

Parish Priest's Report to the AGM

St. Joseph's 29th September 2013

Greetings one and all. I bring you greetings from the Holy Father, whom those on our pilgrimage to Rome saw and heard last Wednesday. He gave us his blessing. I have never seen so many people at a Papal audience; he is so popular that they are considering two audiences a week! I prayed for you and yours while in St. Peters over the spot where our first Pope was buried.

I would like to begin by saying what a good parish we have. I don't say that in any proud sense, to win praise or to flatter; I say it because it is true. I met a lady who is leaving the parish with her husband to go abroad; she told me how much she will miss this Parish, and what wonderful people we have here. I agreed with her. Obviously it is not perfect, it could be better. This hasn't just happened, it's taken years to get to this, indeed 98 years to be precise. In two years time we shall be celebrating the first centenary of our Parish. It is an moment in our Parish's history that we should really celebrate. First of all, and above all, it is to give thanks to God for all the blessings He has bestowed upon us over all these years. It is also a time to look back and to give thanks to all those people who have contributed so much to make this Parish the way it is. I was privileged to be here at the 75th anniversary and now I am here for the 100th. Some of those who were here at the 75th are no longer with us, but they are not forgotten. We owe it to them to mark our centenary with a worthy and dignified celebration, to give thanks for the past. At the same time, we have a responsibility to prepare for the future, for the next 100 years.

First of all I would like to share with you what we have done so far in our plans for the centenary. We have set up several committees to prepare for this special occasion, which will begin in January 2015 and end in December 2015. A history group is in the process of looking at our past. I don't want to say too much now because, to be honest, at this stage there isn't much to tell you. I hope there will be presentations in a variety of forms, including exhibitions, photos, interviews with long serving parishioners and some kind of DVD presentation. There is another committee which has been assigned to look at the cemetery. I know it sounds like a dead end task but you'd be surprised how many are dying to get on the committee... (pause for laughter!). We want to improve the graveyard, and have a special blessing of the graves during the year, and invite people to come to this who have relatives in the cemetery. We shall also be improving the memorial cross and make the names of the deceased soldiers more legible.

There is a spirituality committee that is planning all sorts of events throughout the year. It is important that we do not forget to pray and to thank God in this way. Prayer is at the very centre of our lives as Christians, it is the oil that keeps this Parish moving. Also, we shall be staging some social events during the year, and we shall try to make the Parish Day particularly special. Our school, being our future, should be involved as much as possible. The highlight of our celebrations will be the Mass on 29th July, celebrated by our Bishop Peter Doyle. We would expect a large number of people to turn up and there will be special invitations to past parishioners, ministers from other churches and civic leaders. Apropos of civic leaders, In 1990, at the 75th anniversary, the head of the S. Bucks District Council, who was a Roman Catholic, attending the celebration. Which prompts me

to encourage some of you to get into local politics: do we have any Councillors at this time, I don't think so.

You will know by now of our plans to reorder the Church and Parish Centre and Hall. I told you in a recent letter that we have been working on this for at least 18 months. The process has taken longer than we expected but it has been thorough and I am pleased with the efforts we have made. I chose a committee made up of people who have been in the parish for a long time and are well known to most people: Nan Jacobson, Tom Tipler, Mike Gregory, Kasia Misiewicz, and more recently, we discovered we had an ex-architect in our midst, Leni Infante. It was important that they should be, for the most part, well known parishioners who have been here a long time, because I wanted them to represent you, confident that if they were happy with the proposals then most of you would be. These people and others have worked hard over a long period of time to come to the point where we are now. We are in the process of choosing four or five architectural firms to whom we shall give our brief. Then when we have eventually chosen one design we shall exhibit it for everyone to see. It will be your chance to have your say, and I promise you if there are consistent objections by a number of parishioners then we shall amend the plans accordingly, but I would be very surprised if that should happen. All along we have consulted with the chosen representatives of this Parish, especially the Parish Council, so that at every stage we have got their approval.

We shall be adding a new Parish Centre and Hall to the Church, so that it forms one building complex. We are doing this in order to make a good community an even better one. With a new entrance, and Centre, people will have plenty of space to congregate after mass. It is a bold move but not unique. We were advised by our Centre-Hall Committee, led by Fr. Bob, to consider building a new Centre, as it would be a waste of money improving the present Centre and Hall due to fundamental problems with the design. Almost every member of the Parish Council travelled down to see St. Dunstan's Church in Woking, which has a Centre and Hall attached to the Church. We were inspired by what we saw and are confident it will work here. I won't go into details now because, in the first place, I don't have many, but secondly, you will have a much better idea when you see the architect's plan. When will that be? At a guess we are looking at several months down the road, sometime in the New Year, probably in the spring. And, as I mentioned, it will be an opportunity for you to have your say. We were told by someone who should know that it will be at least a year before any building work will start. So, we have plenty of time to rearrange mass venues, but I would hope Sunday mass could be celebrated in the school.

Of course, all this is going to cost money. So soon we shall have to begin fundraising. We have had a bit of good fortune as one of our parishioners left us her house. In her will she left it to 'The Carmelite Provincial Fund for the specific use of St. Joseph's RC Church.' The matter is still in the hands of lawyers who are discussing with our Carmelite Provincial how this person's wishes can be carried out.

All this work is to celebrate our Centenary. Our focus should be on the future of our Parish, and that is not really about bricks and mortar but about people, you and me. We are living in a secular and materialistic society; a society that has become really liberal; God is being pushed more and more to the margins, Gospel values are being eroded. All of us are affected by the world we live

in, consciously or unconsciously, we are influenced by our peers, and this is particularly so of the young.

It can be very discouraging to see so few young people at mass, particularly teenagers. It is not as if the Church isn't trying. I know many parents worry a great deal when their children don't go to mass. It starts early, this non attendance, and it seems to be getting earlier. Of course on First Holy Communion Day, there is a great celebration. It is probably the biggest and best we have in the year; the Church is packed, the children well behaved and looking beautiful, the girls in their mini wedding dresses. But for too many of these children their First Holy Communion is their last Holy Communion. Some years later it is time for Confirmation. Again there is a great celebration, our youth worker, Michael Ellul, could not do more to prepare the teenagers for this special sacrament. But like First Holy Communion, only worse, you won't see most of those children at Mass the following Sunday. So, what do we do? What we mustn't do is despair, or beat ourselves up for failing. Parents never underestimate the influence of peer pressure; in some ways, you don't have a chance. However, all is not lost, as I shall now try to explain.

Recently, we have begun a new programme for Baptism, which we are sure will have a positive effect on future generations of families. We realised that if the faith is to be passed on to the next generation then we must prepare not just the child but also, and above all, the parents. This we see as the way forward; to focus on the parents, to help them to understand that they are the first and the best teachers in the ways of faith of their child, as indeed they are. And so, with this new programme, we require the parents to come with their babies to the 9 am mass for three consecutive Sundays. On the first Sunday they are introduced to the parishioners, then given a bible, and then, instead of the creed, we all renew our baptismal promises. After each mass the parents come together with a small team of our parishioners to talk about their faith and what it means to have their child baptised. We have worked with three groups of parents over the past three or four months and, I can tell you, it is making a difference. There has been positive feedback all round. We are now sowing the seeds which may take another generation to bear fruit, but we have begun. I would like to thank all those who are involved in this new baptismal programme; thank you for your work and dedication; I thank you and thank you on my behalf of all the parishioners of St. Josephs.

In this connection I would like to mention the good work done by the children's liturgy on Sunday mornings. I told the catechists recently that many parents have no trouble bringing their children to the 9am mass, because they look forward to their own special liturgy of the word. When the children go out they are made aware of the theme of the readings, and the younger ones make drawings. I even suspect that the enthusiasm of the children is responsible for bringing some parents to Church. I only wish we could do the same at Denham. I am sure it would encourage even more families to come, but maybe we have to wait, as there isn't much room right now.

While still on the subject of the Church, we recently began to have Mass Representatives at each mass. Their role is to greet people as they come in, and to hand out hymn books when necessary and other bits of information at the end of mass. It is so important to make people feel welcome; we don't want newcomers to the parish not coming back, because they find us unfriendly, that no one spoke to them. From now on the Mass Representatives are also to read the notices at the end of mass. So, things are becoming more organised. I would like to see more collectors at the

offertory, right now the collections are taking too long; we need four collectors not two at most masses, we should also bet better collecting boxes; I am aware that the slot or opening in the present ones are a little too small; maybe if we get bigger openings we'll get more money (pause for more laughter). I want to thank the Mass representatives for getting to Church in good time and doing a good job at welcoming people.

While on the subject of good timing, maybe I could just say something about coming to mass on time. I suspect late-coming is a habit and habits are hard to change; it is always the same people who are late. And this has repercussions for parking; as cars are often abandoned rather than parked when you are late. I sometimes see people coming into Church 15 minutes and more after mass has started. They have missed the liturgy of the word, which is so important, indeed it is a vital part of the mass. We are not just nourished by bread and wine, but also by the Word of God. The ideal scenario is to come to mass at least 10 minutes early, there is then no stress about car parking, you have time to read the newsletter, maybe have a look at the notice-board, before focussing on the mass that is about to begin.

I would also like to see people sitting nearer the front, particularly people with children. There is much more atmosphere at the front and the children can see more, they will be less distracted; also, if they begin their lives in the Church sitting at the front, then they will probably continue that practice. Please let me share with you that one of the most frustrating aspects for a priest is to celebrate mass where the majority of the people are in the back pews. I know you don't mean it, but it is implying to the priest: we do not really want to be here, we do not really want to take part, and worst of all, we do not really want to hear what you have to say. I know this is a massive generalisation, but this is how we priests often feel. Whereas, by contrast, when the Church is filled from the front, we can notice the difference in atmosphere; it greatly encourages this priest and I can say, most priests. No one is asking you to sit in the front pew, but don't always occupy the back pews. We are creatures of habit, and I realise it is hard to break a habit. We priests often identify people by where they sit; 'Mrs. Smith, you know she sits halfway down on the right, at the end of the pew; or 'Mr Jones, you know, he sits right at the back on the left hand side.' It is good to get out of bad habits and adopt new better ones.

Now that's enough of having a go. The future of our Parish is our young children and particularly our school. I was surprised to hear from the new head, that there is a high proportion of non-catholics at the school; in other words, there are not enough catholic children attending the school. I am not going to preach about this, as I understand why some parents chose not to send their children to our school; it is not usually selfish motives, but rather, because they want the best for their children. However, I would encourage you to think again about the value and worth of a good Catholic education from the beginning. We now have a new head, as I said, Mrs Josephine Marsh, who as deputy head in her old school, which is twice the size of ours, was in great part responsible for it becoming outstanding; I have every confidence she will do the same with our school. So, we should all try to support her. We have an excellent teaching body and board of Governors. Can I just say a word about the Governors. These are people who give up hours of their time to attend long meetings; Governors meetings have been known to go on beyond 11pm. Yet they do this willingly, out of the generosity of their hearts. They are the unsung heroes of our school. Incidentally, I am one of them! (pause for applause!).

One of the problems I first encountered when I came here was the number of our children who leave St. Joseph's and go on to non-catholic schools; particularly to the local Academy in Chalfont St. Peter. Again, I can see why: it is convenient, being local, and has an excellent head, and marked 'outstanding' by Ofsted, the schools inspectorate. This year only five of our children went to Catholic schools: 3 to St. Michael's, High Wycombe, and 2 to Joan of Arc, Rickmansworth. None to St. Bernard's Grammar School, in Langley. Again, I understand there is a problem of transport; what's on offer is inefficient and/or expensive. However, where there is a will there is a way. Catholic parents do have a responsibility to have their children educated in good Catholic schools. We are blessed to have some outstanding schools in the area. I do not know the solution to the problem of transport. Maybe someone might have some ideas how we can transport our children to Catholic senior schools in a way that is convenient and not too expensive.

I would just like to say a few words about an entity known as the Pastoral Area Council. As you may or may not know, St. Joseph's forms part of a diocesan area, formerly known as a Deanery, now called a Pastoral Area; in fact, ours is called the South East Bucks Pastoral Area. Our patron is Blessed Mary Ward. The Council is made up of representatives from all four parishes in Chesham, Chesham Bois, Little Chalfont and our own, meeting on a regular basis throughout the year. Recently, it was given the task of planning a strategy: how to prepare three parishes, Chesham, Chesham Bois and Little Chalfont, for the time in the not too distant future, when there will be only one priest. I am grateful to the members of the Pastoral Area Council: apart from myself there is Charles Whitehead, who is also our Parish Council Chairman, Suzanna Lawrence and Joan Barham. I am the Dean of the area; not out of any merit, but simply because the other two Priests are over 80.

We should always try and think of the bigger Church; we are part of a Deanery or Pastoral Area and on a bigger scale, we are part of the Diocese of Northampton. We should never be satisfied with the Church as it is. One area that should concern us all is the division between the Churches; within the borders of our Parish there are at least eight Anglican churches, one Baptist, one United Reform and one Methodist. A good Catholic is concerned about unity, is striving in whatever way they can to bring about unity. I mention this because we need to support any efforts being made to make us one. This kind of work takes years, and seems to be getting nowhere, but it is essential work. I would ask you to then to support any initiatives our Church makes in this area.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the various organisations that go to make up our parish; some of them have been going a long time, like the CWL and the SVP. The Furniture Market and the London and Slough Runs are unique to our Parish; all staffed by volunteers. Without their generous help these charitable bodies could not exist. I would encourage anyone who can to volunteer for these two worthwhile organisations. Our flower ladies work hard to keep our church looking beautiful on Sundays, and especially so for weddings; many people on seeing our flower arrangements think they are professionals. The Events Team are to be thanked for all the fund raising they do on behalf of the Parish; the Parish Day and other social events wouldn't happen without them; so well done to you all and thank you. Our Church is kept spotlessly clean by our cleaners; often people come into the Church and remark how clean it is; it is a credit to those who do this work week in and week out. Finally, I would like to thank our staff: Joan Barham, Helena Sullivan, Karen Rogers, Janet Eshelby our cook, June ?, our cleaner and Michael Ellul our Youth Worker. Thank you for all you do in and for the Parish. Recently, our secretary-receptionist, Therese

Lawton, retired after many years. On your behalf I want to thank her for her dedication, efficiency and welcoming manner. We are delighted to have found Karen Peters to take her place. When I took over from Fr. Tony Parsons, two years ago, I told him how grateful I was for the people he employed to work here; we are so blessed to have you.

Looking ahead to the following year, there are some key areas that we need to develop. I have asked three parishioners, Charles Whitehead, Sally Taylor and Joan Barham to join myself and Fr. Bob in forming a pastoral council. What is this exactly? It is a group of people who will help me to think and reflect and make decisions about every aspect of our parish, including catechesis, liturgy, ecumenism, evangelization and sacraments. I need help and support in these important areas. I would ask your prayers for our first meeting in a few weeks time.

The liturgy is one of those areas that is so important in any Church. People will come back to Church if they have had a nice experience; now although we are not in the business of entertaining, nonetheless we can make our services as uplifting as possible. Music and singing are central to this, but not the only factors. I would like to express my sincere thanks on behalf of everyone in St. Josephs to Paul McCarthy, now retired, for all he has done for our choir over the years, in the same breath I would like to thank Charles Watters and Mary Keenan for all their hard work and dedication to music and the choirs. I would also like to thank Richard Cottle in Denham; I know that some people from this area go to our Church in Denham because of Richard and his music. I thank Nan Jacobsson for the 9 am choir and Micahel Ellul for his musical lead at youth masses. I am endeavouring to form just one choir for the 11 o'clock but first I am trying to find some kind of professional choir master, and to date that has not been easy. Another area that needs developing is readers: I am grateful to the readers we have but we need more and I feel there needs to be better preparation. Finally, altar servers; we badly need more of these and I shall endeavour to get more.

Finally, a few words about us Carmelites. I know I speak for Frs. Bob and Maurice when I say that we feel truly privileged to serve in such a parish. We ask forgiveness for our inevitable shortcomings but rely on your prayerful support. Thank you too for your consistent kindness and generosity especially at Christmas and Easter. Those of you who have been here many years will know that we have what we call a Provincial Chapter, or a meeting, every three years. Our next one occurs next May. It is possible that there will be changes in personnel after this meeting, we hope not but I just want to let you know that there is that possibility.

Finally, finally, I should like to say a big thanks to all the members of our Parish Council, to Charles Whitehead its Chair, John Bates, the Vice-Chair, and all those who turn up faithfully to help make this place to be the great Parish it is. Charles Whitehead told me a few weeks ago that he wishes to step down, so I shall be looking for a new Chair of the Parish Council. We owe him a great deal for all he has done over many many years. So let us keep working over the next 12 months, let us keep faithful to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We have a great Parish; you make it so. May God bless you and all the efforts you make.