

Eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners,

The diocesan clergy of the Archdiocese of Birmingham spent forty-eight hours at a residential in-service gathering at Woodland Grange, a conference centre/hotel in rural Warwickshire near the Midland resort town of Leamington Spa. We were invited to reflect on our own identity as priests. We were also challenged to consider what the role of the Catholic priest is in the secular world of today. You can well imagine that many of those present at the gathering have been priests for a long time, the majority have celebrated their silver jubilees of ordination and a considerable number have been priests for half a century. Even though most of the priests had been in the seminary and exercised their ministry in the years after the Second Vatican Council, all of us recognised how much the Church had changed in our life time and were equally aware that the world and society has undergone an even greater transformation. But there was the recognition that there have been priests playing an essential role in the Church's life since the great mission of evangelisation was launched on the first Pentecost Sunday in the very city where Jesus had been put to death a mere six weeks earlier.

Our speakers helped us to reflect on what was essential to the priestly character and mission in every age and century. That call from the Lord to follow him, that request that we preach the Good News to *all nations*, that we celebrate as Jesus told us on the night before he died *in memory of him*, that we create, maintain and sustain communities – however small – and gather disciples so they can hear the Word of God together and share the banquet of the Eucharist. This was what Jesus' first disciples did in Jerusalem within weeks of his death, this is what priests have done down the centuries and this is what those gathered at Woodland Grange are still doing today. Priests are men of conviction, generous with their time and their energy, and as people who, despite their very obvious human weaknesses and the enormous variety of their characters, strive to love and serve their people on account of the Lord.

What was good about the gathering was that, conscious of the maelstrom of change which is transforming our world at an accelerating rate, and that the lives of all our parishioners are as rudderless as we often feel our own to be, we focused on what has been essential to the Catholic priesthood in every age. This was not only reassuring but of great assistance in answering the question every priest is asking today as to how we carry our mission into an increasingly uncertain future. Fidelity to the values of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus, the humility to seek instruction and guidance from the Church, our mother, and a regular recollection of the promises we made at ordination all help us to keep focused on our mission and reassured as to what is essential about our identity. Pope John XXIII was not specifically cited, but the spirit of the gathering and the collective sense of purpose at its close was that, together with our people, we priests should read the signs of the times in the light of the gospels.

Father Patrick