjective, awesome, very carefully. And because it is good news, because Christ is risen, and set us free, we should therefore celebrate the Eucharist as best we can. Normally, that will mean music and singing, if only the Gospel Acclamation and Holy, Holy. When we celebrate we sing, don't we? When we celebrate someone's birthday we don't say, 'Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you' do we, no, we sing it. 'Happy Birthday to you...' We can always improve on how we celebrate the Mass, no matter how good we think it is. I am delighted we shall be getting newcomers to the Mass. It is important to welcome people into our Church, to make them feel welcome, to acknowledge their presence.

While talking about liturgy and music in particular we have recently lost the services of Paul McCartney who had been directing the 11am choir. Paul has recently decided to resign. I want to thank you Paul, publically, for the work you have put into the choir over the years, not only here but in the other churches you have attended. You will be a hard act to follow, as they say. I can tell you that we are in the process of finding a new choirmaster.

We have now enough Eucharistic ministers. What we don't have enough of are Readers: there should be two readers for every Mass; one for the first reading and psalm the other for the second reading.

I will mention altar servers now. I want to thank Bernard Hodgson for all the work he has done for more than 20 years, in keeping our servers together. Bernard has recently retired from this task, and I have subsequently asked one of our younger parishioners, Oliver Bentley, if he will take responsibility for building up and training our pool of altar servers. I am pleased to say he has agreed to do this. He will be ably helped by two women from the parish.

If I have a negative observation about the mass it would be that late-coming has become a bad habit for too many people and families. Often the Mass begins when the Church is only a quarter full, but by the time of communion it is three quarters full.

Car-parking can be a problem at times. People park on the street when there is room in the car park.

- My second priority is care of the elderly, the housebound and the sick.

It is not always easy for us priests to visit all who are housebound on a regular basis; we do our best. However, we are grateful for the help given by the SVP and the many extraordinary ministers of the eucharist who visit the sick and housebound on a very regular basis. I would hope we can get more Eucharistic ministers to do this rewarding ministry.

- **Youth**

Youth are another priority. We have been blessed to have a full time youth worker for over twenty years; not the same one. Our present youth-worker is on maternity leave and will be coming back next year. In the meantime the Youth Management Team is doing its best to meet some of the needs of the youth in our parish.

Of all the categories in a Parish the youth are, in my experience, the most difficult to minister to; not that they are a problem in themselves, but getting them to Church or functions is difficult. This is not just our problem or challenge; all churches of all denominations have the same problem. I know it is a concern for many parents. You struggle to keep your children in church once they have reached a certain age, which seems to be getting younger and younger. You are competing against the lure of a secular society that has little or no time for the Church. I could spend the next hour addressing this particular challenge, obviously I don't have that much time, but suffice to say we as a Church will continue to do what we can to help.

The other day I was approached by the Rev Jim King from St. Peter's Parish Church; he asked if we, the Catholic Church, would be interested in joining forces with the other Churches to do more for our 16+ plus age group. He insisted to me that none of the Churches were really able to do much for this age group, including the Baptists. I told him we would like to help. Within the Parish we had a meeting for interested parents to discuss what we ourselves could do. We didn't come up with any magic formulas, but we are trying and we will continue to try to reach out and meet the needs of your young people.

- **Schools/Education**

Linked with the theme of youth is that of our schools and education. We have our own infant and primary school. I have picked up that the school has gone through a difficult period some years ago, but now with a new head and a hard working, committed board of governors, things are really looking up.

I wasn't here long when I noticed that the vast majority of our pupils leaving St. Joseph's were going to the Community College here in Chalfont St Peter. I wondered what had happened in the 20 years since I was last here when the majority of our children were going to St Bernard's in High Wycombe. I must admit I still haven't fully understood why but some reasons became obvious, and the one of transport in particular. Twenty years ago there was free transport for everyone but that is no longer the case. I suppose in an ideal world we would have Catholic Secondary or Grammar Schools in every village in the country, unfortunately, we don't live in an ideal world. We do however, have Catholic Senior schools in High Wycombe, Slough and Rickmansworth. It does mean that now our children do have to get up earlier to get to these schools. However, if I can put this in some sort of perspective, when I was in Malawi, Africa, I would often walk along the road, and inevitably people would come and join me, including children. There were two brothers who walked with me on a few occasions. When I asked one of them what he wanted to be when he grew up he said a doctor. When I asked him how long does it take him to get to school, he said two hours, on foot; he couldn't afford a bike, even though his grandfather was a church minister. Now, I know that that's Africa and

not England but sometimes it is good to realise how well served we are with schools, including Catholic Schools.

I know that there is talk of starting a Catholic Free School in the local area. However, when I approached the Bishop about this his spokesperson, Mgr. Kevin McGinnell, told me the position of the Diocese has not changed: 'The diocesan position is unequivocal : the Trustee has provided Catholic education in the area and any attempt at a free school would threaten current provision.' Fortunately, the situation regarding Catholic education has taken a sudden turn for the better, insofar as 20 of our children this year are now going to the Catholic St. Joan of Arc School in Rickmansworth, plus some going to St Bernard's, Slough. When you take into account that a good proportion of children in our school are not Catholic, it means that for the first time in years the majority of our children are going on to Catholic schools. We need to build on this. I have been invited by St Joan of Arc to meet the Head Teacher and will encourage him to do what he can to offer more places to our pupils. I intend also to visit the Head Teacher of St. Bernard's, now called St. Michael's, High Wycombe, and encourage him to attract more of our pupils next year.

I ask you to be patient and understanding. But pleased by reassured we are doing what we can to encourage our children to go to Catholic schools.

- **Finance**

Another priority area is Finance, but I am going to leave this to Mr John Forte when he gives his report shortly after mine. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him and Fr. Bob, also Tony de Vletter and Dan Taylor, as well as the other members of the Finance Committee for all your hard work and commitment to help with the finances of this parish. While on the subject of money, I would like to thank all those who give up a couple of hours of their Sunday evenings to count our Sunday collections.

**4. Plans for the future:**

- **Centenary: Church, Parish Centre, Cemetery, Gardens.**

The first item I think of when planning for the future is the Church Centenary. The Church was built in 1913 and consecrated in 1915. The centenary is fixed from the date of consecration; 1915-2015. I couldn't believe my luck when asked to take over as PP at this time. I see it as a wonderful opportunity to prepare the Church and surroundings and to mark this historic date in a way that will be fitting and dignified. We consulted the Parish for ideas, and following the feedback have formed three Committees. One Committee is looking at our Church and another at our Centre, which will include the cemetery and garden, and a third group, the history of the Parish. When plans are ready we shall then show them to you for your consideration. This may not be until early next year. There will also be a calendar of social and spiritual events, including pilgrimages.

- **Pastoral Area**

Another area of future concern is what is called the 'Pastoral Area'; formerly known as a Deanery; in other words a collection of Parishes. We belong to the SE Bucks Pastoral Area, consisting of 4 Parishes: Chesham, Chesham Bois, Little Chalfont our ourselves. The Bishop wrote to the Pastoral

Area Council recently to tell us that when the three Priests now in charge at Chesham, Chesham Bois and Little Chalfont retire, and all of them are 80+, he will only be replacing them with one Priest. He has asked us to come up with a strategic plan to prepare for this fairly imminent eventuality. Just to share with you, the Bishop wondered if we might not build a new Church in Amersham. A Committee has just been formed to look into this and come up with suggestions by this time next year.

As it stands it will not affect us. However, from a Carmelite viewpoint, we are living in fragile times. I am going to a meeting in Dublin on Wednesday next to look at the issue of personnel in our houses. Many of our friars are elderly and others are not well. However, we have now got a flow of vocations, with one Priest ordained this year, three students, three novices and two ready to enter the novitiate; we also have one Priest who left us asking to return. If this flow continues then the future looks more certain, but we cannot guarantee this. I don't think we shall be directly affected in the near future.

#### - **Adult formation & Leadership**

The third and last area for future concern is that of adult formation. This Church needs more people to take on leadership roles, particularly in catechesis, RCIA, marriage preparation, and sacramental preparation. Sometimes I feel I am right on the edge of my capabilities, and I know I speak for the other priests when I say this. It would be such a help to have more leaders in the Parish; people to take on more responsibility for planning, preparing liturgy, sacraments and meetings. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Joan Barnham, our Parish Administrator, who takes such much work on her own shoulders. In spite of that, we Priests are stretched. This is a demanding Parish, our Parishoners want the best, and rightly so, but there is a limit to our time and energy.

However, to become a leader, you should have undergone a substantial course of studies; I would suggest a minimum of two years. There are opportunities to do this in various places. I recently went with two of our Parishoners to a Centre for adult education in Tooting Bec, S W London. There we met people of all ages engaged in studies about the Church and God. One impressive woman had three young children yet still found time to do this. Where there is a will there is a way. I would like to encourage those of you who can to think about committing yourselves to study for a couple of years, with the possibility of assuming some kind of responsibility for catechetics in the Parish. Sometimes I ask myself if we should not have a Permanent Deacon or two.

One of the reasons why the Gold Hill Baptist Church and St James' are so successful and dynamic, is because they have so many trained and professional leaders. Why can't we have the same? Maybe we shall have to find more money to pay someone who wants to become a leader; I don't know, right now I am just thinking out loud. However, I do see adult formation or education as the way forward.

## **5. Conclusion**

Thank you for coming. Thank you for your support of us Carmelite priests, and of the Parish. I can honestly say that we have one of the best Parishes in the Diocese. I don't say that because we have so much natural talent, or an abundance of resources, of money and people, but because we are a friendly Parish. I was talking to a Parishoner after mass recently who was thinking of moving away

but in the end decided not to, because she said; 'where else would I find a Parish like this.' We are in this together. Let us strive together to make our Parish an even better one, for the greater praise and glory of God.