

SEEKING THE FACE OF CHRIST

**O my God teach my heart where and how to seek you,
where and how to find you ...
You are my God and you are my All
and I have never seen you.
You have made me and remade me,
you have bestowed on me
all the good things I possess,
still I do not know you ...
I have not yet done that for which I was made ...
Teach me to seek you
I cannot seek you unless you teach me
or find you unless you show yourself to me.
Let me seek you in my desire,
let me desire you in my seeking.
Let me find you by loving you,
let me love you when I find you.**

St Anselm of Canterbury

Icon used with kind permission of Aidan Hart www.aidanharticons.com The icon is at The Monastery of St Antony and St Cuthbert, Gatten, Shropshire



FACING THE FUTURE WITH CONFIDENCE

INTRODUCTION

My motto "Evangelii Nuntiandi" (Evangelisation in the Modern World) reminds us that the Church exists in order to evangelise and the first people to be evangelised are ourselves. Before ascending to the Father, Jesus told the disciples – 'As the Father sent me, so am I sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit.' (John 20: 21-22). It is God's Spirit that empowers our life and enables the mission of the Church.

Our world is very different from that of the first disciples. For many of us our world is different from the world in which we grew up. Rapid change is a characteristic of our society and there is no indication that it is going to slow down. New challenges emerge such as climate control and the care and protection of our environment. In all this the Church is called to be faithful to Christ and to go out to the whole world and proclaim the good news. We need to proclaim the Gospel in a language that people understand and live a life which brings healing and hope to the lives of others.

We need to face the future with confidence. To enable us do this we need a vision which finds expression in pastoral guidelines and informs the activities of all communities within the Diocese. In the shaping of the vision and the drawing up of pastoral guidelines, I invite you all to participate. Together we seek the face of Christ so that we mirror that face to others.

This document is a first step in a process of putting together a vision of the sort of Church the Lord is calling us to be. The areas covered are:

Made in the image and likeness of God
God in all things
The Communion of God's People
Revealing the face of Christ

My invitation to you is to consider these areas and see how they affect you in your mission whether it be in parishes, deaneries, schools, religious communities or other groups who contribute to the life of the Diocese. Once we have done this and communicated our joys and hopes, our fears and anxieties to one another then we can take further steps in drawing up a vision and guidelines that will give us and others reasons for living and for hoping.

Bishop of Clifton

WHO IS THIS PROCESS FOR?

It is hoped that as many people as possible will be involved in these reflections and the subsequent development of the Diocesan guidelines.

This booklet can be used in any way you wish. It can be used individually or as part of parish or school groups. The responses to the issues that are raised will form an important part of the future of our Diocese of Clifton. For example:

- **Parish Pastoral Councils might use part of this booklet in order to consider ways in which they could reflect upon their own parish pastoral plan;**
- **Deanery Pastoral Councils might use part of this booklet in order to consider ways in which they could reflect upon their own deanery pastoral guidelines;**
- **School groups;**
- **Religious communities;**
- **Parish groups;**
- **Diocesan Departments;**

If you are taking part in these sessions, through parish, school, religious community or other group, perhaps one person could be nominated to write notes and send in any responses.

WHERE TO SEND YOUR RESPONSES:

Written responses can be sent to:

"Seeking the Face of Christ"

St Ambrose, North Road, Leigh Woods, Bristol BS8 3PW.

Email responses can be sent to: seeking@cliftondiocese.com

There is a space on the reply page for you to fill in your name but you are very welcome to send in your responses anonymously.

Timeline

30 June 2007	Final deadline for feedback to the pastoral guidelines steering group
November 2007	Collation of feedback by steering group
January 2008	Formulation of draft proposals for further consultation which will form the basis of diocesan pastoral guidelines

HOW TO APPROACH THIS BOOKLET

In our busy lives the most urgent things often take precedence over the most important aspects of our lives. That would be a mistake in drawing up our diocesan pastoral guidelines. For example, some might think that our most pressing concern is how we organise our parish and deanery structures in the future when we have fewer priests than we have been accustomed to. Or it might be how we stay true to the Christian mission of our schools in the light of so much change brought about by government legislation. For others it might be how we face the challenge of the changing nature of the Church in the light of the Catholic immigration to our country. The possible points of departure are almost endless but the rush to action would be a mistake.

So the criticism could easily be made that this booklet is not practical enough as the basis for pastoral guidelines. To some extent that would be a valid criticism. However that is not what this is intended to be. The purpose of these reflections is to act as a springboard for consideration of the four aspects of the Bishop's introduction. It is the responses that are received from you which will be the basis for diocesan pastoral guidelines.

Therefore this booklet is divided into four chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of what sort of Church the Lord is calling us to be. Each section is only a small window opening onto the mystery of our Christian faith. Each is intended to lead to discussion which will focus us on practical ways in which we can make plans for our diocese. We must first reflect on what it means to be Christian in order to work out a structure for pastoral guidelines.

God showers his grace upon us so that we may become ever more deeply what God has made us in Baptism - the Body of Christ in the world. The four sections challenge us to reflect upon four central aspects of our distinctively Catholic vision of the world. First we believe that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God and second that God reveals himself in all things. Third that we are called to live and celebrate the reality that we form the communion of God's holy people, the Church. Fourth we are called to be a Church for others with the confidence to proclaim our faith, to reveal the face of Christ to the world.

At the end of each section are two questions, the response to which will inform the drawing up of diocesan pastoral guidelines.

What do you think God is calling you to do in your parishes, deaneries, schools, religious communities or other groups to make this a reality?

What do you think should be included in diocesan pastoral guidelines to enable parishes and deaneries to live their Christian calling?

HOW TO USE EACH SECTION

You may approach the study of this document in any way that is helpful, but the following method is suggested as an appropriate way that a group could reflect together.

- 1) Each section, which should begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit for guidance and be followed by a passage of scripture, lasts no longer than an hour and a half. Allow sufficient time for silence so that the word of God may take root.
- 2) Ask one member of the group to read the text.
- 3) Use the questions to reflect upon and to share your understanding of the text.
- 4) Using the insights gathered ask yourselves the following questions:

What do you think God is calling you to do in your parishes, deaneries, schools, religious communities or other groups to make this a reality?

What do you think should be included in a diocesan pastoral guidelines to enable parishes and deaneries to live their Christian calling?

- 5) It would be good to hear the views of every person who takes part in the process but, if you are taking part in these sessions through a group, one person could be nominated to write notes and send in responses.

In this consultation every response, short or long, is welcome.

- 6) Each session ends with a concluding prayer.

Some thoughts about working together -

It is important that we:

- listen carefully to what other people are saying, even if we don't agree with them
- treat other people and what they say with respect
- make sure that every person who wants to say something has a chance to do so
- trust each other not to reveal anything that has been said in the group that is of a personal nature
- recognise that there may not be enough time to say everything we want to say, therefore we need to be focused both on the tasks and the timing

1. MADE IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD



After a period of silence say together the opening prayer:

O Lord, heavenly Father, in whom is the fullness of light and wisdom, enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit and give us grace to receive your Word with reverence and humility, without which no-one can understand your truth.

Choose someone to read aloud the following scripture passage

A reading from the letter to the Colossians 1:15-20

Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

This is the word of the Lord.

Remind yourself of the Bishop's introduction and spend a few moments looking at the icon of Christ on the cover of this booklet to focus again on the point of this exercise which is to seek the face of Christ. Ask someone to read the following text:

The face of God

The Catechism of the Catholic Church begins by reminding us of the difficulty of speaking about God. The difference between the images we have of God, and the words we use about God, compared to who God really is. Anything we say about God always falls 'short of the mystery of God.'

'God transcends all creatures. We must therefore continually purify our language of everything in it that is limited, image bound or imperfect, if we are not to confuse our image of God – the inexpressible, the incomprehensible, the invisible, the ungraspable – with our human representations. Our human words always fall short of the mystery of God.'¹

¹Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 42, Geoffrey Chapman 1994

MADE IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD

Yet God does reveal himself to us. God who created the stars of heaven and the flowers of the fields wants to reveal himself to us. We believe that God reveals himself to us in many ways but at the heart of our Catholic faith we believe God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, who is the image of the invisible God. The Catechism continues:

‘God, who "dwells in unapproachable light", wants to communicate his own divine life to the people he freely created, in order to adopt them as his children in his only begotten Son. By revealing himself God wishes to make them capable of responding to him, and of knowing him and of loving him far beyond their own natural capacity.’²

God has revealed himself to us primarily in Jesus Christ. God reveals himself to us in the Scriptures. We learn that God is the God of love, of mercy, that he is the God that is Emmanuel – God with us. If we want to see what God is like then we need to look at Jesus Christ. If we focus our attention upon the face of Christ then the face of the invisible God will be revealed to us.

The face of humanity

Christ reveals God to us but he also reveals to us the vision that God has for humanity. Jesus shows us what it means to be a human being. The second Vatican Council reminded us ‘that Christ not only reveals God to man but reveals man to himself. Until we encounter Christ the human person remains a mystery to himself.’³ It is only in the incarnation that we fully understand the dignity of the human person, it is only in the light of Christ’s death and Resurrection that we know what God intends for each person. When we fail or when we sin, it is Christ who shows us that it is a mistake to tell ourselves that we are ‘only human’. What Christ reveals is that when we sin we are being less than human, less than what we are called to be, less than all that God intends us to be.

What God intends for us is to know that we, and every person, are made in the image and the likeness of God. Pope Benedict XVI reminded us in his inaugural homily:

‘Only where God is seen does life truly begin.
Only when we meet the living God in Christ
do we know what life is.
Each of us is the result of a thought of God.
Each of us is willed,
each of us is loved,
each of us is necessary.
There is nothing more beautiful
than to be surprised by the Gospel,
by the encounter with Christ.
There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him.’

²Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 52, Geoffrey Chapman 1994

³Gaudium et Spes, no 22: The Documents of the Second Vatican Council

God reveals to us our true selves. It is God who reveals what he intends for the human family. Primo Levi, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, knows well the death that descends upon humanity when this dignity of the human person is forgotten and obliterated. In a poem entitled 'Shema', he suggests that it is as difficult – maybe even more difficult – to remember that each person is a person as it is to remember that God is God. Just as the Hebrew prayer called the Shema reminds us that God is 'one' and like no other, we should also remember that every person, who is made in God's image, is 'one' and like no other – that no other one exists like this one.

Reflection questions

- What does the life and the message of Jesus say to you about God? Has there ever been a moment in your life when you have been 'surprised by the Gospel of Jesus?'
- Our Christian understanding is that every individual is created in the image of God. Does the way we treat others reflect this truth?
- Many people have difficulty in perceiving the image of God within themselves. How can our faith communities live in such a way as to help us appreciate more fully our human dignity?
- How do you think our faith should affect our attitude to human rights' issues? Does our behaviour as individuals and as a community need to change?

The questions we would like your response to:

What do you think God is calling you to do in your parishes, deaneries, schools, religious communities or other groups to make this a reality?

What do you think should be included in diocesan pastoral guidelines to enable parishes and deaneries to live their Christian calling?

The session can be ended with the following prayer:

God, we praise you;
Father all-powerful, Christ Lord and Saviour, Spirit of love.
You reveal yourself in the depth of our being,
drawing us to share your life and your love.
One God, three persons,
be near to the people formed in your image,
close to the world your love brings to life.
We ask you this, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
one God, true and living, for ever and ever.

NOTES AND IDEAS

2. GOD IN ALL THINGS



After a period of silence say together the opening prayer:

O Lord, heavenly Father, in whom is the fullness of light and wisdom, enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit and give us grace to receive your Word with reverence and humility, without which no-one can understand your truth.

Choose someone to read aloud the following scripture passage

A reading from the book of Genesis 1:1, 26-31

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. God said, 'Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild beasts and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth.'

God created man in his own image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.

God blessed them, saying to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth,' God said, 'See, I give you all the seed bearing plants that are upon the whole earth, and all the trees with seed-bearing fruit: this shall be your food. To all wild beasts, all birds of heaven and all living creatures on the earth I give all the foliage of plants.' And so it was. God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good.

This is the word of the Lord.

Remind yourself of the Bishop's introduction and spend a few moments looking at the icon of Christ on the cover of this booklet to focus again on the point of this exercise which is to seek the face of Christ. Ask someone to read the following text:

Earth is crammed with heaven

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches this fundamental truth:

‘The world was made for the glory of God.’ St Bonaventure explains that God created all things ‘not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and to communicate’, for God has no other reason for creating than his love and goodness: ‘Creatures came into existence when the key of love opened his hand.’¹⁴

At the heart of our Christian understanding of God is that all creation and life contains within itself the presence of God. The gift that we have to give as Catholics is that God is completely self-gift and uses the whole of creation to communicate his life to us. Unfortunately for many of us the world is divided into the sacred and the secular and indeed our society would like to privatise all faith from the secular sphere. However, we believe that God is active and present in all things. This is expressed by the English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning who wrote:

*‘Earth is crammed with heaven
and every common bush afire with God:
but only he who sees takes off his shoes,
the rest sit round, and pluck blackberries.’¹⁵*

Do we make the mistake of seeing God only in holy places and holy things? The opposite mistake is to only see God in nature. Should not our experience of a holy God lead us to see his presence everywhere? The truth is that we can only truly appreciate the presence of God in creation when we have glimpsed his face in the revelation of Christ.

We are called to understand that God is present in every experience. The thirteenth century Dominican Meister Eckhart wrote:

‘When people think they are acquiring more of God in inwardness, in devotion, in sweetness, and in various approaches than they do by the fireside or in the stable, you are acting just as if you took God and muffled his head up in a cloak and pushed him under a bench. Whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden.’^{13a}

Eckhart is saying that we too easily compartmentalise the presence of God, but in actual fact our Catholic gift is to see God by the ‘firesides’ and in the ‘stables’ of our lives. We come to Christ, to the celebration of the Liturgy, to encounter him in word and sacrament, so that we can recognize his presence in our daily lives. It is the revelation of Christ which enables that approach to the creator in all his works.

¹³Meister Eckhart 'German Sermons and Tracts' Zurich 1979 p.180

¹⁴Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 293, Geoffrey Chapman 1994

¹⁵Barrett-Browning, E., Aurora Leigh, Penguin Classics, Oxford, 1995 Book 7 Lines 815-820 p. 232.

Reflection questions:

- How and when have you recognised God in the ordinary events of your life?
- Does our celebration of the presence of Christ in the Mass help us to see Christ in our daily lives? How can we help people, through our liturgical celebrations, to make connections between faith and life?
- Do you think that parishes need to offer a greater range of activities?
- How does our understanding of 'God in all things' give us a distinctively Christian approach to environmental issues?

The questions we would like your response to:

What do you think God is calling you to do in your parishes, deaneries, schools, religious communities or other groups to make this a reality?

What do you think should be included in diocesan pastoral guidelines to enable parishes and deaneries to live their Christian calling?

The session can be ended with the following prayer:

Father, all-powerful and everliving God,
we do well always and everywhere
to give you thanks through Jesus Christ our Lord.
In the wonder of the incarnation your eternal Word
has brought to the eyes of faith
a new and radiant vision of your glory.
In him we see our God made visible
and so are caught up in love of the God
we cannot see.
And so with all the choirs of angels in heaven
we proclaim your glory
and join in their unending hymn of praise:

***Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might
heaven and earth are full of your glory, hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.***

NOTES AND IDEAS

3. THE COMMUNION OF GOD'S PEOPLE



After a period of silence say together the opening prayer:

O Lord, heavenly Father, in whom is the fullness of light and wisdom, enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit and give us grace to receive your Word with reverence and humility, without which no-one can understand your truth.

Choose someone to read aloud the following scripture passage

1 John 1: 1-4

Something which has existed since the beginning,
that we have heard
and have seen with our own eyes:
that we have watched
and touched with our hands:
the Word who is life -
this is our subject.
That life was made visible:
we saw it and we are giving our testimony,
telling you of the eternal life
which was with the Father and has been made visible to us.
What we have seen and heard
we are telling you
so that you too may be in union with us,
as we are in union
with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.
We are writing this to you to make our own joy complete.

This is the word of the Lord.

Remind yourself of the Bishop's introduction and spend a few moments looking at the icon of Christ on the cover of this booklet to focus again on the point of this exercise which is to seek the face of Christ. Ask someone to read the following text:

Jesus, the Word who is life

The first disciples wrote of Jesus Christ as the one they had seen and touched with their hands. This tangible presence of Christ is not only something in the past because Jesus became flesh for all time.

THE COMMUNION OF GOD'S PEOPLE

The Catechism teaches:

‘when his visible presence was taken from them, Jesus did not leave his disciples orphans. He promised to remain with them until the end of time; he sent them his Spirit. As a result communion with Jesus has become, in a way, more intense, ‘By communicating his Spirit, Christ mystically constitutes as his body those brothers and sisters of his who are called together from every nation.’⁶

Christ is present in the Church. The incarnation continues as the ‘Word takes flesh’ amongst his people, the Church. We cannot make a distinction between Christ and his Body the Church. In his first series of catechetical teachings Pope Benedict meditates on this understanding of the Church. The Pope said "There is no way to reconcile Christ's intentions with the slogan which was fashionable a few years ago, "Christ Yes, the Church No". The individualist Jesus is a fantasy. We cannot find Jesus without the reality he created and through which he communicates himself. Between the Son of God, made man, and his Church, there is a profound, inseparable continuity in virtue of which Christ is present today in his people.’⁷

The challenge for us is to be the face of Christ. We do that by reflecting on what it means to be the Body of Christ for the world. Pope John Paul II reminds us that in making our pastoral plans we need clearly to understand the mystery of the Church and what we are called to be. We need to be able to see that the Church is not simply an institution but is the mystery of God dwelling in our midst. He reminds us that we are called to understand more deeply that we encounter Christ in his Body, the Church. The closer we grow to the Church the closer we grow to Christ, the closer we draw to Christ the more deeply we will be inserted into the mystery of the Church. He calls this ‘a spirituality of communion’.

In his letter for the start of the new millennium Pope John Paul wrote:

‘Here too our thoughts could run immediately to the action to be undertaken, but that would not be the right impulse to follow. Before making practical plans, we need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up. A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us.

‘A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as ‘those who are part of me’. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship. A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God; not only as a gift for a brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a ‘gift for me.’⁸

⁶Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 788, Geoffrey Chapman 1994

⁷Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, March 15 2006

⁸At the beginning of the New Millennium, Pope John Paul II, no 43, Catholic Truth Society 2001

The inner life of God, a communion of three persons, is revealed to us in the inner life of the Church which is a communion of persons with God living at its heart. This mystery enlightens us from within. If we are to see the face of Christ he is first of all visible in his living body, the Church.

Reflection questions

- Do you think of yourself, primarily, as an individual or as a member of a community?
- What positive experiences of 'community' have you had? What made this so? Is the Church a community for you?
- The early Church was an inclusive community, working for the common good and witnessing to Christ through the way people lived. What could we do to foster in our parishes an awareness of this mystery of the Church?
- Is there anything in the way in which we celebrate our liturgy or live our Christian lives which conceals rather than reveals the face of Christ to the world. What else could we do in our parishes which would allow the face of Christ to shine?
- What practical effect does our understanding of 'a spirituality of communion' have for ecumenical dialogue?

The questions we would like your response to:

What do you think God is calling you to do in your parishes, deaneries, schools, religious communities or other groups to make this a reality?

What do you think should be included in diocesan pastoral guidelines to enable parishes and deaneries to live their Christian calling?

The session can be ended with the following prayer:

God our Father,
we give you thanks for the good news of salvation:
your Word became flesh, and we have seen his glory.
Let the radiance of that glory enlighten the lives of all who believe in him.
Reveal to all the world
the light no darkness can extinguish.
We ask you this,
through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever.

NOTES AND IDEAS

4. REVEALING THE FACE OF CHRIST



After a period of silence say together the opening prayer:

O Lord, heavenly Father, in whom is the fullness of light and wisdom, enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit and give us grace to receive your Word with reverence and humility, without which no one can understand your truth.

Choose someone to read aloud the following scripture passage

Matthew 5:13-16.

Jesus said to his disciples: 'You are the salt of the earth. But if salt becomes tasteless, what can make it salty again? It is good for nothing, and can only be thrown out to be trampled underfoot by men.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hilltop cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Remind yourself of the Bishop's introduction and spend a few moments looking at the icon of Christ on the cover of this booklet to focus again on the point of this exercise which is to seek the face of Christ. Ask someone to read the following text:

Light of the world

The Church does not exist for itself, it exists for others. The Church exists so that it may be salt for the earth and light for the world. Jesus Christ came to proclaim the Kingdom of God. The very person of Christ, his actions and his words, reveal the secret of God. Christ reveals God's plan, God's promise, and so changes human hearts.

The Church exists so that we can allow the light of the Gospel to illuminate the people of our times. The Church exists in order to spread the Good News or, to use the ancient Christian word, to evangelise. In his letter on the meaning of evangelisation, Pope Paul VI emphasised quite simply that: 'evangelisation is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church. Her deepest vocation'.

Evangelisation is sometimes only seen as the verbal proclamation of the Gospel. However the Church's understanding is much deeper than that.

REVEALING THE FACE OF CHRIST

As Pope Paul wrote:

*'The Church exists in order to evangelise,
that is to say, in order to preach and to teach,
to be the channel of the gift of grace,
to reconcile sinners with God,
and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass
which is the memorial of his death and glorious resurrection.'*⁹

The meaning of evangelisation is diverse and dynamic. It involves the proclamation of redemption, the transformation of humanity, the witness of Christian life in a vibrant Christian community, the power of grace.

Evangelisation does not simply mean outreach, it means the whole truth of the Christian mystery as it is lived. Evangelisation is the work of the Church, the parish and every Christian. Everything we do as Church can either reveal or obscure the face of Christ.

Salt of the earth

We, as disciples of Christ, are called to shed the light of the Gospel on the world and we are also called to be the salt of the earth. What does this mean? Some speak of Evangelisation as bringing God's word to those who are 'unsaved' and so in this understanding evangelisation means bringing salvation to an unsaved world. This approach is not the first to come to a Catholic way of thinking. The question 'Are you saved?' contains within it a whole variety of other questions, such as 'Do you know God created you? Do you know that God loves you with a tender love which you could never imagine? Do you know you have fallen away from God's grace, but that through Jesus Christ he gives you the ability to experience his love both now and for all eternity?' Before people have even heard the Gospel these things are already true. The Church exists so that people may know that they have been created in love and redeemed in love. Salvation has been accomplished and in one sense every person has been 'saved.' In another sense every person is called to 'take hold' of that salvation.

At the heart of the Catholic understanding of evangelisation is the fact that God has already saved the world. To be the salt of the earth is to allow ourselves to be used so that people may taste the truth of their humanity.

Through the incarnation Christ is already intimately bound up in all human existence, so that in revealing the face of Christ to others we are not introducing them to a Christ they do not know. The theme which ran through John Paul II's teaching was his understanding that through the Incarnation God had joined himself to every person:

*'For by his incarnation, he the son of God in a certain way united himself with each person. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin, he, the redeemer of humanity.'*¹⁰

⁹Evangelii Nuntiandi, Pope Paul VI, no 14, Catholic Truth Society 1976

¹⁰Redemptor Hominis, Pope John Paul II, no 8, Catholic Truth Society 1979

The English poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins put it in another way when he wrote:

*'For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
to the Father through the features of men's faces.'*¹¹

This verse expresses that Christ is to be found in all humanity. So when we teach people about Christ we are not introducing them to a stranger, we are introducing them to the Lord 'who has already united himself with every person'. The Catholic question would not be 'are you saved?' but 'do you know you are saved and has that salvation become part of your life?'

John Paul II wrote:

*'The Church's fundamental function in every age and particularly in ours is to direct humanity's gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity towards the mystery of Christ, to help all be familiar with the profundity of the redemption taking place in Christ Jesus.'*¹²

The challenge for us is to be ever more faithful to the word of the Lord so that we may be the face of Christ and reveal him to the world.

Reflection questions:

- When you read or listen to the Gospels, what is it that Jesus said or did that makes you want to follow him?
- When people look upon us do they see reflected the face of Jesus Christ? When they see the parish/school/organisation do they see something of Christ at work there? What can we do to make Christ's presence felt more clearly?
- Do we see Evangelisation as shedding the light of the Gospel upon contemporary issues and making Jesus' words and life relevant to the problems and challenges people face?
- We live in a multifaith society. Does that pose challenges for us? What should interfaith relationships be like?
- How could we develop our interfaith relationships?

The questions we would like your response to:

What do you think God is calling you to do in your parishes, deaneries, schools, religious communities or other groups to make this a reality?

What do you think should be included in diocesan pastoral guidelines to enable parishes and deaneries to live their Christian calling?

¹¹Manley Hopkins, G: As Kingfishers catch fire: The Penguin Poets, Penguin books 1961, p 51

¹²Redemptor Hominis, Pope John Paul II, no 10:3, Catholic Truth Society 1979

REVEALING THE FACE OF CHRIST

The session can be ended with the following prayer:

O God, be gracious and bless us
and let your face shed its light upon us.
So will your ways be known upon earth
and all nations learn your saving help.

Let the people praise you, O God;
let all the people praise you.

Let the nations be glad and exult
for you rule the world with justice;
with fairness you rule the peoples,
you guide the nations on earth.

Let the people praise you, O God;
let all the people praise you.

The earth has yielded its fruit
for God, our God has blessed us.
May God still give us his blessing
till the ends of the earth revere him.

Let the people praise you, O God;
let all the people praise you.

(Psalm 66)

Conclusion

Fr Timothy Radcliffe recently wrote:

‘The challenge for the Church is to become the sort of community that can speak convincingly about God, which is to say a place of mercy and mutual delight, of joy and freedom. If we are seen to be timid people, afraid of the world and afraid of each other, then why should anyone believe a word we say? We must be in some ways strikingly different so that people will have to ask themselves what is the meaning of our lives. And the meaning of our lives, of course, is God.’¹³

If people are to see that God is the meaning of our lives we are to be ever more deeply rooted in prayer. This reflection process will bear fruit to the extent that it is grounded in prayer. The following prayer could be said at parish gatherings and at Mass during this time of consultation:

***God our Father,
you have revealed yourself to us
in the face of Jesus Christ your Son.***

***Teach us to see your glory,
reflected in all people and in all creation.***

***Help us to be a people of grace,
open to the gifts of your Holy Spirit.***

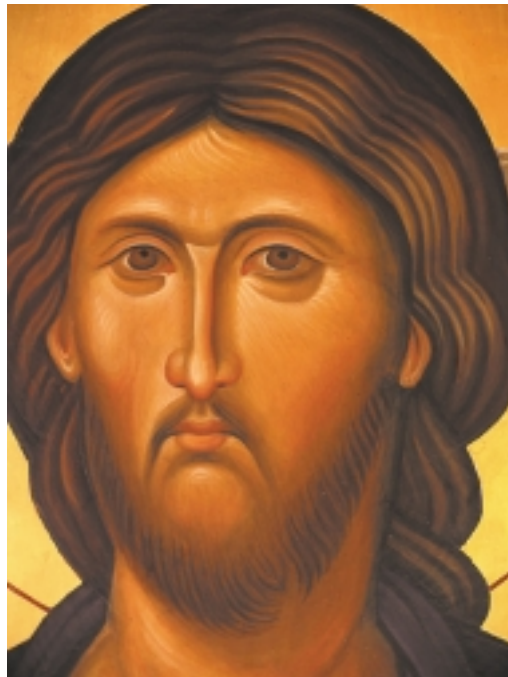
***May the wonders of your love
be revealed anew in our times,
through the people you have made your own.***

***We ask this through Jesus Christ your Son,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.***

With many thanks to the parishes of: **St George’s Taunton, St John the Baptist Trowbridge, Sacred Hearts, Cheltenham** and the **Cathedral Parish of SS Peter and Paul, Clifton** for hosting the four launch days of this document.

My thanks also to **The Steering Group, Ann Fowler, Bernard Massey and Michael McAndrew** for helping to produce this document, **Seeking the Face of Christ**, and for their ongoing help in facilitating this process.

¹³What is the point of being a Christian, Timothy Radcliffe, Burns & Oates 2005 p.210



SEEKING THE FACE OF CHRIST



www.cliftondiocese.com