

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear parishioners,

Next week across the diocese the priests from the various deaneries will be holding a day-long meeting concerning their sense of their own identity in these fast-changing times. The changes that impact on our lives are not dissimilar to those which are shaping family life in every part of the country – the smart devices in all our homes, parental supervision of their children’s access to the internet, their own use of mobile phones, as well as the work/life balance which has been with us for a couple of generations now. Priests will be more acutely aware of changes at the heart of the Church: the new theological insights which have emerged from the Second Vatican Council and are taking root in our seminaries, colleges and houses of formation; the evolving shape of our liturgy and the new understandings of the purpose of worship that are changing as our congregations become more multi-cultural; and the visible decline in religious practice in numerical terms as well as the marginalisation of religious faith in a society which is increasingly defined as secular. The scandals which have emerged within the ranks of the clergy over the past quarter of a century and which have hit us in successive waves, the fact that our own diocese was singled out for an in-depth State sponsored official inquiry into the way our institutions handled the crimes of sexual abuse, and the forthcoming encounter between Pope Francis and the heads of episcopal conferences from across the world in the coming weeks combine to keep the spotlight focused on a history of events in the life of the Church, local and international, that we might prefer to forget.

The profile of priestly identity in contemporary Church and society needs to be set against this complex background. I have every confidence that this period of reflection for the diocesan clergy, launched by our Archbishop last June, being continued at local level through the deanery meetings next Tuesday 12 February, and then brought to some sort of conclusion at the Priests’ Day at Edgbaston on Tuesday 19 February when we are being asked to assess the notion, much bandied about currently, of “clericalism”. Are we a caste? Do we have a specific identity? What is our current profile? Is it one which adequately defines the nature of our mission and calling? Do we need to enlarge it so that it embraces the complexity of the world in which we exercise our vocation? Have we asked those we serve to help us understand more deeply what they expect of us? I am sure that our congregations would be more than happy to share their views with us and to suggest to us what their expectations are. The fact that pews are still occupied, that two hundred copies of the Bulletin disappear each week, that the phone still rings, and the doorbell too, suggest that most people, most of the time, are happy with what their priests are doing, need their services and feel blessed to have such dedicated ministers of religion. And there lies the rub: if it is our relationship with God we are concerned about, the priest gains his credibility and respect from the way in which he proclaims the kingdom of God and the consistency with which he pursues its values.

Father Patrick