

## **Fr. PAUL'S REVIEW OF THE PARISH 2011.**

Last year I hoped that as a result of all the major building works to prevent water penetration, we could have some time to rest from our labours as regards works on the church buildings. However, as you will hear in our various reports during the Annual Parochial Church Meeting to follow this Mass, the best laid plans can go wrong. Nevertheless, in June we were able as a parish to join together in celebration of my Silver Jubilee Anniversary of Priesthood. It was a truly wonderful evening and I was so pleased to see large numbers of the congregation and various guests joyfully sharing this occasion for which I do thank you. May I particularly reiterate my thanks for the Long cased clock in celebration of this event.

It is in remembering this celebration of priesthood that brings me to a most important matter – the ordination of Women to the Episcopacy. From comments that many of you have made to me, I am aware that there is confusion amongst you as to what is actually going on, due in no little part to biased and inaccurate information from the media. Indeed, it is important that everyone understand this matter as it affects this, and every parish, for as a result of the General Synod's decisions last this year, the Church of England is now facing the greatest change in its existence since the Reformation. I therefore felt that today I should respond to your requests for information and try to explain to you how we have come to this situation, the decisions that have been taken by General Synod and the consequences of those decisions.

To understand the situation that we now find ourselves in, we need to go back to 1992 when General Synod came to the conclusion that there was no reason why women should not be ordained to Priesthood - but did not find sufficient grounds in Scripture or tradition as to why women should be ordained. Synod nevertheless decided to allow women to be ordained as priests, whilst accepting that there would be clergy and laity who could not in all conscience accept this innovation. Indeed, many clergy and laity left the Church of England at that time. However, in order to encourage other priests and laity to remain in the Church of England, General Synod also passed two documents called 'Bonds of Peace' and an 'Act of Synod'. By these instruments, parishes were able to decline the ministry of an ordained woman by passing either, or both, Resolutions 'A' and 'B'. Those parishes who also passed

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Resolution 'C' could further petition to receive the ministry of one of the three Provincial Episcopal Visitors who were consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Further, the Act of Synod stated that '***the integrity of differing beliefs and positions concerning the ordination of women to the priesthood should be recognised and respected***' (*Preamble 3.iii*). The Manchester Bishops Meeting in February 1993 further stated that '***there are those who doubt the theological and/or ecclesiological basis of the decision, and we accept that these are views which will continue to be held within the Church of England, and that those who hold them remain valued and loyal members of the Anglican family***' (*paragraph 4*). Now, it has always been held that Holy Orders are not those of the Church of England or of the Anglican Communion but are of the ministry of the Universal Church. For this reason, the Church of England insisted that this innovation be tested and '***seen within a much broader and longer process of discernment and reception within the whole Church under the Spirit's guidance***' (*Bonds of Peace section 2*). Thus, the matter of women's ordination could not be declared to be settled beyond any shadow of doubt until it was received by the '***whole church***' and not just the Church of England. Meanwhile, Anglicans holding different views, were urged to go on respecting each other's integrity, allowing room for conscience to be protected and remaining in the '***highest degree of communion as possible***' (*Act of Synod section 3ii*). Only in this way could the Anglican understanding of itself as part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church be maintained. The Church of England could thus continue as an accepting Church, tolerant of dissent.

More recently, the call for women to now be ordained as Bishops has taken centre stage in the business of General Synod. Most opponents of the ordination of women recognised and accepted that if there were women priests then there must be women bishops, even though they could not recognise the validity of their Orders. However, for this innovation to occur, orthodox Catholics said that provision needed to be made whereby they could continue in the Church of England. Thus, their report 'Consecrated women?' was an attempt to engage seriously with the issue of women bishops. The 'free province' solution as outlined in this report would have

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avoided the mess we are now in for, by creating a new province within the Church of England but where the ministry of women priests or bishops was not exercised, those needs would have been met. At the same time it would have made it possible to have women bishops in the provinces of Canterbury and York without any restrictions whatsoever on their ministry. This idea of a 'free' or 'third' province was not a new idea but accorded with existing practice elsewhere. There would have been a degree of separation - but also much collaboration in mission to our nation. It was a solution which would have been comparatively simple to implement and would have been to the benefit of the whole Church of England, drawing a line under the time-consuming debates and setting both parties free to proclaim the Good News. However, for reasons best known to the powers that be, this proposal has never received serious consideration through debate in Synod. Nonetheless, despite the failure to give due consideration to those proposals, traditionalists did not respond by 'taking their bats home', rather they consistently tried to engage with others to find a way forward. The July 2008 Synod considered a range of possible types of legislation that would have given orthodox Catholics and Evangelicals the provision whereby they could stay in the Church of England. Yet every possible provision was rejected by Synod who then passed the matter to a Revision Committee for them to see what solutions could be found. However, as the chairman of that committee reported, they felt that they were unable to come up with a solution.

With that background information, we now come to the General Synod meeting held in July last year. Contrary to the ill informed and misleading information given on the radio and television, the debate was not about whether women could be ordained as bishops, as this had been agreed at the Synod of 2008, but about whether there should be any legal provision for those opposed to this innovation that would have secured a future for orthodox Catholics and Evangelicals. As you know, Bishop Christopher spoke in support of the amendments proposed by the Archbishop's of York and Canterbury, urging Synod to make provision for opponents of this innovation. Synod however, rejected the Archbishop's amendment and instead decided on a non-binding and voluntary 'Code of Practice'. In reality this means that

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General Synod has given notice that the period of reception outlined in the 1992 legislation is to be summarily terminated, even though a consensus has not achieved either in the Church of England, the Anglican Communion or with Rome or Orthodoxy. Further, once the Canon to ordain women to the Episcopate is promulgated, the documents called 'Bonds of Peace' and an 'Act of Synod' that allowed the Resolutions A and B will be completely revoked, as will Resolution C that allowed for consecrated Provincial Episcopal Visitors who were to speak for those who remained opposed to such innovations (see Act of Synod 5 [4]). Thus, a parish will then no longer be able to decline the sacramental ministry of women priests or bishops. All that is being offered to opponents is a vague 'Code of Practice' and whilst details of this are still being worked out, it is unlikely to provide opponents with the security that enables them to continue in the Church of England and will be sexist in its operation. For opponents of the innovation, the question remains that, as binding provisions were made before but never fully implemented, how can anyone trust a Code of Practice when it doesn't have legal force? Indeed, the draft Code of Practice will not be available before the Diocesan Synods vote on the measure and the actual Code cannot come into being until the Measure to ordain women bishops becomes law. Thus, opponents would point out that approving the Measure will be like signing a blank cheque! So the legislation permitting Women bishops and the ending of the 'Resolutions' will signal the demise of the tolerant and inclusive church which 'Bonds of Peace' and the 'Act of Synod' had bravely brought into being.

As regards a timetable for all this to come into effect, the Legislation as I have outlined above, but without a draft Code of Practice, will now be remitted to the Dioceses for consideration. If approved by the majority of Diocesan Synods, it will return to the General Synod for the Final Drafting Stage who will then refer it to the House of Bishops. They in turn will return it for Final Approval to General Synod. General Synod will then vote for the last time on the proposals in their entirety by division of the three houses (bishops, clergy and laity) at which two thirds of each house has to approve in order to receive assent. The Ecclesiastical Committee of

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Parliament will then examine the proposals and, if agreed, they will be given the Royal Assent. Although not set in stone, nevertheless the likely date on which the Canon will be promulgated to enact all this will be February 2014 but any Code of Practice will not form part of the legislating Canon. After that date, women can be ordained as Bishops and all the Resolutions that have secured the place of orthodox Catholics and Evangelicals in the Church of England cease.

What will the likely consequences of the ordination of women to the episcopacy, without any meaningful provision for opponents, mean in reality? Well, every parishioner will need to consider realistically what the Church of England will look like in five years and then ask whether it will still be the place in which they can continue to feel at home. For those who wish to remain in the Church of England then of course they can continue to worship in their churches but must fully accept the ministry of women as priests or bishops in their parish church together with whatever may be enacted through synodical government in the future. However, many will not be able to do so. For orthodox Catholics, the Christian faith can develop in understanding - but not in a way that contradicts the core teaching of the Bible or the Apostles. Thus, for Catholics questions of the equality of the sexes has never been the issue; what has, is the understanding about the nature of the Church, the authority of the Church and the sacraments of salvation. With the ordination of women as bishops, a sacrament rift will open. This means that Priests who cannot live with these fundamental changes to Catholic Order will have to leave their homes, give up their stipend and accept a heavy loss of pension. For those laity who cannot accept a woman minister celebrating at the altar, they too will have to leave the parish in which they have been worshipping in for many years and which they have supported both through their work and financially. For both laity and clergy they will of course be experiencing enormous emotional and spiritual turmoil. Further, there are unlikely to be any new ordination candidates or Bishops from the Catholic wing. As for conservative evangelicals, perhaps the wealthiest group in our church, they are not likely to remain in a Church infected with what they see as secular liberalism whose attitude is now 'You can stay so long as you agree with us'.

The failure to provide statutory legislation for those who, in all conscience, cannot

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accept this innovation brings the Church of England to an unprecedented crisis, both theologically and pastorally. If I may now speak personally, it is of course not for me to tell anyone how they should respond to General Synod's decisions - but it is for me to give information about the various options and to support individual decisions. There are some who feel that with the elections of new members to General Synod, there is hope that the legislation will fail at the last stage. Yet I have to say that this would only delay rather than remove the matter, would only bring more frustration and prolong the agony. Indeed, I personally feel that this would be the least helpful development for I believe that the Church of England has spent far too much of its energy and time on this matter to the detriment of its mission and ministry. So if the legislation does proceed as anticipated, we will find that some will stay in the Church of England in which women priests and bishops exercise a ministry in all parishes. Then, some are looking to remain but as part of a new Society of St. Wilfrid and St. Hilda that seeks to continue within the Church of England but without women's ministry. However, this group is still an aspiration rather than a reality in that it still has to secure synodical approval for its structure and principles, those same principles which were previously turned down by the Revision Committee. Will Synod therefore reverse its previous decision that upheld the Revision Committee's report and thus perform a volte-face to grant this new group authority? Well, only time will tell but at present what is proposed does seem to be a short term solution that could fall at the first hurdle.

Locally, for the last two years Bishop Christopher has been meeting with a group of clergy and laity who remain opposed to these innovations. Maureen and I went along to represent this parish. In a conversation I had with him on Monday, the Bishop informs me that he is actively seeking to produce new provisions both within this Diocese and nationally for those who remain opposed to women as priests and bishops. These provisions would allow parishes such as ours to continue to decline the ministry of a women priest or bishop. I personally have absolutely no doubt of the good intentions or sincerity of Bishop Christopher – but it needs to be remembered that he is only one bishop on a bench of bishops who have previously refused to accept alternatives. As the Diocesan Bishop, he will be able to ensure that provision is made within Coventry Diocese but it very much remains to be seen

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as to whether he can persuade General Synod to now accept something that they have previously rejected. Further, I have to warn you that any diocesan provision would of course only remain in place whilst Bishop Christopher is our bishop. His successor, be it a male or female Bishop of Coventry, would **NOT** be bound to continue Bishop Christopher's provision.

In the light of General Synod's decisions, some people will feel that they have no choice but to leave the Church of England. Some have already joined the Roman Catholic Church so as to be able to continue their pilgrim path within a Church where they feel that they are both wanted and at home. Thus, in September, Shirley and Martin left us to join an existing local Roman Parish. Others have taken up the Pope's generous offer to join the new branch of the Roman Church called 'The Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham'. The Ordinariate is 'a new way of being church' within the Roman Communion whilst retaining its Anglican ethos. Indeed, five Bishops have already resigned from the Church of England to join this group and locally, Fr's Marcer, Burch and Pittam have done the same thing. The two John's left this parish to also join and I can tell you that to date within England; there are thirty seven branches of the Ordinariate of which the Coventry branch that meets at the Church of St. Joseph the Worker in Canley is but one. At Pentecost, Fr's Burch and Pittam will become the priests for this local group to serve the forty five laity who have left local Anglican parishes to join the group. These people represent the first wave to join the Ordinariate in this area but I anticipate that their numbers will continue to grow in the coming years as more people come to terms with the reality of the situation of the new Church of England that has women priests and bishops. Others will join an Orthodox community, like the one that worships in Rugby and is composed largely of Anglicans who left in 1992 when women were ordained Priests. However, the ones I worry about are those who will feel unable to deal with this matter any longer; who cannot accept a women minister at the altar but are uneasy about other options - and in response, simply give up worshipping in a church.

So I conclude by asking you to pray for all people in their decisions about their future Christian pilgrimage - but particularly for those who may be tempted to give up.