



## Our Diocesan Church: Continuity and Change



*Pope Benedict greets Bishop Jarrett on his recent visit to Rome*

**D**ear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is now some years since a number of changes were made in the arrangement of our parishes in response to movements in population and the decline in the numbers of priests. Four parishes were linked with their neighbours and one priest became the pastor of two parishes. In the Nambucca Valley three parishes were combined into one. The result was a Diocese effectively of 24 parishes, remaining the same to the present.

Twelve months ago it would have seemed that we were managing well enough, thanks to the fact that while we have had no priestly ordinations since 2001, five young priests had come to work among us. There remains the good prospect of new

*There remains the good prospect of new young priests in our five deacons and seminarians spread across the years of priestly formation.*

young priests in our five deacons and seminarians spread across the years of priestly formation.

However, since April we have suffered the tragic loss of two of those priests; a third departed overseas to pursue a call to the religious life; and one of our long-serving parish priests moved into retirement. Three others are coping with illness from which we pray they will happily recover. It is only realistic to expect that with the average age of our 29 active priests standing at 56.8 years and with three beyond retirement age or in prospect of it, the health of our priests becomes an important issue in view of the greater burden placed upon them.

### *The Way Ahead: the 'low beam' view*

In recent meetings of the Council of Priests and College of Consultors there has been discussion of our situation and how it is to be met should the number of active priests fall below the present number of parishes.

While decisions must ultimately be taken at higher levels and by the Bishop himself, the basic discussion and proposals for change must come from the parishes and regions where everyone can be involved and the possibilities can be best seen. I believe

*the basic discussion and proposals for change must come from the parishes and regions where everyone can be involved*

that our existing regional structure provides the best context for this process to take place, overseen by the Regional Vicars in their respective Clarence, Macleay, Richmond and Tweed regions.

### *The Way Ahead: the 'high beam' view*

However, the immediate prospect of fewer priests is, I believe, a clear prompt which the Lord is giving us as a diocesan Church to switch up to 'high beam' and look at a much bigger picture. I see that it brightly lights up His call to each of us to live to the full as members of Christ and witnesses to His gospel, to the work of redemption and grace and to the promise of eternal life in the heavenly Kingdom: a marvellous and exciting view of the mission of the Church. It's in this light that we can look into a mirror and see the real picture of how we are progressing as this particular community of believers that is part of



the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. A sharpened focus will reveal the changes that might be needed if we are to make our way into the Lord's future for us.

In other words, we need to look further than the parish and diocesan logistics of territory, personnel, buildings, finance and Mass times, to the reality of what we truly are in each and every parish: the Church of Jesus Christ, a community called to be saints alive with holiness and good works to the glory of the Father, living with a unified spirit compacted about the Eucharistic Sacrifice celebrated by and with a priest in our midst.

*Is it not time now for us as a Diocese to be holding up that mirror to ourselves and to look at the picture in the light of the Gospel?*

The question I ask is this: is it not time now for us as a Diocese to be holding up that mirror to ourselves and to look at the picture in the light of the Gospel, the teaching of the Scriptures, the sacred Tradition handed down to us in trust and the ordinary regulative laws and norms of the Church? Relying on the help of the Holy Spirit we could not possibly have anything to fear from such a vision and its challenge – indeed everything to gain for the future of the community of our Diocesan Church. We can only grow when we allow the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the full measure of our strength as well as to bend what is rigid, water what is parched, light up what is obscured, warm what is frozen and correct what has gone astray.



### *Taking Stock*

We face difficulties which are obvious and shared commonly across many countries like our own. Apart from fewer priests, most obviously is the regular absence of over 80% of Catholics from the Sunday Eucharist, believed by us to constitute the source

and summit of the Church's life and standing at the heart of Christian community and spiritual life.

For adolescents and young adults who were so conspicuous at Mass forty years ago, a glance around at any Sunday Mass is clear evidence of a more worrying dimension to the difficulty.

Although there may be factors to blame in weaknesses in many church communities today, the cause of such silent apostasy must lie largely with the all-alluring and seductive materialism, greed and selfishness of modern society. This is aided and abetted by forces of dissolution spread about by a dominant secularist culture that relegates religion to the sphere of a private interest or hobby unrelated to any question of objective truth or reality. Hyped-up movies that falsify historical fact, TV series that caricature or deliberately misrepresent what Christians believe and literature and other media hostile towards the Catholic Church all create a climate that can freeze out a struggling glow of faith in young and old alike.

### *Witnessing to the Truth*

The Catholic Church in Australia was once renowned over many hard years for its strong loyalty to the Pope, its internal cohesion and the effectiveness with which Catholics passed on to their children the mysteries and practice of the faith through strong families and a remarkable system of parish schools. We have passed through a more recent era in our country in which we have seen our communities confused and uncertain about what we believe and the expectation laid upon us to live and witness to our faith and its discipline. Furthermore the Body of Christ among us has often been depicted as a mix of polarised factions, on the left or right, conservative or liberal, traditional or modern – as if the Church were some sort of political organisation or freethinking community in which everybody's 'truth' and way of 'being church' must be of equal value.

We really have to abandon such thinking and behaviour, for our future can only lie in grasping securely and promoting the truth of Jesus Christ and His Church that comes to us from



*our future can only lie in grasping securely and promoting the truth of Jesus Christ and His Church that comes to us from the Apostles*

the Apostles and is validated by the teaching of the modern Church in communion with the Successor of Peter. Today that especially means giving up trying to pressure the Church into making changes she has no power to make, or calling for 'reforms' that have been repeatedly and with good reason rejected by longstanding and proven tradition. Catholic means Catholic and we honour that title when we remain faithful to the universal teaching and practice of the Church, even if at times it might challenge our capacity to understand some particular point.

So we get on quietly and unashamedly with the job of positively supporting and living those teachings which draw the incredulity of many of our contemporaries, such as our opposition to the killing of the unborn as a right of choice, artificial birth control/contraception, euthanasia, IVF and the rest. In doctrine we take as our guide the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in liturgy the traditions and norms set out in the Missal and other liturgical books and we support the Church's social teaching on human rights and the dignity of the human person.

*These are some of the ways, in our modern situation, in which we show the world a spirit of openness to our need for God*

These are some of the ways, in our modern situation, in which we show the world a spirit of openness to our need for God and His grace and truth and push back the contrary spirit of self-sufficiency, scepticism and pessimism. They are ways in which we can share some of the excitement and courage of St Paul in his advice to



the young bishop Timothy: "Proclaim the message, be persistent in season and out of season, be unfailing in patience and teaching, for the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths." (II Tim 4:2-4).

### Review of Life

I believe it is time for our Diocese to review its life at every level to prepare for the future God has in store for us. We have to ask if we are making the best use of what God has

*We have to ask if we are making the best use of what God has blessed us with*

blessed us with in a whole range of areas, lay and priestly, in liturgical and Eucharistic life, in managing our temporal goods and resources and in education and catechesis.

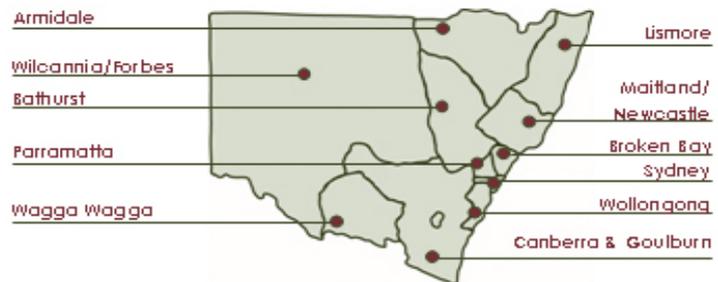
Rather than acquiescing in any thought of a diminishing number of priests to serve our parishes, we must set our sights on cultivating a new awareness of God's constant call to young Catholic men to venture into this special life of Christian fatherhood as priests like Jesus Christ. In the short term or even longer we will continue to welcome priests from overseas and seek overseas students to study for the priesthood here in Australia. I strongly commend and encourage the Holy Hours of Eucharistic Adoration held in many places for vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life and the strengthening of Marriage and Family Life. Here we put on the line, as it were, our belief in the power of prayer, in the only power we believe that can bring certain things to come to pass.

Rather than closing parishes and churches we should be thinking about redeploying our resources for the best service of the Catholic community today. Rather than settling for celebrations of the Liturgy of the Word and Communion which should be truly exceptional and unusual (and in any case only permitted by special permission of the bishop), we should be ensuring that Sunday Mass is within easy reach of every Catholic, even if requiring a reasonable distance to travel. Never have we been so mobile, thinking nothing of going

### Diocese of Lismore – Parishes



### The Dioceses of New South Wales



into town to pick up the milk or the Sunday paper! We should also be promoting among all members of the Church the prayer of the *Liturgy of the Hours*, the liturgy of the whole Church prayed with the whole Church and led by lay people whether Mass can be celebrated or not. It would be a wonderful thing and a fulfilment of the serious encouragement of the Church if, at a stated time every day in each parish, priest and people came together in the church to celebrate morning and evening prayer (Lauds and Vespers).

### The Bishop's Proposal

With the contribution of the Council of Priests, which comprises also the Regional Vicars and the Diocesan Pastoral Council, I propose that in Lent, 2009, the Diocese enter

into a definite, structured, review of its life and resources embracing the fullest participation of all members at every level and in every parish. Preliminary discussion can begin early next year, with the full planning scheduled to take place from July 2008, with the completion of World Youth Day. It will be on the basis of the recommendations from this Review that decisions will be considered for implementation both regionally and for the whole Diocese.

Please join me in prayer to Mary, the Mother of the Church, as we place these plans in her hands.

*With every good wish and blessing,  
Yours devotedly in Christ,*

✠ Geoffrey Jarrett,  
Bishop of Lismore