



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter - December 2009

News from Rome

THESE ARE heady times. We had already heard about a papal visit in 2010 and early plans for the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman, the most famous Anglican in the Oxford Movement to convert to Rome. Then there was the visit of the relics of St Thérèse to England, a visit which included York Minster and the Walsingham Shrines in the itinerary. Within a week of her feast day, news came through on Tuesday 20th October of the publication of an Apostolic Constitution. Here was a 'fresh expression' of ecumenism, a fresh initiative in the search for Unity with the Holy See which many Anglicans in the Catholic tradition have long prayed for and pursued.

The Bishop of Richborough and I have called for a time of quiet prayer and discernment, especially appropriate in Advent and during the peace and stillness of Christmastide. This is not the time for big decisions, and most of us will be pre-occupied by practical questions, and trying out in our heads the various possibilities. What might it mean to stay? What would it mean to go? How would it affect our congregation, our church building, our families, and, in the case of the clergy, our homes, our stipends, our pensions? Will we be able to share our churches with the local Church of England deanery, so that we can continue to worship together without depriving the local population of the occasional services which they come to? The Church of England will surely not try to drive us out of the buildings which our Anglo-Catholic forefathers built Nor will it begrudge us use of the churches built when the whole country looked to the Holy See Or what ... ? As we think all this through, the thoughts of John Henry Newman, published this month may help.

The Council of Priests will be meeting on 22nd February, the Feast of The Chair of Peter, and this will be a very appropriate day for priests and people to make an initial decision as to whether they wish to respond positively to the Apostolic Constitution. This would mean exploring further the practical details. Some will want to stay on, come what may, within the Church of England. Others may wish to make individual arrangements as their conscience directs. A further group of us, we think, will form the caravan we have spoken about in the past. It will be a rather untidy caravan, rather like the People of Israel crossing the desert in search of the Promised Land. Whatever decisions people, priests and parishes eventually make, if they are made well, you will find peace and blessing in following what you discern to be God's will. Many, understandably, will need a much longer period of discernment and hasty reactions of whatever kind are usually a bad idea.

May the prayers of Our Lady of Walsingham, St Thérèse and John Henry Newman bring us closer to God and assist us as we follow in the way of Jesus Christ, who became flesh and lived amongst us.

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